My goal for this Action Plan was to empower girls and combat Sexism in my community. I achieved the goal by creating a local club of the United Nations Foundation, Girl Up. This global project aims to “engages girls to stand up for girls, empowering each other and changing our world” (Girl Up, 2019). Namely, it hopes to create solidarity among girls and bring forth positive social change, especially in aspects of gender equality.

I decided on this project because there is still a misogynistic culture at my school. In a survey I conducted at my high school I found out that more than 50% of the students do not identify themselves as feminists and have never and do not wish to participate any related activities; and there’s almost one thirds of student believe that when grown up the main job of a girl should be household duties, etc. While I knew that cultural stereotypes around women are abundant, I was still astonished by how readily my peers internalize these harmful notions. What’s worse is that these cultural stereotypes become almost self-perpetuating because a lot of us refuse to engage in open conversations around feminism. I was keen to address this noxious situation.

What I came to realize as I carried out this project is that a lot of people are not against the notion that women and men should be equal, including the ones that claim they hate feminists or believe in certain sexism ideas. In reality, these people are also the ones that knew the least about feminism theories. Coming from different backgrounds and experiences, they without the aid of critical theories, I would guess, might easily generalize their own experiences or other’s ideas uncritically to all the women and girls. I realized that if I want to combat sexism, first I need to start by breaking the stigma around Feminism and aid more to critically examine pervasive cultural notions on gender. Besides, I thought if this club can be led and planed majorly by girls, it can empower girls along the way. (We also welcome boys as participants and leaders.)

My first step in realizing my Action Plan was to obtain an approval to create a local club: Girl Up Chengdu, in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. I submitted 2 written reports as an application. After I gained approval, I exchanged emails with assigned Girl Up advisor, Girl Up regional leader, and Brown Leadership Institute mentors, to refine my original action plan according to regional particulars and completed a detailed monthly plan for Girl Up Chengdu. There is one more female right organization at my city that focuses on training working women to adapt and thrive in the current working environment based on the model of Lean In by Sandburg. As I learned in the leadership institute, I acknowledged the limitation and exclusivity of their approach. However, while having a different philosophy, I also recognize the importance of allyship. So I reached out to the founder of the organization and secured their contact for further cooperation. (This September, I reached out to the leader of the organization, and we sat down and discussed how they can be more inclusive!)
I quickly gathered ten other girls as core members of the club for further club activities. We also secured a community activity room and carried out the first activities each with more than 20 participants from 5 different high schools across the city with a Girl Up regional leader from Beijing. Everything seems to be running smoothly. However, as we planned the next few similar information-packed lecture-style activities, participants started to lessen to 4 or even 3. This sudden decline of participation forced us to halt the activities and reconsider our strategies, for our aim is to spread feminism, we need to reach a wider audience. We immediately designed a survey to find out reasons that high school students don’t come to Feminism activities and what are some topics that intrigued high school students. Result yield that 1) it is majorly because of demanding working hours of high school schedule that they chose not to attend feminism activities; 2) High school students are interested in topics like Art, Jazz Dance, Debate, and Beauty. Being more informed of what’s necessary to expand our impact, we started a few more creative initiatives, including 1) Creating online Feminism Terminology cards to minimize the time for students to learn about feminism. 2) Establish bi-weekly interactive workshops that encompass elements like debate and covers topics ranging from “beauty norms in skin whitening products” to “gender representation in Ballet”. 3) create Jazz Dance workshop to boost girls’ physical confidence. What was interesting as I took all these steps was that I came to adapt and advance my action plan even further by using scientific research methods. I also found myself becoming more and more creative.

As membership began to rise slowly, my group and I continue to spread surveys like this periodically to pinpoint the most attractive topics for high school students. However, to ensure that the activities are not only interesting but are also meaningful and educational, core members and I organize monthly group meetings to discuss and rehearse activities. In addition, one of us will dedicate to research and present a feminism topic, like abortion, for group learning. In this space, shared leadership and open space for different perspectives were the norm. As time went on, I found improved confidence in my leadership skills. Some of the skills I developed were: listening well, researching unfamiliar topics, presenting complex ideas with graphics and simple language, and giving advice respectfully.

As one goal of my action is to empower more girls, I consciously encouraged my ten core members to take the lead. I invited everyone to plan and carry out at least one activity according to their talents and interest in two months. This process has benefited Girl Up Chengdu by diversifying the topics and activity types we have. I used to be terrified at the thought that I am not in full control of what’s happening in the club, but seeing the growth of Girl Up Chengdu, I knew that learning to let go and allowing others space to be heard are vital. In addition, I also hold workshops dedicating to talking about leadership skills, styles, etc., sharing what I have learned at Brown with the core members and other girls. In this, I learned to mentor and foster the development of others. It was a very rewarding experience for me when one of our extremely shy core members successfully held an event on her own. I felt genuine joy in seeing myself being useful to others.
One of the largest challenges for me in developing Girl Up Chengdu is to increase our inclusivity. Ten core members and I are all straight, Han, and middle-class girls. Knowing that our comparatively privileged background may lead to bias and neglect of certain voices, we reached out to a Girl Up Chengdu Local Mentor. Through her facilitation, we were able to hold three events featuring women from different social-economical background, with different sexuality, and racial identity. Surprisingly these events are very popular, each with more than 40 participants. Moreover, it is an eye-opening and educational experience for me, as I was exposed to different concerns, life situations, etc. I saw how race, poverty, lack of access to education can be interconnected with gender issues. This in a way also informed my academic interest in sociology that branches all these complex aspects.

In the process of these events, we also made connections with the government in Liangshan, Sichuan, China, whose major residence are Yi people, in southwestern mountain ranges of China. Due to historical and cultural backgrounds, girls in Liangshan nowadays still face considerable challenges to complete even early-stage education, let alone universities. In one of the villages we visited this July, there hasn’t been any female undergraduate student for decades. I was deeply empathetic about the life situation for girls there. Knowing how much education has changed my perception and advanced my life, I started to plan a long-term project to aid the education of Girls there. Girl Up Chengdu is currently dedicating to develop an online cultural exchange program with kindergarten in Liangshan, in which volunteers in Chengdu will talk to children in topics including respect for female, self-love, etc. and through this process help them to practice mandarin. In exchange, volunteers will learn the Yi language and their culture from the Children. We have already raised more than 300 dollars for the books, and other school utensils for the school and recruited 20 volunteers. In the long term, we hope to expand this online project to teachers and parents. So that more people from the Yi community can help to advance girls’ equal opportunity to education.

Another large challenge we face is that I am not a Gender Study professor! Despite group learning sessions and intensive research, ten members and I do constantly feel limited understanding of theoretical knowledge of Feminism. We also recognize that since we have not worked or interned at any local organizations that dedicated to ensure rights for women, we are lack “practical wisdom” as well. To address this problem and offer Girl Up Chengdu members more professional and up-to-date knowledge on feminism, we created a summer camp in 2019, in which more than 20 people attended from working adults to middle-school students. I approached professors in local universities, NGOs, and organizations with my plan. And I eventually programmed a three-day event with 4 speakers (A gender studies university professor, a local LGBTQ+ activist, founder of Lean Chengdu, a lady dedicated to empowering women in Nepal). Through this process, I find myself more and more comfortable in negotiating fees, articulating my goals to various audiences, and coordinate complex event.

Through a year’s work, Girl Up Chengdu has grown from an idea in an action plan to a
vibrant club. Given our active records and impact level, we were ranked and awarded at 6th among 60+ Girl Up Clubs in Asia and Pacific regions in 2019 by Girl Up. Being proud of the cumulation of my work, I also want to ensure it continues to grow in the future. Therefore, I am already planning the succession plan. I have been mentoring 2 junior students that are interested in becoming core members and potentially lead the club in the future. There will be a secured designated junior to lead the club next year before end my senior year and leave China. Through this process of building Girl Up Chengdu, I met lifelong friends and learned what it takes to be a good leader: always open to changes. I learned it is important to adjust the plan according to real-life situations, expand projects to include more opinions, and not to afraid to acknowledge my weaknesses while actively addressing them.

Approaching the end of the report, I had a few ideas to share for those who are planning their action plans: 1) Make sure the action plan helps to address a social issue that you care deeply about (no matter big or small). There’s going to be a lot of challenges and stress along the way. Only your dedicated passion will motivate you. 2.) It doesn’t hurt to always start small in your community. 3.) Always be humble and open to advise, help, even criticism. 4.) Reflect on your project periodically once you carried it out. It will help you and your team to learn from the mistake and move forward more effectively.

I want to end this report by giving thanks to the Brown Women and Leadership Institute. Without the mentors, friends, and knowledge, I could not have made Girl Up Chengdu possible. With the courage, perseverance, responsibility, inclusivity, I was empowered in the institute, I would move forward to serve more.