

Personal Statement
India, Sociology

Yah shakhti mere shareer mai hai, Madhu said as she looked me in the eyes, her hands still for the first time since she sat in the chair next to me that day. The room where I and three other American students came twice a week to teach informal English classes at the Rajasthan University Women's Association short-stay home for abused women was bare except for a table covered in a green plastic tablecloth and the metal folding chairs where we sat with the women. The ceiling fans swung blades at the summer heat and I found myself surprised at Madhu's words and sudden change in composure. "I have power inside myself," she told me.

Coming into college, I declared English as my major and was part of the Bonner Leader Program, with which I volunteered 300 hours with a community partner in the course of a year, developed as a leader, and went on alternative break trips both nationally and internationally. This program introduced me to concepts like social justice, privilege and oppression, and community building, which inspired me to switch my major to Sociology where these ideas seemed more practical and alive, and where my classes gave me analytic tools to learn more and create solutions for empowering my campus, my community, the world, and myself.

During my junior year, I led an alternative break trip to Morocco, where I, along with twelve other Bonner students, engaged the community of Rabat in service. I spent the two weeks at an orphanage in the ward for people with special needs, helping the nurses bathe, feed, and care for the people, who ranged from slight to extreme physical and mental disabilities. Getting to know the residents—particularly one teenage boy named Kamal who was bedridden and more isolated than the others—and seeing first-hand their difficult living conditions was radically unsettling at first, but it triggered a deepening empathy. Looking the people in the eyes as I bathed and fed them, I came to see them as courageous people who want love and dignity.

When we returned home, I initially felt defeated because, while we had "helped" Kamal and the orphanage, we weren't able to address broader social issues. However, though we weren't able to create sustained change, I was personally empowered because I had been changed—made aware of the judgments I had about people with disabilities. I grew increasingly motivated to interrupt oppression I saw in my own community, and inspired to pursue social change rooted in asset-based community development, which is a model for social change that identifies assets within a community to bring about change from within. I decided that, after my experience with Kamal, I wanted my career to involve bringing about sustained change for vulnerable people through precisely this type of empowerment in an international setting.

This past summer, I was able to test out this career goal after receiving a Critical Language Scholarship to further my Hindi language studies in Jaipur. While my mornings were devoted to Hindi classes, I chose to spend my afternoons teaching English at a women's center, forming relationships with the beautiful women like Madhu. They shared their stories with me, impressing upon me their personal power despite the difficult circumstances they found themselves forced into, and the impact learning English could have on their empowerment. When Madhu told me she felt power within herself that day in the sparsely furnished room, I was inspired. I had always imagined and even experienced India as a place where women are second-class citizens with limited power and voice. But my growth as a community activist and leader, along with the ways I have witnessed empowerment on a grass-roots level both at home and abroad, have informed my decision to pursue research as a Fulbright Scholar in India, exploring how NGOs in India dedicated to women's issues are themselves empowering—or failing to empower—women as leaders.