Working Towards Community Change Through Gender Equality

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My time at Brown last summer brought about new ideas and thoughts. The concept of an “Action Plan,” where I created a plan for bringing about change in my community, resonated deeply. One of the aspects of the Action Plan that stuck out to me was the idea of a “community”; community, as explained to us by Brown Leaders, did not necessarily have to be something that was close to me geographically, but something that was still close to “home” in the sense of where my closest connections were. With my action plan, I set out with the intent of spreading awareness about a particular societal issue with the intent of engaging in a meaningful dialogue. After much thought, I found that I wanted to learn about gender inequalities in education in India, the country of my parent’s origin. In addition, I wanted to have a platform through which I could purvey my thoughts on the issue to a wider audience (i.e. newspaper, online blog).

Keeping these goals in mind, I came across an NGO called Janvikas Pratishtan working in India, in the rural parts of the state of Maharashtra, in an area called Maval (see map of India attached with identified locations). My great-aunt, Nandini Datar, had founded the NGO in the early 1990s after years of extensive work in the field of social work and community development. Janvikas Pratishtan was founded with the mindset of community building through the implementation of recognition of gender equality. One of Janvikas’ missions is to improve communities as a whole by empowering women, the other 50% of societies that often live in the shadows of their male counterparts, while doing as much, if not more, of the work and breadwinning on a daily basis. One of the reasons I was drawn to Janvikas was their work in inequalities between boys and girls in education, a phenomenon that I was already interested in. This past December, I convinced my parents that I would like to visit Janvikas and understand in person the work it had done to alleviate gender inequality. I had the remarkable opportunity to travel to India alone and visit the NGO in the rural outskirts of Pune, Maharashtra and learn what kind of work Janvikas did in the rural communities, as well as talk with community members to document their stories in everyday life.

In the broadest sense, my action plan discusses the potential that many people in rural Maharashtra may possess, and how they are unable to realize this potential due to an incomplete
education, societal inequalities, and an inability to access resources that many of us in the US take for granted. For instance, a student wanting to pursue a further (secondary) education after his or her 10th grade is finished has to travel many kilometers out of town just to reach the nearest school. I talked to students who had this problem, but they were in the minority. Most of the students who finish their 10th grade in their home community do not go on to pursue a secondary education. Many don’t even make it to their final year of primary education, 10th grade, where they all appear for a state-wide board examination. Sometimes, a couple highly achieving students will ‘ace’ their exams and find avenues to make it further than their hometowns, but more often than not the ones who do not pass the exams are left to stay in their village and continue the trend that has hampered their society. However, with the help of organizations like Janvikas Pratishthan, the future is looking more optimistic.

Janvikas insists on only “helping those who help themselves.” Their philosophy of community development is one that encourages fostering growth by empowering local citizens to become leaders in their community. For the purpose of my action plan, I examined the impact of Janvikas’ initiatives on girl students. I visited a number of schools in the Maval district; a pre-school, an elementary school (1st through 4th grade), a middle school (5th through 8th grade), and a high school (9th and 10th grade.) (see attached pictures). I met each of the principals and talked to each of them the classes that were offered, enrichment opportunities, girls’ education, and my own educational experience back home and how they differed from the ones in India. I found that talking with schoolteachers and principals about my own experience and asking meaningful questions built a sense of trust and mutual understanding. Through talking with the adults in charge, I understood how the most basic societal issues affected the success of girls in school. Many parents felt unsafe sending girls to school once they hit puberty because for fear of harassment on the way to school; others simply didn’t see the use for educating a girl who would likely become a stay at home mother for the rest of her life. Many girls are resigned to the fact that they won’t amount to much more than cooking and cleaning their house when they grow up. Janvikas offers tutors, teacher training, and other modes of guidance for members of the school community so they can further maximize the benefits of education on the schoolchildren. Through detailed discussions with all members of the
community, whether it was NGO workers, children, or adults who had lived in their village their whole life, I had realized that I had a deep interest in this issue for one of the first times in my life, and planned to spread awareness of it.

While I learned a great deal in my experience while visiting Janvikas Pratishtan and its communities, my time in India was not without its own share of struggles. Oftentimes, the situations I learned about and saw firsthand made it difficult to regain the sense of optimism I had arrived with. In addition to this, there was a slight but significant language barrier. While I speak the state language, Marathi, that is spoken in the villages, with moderate proficiency, it was hard to speak and catch on to the dialect that was spoken. Although this was something that every person from outside the villages experiences when entering for the first time, it certainly contributed to my feeling of being an “outsider” in a place where I was trying to become part of the community. I strongly suggest to people pursuing action plans overseas to become acquainted with the local language before diving in; communication with the ones you are trying to connect with is paramount.

I advanced to the next part of my action plan after I got back from India; spreading awareness through dialogue with community members back home and through a publication. For a dialogue, I had an open discussion and presentation with a ‘Global Issues’ class at Carrboro High School that a teacher and advisor of mine, Matt Cone, had been teaching. For me, the experience was meaningful as it gave me a chance to not only enhance my public speaking and discussion skills, but also inform a larger audience of kids my age and with similar interests about a topic that could influence their future aspirations. Some of the questions from the students included “What do the villagers think about moving to urban areas?” (an idea central to a book read in the class called Arrival City) and “How do girls get help with issues related to physical health and puberty, when many of these topics are taboo in the society?” The field of social work and community development can always use more heads and hands, and it is why one of the goals of my action plan was to get the word out about NGOs like Janvikas Pratishtan and the amazing work they do.

For my online blog publication, I found a website called everydayambassador.org with the help of my teacher Matt Cone, and published an article about my experiences in India with the help of
a staffer on the website, Meg VanDeusen. My article discussed some of the challenges, triumphs, and other stories from my time in India (provide a link to the article).

For my next step in my action plan, I hope to keep visiting Janvikas Pratishtan and learn from the amazing workers and community members, while continuing to talk with people on their situation and how they think it can be improved. At the heart of my Action Plan lies a strong belief of mine: many people want the jobs in public policy that allow them to write in big, sweeping changes, but very few actually desire to go into the field and meet the people they are impacting with their decisions. Because of this, I think the leadership and listening skills that can provide to communities like this can be invaluable, as the words of many often turn into whispers in the eyes of many policy-makers. I want to continue to involve members of my school community in this venture by encouraging them to read up on this issue and even visit some of the places they’re talking about. I’ve even had a couple of students come up to me and ask about how one could travel to areas like rural Maharashtra and see community development firsthand! While I realize it will be difficult to maintain commitment, my eventual goal is to stay in the villages for a period of time, and perhaps bring others with me. With each visit I take to the villages, I hope to become a stronger leader in the community. The logistics of this situation aren’t necessarily the easiest to overcome, but I feel that with proper motivation and organization I can follow through on my effort to make it happen.

In closing I am thankful that I attended Brown University’s program as it helped me to develop these ideas and made me take action. For current Leadership Institute students, I suggest finding topics for your action plans that are close to your heart. To me, the reason I was able to follow through this far on my action plan was because I was studying and developing a point of view on a topic that already intrigued me. We all have to find our calling in life, whatever shape or size it may come in. In addition, staying organized with weekly check-ins is as important to your completion of the project as anything else. Humility is also another big part of success in the community you are working in. If you are able to stay grounded and LISTEN to the people you are trying to learn from, your experience will be a fantastic one. I hope the Leadership Institute finds some really good Action Plans this year!