Shush, a project to alleviate sexual stigma and promote healthy and safe sexual practices, mentally and physically. Through working with and interviewing women from India (forty thus far,) this project collects the data to represent the lived experiences of these women and use their experiences to create an accessible and sharable resource guide for anyone to reference and learn from.

I did apply for additional funding, but was not able to secure anything else at the time. Additionally, due to my (the project lead's) status as an international student, my funds were cut by 30% as per the foreign vendor tax placed on non-resident F1 visa holders. This lead to me using some personal funds to get the project to its current stage.

As an Indian women who grew up in India, I have experienced the strange dichotomy that surrounds sex and sexuality in India. The way sex is treated, has always been something I have thought about. Over the years, I have done some of my own research into India’s sexual history, back to how it was treated in the pre-colonial and Mughal eras, up to how it is treated in contemporary India. Even now, we have a strange mixture of hyper sexualized media mixed with shame filled sex-ed talks in school and ridicule and gossip within communities. India, culturally respects modesty, however talking about sex and expressing sexuality does not come from a place of immodesty. It took me some time to work through my own shame’s revolving sex and sexuality, and doing so made me want to talk with others with the same experience as me and learn about their experiences and beliefs. I started by talking to with only my immediate circle and that helped me develop this project. Listening to the stories from my immediate circle made me create this project proposal and collect the data I was receiving to create a web resource to help fill the gaps between the things we hide through shame for sex, back home. Through growing my interview pool and listening to the lived experiences of forty women from different parts of India, aged between 17 and 52, I was able to create a larger base of questions and collaborate with illustrators, NGO workers, and educators to create a resource that can continue to be shared and grow after this summer.

India, a country with an incredibly rich history that included a lot of openness surrounding sex and sexuality, somehow turned into a complete communication black hole regarding sex over the past 400 years. With a population of over 1.3 billion people, a growing aids epidemic, extremely high sexual harassment and assault cases, we are clearly a hyper sexual country that is bursting at the seams with sexual repression. While some of the identifiable reasons for this repression are due to several years of colonialism and an inability to reconcile a pre-colonial and post-colonial mindset (we live in a strange progressive Victorian era England, in India,) other reasons come from a mass concept of shame. If we are ashamed of something for ourself, we impose our shame upon the world around us. There may be many more reasons that India has such a strong sense of shame regarding sex and sexuality, however the biggest perpetuation of the issue is the simple lack of communication and acknowledgment of the normalcy and importance of sex and sexuality.

I chose India as my host site as that was where I identified and experienced the issue I was working with.

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It was very easy to communicate with individuals and grow my interview base working within India. I did need to keep names/true identities private due to how personal the information I was being given was. Despite some unforeseen challenges, people were receptive and interested in the project and did make time to contribute and help make the final resource.

f. Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

There were many times when I felt like the project was going to fall apart. An element I wanted to include over the summer was to use the resource to actually go to schools and print copies in person to leave in public spaces to make accessible. However since I was unable to go in person and due to several restrictions in India at the time, I was unable to implement some elements. I was able to work within my limitations and focused on flushing out the web resource so that it is more widely accessible through the internet and can be shared through educators with schools opening up now.

g. What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

The biggest challenge with communication was due to the pandemic.

h. How do you define peace?

I define peace as a state of being where individuals feel comfortable being who they are, where they are empowered with knowledge, agency over their own actions, and respect for one another. I think peace comes from a space when individuals can acknowledge their differences and respect one another for having them.

i. How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

The conversations and resources created through this project are all active elements that will continue to grow and be available to the world. The intention for this project is to create a space for individuals to ask questions and have them answered, and hopefully reduce the shame in relation to sex and sexuality within them. In working with an individual to resolve and communicate about their internal shames, it initiates more individuals to resolve their internal shame, and hence broadens the community of acceptance and empowerment of sexual identity, that can then be shared through them to others.

a. Please describe changes created by the project during the summer?

The changes created were through the conversations with the forty different women I worked with. Additionally in sharing their experiences with me and one another, the women, including myself were able to resolve some of our own stigma’s and shames relating to our sexuality and sexual identities.

b. Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the project.

Due to the many limitations from covid and having to put certain aspects on pause. The project will continue to grow as I interview more people and work towards group sessions and getting the resource out to students and into actual courses. Additionally since the resource exists online indefinitely, it will always be a space were individuals can go to find information and solidarity in their curiosity.

j. Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

The project helped broaden my own understanding of the stigma’s that exist within my community and country. It helped me understand the many different perspectives people feel shame from. While I was aware that I would learn a lot through this project, I was taken aback by how strong my connection with those I worked with became. There was a strong sense of liberation that came from our conversations which only helped deepen my interest in continuing to work on this project in the future. This project has helped me become a much stronger communicator and listener. Additionally it has changed how I approach a difference in opinion in terms of how
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individuals chose to use their right to express their sexuality. It really helped me understand the different perspectives behind modesty, cultural respect, as well as the right to freely express and act upon your sexuality with respect for one another.

k. Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes.

a. If yes, please describe any impacts you and/or community members engaged in your experienced.

Over the summer the COVID-19 pandemic in India reached its peak. Through the 2nd to 4th wave of the pandemic in India there was a point where everyone I was in contact with was facing the challenge of either having Covid, or having family members experience and/or die due to the illness. Initially, a large part of my project was to work with sexual health NGO’s and non-profit educators in order to share a resource that I had created based on the data I collected from 15 people I had interviewed. My goal was also to interview more individuals along the way in order to grow my resource guide. Additionally, I was supposed to go back to India in person and actually work with the NGO’s and educators in person. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic and my OPT status, I was unable to go back in person. The non-profit educators and NGO I was supposed to work with in person went on hiatus for a few months over the summer, only opening up again with limited working in August. This was very challenging and seriously changed how I was working with the project. When I re-grouped and changed the way I would approach my project to work towards my goal, I decided to instead focus on expanding my interview base, and build connections with individual women, as well as consult some members from the NGO, as they were available. Even here, communication and timing was a bit of a challenge as most of my interviewees were in India and we had to work with both a 13 hour time difference, as well my contacts having to deal with a lot of issues due to the pandemic.

b. How did you advance your projects goals despite these challenges?

i. What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?

I think the most important thing was patience and persistence. The people I was working with were both interested and willing to help in creating my project, as many would be for projects funded by PfP, due to how relevant they are to our world. Since the main challenge was the outcome of the pandemic, and my contacts were facing things outside of their control, I continued to be patient and contacted them often, while also being very flexible to last minute rescheduling and cancelations. I advise all PfP grantees to be flexible, patient and persistent in their pursuit of completing their project. There are many challenges with projects that deal with creating a space for peace, in both a world with a pandemic, as well as a world without. Flexibility is key.

c. If you were able to implement your project remotely, speak to the highlights and challenges of a conducting a remote project

As highlighted above, my biggest challenge was navigating through the impacts of the pandemic and the challenges it brought to my contacts’ lives. While certain elements had to be put on hold to come back to in the future, I was able to overcome some challenges through persistent communication and flexibility.

i. At the end of your narrative, please provide a one- to two-sentence personal statement, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result.

“Sex should not be a myth, nor a mystery, and neither should a woman’s pleasure and safety through sex. My research so far has shown me that proper sex education is an essential aspect
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in achieving peace among a community, as we cannot live at peace with one another if we continue to internalize and project harmful ideas about a very normal aspect of our beings. All bodies have the right to engage with sexuality, as we are all sexual beings. We all deserve the right to pursue pleasure safely and respectfully, and we all deserve to have access to education that allows us to do that. We don’t have to understand each other to be able to respect each other’s choices ways of expression.”

Anavi Bhushan Nugyal

Section II: Photographs
For the privacy of the women I worked with I cannot share any of their faces – instead I have illustrations/layered on screenshots from our zoom calls.