Project title: “Shush, A project to alleviate sexual stigma and promote healthy and safe sexual practices, mentally and physically.”

India is a country with rich cultural values and profound social stigma at large. Sex and sexuality is a heavily shunned and stigmatized subject in Indian society, a wonder given the sheer population and deep historic and spiritual value attached to sex. Over waves of colonization and cultural integration the Indian society has adapted old western stigma and placed it upon itself, to create a community that discourages open dialogue and acceptance over any sort of sexual behavior, especially that which involves a woman’s free will. This project aims to increase sexual literacy to help women explore their sexualities in a healthy and safe way. I will be creating a website, a community focused on women’s health and sexuality, and a sex-ed curriculum to help women better understand and explore their bodies. I will be addressing sexuality as experienced during pre-puberty, puberty, and adulthood in women.

India has the 3rd largest HIV epidemic in the world. There are over 2.3 million people over the age of 15 years, who have an HIV infection. There is very little awareness about safe sexual relations and the consequences of having unprotected sex. Reproduction and sexual intercourse are largely dominated by male will and women are objectified as nonparticipatory tools only meant for a man’s pleasure and satisfaction. This makes women vulnerable. The prevention of other sexually transmitted infections is even higher than that of HIV/AIDS and has even less awareness as per studies by the International Institute for Population Sciences & Indian Population Control.¹

Additionally, a lack of proper sex-education leads to higher vulnerability towards sexual violence and abuse. According to a survey by the Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development, nearly 50% of boys and girls face sexual abuse in their youth in India. This can be attributed to both a lack of sex education and conversations about sex. Children, who are not given proper sex education, are unable to identify inappropriate sexual behavior. For a woman, sex is seen as a reproductive and marital responsibility. Given these statistics, female pleasure, and safety through sex are deemed socially irrelevant.

There is a need for a safe and reliable space where women of any age can go to be better informed of their bodies and needs. This, in addition to a country wide sex education curriculum, would better inform the Indian population. With an increase in internet access and usage in India, the web has become a key portal for questions and education about sex. In a

¹ https://www.careerizma.com/blog/sex-education-india/
https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/asia-pacific/india#:~:text=India%20has%20the%20third%20largest%20HIV/AIDS,have%20sex%20with%20men.
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4711229/
series of interviews I conducted with women between the ages of 18 and 50\(^2\), I learned that they took any questions that they had about their bodies, sexual drives, and safe sex practices to the internet, and even there, they only found unverified, unrelatable, and unreliable information. Fishing through the internet for verified content, especially about sex, can be exhausting and deeply unsettling. This lack of information, paired with the mental and physical pressure put on women, is the driving source of my project.

*Shush* is a project that will create a web based resource, community, and curriculum for sex-education. The content will be focused on and decided by the lived experiences of women I have interviewed. With the help of this grant, I would like to expand my research to women across subcultures within India and provide them authentic resources including doctors, sex therapists, and sex-educators. I have begun to contact individuals and organizations including Teach For India\(^3\) and the National Organization For Women New York\(^4\) for my research to understand what would make an accessible and comprehensive resource.

Mumbai, a city I have previously lived in, will be my home base. There, I have access to schools, educators, and creators who can help me implement this project. Through my connections I will reach out to educators, students, and women who are willing to share their experiences and feedback to create the website and curriculum that will be targeted towards women; their pleasure and safety. I have begun to gather resources\(^5\) to create an informed website. I intend to hire individuals with experience in sex therapy, sexual health, social media, and curriculum design.

The materials and resources created through this project will be active and accessible beyond the summer of 2021. The website will be maintained and continue to grow over the next few years. Within the next 5 years, I will further expand into different disciplines. The future of this project will be to encompass a wide range of subjects and create an accessible curriculum that everyone across the globe can learn from. The website will grow to become a multi-country, multi-disciplinary resource to be used across generations.

**Committed Individual and Organizational Partners:** Teach For India: Muskan Bisen; Indian Education Ministry: via Amit Khular (writer & researcher); K-12 Schools (thus far) in Mumbai: MIT Vishwashanti Gurukul, Billabong High, and Kendriya Vidyalaya; Title 1 School Curriculum Coordinator: Abigail Shute; Sex Therapist: Neha Bhatt; Documentary and Bollywood Film Makers: Anjali Bhushan; Sabha Divan; Rahul Roy

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\(^2\) https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1m2YRk3fpfxPdK2iGYChk2VoPy7D8gEiZW6ZVhamWFvUk/edit?usp=sharing
\(^3\) https://www.teachforindia.org/education-crisis/
\(^5\) https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FMibDMaXrsncSlnP0i7ol9hpMCwKOvq51rzjG9JZ1Ls/edit