


**the  {in}dependent
project**



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Designed by
Rutvika Gupta

Advised by
Miya Osaki



Preface

When I began my journey, I felt strongly about using my thesis project to begin to define my values for my future practice as a social designer. The road has been far from simple or straight. With every twist and turn, I was forced to pause, reflect and turn the next corner with humility and courage. I have had several moments of doubt that turned into strength when I went back to the assets I always had with me; my community, my advisors, my loving cohort, my parents, and most of all, a blank drawing board.

I reflected on my role as a designer, as a citizen in a community of immigrants, as an ally, as a woman of color – all pieces I believe defined my process and my values. I built relationships with strangers that trusted me with their stories, their experiences, their future, and allowed me inside their community with open arms.

This journey has been a process of deep listening and trust – both in my community, but also in myself. It has been about ensuring that all my actions felt congruent to my values of equity, transparency, and compassion. It has been about ensuring that I remained committed to my community’s needs and allowing that to be the compass throughout. It has been about letting myself feel pride in the bright spots, and despair in the darker ones. It has been about reframing what I thought were “losses” into moments of deep learning. It has been about taking constant inspiration from my community’s resilience and courage. It has been about finding my own courage.

While this part of the journey is nearing the end, it is only the beginning. I can’t wait to apply what I have learned in my future practice and to continue to work with my community and others as an ally and a facilitator. *The future of social change is bright...*

“Design is the best way to get from A to B when you don’t yet know what B is.”

Cheryl Heller
Chair, Design for Social Innovation





Forward

My thesis journey began with a community that I felt like I had the cultural context to work with, a community I was already a part of — **South Asian women in the United States**. As an Indian woman in the U.S., I was aware of the cultural contexts that informed our experiences as well as tensions, questions, and gaps. I used my personal knowledge and experiences to help me find a starting point for my journey. I explored several different avenues but they all kept pointing back to one overarching theme: **mental health**. Talking about mental health in any culture is difficult, but being a South Asian woman made it that much harder.

Through my journey, however, I began realizing that the problem came second to my community. By grouping South Asian women as a single community, I was discounting the fact that they are a diverse group of women with very unique experiences. Thus my first defining moment was the decision to no longer interchangeably use “South Asian women” as my target audience. I had to get more specific and that’s where I landed into my community – a group of women bound not only by their race and culture, but by their experiences.

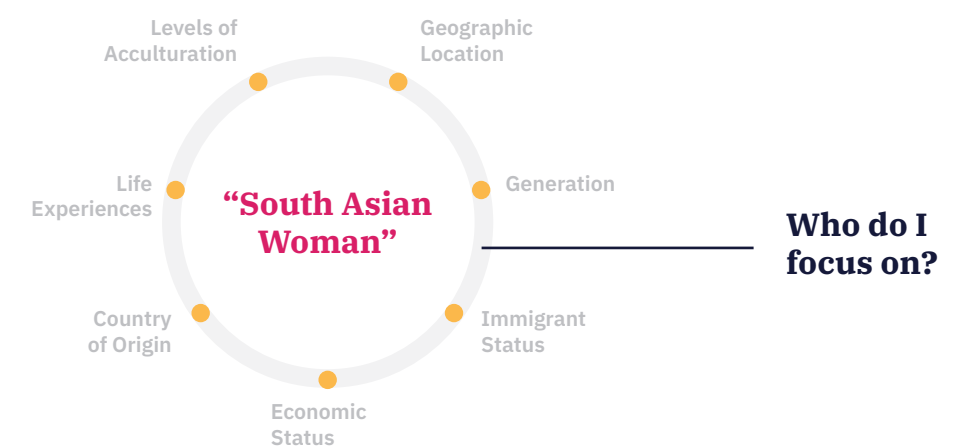
It’s strange that even though my journey took me seemingly far from mental health, it still ended up being at the core of the issue I spent the year working on. My second defining moment was listening to my community and realizing that while I was exploring mental health as the cause, it was instead a symptom of their experiences – thus leading me to zoom out, and focus on the actual root cause.

Looking back at my values and the issues I am interested in, it is only fitting that my thesis, **The {In}Dependent Project**, ended up at the intersection of the four spaces I am most passionate about: *gender justice, civic engagement, education, and a sliver of healthcare*.

I often think we must reflect on where we started to make sense of where we ended up. My year-long journey began with exploring the various layers of barriers that South Asian women in the U.S. face in accessing and utilizing mental health services.

Over the summer, I conducted extensive research with several South Asian women. I heard their stories and experiences about not being able to combat cultural stigma to ask for the help they needed. I heard about horrific experiences of finding help that was culturally incompetent – causing the women to end their journey of seeking help.

However, in these stories I was hearing a variety of experiences and quickly realized, “South Asian women” isn’t a singular community. This community encompasses women from 8 different countries¹ which means their experiences are extremely diverse. The experience of a Pakistani woman is very different from that of an Indian woman and so forth. Beyond simply their country of origin, there were further differentiators such as generations, levels of acculturation, geographic location, economic status, immigrant status, and major situations or experiences. I thus decided that I could not proceed until I selected a very specific segment of this community to focus on.



It's
been
a wild,
wild
road...



ONE: RESEARCH

**Learning from
the Community**

Who are H-4 Visa Holders
Key Learnings

Page 14

**Pivoting the
Direction**

Skilled Immigration
Present vs. Future

Page 24

**Scoping the
Direction**

What is Action?
Who Do We Activate?

Page 30

TWO: PROTOTYPING

**Designing in
the Workplace**

The Coworkers Angle
DIY Intervention

Page 38

**Starting the
Conversation**

Dear Allies,
One Foot Forward

Page 42

**Gatherings as
a Medium**

Chaat & Commenting
Informal Trainings

Page 46

THREE: INTERVENTION

**Dear
Citizens**

Final Intervention
Scaling

Page 55

**Piloting &
Measuring**

Initial Pilot
Measurement

Page 66

**Looking into
the Future**

Looking Beyond
Final Learnings

Page 81

One: Research

Learning from the Community 14

Who are H-4 Visa Holders?
Key Learnings

Pivoting the Direction 24

The Larger System – Skilled Immigration
The Present vs. the Future

Scoping the Direction 30

What is Action?
Who Do We Activate?





01 Learning from the Community

Zooming in on the Community

When probing a few mental health professionals on specific segments of South Asian women who may face additional barriers in accessing mental health services, **newly arrived immigrants** kept coming up. Having the privilege of being a citizen, this was a segment I hadn't thought to look to at all. This led me down the path of trying to better understand our massive, opaque system of immigration and the various types of immigrants that make up our country.

At this same time, I came across an article called, "**The Untold Stories of H1-B Wives**"² and suddenly, I knew exactly who could be my community for the next year...

"Inter-continental relocation is displacement in reality, even if it happens by choice."³

Dipti Nair
YourStory, "*The Untold Stories of H1-B Wives*"

Who are "H-4 Visa Holders"?

Known by several names – *H-4 Visa Holder*, *Dependent Spouse*, *H1-B Wife*, *Visa Wives* – the community of H-4 visa holders is made up of the spouses of highly-skilled professional immigrant workers.

Their visa status is entirely dependent on their spouse, but beyond that, there is a very specific restriction that allows them to live in the U.S. H-4 visa holders are **unable to earn or receive any form of income while they stay in the U.S.**

While there is no clear data on the total number of H-4 visa holders in the U.S., from 2014-2017, there were about 500,000 H-4 visas issued.⁴

"Statistics indicate that 94% of H-4 visa holders are women, and of these, 93% are from India."⁵



Priya Chandrasekaran, an H-4 Holder was unable to work for five years after she moved to the U.S. in 2010.

Photo Credit: Priya Chandrasekaran, Retrieved from pbs.org

2,3. Nair, Dipti. "The Untold Stories of H1-B Visa Wives." YourStory.com.

4. Non-Immigrant Visa Statistics, U.S. Department of State.

5. "Migrant Wives: The Harsh Reality of Indian H4 Visa Holders, Who Must Remain Dependent on Spouses or Live Illegally." Firstpost.



Connecting with the Community

Reading more about this community through secondary research and seeing various instances of affected mental health – and even high rates of domestic violence – I knew I had found a specific community. However, this was still a community that I had no access to. I had no idea how they felt about me working with them – a critical value in my process.

I immediately joined several Facebook groups catered to the community of H-4 visa holders and introduced myself. I sent out a survey focused on mental health to try and better understand their specific experience and received 86 responses and also a pipeline of individuals who were willing to speak to me in-depth through an interview.

In most of the articles I read, one name came up repeatedly – **Meghna Damani**. A filmmaker, and previously a dependent spouse herself, she created a documentary, “*Hearts Suspended*” that shared her own story and raised a large amount of awareness on the issue. I connected with her and she became my first direct connection to the community. Through her networks, I was able to access other women and through conducting a small workshop with her, I was able to better understand the experience of a woman on the H-4 Visa.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does a dependent spouse’s situation affect her mental health?

(Below) Meghna Damani advocating with others on Capitol Hill in 2015⁶



Interacting with the Community

Although I had began to create connections to the community, a key reality of my process was that none of the women whom I was speaking to lived in New York City. This required me to both get creative, and comfortable with doing a bulk of my primary research over the phone, video calls, and sometimes even messages.

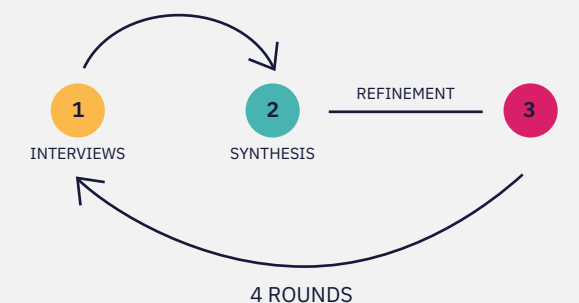
The women were very kind with their time but due to their busy schedules, interviews were rapid and sometimes conducted over a series of phone sessions. Women spoke to me in hushed tones during their short work breaks, they called me during their commute... I even spoke to a mother driving her kids around the block to put them to sleep at night. I FaceTimed a mother, and her son who refused to leave us.

Through these micro-interactions, I was still able to get a glimpse into these women’s lives. These were women with identities that were far more than the singular identity of a dependent spouse. These were mothers, wives, neighbors, co-workers, community members. These women were warriors, and were not only juggling their professional and personal lives, but were also giving me time and telling me they want to do anything they possibly can to make change towards their situation.

Because of the busy nature of their lives, I quickly realized on-your-own time probes weren’t as effective, and that semi-structured interviews not only gave me insights, but also gave them space to share their stories.

MY RESEARCH APPROACH

I conducted four rounds of primary research that included semi-structured interviews with 4-5 women in each. Each round built on the previous one, and my line of questioning incorporated the findings from my synthesis and analysis to keep the process agile.





Key Learnings from the Community

Dependent Spouses do not have support structures to help them acclimate to a new country and lifestyle, which takes a deep toll on their mental health.

Most dependent wives come to the United States to join their husbands (who were often already working in the country, sponsored by their employers) and find themselves in cities defined by their husbands' jobs. They don't have any friends or family waiting to help them assimilate into this foreign country and brand-new lifestyle. Many of these women can go days before seeing anyone but their husbands. This lack of support and interaction with others soon starts taking a deep toll on their mental health and well-being, causing feelings of depression

Being unable to enter the workplace affects Dependent Spouses' ability to integrate into American society, which leaves them feeling like an outsider.

Being unable to have the freedom to work makes the women feel like they aren't a part of American society. They deeply question their role and value in society and also at home, since they are unable to contribute to any household expenses. Grappling with feelings of being undervalued – despite being qualified and ambitious – lowers their self-esteem.

“Being alone in this country....It's traumatic. 5 years ago, I lost my baby.. I don't think I recovered for years, I would say... I didn't really have my people or you know, the support system to kind of... kind of process it.”

Avantika*
H-4 Holder

Dependent Spouses do not have channels for utilizing their skills and talents in meaningful ways, leaving them with a lack of fulfillment and diminishing sense of self and confidence.

Most of these women are also highly skilled, if not as or more skilled than their husbands. Not being able to enter the workforce and use their skills has a hugely detrimental effect not only on their mental health, but also their sense of self and self-confidence. Most of these women had flourishing careers back home in India, and upon coming to the U.S., they have to reconcile with giving that up. Often, their only options to find a sense of fulfillment are through volunteering or going to the library. They are further isolated when other members of the Indian community can not relate to their situation. Often, they are met with judgement or unrealistic expectations from other Indians, including their families back home.

Dependent Spouses' mobility can be affected due to their high dependence on their spouse, leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

The high levels of dependency – both financial and emotional – on their husbands further affects their mobility and sense of independence. Simple things like receiving a driver's license requires their spouses approval and they are unable to receive a Social Security number or open a bank account. The implications of these dependencies could be far worse in cases of domestic abuse.

“I was so dependent even for my basic needs...sanitary napkins or just going out and having fun with my friends...for every little thing. You know, I can't buy a car. I can't open a bank account... nothing.. I was totally dependent on him.”

Sharmi
H-4 Holder

“It’s kind of like you’re expected to be working if you’re here. At least in the Indian community, I don’t know otherwise. I remember we would all get together and everyone would be like, what do you do? So it’s like either you’re working or you’ve had a child...

If you’re not doing either, then what are you doing?”

Meghna Damani
Filmmaker, Former H-4 Holder

Meghna’s Story

This story is about Meghna, who grew up in India. Working ever since she graduated, her life was busy. Her career was everything to her and she saw work as a place of growth, community, and validation.

Meghna worked with large clients at an advertising agency, modeled, and was a writer. She was skilled, passionate, and focused. She saw herself as driven, confident, and bold.

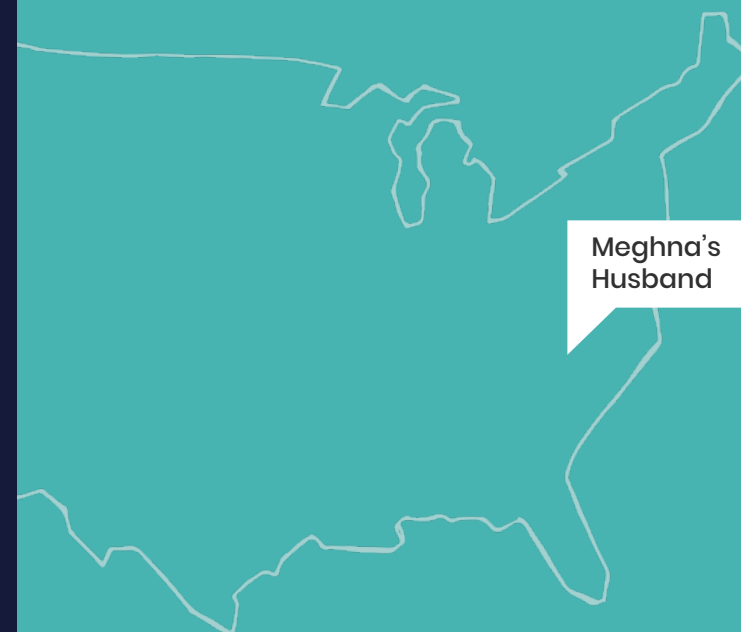
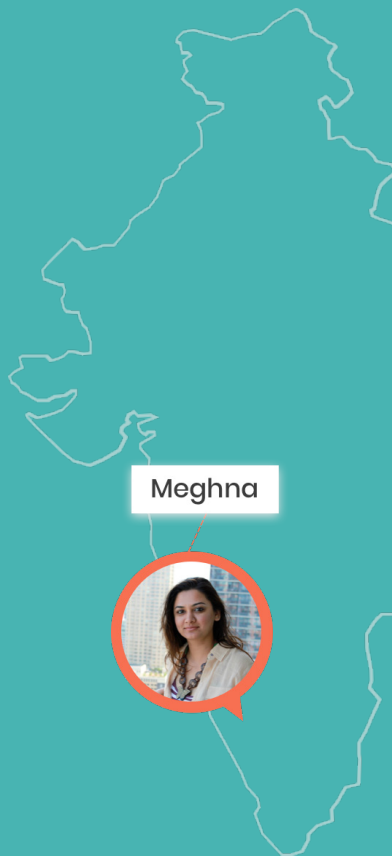
When she was 25, she got married. But soon after, her husband’s job took him to the United States. The only way she could join him was through the H-4 visa, under the condition that she would not be allowed to work or earn any form of income in the country.

And just like that, Meghna lost all her previous identities and was given the singular label of a dependent wife.

Unable to earn her own income or even get a driver’s license without her husband’s approval, Meghna was completely dependent on her husband. The only places she would go on her own were places she could get to by foot.

Living trapped like this took a toll on her self-confidence and how she viewed herself. Meghna would go days at a time without seeing anyone but her husband and she disconnected from her family and friends because they couldn’t relate to what she was going through. She was diagnosed with severe depression, and even battled with suicidal feelings.

Meghna spent 10 years of her life like this - feeling absolutely hopeless and powerless, like she was slowly becoming invisible.





As a Dependent Spouse, I need...

EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Support from H1-B employers in the form of career guidance and mental health counseling, and understanding and awareness about my situation in my community.

AVENUES TO CONTRIBUTE

Ways to match my skills and interests to needs in the community as a form of involvement, and being able to contribute in meaningful and productive ways.

SPACES TO BE HEARD

A space or platform to share my story, frustrations, problems, and needs in order to gain a sense of validation and comfort from external sources.

“These women need tools to plan... if they want to get a life coach, get a therapist, enroll in a course, have an honest dialogue with their husband...”

Meghna
Filmmaker, Former H-4 Holder

WAYS TO FIND COMMUNITY

Avenues to support other newly arrived H-4 holders, and help them integrate in the community to form a network of women experiencing similar situations.

RESOURCES

A way to be prepared on how to make a plan for the time period of being unable to work, manage my time and find available services and options.

MOTIVATION

A way to be exposed to other women going through the same things to regain hope and strength, and gain a consistent source of motivation, mentorship, and encouragement.





02 Pivoting the Direction

Understanding the Larger System

The Skilled Immigration system is extremely complex. I spoke with Andrew Moriarty, an expert at FWD.US, an organization that deals with immigration reform and advocacy, extensively to better understand the larger system. I learned that while many of the women come to the U.S. on the H-4 visa, their status and ability to work would change once their family receives their **Green Card** i.e. once they become permanent residents of the country.

However, this system and process has a fundamental flaw – there are limits to the number of people who receive their Green Card, depending on the country they come from. This is known as the **Per Country Limit**.

The reality for many H-4 visa holders and their spouses is that the volume of individuals from India who are applying for a Green Card far exceeds the total number of Green Cards available. Over the years, this has resulted in a massive backlog – known as the **Green Card Backlog** – of people waiting to receive their permanent residency, even though they have been approved to do so. *People are waiting in this holding pattern for 8, 10, 12 years, simply because they are from a country like India.*

GREEN CARD

Allows one to live and work permanently in the U.S. – also known as Lawful Permanent Resident Card.

PER COUNTRY LIMIT

Each country has a numerical limit of 7% or 9,800 / 140,000 Green Cards issued per year, regardless of its population.⁷

GREEN CARD BACKLOG

When the number of approved applicants from a certain country are more than the number of Green Cards allowed to be issued, a line of applicants in waiting is created.

“How long will we have to wait for the Green Card or you know... finally be able to call this place our home even after 8 years of living here?”

Binny
H-4 Holder

The Bright Glimmer of Hope

In 2015, the Obama Administration recognized that during this time of waiting there is a whole pool of talent and skills that is remaining underutilized. He thus proposed a rule that would allow those dependent spouses whose Green Cards had been approved to receive a work authorization – the **H4-EAD (Employment Authorization Document)**.

In just 3 years, over 100,000 H-4 holders received their right to work; over 93% of them were women⁸.

Since I had accessed most of the women I had spoken to through Facebook groups, it so happened that most of them were recipients of this work authorization i.e. the H4-EAD and had immediately started working once they were able to. Most of my initial research with them was focused on understanding what their experience coming to the country was and how that affected their mental health. However, in our conversations I started noticing that most of the women were hesitant to talk about their past and instead, there was something larger happening that was on their minds.

The Trump Administration: An Uncertain Future

When the current administration released their Unified Agenda in 2016, they stated their intention to revoke the H4-EAD work authorization program under the argument that it was taking away jobs from Americans. For the past two years, the women who received their right to work have been living in a long, painful period of uncertainty. The current administration is threatening to place them all the way back to where they started – dependent and invisible. There are massive amounts of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty within the H4-EAD community, and the feeling of hope is quickly diminishing.

These women have little to no support and few sources of encouragement for them to feel hopeful about their situation. Further, they lack any tools to feel like they can affect change towards it. There are no safe spaces for them to share their stories, both with other H-4 women and also the general community including decision and lawmakers.

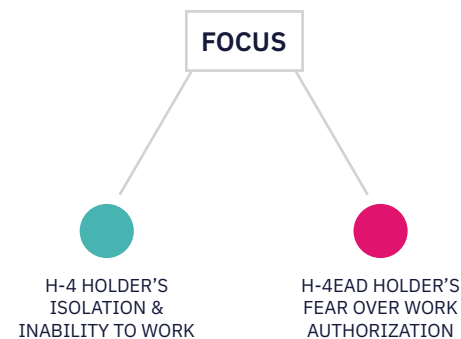


The Present vs. The Future

Learning more about the system of Skilled Immigration, especially the changes being made by the current administration helped me map out the pathway of H4-EAD visa holders in the current state as opposed to focusing on H-4 visa holders as a whole.

There was a clear distinction between the experiences of an H4-EAD holder versus an H-4 holder, and once again I was at a fork in the road. I could either focus on the past experiences of the women, or I could focus on their current sentiments of fear and anxiety over their future and right to work being taken away.

Going back to my original research question of “**how does a dependent spouse’s situation affect her mental health,**” I saw that in this case, mental health was a *SYMPTOM* of their situation but the root cause was clear – this community was given a right and now that right was potentially being taken away.



This wasn't just about mental health, this issue was about basic human rights.

Thus, my thesis direction changed from focusing on the past to thinking about the *future*. I also scoped my audience within the H-4 visa community to the women who were already working and had an H4-EAD.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How might we help dependent spouses protect their right to work?

“ I’m anxious, I’m nervous... I don’t want to go back to the time I was...just, you know, I was a mother, I was a wife but I wasn’t “me”. I got to be me after a huge gap and I want to continue to be me. So all this makes me very anxious and nervous.”

Sharmi
H4-EAD Holder

A Highly-Skilled Worker's Employer applies for

H-1B VISA

TEMPORARY WORK AUTHORIZATION
which allows the worker to enter the U.S. and work for that specific employer for a temporary period of time

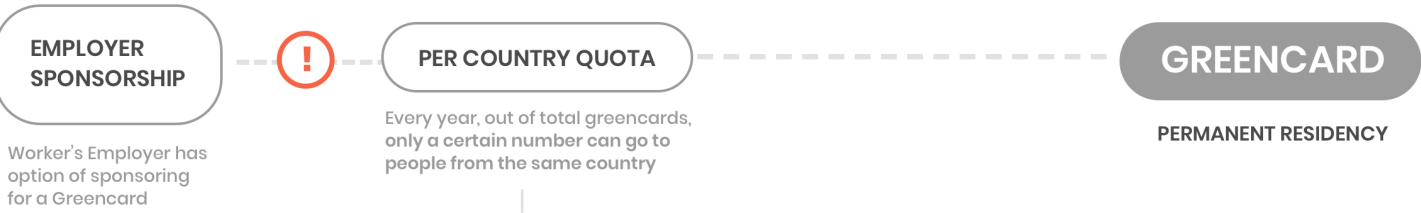


The spouse of the H-1B worker receives

H4 VISA

DEPENDENT VISA
which allows the spouse of an H-1B visa holder to come to the United States

BUT does not provide them with the authorization to work, although a majority of them are highly-skilled



Every year, out of total greencards, only a certain number can go to people from the same country

COUNTRIES LIKE INDIA, CHINA, MEXICO, THE PHILIPPINES ARE AFFECTED DUE TO THE HIGH FLOW OF TALENT

BACKLOG

WORKERS FROM INDIA ETC. ARE HAVING TO WAIT IN LINE FOR DECADES TO GET A GREENCARD

STUCK IN TEMPORARY STATUS FOR DECADES

H4 VISA HOLDERS SPENDING DECADES UNABLE TO WORK

OBAMA INTRODUCED H4EAD POLICY IN 2015

which gave over 100,000 spouses who had approved Greencard applications (90% of whom are women from India) the right to start working in the U.S.

BUT NOW BECAUSE OF



TRUMP'S UNIFIED AGENDA
states process to remove H4EAD will be instated

A LAWSUIT BY SAVE JOBS USA
A pro "more jobs for Americans" group

H4EAD IS IN DANGER OF BEING REVOKED

OVER 100,00 HIGHLY SKILLED WOMEN COULD LOSE THEIR ABILITY TO WORK AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR FAMILY & SOCIETY

GREENCARD

PERMANENT RESIDENCY

BEFORE

HAVE TO RENEW H-1B

DEFERENCE
If H-1B application was approved the first time, renewal decision is deferred to first decision and renewal is pushed forward

REQUEST FOR IMMINENT
If a piece of evidence is missing from application, worker is sent a letter asking to provide the piece of evidence

NOW

CURRENT ADMINISTRATION REMOVED DEFERENCE AND REQUEST FOR IMMINENT

RENEWAL PROCESS IS LONGER AND MORE DIFFICULT

If renewal takes too long
OR
if the application is denied

STUCK WITHOUT LEGAL STATUS

HAVE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

HAVE TO FIND LEGAL MANEUVER

- Buying a house
- Having a kid
- Moving
- Investing in education

LONG-TERM LIFE DECISIONS FOR THE FAMILY ARE DIFFICULT

Mapping the Entire System of Skilled Immigration

- H-1B visa holders are authorized to work
- H4 visa holders are not authorized to work
- H-1B's pathway to getting a Greencard



03 Scoping the Direction

Now that my direction had moved more towards the future state of the women's right to work, I went back to experts and members of advocacy organizations to better understand what could actually be done about the women's situation. I was exposed to a process that helped them receive their right to work in the first place – a process called **Public Commenting**.

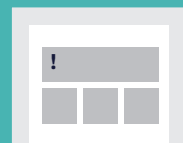
Action = *Public Commenting*

The administration's decision to revoke the H4-EAD comes under a process known as **Federal Rulemaking** – a process where a government agency wants to make changes to an existing rule, or create a new one.

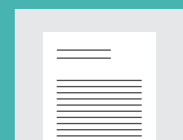
Part of the beauty of our democracy is that we still have a voice. Public Commenting is a part of Rulemaking, where the govt. must open their proposed rule to solicit feedback from the public to improve the rule.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

1
RULE IS DRAFTED
BY GOVT. AGENCY



2
RULE IS PUBLISHED
IN FEDERAL REGISTER



3
RULE IS OPENED FOR
PUBLIC COMMENTING



Since the H4-EAD rule is a part of Federal Rulemaking, the Dept. of Homeland Security cannot simply take it away.

The decision to revoke the H4-EAD has to be opened to the public for 30-60 days, where anyone can weigh in and comment on whether or not they agree with the government's decision to revoke dependent spouses' right to work in the U.S.

I also learned that every unique comment matters. The government has to defend their decision on the basis of each comment when they publish their final rule, but if they decide to publish the rule as is, any group of affected individuals can sue the government agency and the comments in support of them act as evidence since they are a part of public record.

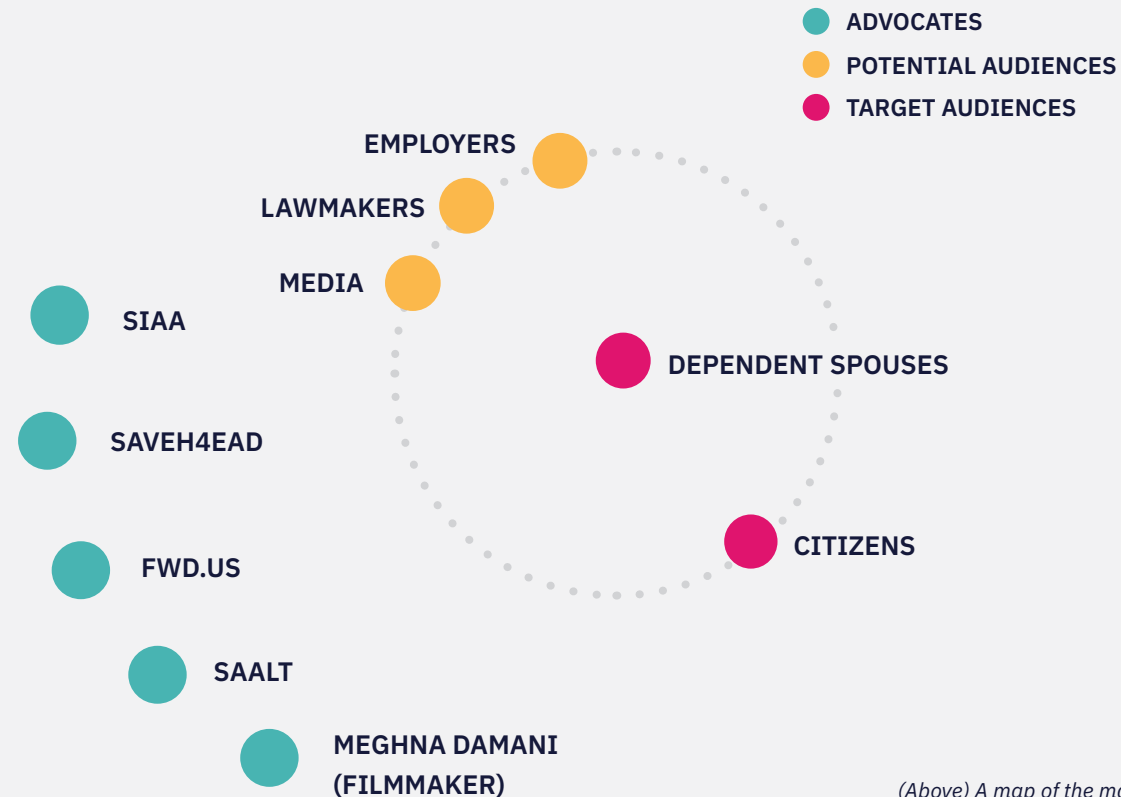
This process was a direct form of affecting change on the women's situation, and from this, I honed in further on my direction – **pointing people to participate in the process of public commenting to support H4-EAD holders.**

THESIS QUESTION

How might we activate people to participate in public commenting to support dependent spouses?

“This is a very complicated issue. It's a very complex and oftentimes legal one. How do we make that a human story and then how do we get someone then to take a meaningful action, based on it? A meaningful action, not just, you know, tweet that this is really important, but actually file a public comment or something like that.”

Andrew Moriarty
Deputy Director of Federal Policy, FWD.US



(Above) A map of the major stakeholders in the current ecosystem

Which People Do We Activate?

I decided to focus on **dependent spouses** and **citizens** as my core audiences, since I already had access to several dependent spouses and had learned that citizens were a particularly influential leverage point because if the Government's argument to take the H4-EAD away was that American citizens' jobs are being taken away, their support could help show that this is not true.

There was a brief moment where I decided to try and look into working with employers since their participation would be a huge leverage point but due to a lack of access to both them and also lawmakers, I decided not to pursue them as my key audience. I also spoke to a few dependent spouses and could sense their hesitation when I mentioned going the route of employers, and hence narrowed my focus.

Where are the Gaps in Current Efforts?

Now that I had narrowed down both the change I wanted to work on – **Public Commenting**, as well as the communities I would be working with – **H4-EAD holders and Citizens**, the final critical question was to assess what advocacy organizations were already doing, so I could ensure I was focusing on the gaps and not simply duplicating their efforts.

Throughout my process, I had been interviewing several members of **SaveH4EAD**, a key online advocacy group where I found several of the women I worked with. Talking to them helped me gain better insight into what they were working on, where they saw the gaps, and some larger gaps between the advocacy group and individual dependent spouses.

GAPS IN ACTIVATING DEPENDENT SPOUSES

Some advocacy efforts are disengaging dependent spouses because their values are not aligned, or they are asking for high levels of engagement, such as asking for participation for in-person meetings with lawmakers.

Dependent spouses want to share their story and do something, but feel like as individuals, they can't make any difference.

GAPS IN ACTIVATING ENGAGED CITIZENS

Many civically engaged citizens are unaware of what dependent spouses are going through, and that public commenting is a process they can engage in – and that their participation matters!

Advocacy organizations are largely targeting the media and lawmakers, but are not engaging a key community of citizens, despite experts saying that their participation matters because they are voting, tax-paying individuals.

Thus there were key gaps in terms of both dependent spouses and citizens, and this ultimately defined my final thesis direction.

FINAL THESIS STATEMENT

1. How might we connect dependent spouses with citizens to make the women feel like they can affect change as individuals?

2. How might we increase citizen awareness and participation in the public commenting period to support dependent spouses?

Two: Prototyping

Designing in the Workplace 38

The Coworker Angle

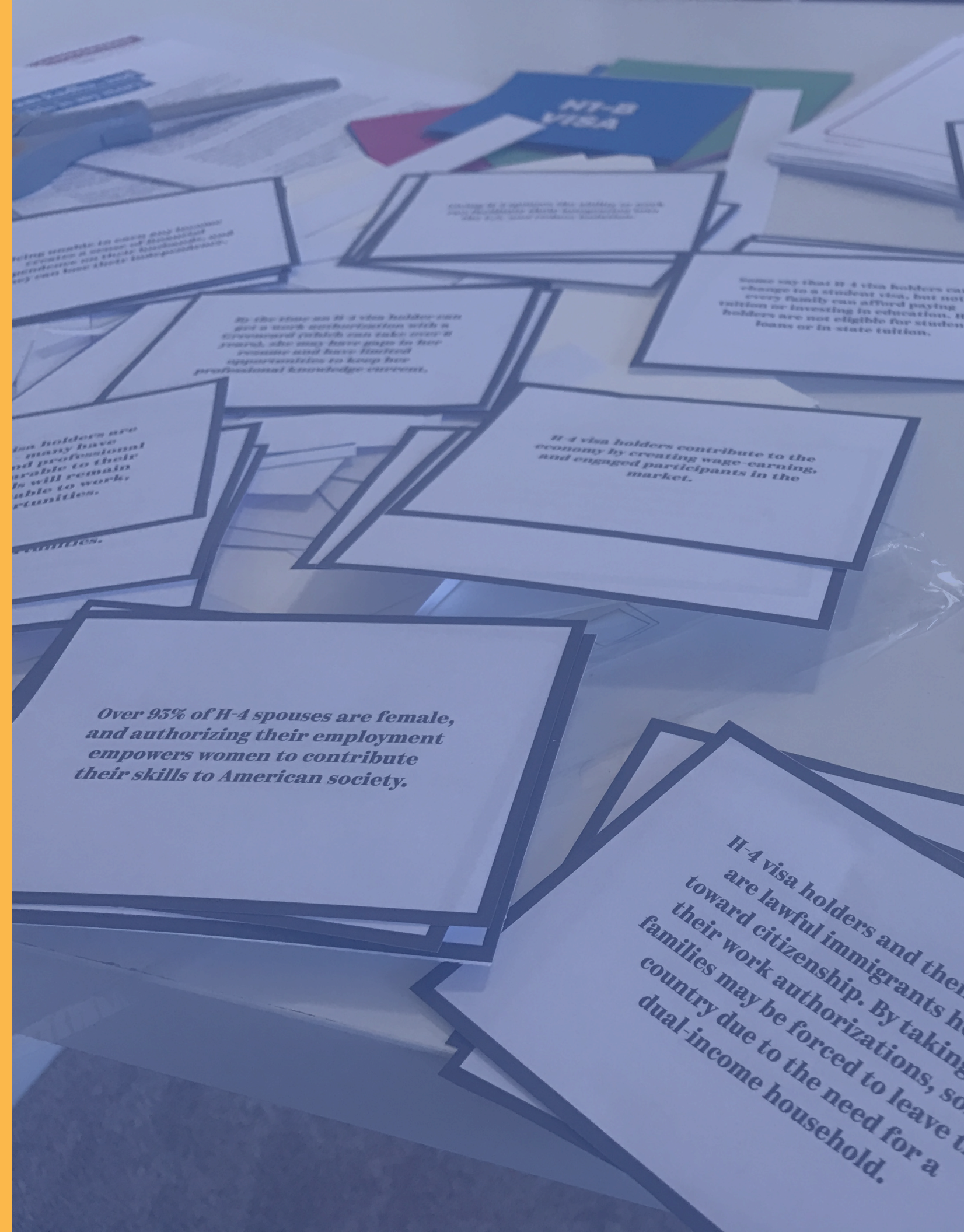
DIY Intervention

Starting the Conversation 42

Dear Allies,
One Foot Forward

Gatherings as a Medium 46

Chaat & Commenting





Starting to Make.

From November onwards, I began turning the insights I had collected during all my primary research into action. I used a process of rapid prototyping to help me think through making; first starting small and then refining to become more specific.

Similar to my challenges during primary research, I had to prototype while working around the fact that none of my community members were located in NYC. I realized how critical in-person access was for rapid prototyping and having to do some of this process virtually slowed me down a bit.

TRANSPARENCY & AGENCY

Another challenge was explaining the design process to my community in an accessible and simple way. Many of the community members were willing to do “as much as they could” but I **wanted to ensure that they knew upfront what the process was and had agency in deciding how much they wanted to be involved** since they were already busy with so many other parts of their lives.

CONFIDENCE TO CONTRIBUTE

I found that most of the women wanted to share their stories and found great relief in it. However, when it came to coming up with ideas or thinking of a better future, most of them struggled. Hence most of my process was finding ways to get their feedback on ideas that **didn’t overwhelm them but also allowed them the confidence to contribute their ideas.**

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

Through the advocacy group on Facebook, I was able to track the responses my various posts got as well as posts from other folks doing work in this space (like authors, journalists, and even Meghna, the filmmaker).

I soon saw a pattern of an overwhelming response for posts asking for H4-EAD holders to share their story but any asks that were bigger, like my ask for brainstorming, got a relatively lower response. I saw my posts in the group (like the flyer on the right) as prototype for me to start seeing what the most effective way to encourage participation was, and realized that **I had to provide for levels of participation.**

THE {IN}DEPENDENT PROJECT

Dear H4EAD holders,

**What if you could activate citizens
in your community to support your
work authorizations?**

THE {IN}DEPENDENT PROJECT is my Master’s Design Thesis aiming to collaborate with H4EAD holders to brainstorm and implement creative ways citizens can be activated as allies.

You are invited to participate in in-person (if you are in the NYC/NJ area) or remote brainstorming sessions to co-design something that can help the H4EAD community!

If you are interested in attending a brainstorming session, or want to learn more about the project, please contact Rutvi at rgupta3@gmail.com or message me on Facebook.

(above) An early flyer I created to post in advocacy groups in order to try and create a user group for prototyping.

THE WORK SHEET

THIS WORKSHEET IS MEANT TO HELP YOU REFLECT ON YOUR WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT. PLEASE COMPLETE THE ACTIVITIES IN THE ORDER THEY ARE NUMBERED, AND DON'T WORRY - THERE'S NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS HERE!

(YOUR NAME)

(YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS)

I. MADLIBS

Please fill in the blanks using the word prompts below each blank. If none of those prompts fit your situation, please feel free to add your own word.

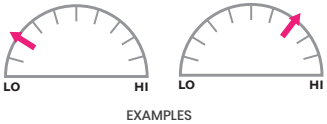
I WORK IN A _____ SIZED-COMPANY IN _____
(SMALL / MEDIUM / LARGE) (INDUSTRY NAME, LIKE TECH ETC)

I USUALLY INTERACT WITH MY COWORKERS _____
(IN-PERSON / REMOTELY / DESCRIBE OTHER METHOD)

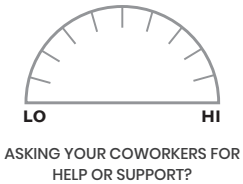
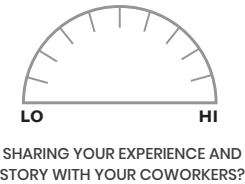
MY COWORKERS' AWARENESS OF MY H4EAD SITUATION IS _____
(ADD DESCRIPTOR HERE)

II. COMFORT SCALES

Please rate your level of comfort for the following questions by drawing a line or arrow on the line that best represents your comfort levels, from low to high.



HOW COMFORTABLE ARE YOU...



PAGE 1/2

01 Designing in the Workplace



PROTOTYPE #1 The Coworker Angle

HYPOTHESIS: Women feel comfortable and are interested in experimenting in their workplace with their coworkers.

From dependent spouses, I heard stories of their coworkers being supportive and how much they valued that. From experts, I heard that the spouses' coworkers could be particularly strong leverage points to pressurize employers to come out and support the women. I began exploring ways to create space for dependent spouses to share their story with their coworkers and move them to action.

PROTOTYPE: A "Work Sheet" that helped women reflect on their workplaces and how comfortable they felt talking about their situation in the office or sharing their story with their coworkers at work.

WHAT I LEARNED

Although there were other factors that bound the women who were working, their workplaces themselves were extremely different. Some women owned their own businesses and employed others, some women worked with several other Indians or were employed by an Indian, whereas some women were the only immigrants in their office.

Comfort levels within these workplaces greatly varied – some women actively discussed their situation with leadership, whereas some women were extremely scared to even bring it up.

DESIGN VALUES

SAFETY

The women need a level of comfort, trust, and familiarity to reach out to people for support, and need to feel safe throughout.

AGENCY

The women must have agency to identify the people they feel comfortable asking for support.



PROTOTYPE #2

DIY Intervention

HYPOTHESIS: Women would be creatively engaged if they had full agency to design their own intervention for their specific context.

Since agency emerged as a key value, my next direction was to explore a DIY kit that basically lent the design process to the women to give them the tools to design their own interventions, specific to their chosen context.

I envisioned this to potentially exist as a suite of interventions for other dependent spouses to then incorporate into their own contexts.

PROTOTYPE: DIY kit of tools to elicit brainstorming and visioning exercises to help the women get comfortable with the “ideation” part of the design process.

WHAT I LEARNED

The design process can be overwhelming and while agency was important, it was also important to honor these women’s reality of being working mothers. The women seemed intimidated by the idea of coming up with something entirely on their own and responded far better to semi-structured ideas as opposed to creating their own.

As opposed to focusing on large ideas, I began brainstorming ways to simply connect dependent spouses with other citizens through smaller, micro-interactions to better understand what environments and contexts are ideal to reach out to citizens.

DESIGN VALUES

SIMPLE + CLEAR

Engagement must be simple, clear and not overwhelming and must be simple enough that the women can easily participate.

SEMI-STRUCTURED

The intervention must be semi-structured and create a baseline framework for dependent spouses to follow, and then give them room to make it their own.

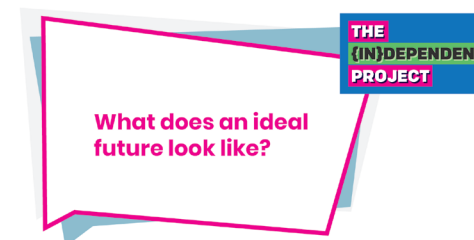
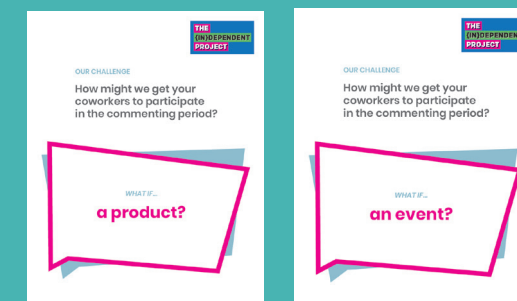


BRAINSTORMING CARDS:

A set of 20 brainstorming cards that prompted the women to think through various mediums, and criteria for the design solutions.

VISIONING TOOLS:

An example of a visioning tool, for the women to creatively start thinking of the future they would have liked to see.



COMIC STRIP OF THE FUTURE: in the given boxes below, illustrate and write out pieces of a comic strip or story that would best lead to the final ending: coworkers participating in commenting. How would the story go?

			<p>I support dependent spouses right to work because....</p> <p>The coworkers login to the Federal Register and submit their comment!</p>

“I really like this idea, but would you be able to send some to me? I don’t have a printer at home...”

Shamby
H4-EAD Holder

100,000 dependent spouses
can lose their right to work.
90% of them are women.

02 Starting the Conversation



PROTOTYPE #3

Dear Allies,

HYPOTHESIS: If dependent spouses had low-touch tools to initiate a conversation with citizens, they would be motivated and comfortable to share their story with them and move them to action.

I tried to test this out through two small prototypes using separate touch points – physical and digital. I also separated the two prototypes by the level of engagement required by the dependent spouse, where one interaction was more active in nature and the other was more passive. By testing the two interactions separately, I was trying to better understand what level of engagement and channel made sense for the women.

PROTOTYPE: An interaction where dependent spouses share their story on a postcard as an invitation to have a deeper conversation, and give it to 2 citizens of their choice.

PROTOTYPE: A short video that explains the story of dependent spouses and gives citizens context, and acts as an open call to engage in support.

WHAT I LEARNED

The medium of the postcard felt inaccessible to the women, since they felt like it required a specific paper to print on. However, they really liked the personal aspect to it, and appreciated the thought of having something physical. The in-person interaction in an outside environment, however, felt a little uncomfortable.

I also learned that videos are a low-touch, scalable way to give people context around the overall situation. The format of the video felt accessible for dependent spouses to share, even amongst themselves.

DESIGN VALUES

PHYSICAL & DIGITAL

There is space to incorporate both physical and digital elements as a way to provide levels of engagement and channels.

LOW - HIGH TOUCH

There is a range of willingness to engage; design should include these levels and needs.



One Foot Forward, One Foot Back

While I had been prototyping at different scales from November to late January, I found myself still struggling to see where to go next and how to define my “intervention”. So I decided to go back to my community to try and understand how I could build on what they already had i.e. meet them where they are.

During this time, I heard two stories from two women – Neha and Sharmi.

Neha told me how two teachers from her daughter’s school came home with some cultural questions, and how in that space she told them about her situation and they immediately supported her – one of them even writing a letter to Congress to support her.

Sharmi told me a story about hosting a Holi party (a cultural festival celebrating the arrival of spring) for her coworkers at her home, and we discussed that being a perfect opportunity to begin a dialogue about her situation.

These two stories led to a sudden realization – this community was rich with culture and traditions. *How could I embrace Indian culture in my process?* This led to two key ideas:

GATHERING

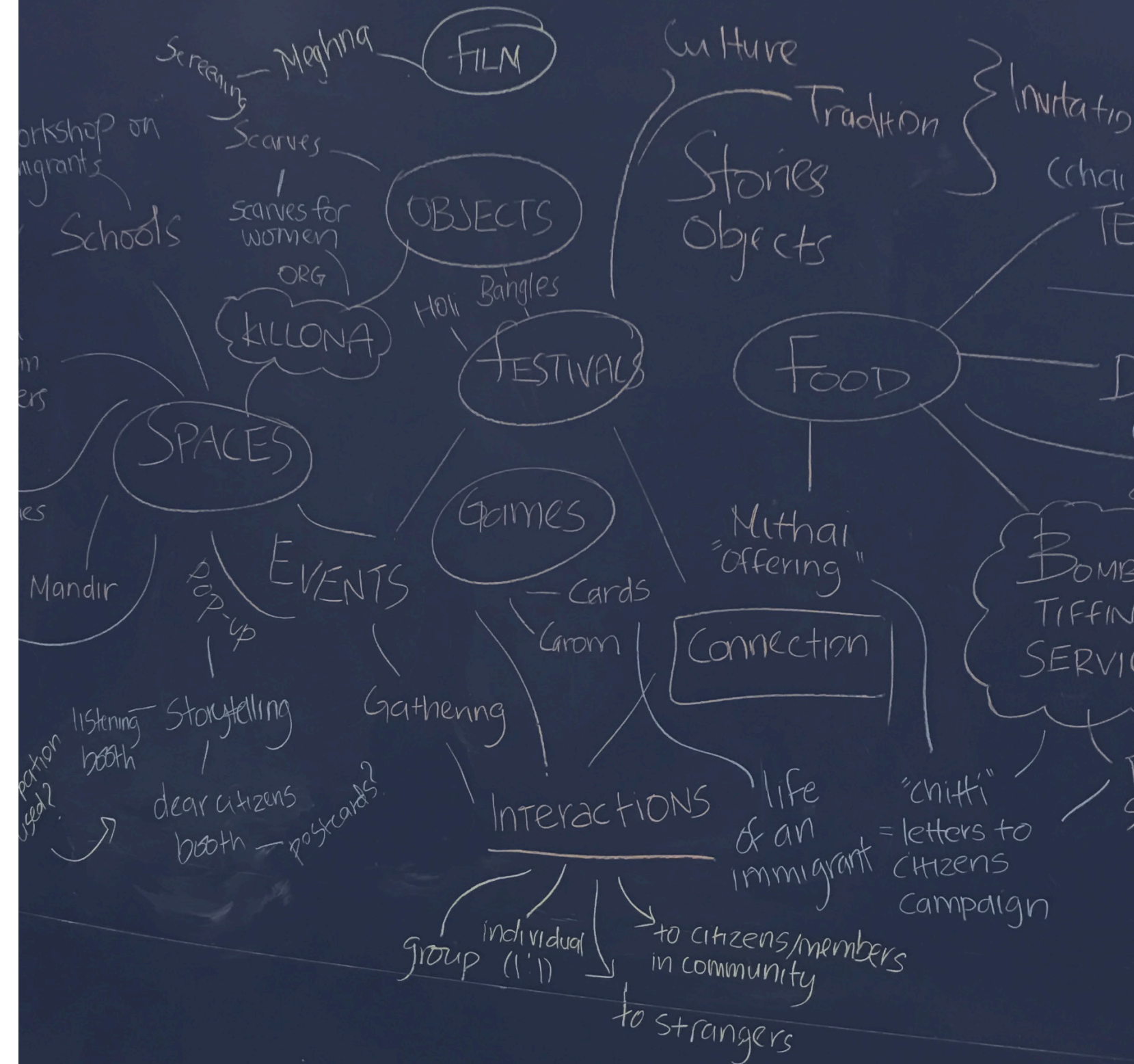
India is a collectivist society. Our culture and customs involve people coming together to celebrate and the home is always seen as a safe and inviting space to do so.

How might we create a safe space for dependent spouses to invite citizens into their home?

FOOD

Food brings us together and creates emotions, but there’s something even more special about Indian food. Chai is comfort, and there are so many different types of Indian food that create conversation. One example is “Chaat” or Indian street snacks, where people gather on the road to experience the food together.

How might we create a space for gatherings that are cultural, informative, and informal?





03 Gatherings as a Medium



PROTOTYPE #4

Chaat & Commenting

HYPOTHESIS: Gathering a group of citizens in the home, exposing them to dependent spouses' situation, and guiding them through the process of commenting can result in the creation of allies & action.

I prototyped the first gathering with the help of a citizen, Renu, with whom I was connected to in Upstate NY. By using the video from my earlier prototype, I was able to give her context and she immediately agreed to not only host the event, but also coordinate inviting all her community members and also providing food – homemade chai, and chaat.

PROTOTYPE: A gathering of 9 women – including 1 dependent spouse – at a citizen's home, where citizens were exposed to stories and facts, and encouraged to write out a comment to support the H4-EAD.

WHAT I LEARNED

Gathering creates an **informal learning environment**, where stories can create compassion, and facts can create context.

Enough time needs to be spent on explaining the **process and importance** of public commenting, and commenting in person, in the moment is stressful.

9 people in one room is a lot. These gatherings had to be more **intimate and smaller** in size, and the individuals gathered needed a **personal connection** to dependent spouses.

DESIGN VALUES

EMOTION + INFO

There has to be a balance of stories to create compassion & information to create knowledge.

CONNECTIONS

There has to be an existing personal connection to create a deeper sense of community and a fewer people to encourage deeper dialogue.



“ I learned so many new things today...Being a citizen, I had no clue how hard it was for these women...”

Renu
Citizen in Beacon, New York



TURNING POINT

The motivation to take action won't happen by just exposing citizens to dependent spouses. How might we also expose citizens to the power of public commenting, and how their participation can affect change?



PROTOTYPE #5

Informal Trainings

HYPOTHESIS: Gathering a group of citizens in the home and informally training them in the process of commenting can result in motivation to take action.

Over spring break, I prototyped 3 gatherings with 3 citizens in each and focused the gatherings more on exposing the participants to public commenting. Each citizen was guided through the overall process, and each gathering iterated on the information delivered. There was also structure for discussions around engaging with the government, and the power of an individual to affect change. Though this prototype was not solely focused on dependent spouses' situation, citizens were exposed to them through one of the contextual examples of public commenting.

GATHERING #1 – Fostering the ability to make change: Focused on understanding what motivates individuals to engage with the government and affect change.

PROTOTYPE: Three iterative gatherings that tested various activities to informally train citizens in the process of public commenting, and help them start engaging.

GATHERING #2 – Power of Public

Commenting: Further exposed participants to the power of public commenting, and went deeper into how it actually works and what constitutes an “effective comment.”

GATHERING #3 – Contextualizing

Dependent Spouses: Built on the previous two, and catered more to dependent spouses' situation and a live demo of public commenting, to create dialogue around using public commenting to affect change on their situation.

WHAT I LEARNED

Learning about public commenting is extremely powerful for citizens – none of them knew what it was and this created new energy and a feeling of empowerment in them.

While the in-person interaction was hugely effective, writing the actual comment was something they wanted to do on their own.

DESIGN VALUES

SPACE TO PROCESS

Since there is a lot of new information given at once, there has to be space for one to process what they just learned, and take a part of the action on their own time.



“I would want to engage even if it didn’t impact me directly, but if I saw something that would impact a whole group negatively...I would speak up. I would need something to help me engage when the right issue comes up...”

Emily,
Citizen in Naperville, Illinois



FINAL INTERVENTION DETERMINANTS

CONTEXT + COMPASSION:

The intervention must incorporate a structure that creates both context and compassion for citizens to be motivated to take action.

COMMUNITY & CONNECTION:

The intervention must be focused on community members of dependent spouses that they have a personal connection to and that they trust to share their experience with.

SITUATION & ACTION:

The intervention must focus equally on what dependent spouses are going through and what action looks like, and how to engage in it.



Three: Intervention

Dear Citizens **55**

Final Intervention
Scaling

Piloting & Measuring **66**

Initial Pilot
Measurement

Looking into the Future **81**

Looking Beyond
Final Learnings

Dear Citizens,

A grassroots initiative that helps dependent spouses
activate citizens to take action for their right to work.



Final Intervention – Dear Citizens

Dear Citizens – a part of The {In}Dependent Project – is a grassroots initiative created to help dependent spouses across the country activate and prepare citizens in their community through in-person gatherings.

The initiative has two key elements:

1. An **ONLINE PLATFORM** making all the resources needed to host one's own gathering accessible to individuals.
2. A **VIDEO COLLABORATION** with filmmaker and former dependent spouse, Meghna Damani, to reach a wider audience of dependent spouses, and motivate and show them to host their own gatherings in their communities.

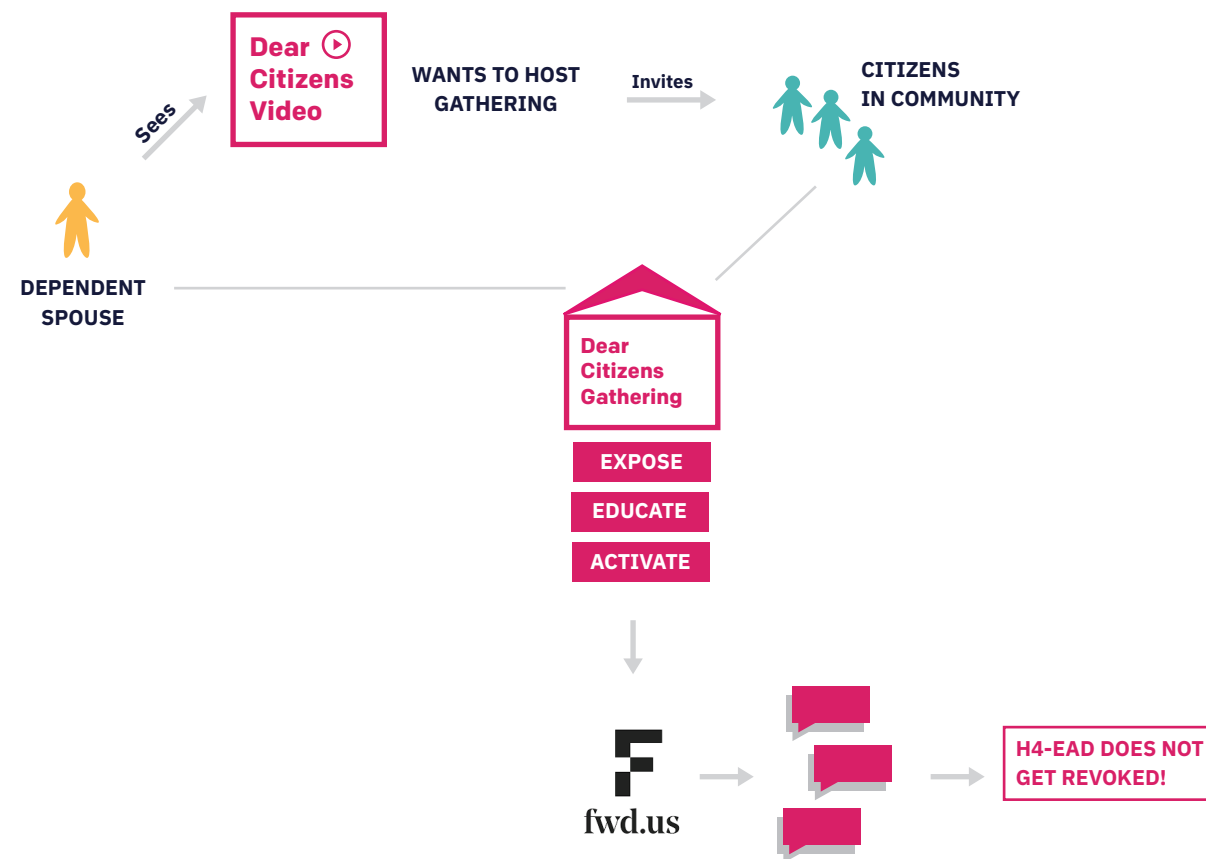
A Bridge to Online Advocacy Efforts

Dear Citizens acts as a bridge to FWD.US, which is an advocacy organization working on building support for H4-EAD holders. It points citizens to FWD.US, where they will be given further support to write and submit a comment through an online interactive commenting tool.

Dear Citizens provides the necessary structure for dependent spouses to activate citizens through high-touch and personal interactions, to then point them to FWD, where they can continue taking action on their own time.



Dear Citizens – The System



Dear Citizens – Gatherings

Dependent spouses have the tools they need to gather a small group of citizens from their community together in their home and through a series of activities, informally expose citizens to their story and educate them on action.

Citizens learn how to engage effectively in public commenting to support dependent spouses, so when the public commenting period opens, that they are prepared.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

GATHER

The dependent spouse host plans and creates an informal environment for a gathering in their home and invites 2-4 citizens of their choice from their community – their coworkers, neighbors, parents in their child’s school etc. – that they believe would support them through public commenting.

EXPOSE

The gathering begins with a screening of “Hearts Suspended”, a documentary made by filmmaker and former dependent spouse, Meghna Damani. This exposes the citizens to the larger situation and system and is followed by the host sharing her own story to create a deeper understanding. This context will help them craft an argument in their comment.

EDUCATE

The host informally educates citizens on public commenting as a form of action through a guide. Citizens are then given a more in-depth understanding of building their own comment through an interactive factsheet that contextualizes building a comment to building your own Chipotle bowl.

ACTIVATE

The gatherings end with citizens committing to submit a public comment to support their dependent spouse host, through signing up on the FWD (advocacy organization) website to be notified when the commenting period is open. Through the gathering, they have been exposed and educated, and are prepared to engage when commenting begins.



Dear Citizens – Gathering Tools

HOSTING HANDBOOK

The **Dear Citizens Hosting Handbook** is step-by-step pocket-sized guide that walks dependent spouses through hosting their own gathering in their home.

It gives them the preparation they may need prior to the gathering, and also acts as an agenda throughout the gathering.

The goal of the guide is to simply provide a framework and structure through a base template; the host is encouraged to make their gathering unique based on their needs.

DEAR CITIZENS,

HOSTING HANDBOOK

STEP ONE

SET THE STAGE [3-5 mins]

Begin the gathering by setting the stage and explaining who you are, and why you have gathered everyone together, briefly. Below are some things you can include:

Introduce yourself.

Remind the people you have gathered who you are, and what your story is.

Why are we all here?

We are here, because a community of immigrant women need us - Dependent Spouses. Give them a quick history of the situation. Who are EAD holders? What is happening now?

Why did you choose to invite them?

Why did you choose these specific individuals? Did you see them as sources of trusted support? Make them feel like their presence is intentional.

What is going to happen?

1. First, we are going to screen a documentary, "Hearts Suspended" that hopefully lets you into the personal experience, and I will follow that with my own personal story.
2. I'd like to follow that up with a discussion so you can get a deeper understanding of the situation.
3. We will then move into a few activities to understand what action looks like.

Ask them if they have any questions.

the
{in}dependent
project

Dear Citizens,

A GUIDE TO GET STARTED
WITH PUBLIC COMMENTING

So, what is public commenting?

It's basically when a government agency wants to propose a new rule or make changes to an existing one, they have to open it up to the public to get their feedback for at least 30-60 days.

What's a govt. agency?

Think the Department of Education, Homeland Security, the FDA and so on. There are 100's of agencies!

Okay, so really it's like an open invitation for anyone to submit their informed perspectives to the government and participate in rulemaking? I had no clue!

Yes! The key is "informed" though - this isn't about opinions, it's about information and real perspectives.

...

COMMENT GUIDE

The **Dear Citizens Comment Guide** is an accessible way for citizens to get a more in-depth understanding of public commenting.

Through outlining the various steps and benefits of participation in the process, citizens are able to build their knowledge around the process.

The informal language makes helps the dependent spouse make this complex process simple and fun to explain.



BUILD YOUR OWN COMMENT

Here is a framework to help you start thinking about writing a comment to support dependent spouses.

STEP 01		WHERE DO YOU STAND?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	For Here	You do not support the decision to revoke dependent spouses' work authorizations.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	To-Go	You support the decision to revoke dependent spouses' work authorizations. (if you select this, we're sorry - this guide isn't for you!)	

STEP 02		BASE	
First, start with who you are and why you're commenting. <i>Check off all that apply!</i>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dependent Spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	Citizen
<input type="checkbox"/>	Immigrant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ally
<input type="checkbox"/>	Co-worker		

STEP 03		FILLING	
Then pick 1-3 primary angles to focus your comment on. <i>Pick what you feel personally connected to!</i>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mental Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	Economic Contribution
<input type="checkbox"/>	Women's Rights	<input type="checkbox"/>	Equity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Families		

STEP 04		TOPPINGS	
Use the list of toppings on the back to support your filling. <i>Use as many as you need!</i>			

STEP 05		SAUCES	
Then use the list of sauces to see what you can do to make your comment unique.			

BUILD YOUR COMMENT

The Build Your Own Comment Sheet is an interactive checklist that walks an individual through building their own comment. It does so by making the process contextual - it's as simple as building a Chipotle bowl.

You have your base – which defines who you are and why you're commenting, your filling – which is your main angle for writing the comment, and toppings – which are facts to help support your comment.

This helps make an otherwise complex and overwhelming process more informal, and elicits a fun, yet productive discussion around building a strong comment to support dependent spouses.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

- ☐ A number of dependent spouses are highly educated - many have university degrees and professional qualifications comparable to their husbands. Their skills will remain unused and wasted if they are unable to work.
- ☐ H4-EAD holders contribute to the economy by creating wage-earning and engaged participants in the market.
- ☐ A number of H4-EAD holders are small business owners or entrepreneurs and are actually creating jobs for others. By taking away their work authorizations, American workers can be affected.
- ☐ H4-EAD holders are making significant tax contributions and dual-income households have larger purchasing power which can help generate growth for American businesses.
- ☐ H4-EAD holders work in critical sectors - from non-profits, to healthcare, to education, to even opening up their own businesses.

AFFECTED FAMILY

- ☐ Giving H4-EAD holders the ability to work can strengthen their families' economic well-being.
- ☐ H4-EAD holders and their families are lawful immigrants headed towards citizenship i.e. they are Americans in waiting. By taking away their work authorizations, some families may be forced to leave the country due to the need for a dual-income household, which would impact employers.
- ☐ Assuming that H4-EAD holders will be able to contribute to the household income, several families have made long-term decisions like buying a house, starting a family, investing in education etc. that would be affected.



Collaboration with Meghna Damani



(Left) Meghna shooting at one of our pilot gatherings.

In order to answer the question of “**how will people know that this initiative exists?**” a video collaboration with filmmaker, Meghna Damani was created. Largely active in the initial public commenting period, where dependent spouses received their right to work, she has been an influential activist in the space and is connected to all advocacy organizations.

She was my first connection to the community, and was beside me at every twist and turn during the journey. It was only fitting that my final intervention pointed back to include her as a key partner.

The goal of collaborating with her was to co-create an effective message to dependent spouses and to disseminate it across all advocacy organizations and their networks, to reach as many people as possible.

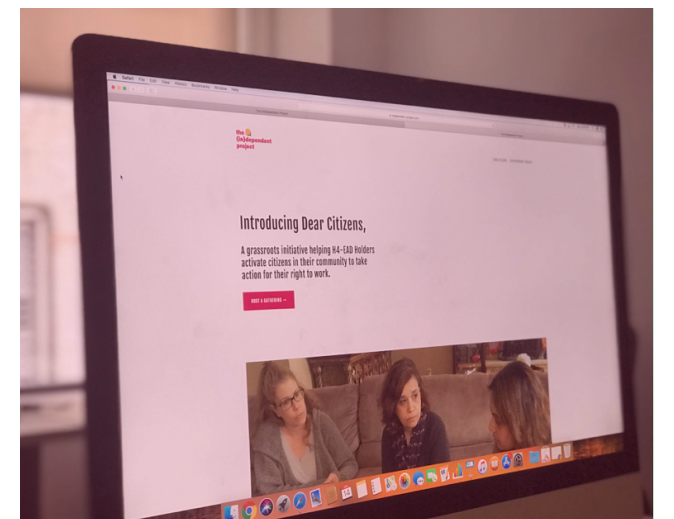
Scaling Dear Citizens – Video & Platform

The primary output of the collaboration with Meghna is the production of the **Dear Citizens Video** – a short video used to mobilize dependent spouses across the country to host their own gatherings in their communities.

Leveraging the learning of the efficacy of using videos as a medium from an earlier prototype, the hope is to create an accessible and shareable way to motivate dependent spouses and make them feel like being a part of this initiative is a simple, yet powerful way for them to affect change on their situation.

A key element to supplement the video is a specific call-to-action for dependent spouses to access the Online Platform – independent-project.com – to be able to access all the resources they would need to be able to host their own gatherings.

Eventually, as this initiative grows, the hope is to use the platform as a space where we can track the outcomes of the gatherings that occur to start measuring the overall impact.





Dear Citizens, Initial Pilot

In April, I piloted two gatherings – one co-hosted by Meghna and I, and the other hosted by an H4-EAD holder, Neha. Each of the hosts invited a few citizens of their choice and we gathered together with the goal of moving the citizens to action. These gatherings were also filmed in order for us to have footage to create our “Dear Citizens” video.



“It feels so ugly when you hear it...It makes you feel so sad when you hear that this is happening in your country. We’re going to be loud and proud by your side!”

Jennifer
Citizen in Scotch Plains, New Jersey

the (in)dependent project

BUILD YOUR OWN COMMENT
Here is a framework to help you start thinking about writing a comment to support independent agencies

STEP 01

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

☐ **For Here**
You do not support the decision to merge independent agencies and administrative

☐ **To-Go**
You support the decision to merge independent agencies and administrative

STEP 02

BASE

☐ **Common**

☐ **Emergency**

☐ **All**

☐ **Comment**

FILLING



Gathering #1 – Outcomes

The first pilot gathering was at filmmaker, Meghna's home, which was extremely fitting since we were using her film as a way to set context for the gatherings. She invited her friend from her Buddhist practice, Leslie, who brought along one of her friends, Katy.

Leslie had limited previous knowledge about Meghna's situation, but didn't know anything about the current H4-EAD situation, and her friend was completely unaware of both situations. Both of them had never heard of public commenting.

At the end of this experience, I...

feel like I know a little more about others' issues and ways to help to make others' lives better.

Katy

am curious and hopeful that I can actually make a difference.

Leslie



The film very clearly moved the ladies and in the dialogue following the screening, they were very clearly able to identify how unfair the situation was. We had a deep dialogue about how everyone in this country is technically an immigrant. Organically, brainstorming began to happen, around different channels that could be leveraged to support dependent spouses. One idea that emerged was going to Neighborhood Association meetings to pitch the idea of this gathering, and a plan was made for all of us to go in the coming month.

Although both women hadn't heard of public commenting before, they wanted to learn even more about it. Leslie even mentioned wanting to have a follow-up to go through the process more in-depth so she could begin engaging.



“Now that I know about this issue, I would’ve reached out to my tenant to see if I could support her in any way...”

Katy
Citizen in Jersey City, New Jersey

“Now that I know there’s a way for me to put my two cents in and do something, I want to start doing this for more issues!”

Leslie
Citizen in Jersey City, New Jersey





Gathering #2 – Outcomes

The second pilot gathering was at dependent spouse, Neha's home, where she invited two of her community members (one of whom had surface-level previous knowledge of her situation) for the gathering.

A few more women were expected to attend the gathering, however they were unable to make it at the last minute which was a key insight for us to keep in mind – people's schedules change, and it's a good idea to invite 1-2 more people, just in case that happens!

At the end of this experience, I...

feel saddened and motivated to help this community.

Jennifer

feel saddened because of the situation and aware of the mental health issues that spouses face.


Andrea



This gathering was the first one that was fully hosted by a dependent spouse, end-to-end. There was clearly authentic support and a motivation to take action that emerged, especially marked by the tears in everyone's eyes after screening the film. Neha was able to be fully vulnerable and tell the women how she really felt about losing her right to work and freedom, and you could sense complete understanding and compassion from their end.

Again, organic brainstorming happened where the women started thinking of ways Neha and the other women's message could be told on a bigger platform, and at the end, both women immediately signed up to comment, both of them willing to host their own gatherings as well, where Neha could share her story.



A photograph of three women sitting on a light-colored couch in a living room. The woman on the left, Leslie, is wearing glasses and a grey cardigan, looking down at a document. The woman in the middle, Andrea, is wearing a dark sweater and a patterned scarf, also looking at a document. The woman on the right is wearing a grey top and blue pants, pointing at a document. A small yellow wallet is on the couch between Leslie and Andrea. The background shows a wooden chair and a shelf with various items.

**“This isn’t just your
fight...we’re in this
with you.”**

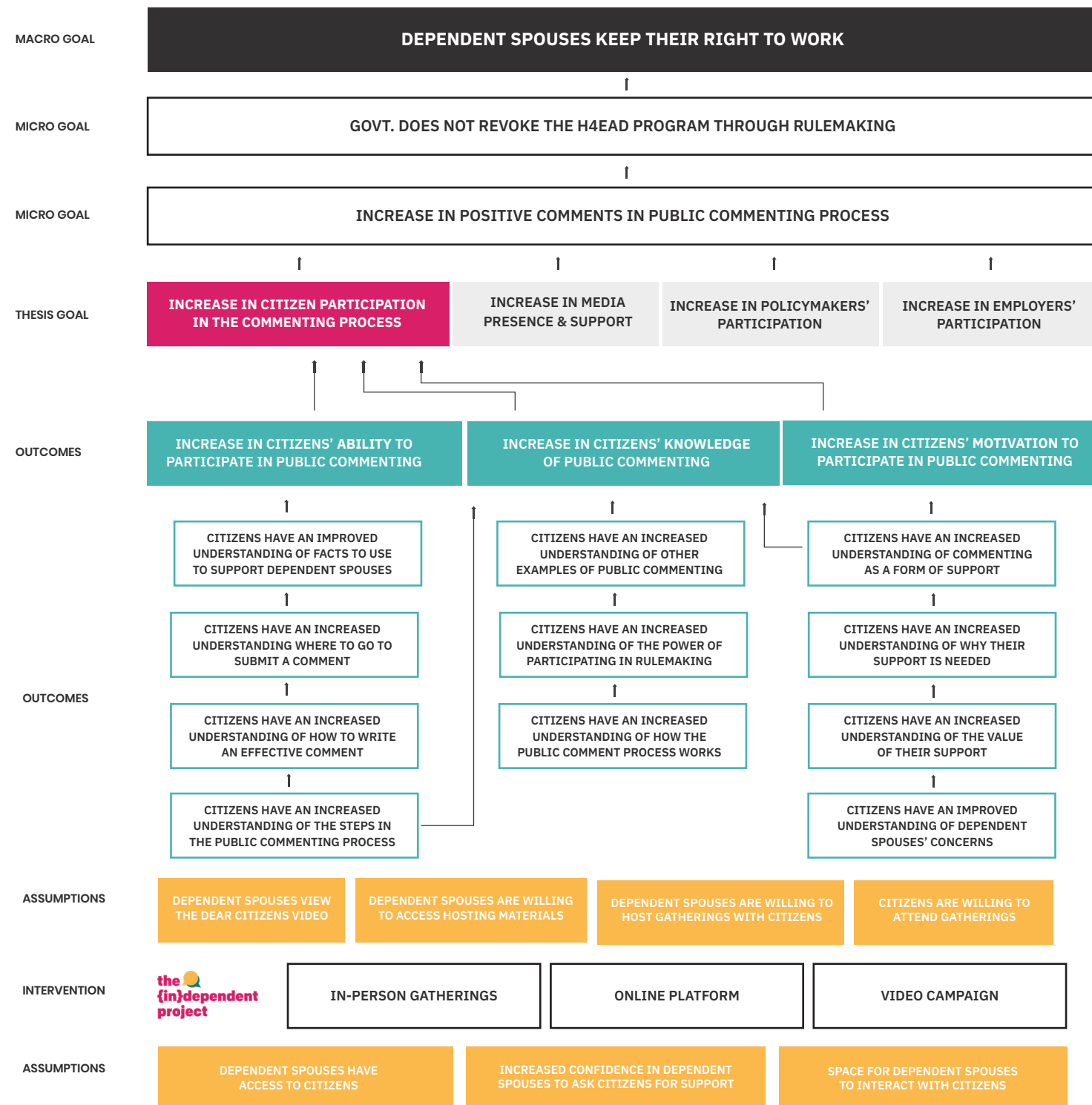
Andrea
Citizen in Scotch Plains, New Jersey

**“I am so sad to, once
again, be made aware of
the discrimination that is
accepted in our country.
This is such a clear case
of victimization.”**

Leslie
Citizen in Jersey City, New Jersey



Theory of Change



Measurement Q's

Increase in confidence in dependent spouses to ask citizens for support

Does giving dependent spouses the gathering resources make them feel more confident to ask citizens for support? What response do they get when they ask citizens for support and how does that make them feel?

Increase in citizens' understanding of dependent spouses' situation and motivation to support them

Does interacting with dependent spouses through a gathering increase what citizens know about them? Does the interaction cause motivation to support them? Does watching the documentary and hearing the host's story create compassion and motivation to support?

Increase in citizens' knowledge of public commenting

Is the process of public commenting and the power of participation clear to citizens? Do the commenting resources create an informal learning environment? Can citizens explain what public commenting is to others?

Increase in citizens' ability to engage in public commenting

Can citizens differentiate between an effective and ineffective comment? Can they understand the arguments to use to structure their own comment for dependent spouses? Do they know how to submit their comment?

MONITORING QUESTIONS

1. How many participants (dependent spouses & citizens) want to be involved in the Dear Citizens initiative?

2. Overall, how helpful do dependent spouses think the gatherings are to drive support for their right to work?

3. Overall, how useful do citizens think the gatherings are to learn about dependent spouses' situation and public commenting as a form of action to support it?



Looking Beyond...

I believe the work done for The {In}Dependent Project can be grown over the years, since I believe there are several more battles to fight. From the arrival of dependent spouses in this country, to the entire premise of their visa – there are several opportunities to use the social design process to facilitate this community to co-create solutions that serve their needs.

For Dear Citizens too, I believe there can be places to grow and extend its reach. What if it was an app? What if we created pop-ups that created more touch points for citizens to be exposed to dependent spouses that helped them take action in the moment? Dear Citizens started in living rooms, but I believe there are spaces and places out in the world where it can exist on a larger scale.

“The in-person conversations sound very effective and interesting as well. This seems like it would make a great toolkit... to give them tools to engage their surrounding communities.”

Andrew Moriarty
Deputy Director of Federal Policy, FWD.US

The Future of Public Commenting

I also believe this model can be applied to other issues open for public commenting. While some of the resources that came out of this intervention were specific to dependent spouses, I believe this model of gathering can be scaled to other issues. **What if anyone could gather anyone for any issue?**

I hope for a more widespread education of public commenting as a process. What if we knew about this process from a young age, taught about it in school? What if we were formally trained to engage in this process? What if participating in this process was the first step to creating a new generation of engaged community members?

I also believe this model can be used to create a larger connection between citizens and immigrants. What if we started hosting more regular dialogue around our differences with our neighbors? What if living rooms became places of gathering, of finding common ground, of support and community?



When in doubt, go back to the community. They have the answers, not me.

An insight that became my GPS.

Oh, the things I learned.

SMALL CHANGE IS STILL CHANGE: Since my project worked on an individual level, sometimes it was hard for me to see the bigger change that was possible. Several moments felt “too small,” but upon reflecting, I was able to see that even “small change” is still change. I was able to touch the lives of a few women by giving them the space to share their story, and the tools to affect change and this was still change. Only by starting small, could I think big.

THINK THROUGH MAKING: There were several moments where I realized I was spinning in circles simply because I didn’t have anything to make my thoughts tangible. By making something, I was giving it form, and therefore more substance to analyze. Making is hard, but it was critical to keep moving forward and to use my design skills to help me.

IF RISKY, TEST IT ON YOURSELF: I was scared, sometimes, of giving my community an idea that did more harm than good, but soon realized that I can be the “end user” as well in terms of understanding what works and what doesn’t, and testing outside the target community. This allowed me to rapidly learn with a lowered sense of risk. If I didn’t want to do something, how could I expect my end users to want to?

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, NOT USERS: A core part of my thesis has been creating and maintaining relationships with the women and advocates I worked with. Through numerous phone calls and conversations, I was able to create informal relationships with several of the women that allowed for a shared ownership and sense of trust. It was no longer me and them – instead, it was we.

BUILD CAPACITY: One of my primary goals was to end thesis with an intervention that no longer needed me. I believe setting this goal allowed me to think through an intervention that was small enough for someone to engage in, but large enough to have an impact.



I couldn't have done it alone...

I was just a tiny drop in the {In}Dependent Project. Several individuals gave me their time, energy, wisdom, resources, love, and strength.

Ma, Dad & Rihu, for the days that went by with no phone calls and the last-minute flights that gave me the love and food I needed.

Cheryl, for creating a program that gave me the space to allow myself to truly learn and to find a community that I will keep with me forever.

Miya, for pushing me harder each week and for giving me your mind, knowledge, support, and feedback with an open heart.

Meghna, Neha, Sharmi, Shambhawi and the countless other women, for trusting me with your stories and ideas and giving me time in between your daily battles of work, home, and the future.

Pratiksha, Danielle H, Lu, Umila, Jess, Mary Beth, Danielle S, for listening to my rants and doubts and for fitting in moments of feedback and clarity in the midst of your own confusion.

DSI Cohort 2019, for showing me that community can exist and for creating a space of warmth, family, vulnerability, and brilliance. You were all bright lights throughout.

Andrew, FWD.US, New American Economy, The Public Comment Project, Doug, SaveH4EAD, for fitting my small project into your busy days and giving me the validation and guidance I needed.

Dear Citizens, a note to fellow citizens

This year-long project was an exploration, not only of my community's experiences, but of my own identity and privileges as a citizen. What does it our role in today's current political climate where the basic rights of immigrants are being clearly violated in our country? I believe we can no longer sit quietly. I believe we must stand with them, and if they are scared to raise their voice, we must raise our voices for them. Dependent spouses are just one community that I focused on but I believe there are several marginalized communities suffering, and that they need communities to seek them out, and show them the support they deserve. Our country is made up of a diverse set of communities, a rich melting pot of experiences, cultures, and traditions. Our country belongs to no one, and everyone. So why are we shutting our doors to a selected few?

Let's break down the walls, and let's extend our hands to the "other." Because at the end of the day, take away our privileges, and we're all the same. So dear citizen, stand with me and join this fight. Let's build a world that is inclusive and filled with love, not hate. Let's create a global movement of unity. Let's reach out to our neighbors and let them know we see them, and we welcome them. Let's stand together. Only then, can we truly be {in} dependent.

Love,
Rutvi

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Designed by Rutvika Gupta