BACKGROUND: Mumbai, India is home to 18.4 million people of whom only 20% seek any kind of treatment or aid for mental health care. Twenty-eight percent of women and 53% of children face emotional, sexual or physical abuse of some kind while the rates for the LGBTQIA+ community and men are unknown. Whether it be mental health or abuse, most individuals fear conflict within their communities and are stigmatized. Consequently, many do not reach out for any kind of help. Even if they muster the courage to get help, the youth, women and children lack the social and financial resources to do so. While several NPOs exist within the city that address issues of abuse, mental health or legal aid for victims, folks fear reaching out to organizations and the law for help, feeling that these resources do not understand their communities and will prove to be more disruptive than assistive. Individuals often need emotional support alongside professional mental health aid when in crisis and/or when fighting for justice. Many NPOs simply can’t provide these services due to a lack of training and funding.

In 2017, I founded The Plane Jar Welfare Foundation (TPJ) that focuses on providing psychological, social and legal aid to facilitate mental health care and social justice for all individuals. Our goal is to work with individuals to tackle their problems at an individual and community level in a way that is culturally informed and builds peaceful bonds between the law, communities and organizations. The three key services that the organization offers are: the Buddy System that provides emotional first aid assistance and emotional support, Crisis Social Workers to assist in times of crisis, or when they need intervention and resources, such as access to mental health professionals at subsidized rates/free of charge, alongside our CAASA Program (Child Abuse Awareness and Survivor’s Assistance program). Our goal is to work with individuals and help tackle their problems at an individual and community level in a way that is culturally-informed and builds peaceful bonds between the law, communities and organizations.

Over 18 months, CAASA has trained 100 individuals – 37 of whom have been certified to be Primary Responders. CAASA addresses subjects such as sexuality, child abuse, emotional first aid assistance, how to work with the Child Welfare Committee of India, and they form case plans based on the client’s situation. Our training has allowed these individuals to assist their communities and some of the Primary Responders have joined TPJ as either Buddies or Crisis Social Workers to help its mission. Since then, the TPJ team has worked on raising awareness among over 30,000 individuals within Mumbai, directly addressing over 120 clients in situations ranging from domestic violence, child sexual abuse, schizophrenia, attempts of suicide, and self-harm.

THE PROBLEM: However, the organization is still unable to attend to some of the most pressing issues, such as long-term cases that require extensive socio-legal intervention and advanced emotional support. For example, in the last year the organization faced a case of domestic violence where Naina, a 16-year-old was being severely abused but did not want to press charges or isolate herself from her community because of her abusive family. Since Naina was from a low-income household, and action is rarely taken on disciplinary violence in India, TPJ could only provide her with emotional assistance during her hardships, helping her eventually find a job and move out. If TPJ had the resources, an in-house Socio-Legal Cell would have helped her attain a sustenance fee from the family in exchange for not taking them to court, and a better trained Crisis Social Worker would have approached her religious leader and set up refuge with the religious center. This approach would have helped her feel at one with her community and enable her to get away from the violence.

PROJECT VISION/GOALS: In Summer 2020, I aim to launch the Respondents for Peace initiative to tackle problems at an individual and community level in a way that is culturally informed and builds peaceful bonds between the law, communities and organisations. TPJ will achieve this by accomplishing two primary missions: First, TPJ will develop a Primary Respondent (PR) Advanced Training, which will be designed with professional social workers and psychologists who work with TPJ to create learning modules that specifically focus on teaching PR’s how to peacefully integrate resources at their disposal. Experts will compile a list of needs from the primary responders and include modules that incorporate emergency protocol, a social work code of ethics and how to build capacity to support clients emotionally, providing holistic pre-counselling skills while knowing how to function as professionals working within an organization. Psychologists working alongside TPJ have requested this service because it can enhance the Buddy System, providing a support system outside of therapy. While this module will train individuals specific to the needs of TPJ and its unique approach to peaceful community intervention, the skills will be transferable to other organizational structures as well. Individuals trained will then go on to host further CASSA Programs, assisting and supporting children in situations of abuse.
We will also use this time to patent the course (use of it without the assistance of professionals would prove to be detrimental) and partner with colleges that could utilize it for psychology and social work course credits. It would ensure that those taking our program will be compensated academically and the individuals who approach us would be dedicated to the program. We will pick our pool of candidates for the advanced training in such a way that we include representation from 3 target communities – the slums of Mumbai, the transgender community, and the Kamathipura red light district. We will host one cycle of the program across 5 weekends in 10 sessions (weekend training will comprise approx. 6 – 8 hours a day and will include lessons in social work, pre- counselling and self-care).

Second, TPJ will institute a new in-house Socio-Legal Intervention Cell which will be headed by the renowned criminologist and social worker, Donita Quadros, who has worked closely with the Mumbai police and other government entities for over 4 years. Donita will provide advanced training (free of cost to trainees) in paralegal skills, teaching the Primary Responders on basics of the law in situations of emotional, physical, sexual and drug abuse. After training, the team will help identify cases to begin working on with the police. This special training will also give Primary Responders an identification card that allows them to work more closely with police. These two initiatives will ensure that the individuals we help receive the resources they need while empowering them with the knowledge needed to advocate for themselves. Davis funding will allow us to attain location for the training, compile print protocol manuals, compensate the professional trainers, and spread the word about our work.

LEADERSHIP/PARTNERS: As the Project Director, my academic background in Sociology, specifically in studying the causation of abuse, equips me with the academic knowledge needed to approach this topic from a sociological point of view. I have also worked with TPJ on a vision to create an organizational system whereby clients can receive collaborative aid from medical professionals, Buddies for emotional support and crisis social workers for socio-legal support. This fund will allow us to train our team to be able to do that with the most advanced methods of social welfare.

Beyond the work of Ms. Quadros, who has assisted us with several cases and police relations in the past, psychologist and Queer Affirmative Therapy Trainer, Aanchal Narang, who designs our training courses and has guided the Buddy System for a year now, and Shipra Paraswani, President at TPJ will also help. These individuals have already expressed a strong interest in furthering TPJ’s vision, and I believe that formalizing their contributions would result in a more professional and timely execution of existing goals.

SUSTAINABILITY AND POTENTIAL IMPACT: We estimate that the Respondent’s for Peace Initiative will be able to launch this summer with the help of the Davis Projects for Peace (DPP) grant and, with its existing funding, establish an ambitious 2-year plan. During those two years, TPJ will have set a precedent and evaluated the shortcomings of this initiative to be eligible for future grants and partnerships to sustain its efforts. In addition, DPP funding would allow TPJ to reduce its administrative workload, providing relief to its part-time staff of 3 to professionalize its capacity to fundraise for operational support. This will allow staff more time to focus on its ability to make marked social impact. We envision to someday be able to compensate our Buddies and Crisis Social Workers who currently serve on a volunteer basis, typically because they believe in our mission.

We estimate that our program would potentially be able to aid approximately 3 more communities, double our existing outreach and assist another 200 more cases – at minimum – in the next 2 years. In addition, given that Donita will be joining us, we will also have a stronger network with professionals who work with law enforcement and the courts. To ensure that there is sustained impact in the community, I will be working with Prof. Vijaya Pascala and Prof. Rick Fieldman of Mount Holyoke College to analyze K.P.I. deliverables. These experts possess extensive knowledge of social impact organizations and Prof. Pascala has run a non-profit in India for 10 years, making her a great mentor for me.

CONCLUSION: I appreciate the Davis Foundation’s time and consideration and hope that you will share my enthusiasm for building a strong support system with the youth of India. I very much look forward to hearing from you, and expounding on my vision in person, or over the phone. The Foundation’s support at this time would not only help TPJ scale in the near future, but also result in sustainable growth that would ensure the steady spread of TPJ’s humanitarian vision.