

# Project DOT: A New York City youth-driven, dual generational effort to re-envision social norms and promote healthy relationships

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

**Saswati Sarkar**

DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE

[New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault \(Project DOT\)](#)



**Gena Jefferson**

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**Joe-Ann Mathias**

YOUTH EDUCATOR

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Project Dream, Own, Tell (Project DOT) is a youth leadership program that engages young people from marginalized communities in shifting norms for healthy relationships in a community-responsive manner. [Social norms](#) function as unspoken rules or guidelines shared by a group of people that shape values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Project DOT was designed and launched in 2014 by the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault (the Alliance), an agency that looks at policy, prevention, and comprehensive intervention services, and provides training, technical assistance, and resources to rape crisis partners throughout the state of New York. As one of the Alliance's programs that is grounded in prevention, Project DOT gives young people the knowledge to think critically about how social norms are created within a community, and the tools to actively change those norms for the better through engaging peers and adults through curriculum, community mobilization, and social media campaigns.

## **THE FOUNDING OF PROJECT DOT: FILLING A GAP IN YOUTH PROGRAMMING ON HEALTHY NORMS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Prior to the creation of Project DOT, the Alliance went through a process of identifying the kinds of programs that existed in the community related to unpacking harmful social norms that contribute to sexual and dating abuse. They found that there was a significant lack of efforts tailored for young people from

marginalized communities. In their effort to address that issue Project DOT began by engaging youth from LGBTQ, Black, Latinx, East, South-East and South Asian communities. Recently they are bringing social norms education and community-level change to young men of color, Muslim young women, and Immigrant youth groups. Saswati Sarkar, Director of Program Administration and Finance at the Alliance, wanted to ensure that Project DOT was filling a gap in a meaningful way. As such, the Alliance is very deliberate and mindful in putting together curricula that centers the struggles and voices that are often missing from traditional youth programming on these issues.

At its heart, Project DOT works with young people to explore existing harmful norms related to masculinity, femininity, and the general tolerance of aggression and violence in their peer culture. They've found that since often few if any adults are talking to young people about these things, quite a wide knowledge gap exists.

### **PROJECT DOT ENGAGES THE COMMUNITY TO CHANGE SOCIAL NORMS**

One of the biggest lessons learned for Saswati and her work on Project DOT was that norms change is, at its core, a community effort. In order for the Alliance to work towards changing social norms, they had to truly understand the community they were interfacing with and their point of view on harmful social norms. As a staff, they constantly consider the question – “Is our strategy for norms-change community responsive, or are we further stereotyping and marginalizing the communities we are trying to help,” for example, by imposing something from outside the community onto the community. To ensure that they are fully community responsive, the Alliance has the people most affected by harmful social norms, like youth from communities of color, play an active role in changing them.

The main way that Project DOT ensures that the community plays an active role in changing harmful social norms is through participating in a leadership-based multi-week healthy relationship program. The curricula are designed with three main components: the first component is a 7-8 week educational curriculum that engages young people in understanding the differences between healthy and harmful social norms; the second component is a 4-6-



*Project DOT works with young people to explore existing harmful norms related to masculinity, femininity, and the general tolerance of aggression and violence in peer culture. Photo provided by: Project DOT.*

week initiative focused on community where the youth participants engage their community through community teach-ins, peer engagement, radio shows, and “chew and chats” (conversations between youth and significant adults over shared meals); the final component is a 4-week social media campaign that enables youth to reach their peers via youth created messaging campaigns (consisting of pictures, drawings, and multimedia videos) on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

In these last two phases of the curricula, young people take what they’ve learned through the program, share it back with their community, and engage in dialogue. When Joe-Ann Mathias, a former participant and current Project Dot youth educator first started the program, she was surprised that she didn't know as much as she thought she did when it came to the concepts and ideas being taught, like what a healthy relationship looks like. On her experience in the program, she says, “Being a youth at the time, I would go back to my friends and share everything that I was learning. It became second nature to me and my vocabulary changed. I started using [the term] 'consent' more. My friends would not understand what that meant and that would be a perfect opportunity for me to share what I had learned with Project DOT.”

### **YOUTH ENGAGING ADULTS IN THE DISCUSSION IS KEY TO CHANGING HARMFUL SOCIAL NORMS**

In rolling out Project DOT, one of the big themes that surfaced among young people was the fact that they were getting most of their knowledge about dating and relationships from popular culture, rather than from parents or other adults in their lives. This was concerning to Project DOT staff and became the impetus for young people to host a radio show and teach-in that addressed parents and other significant adults in the community and the impact that a lack of adult advice on these important issues was having on youth.

In these conversations, the young people discovered that many adults had never learned how to speak about healthy relationships or gender norms with their kids, nor talked with their parents about these issues; they also heard that these same adults were interested in breaking that cycle. With that feedback, a group of young leaders organized a four-hour parent training that invited adults to learn about ways to support young people and to have productive conversations about gender norms, tolerance of aggression, and dating violence.

Since having youth play a primary role in engaging adults is key to Project DOT, it's important that youth get involved from the start. Gena Jefferson, who oversees Project DOT notes, “Young people really want to be heard – if you can find a way to give them a voice, you'll get them in.” As such, Project DOT is very deliberate in how they reach out and encourage youth to join the program. They do so by making sure that the language on their communications materials is accessible and appropriate for the audiences they are trying to reach, offering youth stipends to



*Youth create campaign content on healthy relationships. Photo provided by Project DOT.*



*Young people engage adults in a “chew and chat” session on gender norms, tolerance of aggression, and dating violence. Photo provided by Project DOT.*

support transportation, having food available, and awarding certificates at the end of the project.

### **PROJECT DOT'S IMPACT: INCREASING KNOWLEDGE, DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP, AND INFLUENCING ADULTS IN MANY SECTORS**

Saswati recognizes the program's overall success and notes, “Nothing would have been possible if we hadn't had the guidance of young people.” To measure the success of the program, they have been doing evaluations, mostly in the form of pre- and post-curricula tests for youth that assess knowledge and awareness related to gender norms, consent, healthy relationships, and bystander behavior/intervention. Through these evaluations, Project DOT has found promising improvements and changes in youth's understanding of these issues and how they play a role in sexual and dating abuse.

Sometimes, the work that young people do through Project DOT has an unexpected impact on community members. Saswati gave an example of a youth-led campaign where youth pulled out harmful messages shared through song lyrics and transformed them into messages of consent. A record company saw this campaign and reached out to Project DOT to share that they never knew that music had so much power in terms of some of the harmful norms the record company was putting out. For Saswati, this confession was a great reminder that sometimes people outside of the field of sexual and dating abuse prevention are not actively thinking about issues related to harmful norms and unhealthy relationships – and that young people's work to educate others can have a significant, lasting impact.

In addition to the program's measurable success that can be seen in its enrollment numbers and test scores, there's also the harder to measure success found in the experiences of Project DOT participants. On the impact that the program has had on her, Joe-Ann says, “The fact that I can be part of a change...really makes me feel like a leader in my community. This is work that you can take with you wherever you go no matter how old you are. I've grown so much not only as a leader but as a woman -- standing in my truth and what it is that I want for myself and my community.”

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Saswati Sarkar is the director of program administration and finance at the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault. In this role, she wears multiple hats including, directing the Alliance's research and community-based prevention efforts and leading the NYC Sexual Violence Prevention Regional Center. She designed and launched Project DOT back in 2014. Working with youth and community partners has been one of the most enriching experiences at the Alliance.

Gena Jefferson is the founder and executive director of JAIA (Just As I Am) YOUth Empowerment, a leadership program for teens and young adults offering workshops and trainings in mindfulness and personal development. Gena is also the senior prevention manager at the NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault overseeing Project DOT. She draws upon these two roles to build Project DOT's work.

Joe-Ann Mathias started as a participant in Project DOT through JAIA YOUth Empowerment. As the youth educator, Joe-Ann co-facilitates DOT sessions and conducts outreach. She is now a student at LaGuardia College and also the creator of "For the Love of Joe" a space for women to love and support one another.

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## RESOURCES

- [Project DOT website](#)
- WNYC, New York public radio segments on the need for Project Dot in NYC's diverse communities:
  - [Immigrant Parents, American Kids and the Sex Talk](#)
  - [How First-Generation New Yorkers Handle Street Harassment](#)
  - [#FirstGenSexTalk: Your Stories of Growing Up with Immigrant Parents](#)
  - [#FirstGenSexTalk: Challenging Stereotypes](#)
- [Article on Gothamist about the importance of Project Dot](#)
- [Social Media Campaign: Social media campaign that was created by South-east Asian, East Asian, and Black youth here. Share and tag Project DOT: @NYCAlliance on Instagram and @NYCAASA on Twitter.](#)
- [Community Mobilization Example: Written and created by youth to talk about victim blaming.](#)

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