A summary of the goals of your project.
Our goal was to create a community-led grassroots project for the women of the Govandi, Mumbai that provides psycho-socio-legal resources to aid women in situations of abuse and mental health crisis.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?
We ultimately implemented a post-COVID project with the help of Parveen Ji, one of the women in the Govandi Chawl who has been volunteering with Muslim women in situations of domestic violence for over 30 years. She said, “listening to someone talk about their hardships and burdens, solves 80% of the problem.” I find this quote by Parveen Ji to be rather prudent, as I think she sheds light on a world that she does not realize. Of course, she foremost highlights the importance of finding community, communicating through turmoil, finding solidarity, and the need for a resource to support these women. My approach to the issue of violence has been one of preventing it, and thus everything I did was an attempt to solve the problem. But Parveen Ji noticed the need for helping women gain resilience after COVID. And thus, honoring their lived experiences, I felt the women should implement the project.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?
The city of Mumbai is home to 18.4 million people, 80% of whom do not seek any kind of mental health care treatment or aid. While several nonprofits exist within the city that address either issues of abuse, mental health, or legal aid for victims, individuals fear reaching out to organizations and the law for help. They feel that these resources do not understand their communities and will prove to disrupt rather than assist. Individuals often need emotional support with professional mental health aid in times of crisis and/or when fighting for justice, which most non-profits in the city are unable to provide. The issue in this particular community is exacerbated years of religious discrimination, patriarchal hierarchies of power within families, and generational financial suppression of women and their ability to fend for themselves.

Why did you choose your host site to work in? a. What was it like to work on your host site?
Our site, the Govandi Chawl of Mumbai — a predominantly a Muslim community-dwelling — has seen dire impacts of COVID on its residing families and a severe lack of resources to aid women in situations of domestic violence. This site was uniquely structured as it had a preexisting community center that was used for occupational training and activities for children of the community. We also partnered with another organization that was building a community library, utilizing their community partnerships.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?
Over the last year, this project has endured over 15 setbacks and changes in courses and I would be dishonoring the process if I were to say I did not think it would happen. India’s COVID wave was severe and the resources I planned to use in summer 2020 became consumed by the pandemic: infections were rampant and families fell into disarray. In addition, I could not return to India from the US to be on the ground for the project. In addition, the organizations I had decided to work with initially changed their focus during the pandemic and I had to build the project from the ground up several times before we finally had a plan that could work. Nevertheless, I focused on acknowledging that my circumstances with the project were only a small consequence of a much larger global crisis and, after much pain, patience, and changes to my leadership style, we made room for more of the community to be heard, the project evolved into something far more wholesome than I had anticipated.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?
My biggest challenge was communicating across seas, which included the time difference, internet access, an inability for the whole team to travel to the on-site location, and language issues (some resources we identified because of COVID-19 were unavailable in Hindi or Urdu, the two predominant languages in the community). However, Shreya Joshi, the Project Coordinator who was my on-site eyes and ears, proved to be a great resource in coordinating, building trust with the community, and ultimately leading the project in Mumbai with great success. Despite getting COVID herself earlier in the year and only being able to recently get her first vaccination, she worked tirelessly with me to mobilize the project.
How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term? a. Please describe changes created by the project during the summer?
We designed this project to prioritize the needs of the community and how they would choose to define a problem and the means of addressing it. It is a radically different approach to community work as it makes no assumptions about the needs of a community but instead focuses on allowing the community to use their own experiences to shape their resources through thoughtful moderation. Our project employed three women in the Govandi Chawl as full-time employees over the next year, making this project sustainable in the short-term, and we have created a space for over 1000 women to gain comfort and solidarity over the next year. Moreover, our training provided legal knowledge specifically designed to empower Muslim women, psycho-social training that gives them skills for community mental health care and skills to document their healing process, and entrepreneurial skills which will help them fundraise when the time comes. In the long-term, this project will create a channel for this community to advocate for themselves and will not require outside folks to advocate on their behalf.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?
I think there is something rather difficult when working on projects like this one. One, that for some reason, “I” was running the project. The grant was mine to use for the community. The other, that when working on projects, there’s precedent, some knowledge of how it is supposed to look, what the usual mistakes are, a blueprint for how to make the project efficient, trying to incorporate it in a lean model that is “successful.” But I have learned how important it is to distinguish between the decisions you are making simply out of precedence and what can be done that is particular and flexible and novel. It is important to experiment, reshape elements that can be reshaped, and mold activities into something unique when a project needs to respond, not prescribe. After having listened to the community that graciously adopted me into it, I have learned that working with communities means to accept how little one knows. Peace for me today after having worked on this project is a verb and not a noun. It is an active effort made each second and cannot simply be a state that is attained. It is a process to be fostered.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
This project had to be restructured over 15 times since my receiving the grant in early 2020. In the process, I approached over 9 communities and saw how the pandemic consumed all their resources to a degree that they had none left to even be able to accept the ones I had to offer them with this project. I am grateful that I found Parveenji from the Govandi Chawl who, despite having lost several intimates to the pandemic, and having received over 500 cases of domestic violence reported to her during that time, carried forth with this project. I personally at every stage felt the guilt of not being able to be there for my community, but the work enabled me to feel connected. I do believe that there is a heartbeat to the city of Mumbai that resonates with one regardless of where one goes. The Govandi Community allowed me to hold onto it.

What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?
I think that when working remotely there may be tremendous fear and a sense of helplessness given how far you are. I began to pull away in an attempt to protect my state of mind, but I now realize that I needed to push outwards and indulge in resonating with the community. Staying well-networked is tremendously important and asking for advice and listening keenly enabled me to stay agile and keep the project moving forward. I also think that when I put the people of the community first, and not the project first, I could use the project as a means rather than as an end.
Something else that helped me tremendously was staying educated on styles of mobilizing projects as a leader through the pandemic. Reading journal publications, such as the Harvard Business Review, and looking at how other organizations were adapting, allowed me to incorporate ideas and make unexpected collaborations.

Living in peace often requires compromise and tremendous empathy and acceptance, all of which can only be accomplished through channels of communication and an approach of radical kindness in the face of difficulties.
- Esha Sridhar (she/they)
Section II:

Shreya Joshi (Project Coordinator), Parveen Sheikh (Project ideator), and Najmun (Community worker)