Health

Maternal and Child Health
Community

Solution Exchange for the Maternal and Child Health Community
Consolidated Reply

Query: **Use of Sanitary Napkins in Rural Areas - Experiences, Advice**

Compiled by **Joy Elamon**, Resource Person and **Meenakshi Aggarwal**, Research Associate

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**From Sharmishtha Patil, Gram Seva Trust, Gujarat**

**Posted 18 June 2010**

I work with Gram Seva Trust situated in rural Gujarat. Gram Seva works on health and development of the semi tribal communities. Our organization runs a 50 bedded well equipped hospital and is working towards community empowerment and improvement in maternal and child health. We have been supporting and facilitating more than 100 Self Help Groups (SHGs) in these villages. As an income generating activity for our SHG women we have come across a technique for making low cost environment friendly sanitary napkins. This will help women make sanitary napkins at a cost price of Rupee 1 per napkin.

One of the main problems is that a market for these napkins has to be developed in the surrounding villages. Some sections of people in the area have expressed concerns on the introduction of sanitary napkins in villages mainly due to lack of proper disposal facilities. However, in some places in Tamil Nadu, the sanitary napkins have been distributed in schools and the Government of India has also approved the scheme for providing subsidized napkins to adolescent girls in rural areas. Our concern is that whether it is a positive step for the adolescent girls considering the cultural beliefs in the tribal communities and improper sanitary napkin disposal facilities.

I would like to request views from community members on -

- Is there a need for sanitary napkins in villages? What has been your experience regarding the status of menstrual hygiene in villages?
- Which one is better – a sanitary napkin or cloth and should sanitary napkins be offered to the village women and girls?
- What different methods of disposal of sanitary napkins can be used at the village level?

Before starting this venture, we would like to be sure that sanitary napkins are really needed or are we an instrument in giving entry to products of profit making industries in the villages. Production of sanitary napkins by the SHG groups could be a good source of income for them.
especially with the Government suggesting involvement of SHGs for manufacturing and marketing of sanitary napkins.

Your inputs will enable us to decide whether we should undertake this project and the contribution of members would be suitably acknowledged.

Responses were received, with thanks, from

1. **Sonvi Kapoor**, International Centre for Research on Women, Delhi
2. **Devashree**, L.T. College of Nursing, Maharashtra
3. R.K.Baxi, PSM Medical College, Baroda (**Response 1**, **Response 2**)
4. **Mukti Bosco**, Healing Fields Foundation, Hyderabad (**Response 1**, **Response 2**)
5. Wadgave H.V., PHC, Valsang, Solapur (**Response 1**, **Response 2**)
6. **Shreya Baruah**, UNESCO, New Delhi
7. Prakash Nayak, CARE India, New Delhi (**Response 1**, **Response 2**)
8. **Jashodhara**, SAHAYOG, Lucknow
9. Ch. Santakar, Journalist, Koraput, Orissa
10. **Veronica Peris**, Centre for Governance, New Delhi
11. **Madanmani Dhakal**, Medical Officer, Sikkim
12. **Lakshmi Murthy**, Vikalpdesign, Udaipur, Rajasthan
13. R.Sujatha, Shri Cheema Foundation, Chennai (**Response 1**, **Response 2**)
14. **Aishwarya Pillai**, Futures Group International, New Delhi
15. Bhawani Shanker Kusum, Gram Bharati Samiti (GBS), Jaipur
16. **Johnson Rhenius**, WaterAid India, Uttar Pradesh
17. **Subhankar Bhattacharya**, Consultant, Menstrual Hygiene Management, Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal and UNICEF, West Bengal
18. **Bijoya Roy**, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi
19. **Vikas Desai**, National Institute For Woman and Child Development (NIWCD), Surat
20. **Rajeev Bijalwan**, Rural Development Institute, Uttarakhand
21. **Sharaf Abbas**, Social Consultancy Services (SCS), Lucknow
22. **Apoorva Ahirrao**, Late Shriram Ahirrao Memorial Trust's, 'SATHI' Project, Maharashtra
23. **Shubhada Kanani**, M.S University of Baroda, Vadodara
24. **Pallavi Patel**, CHETNA, Gujarat
25. **Shrigopal Sharma**, Shri Vatsalya Sasthya Seva Charitable Trust, Indore, Madhya Pradesh
26. **Joy Elamon**, UNDP, New Delhi
27. **Anjali Rao**, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, Karnataka
28. **Jyoti Sonia Dhan**, Child Rights and You, Kolkata
29. **Santosh Kumar Patra**, Orissa
30. **M. Sarah Priyatharini Ramya**, INP+ (Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS), Chennai
31. **Saurabh Singh**, Innervoice Foundation, Uttar Pradesh
32. **Alpan Kumar Sinha**, CEDPA, Jharkhand Regional Office, Ranchi
33. **Puneet Misra**, Center for Community Medicine, AIIMS, New Delhi
34. **Niranjan Bariyar**, CINI, Ranchi
35. **Prasant Saboth**, Abhilasha trust, Bhubaneswar
36. **Sadhu Charan Panda**, VSS Medical College, Burla, Odisha
37. **Avinish Jolly**, Chandigarh
38. **Garima Sharma**, Kalawati Saran Children's Hospital, New Delhi
Summary of Responses

In many parts of the country, people still consider menstruation as a period to treat women as “untouchables”. Hence they continue to segregate women during menstruation, sometimes in dark and confined places. Mothers perceive menstruation as dirty and pass on the same feeling onto adolescent daughters. Studies conducted among rural girls and women corroborate these facts. Responding to the query, members addressed several aspects related to menstrual hygiene in villages. They compared traditional practices versus disposable sanitary napkins and addressed the issues related to disposal.

Members emphasized that addressing the needs of adolescent girls for ensuring menstrual hygiene is immensely needed. Many members appreciated the scheme by the Government for providing the sanitary napkins to 1.5 crore rural girls to ensure menstrual hygiene. At the same time, many were concerned about the overall outcome which could be larger benefits for the multinationals.

Cloth continues to be the most commonly used option as it can be easily available at home and is re-usable. It can be hygienic if cleanliness of the cloth is ensured by properly washing and sun drying. However, this can be a tough task for women who do not have access to water, to toilets and to bathing rooms. Other problems cited for non-achievability of this are the social taboos and cultural beliefs associated with drying the menstrual cloth in open spaces as well as for disposing the cloth. Limited privacy while washing the menstrual cloth and lack of enough space for sun-drying augment the problems in doing so. Thus, girls and women tend to keep the cloth half dried or drying in dark and closed spaces. One of the studies found that only 61.6 per cent adolescent girls and 45.6 per cent mother of adolescent girls were drying it under the sun. This
could be one strong reason for preference towards the use of disposable sanitary napkins. The survey conducted by Healing Fields Foundation in Andhra Pradesh found that girls find it easy to use the sanitary napkins as they find it difficult to re-use the cloth.

Members were apprehensive that the use of polyester or other synthetic clothes may cause skin irritation due to low absorption capacity and there is possibility of cloth being dirty or having metallic hooks in old clothes causing infections. This leads to the need for specific studies on the health outcomes of using various types of clothes as sanitary clothes. One of the studies done in Thiruvananthapuram District of Kerala indicate that irrespective of the sanitary protection used by girls, there is a significant risk of hygiene related infections if there is inadequate water supply to the toilets at school or home.

The experiences from Institute of Health Management Pachod have shown that the supply of cotton cloth is also limited along with the issues of washing and sun-drying of the menstrual cloth. In poor households, there cannot be endless supply of cotton cloth, ample water and abundant space to dry clothes out in the sun. The initiative by Goonj manufactured the unused cloth left after the tsunami into sanitary napkins. Discussion pointed to the need to explore and understand the traditional knowledge and practices like an example from Orissa where traditional weavers since time immemorial manufactured cotton stripes to sell it in the Rural Haats. It is pertinent at community level to find out the best practices for menstruation hygiene and the other indigenous materials used in villages which could be local way of managing women’s menstrual hygiene.

The Sanitary Complexes constructed in villages in Tamil Nadu under the Total Sanitation Programme provide the sanitary pads with incinerator facility. The Self Help Group (SHG) women on rotation basis used to refill the sanitary napkin box. This kind of facility increases the accessibility and usage by village women and girls. In Madhya Pradesh, the social marketing of napkins at door step at a lower price lead to huge demand from women. This points to the fact that for moderately poor and above, sanitary napkins are definitely preferred over clothes even in rural areas.

Production of Sanitary Napkins

Members opined that sanitary napkin can prove to be better than cloth as it is more hygienic, comfortable and easy to use considering the current menstrual hygiene practices of women and girls. The initiatives in Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa have been addressing the issue of access to affordable sanitary napkins. Training SHGs to market and to create awareness on good hygiene practices among school girls have proved to be helpful in Tamil Nadu.

A few members were of the view that there is no need for parallel production of sanitary napkins as the cost of napkins produced by the social sector is more or less the same as the branded ones. However, it was said that the production of sanitary napkins should be at the grass-root level and women should become producers and the consumers as well. It can become a good livelihood option for the SHG women. The Menstrual Hygiene Management initiative has provided income generation opportunities for around 200 women. Ensuring the quality of the products produced by the SHGs to match the quality standards is equally important.

Disposal of Napkins

In the absence of proper sanitation and disposal infrastructure, many members said that the indiscriminate disposal may lead to severe health, aesthetic and social issues. Many of them highlighted that mass education campaigns are required for rural as well as urban areas for safe
disposal of sanitary napkins along with providing feasible options. Incinerators with appropriate
and approved technology or deep burial in pits to be covered with lime and mud can be two
options. There are designs available for convenient and cost-effective incinerators that can be
installed in schools, colleges, hostels and at community level with an estimated cost of Rs.
2,500/-. In various schools in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, incinerators have been installed and
used regularly. The use of incinerators has removed inhibitions among girls attending schools
during menstruation. At household level, disposal can still be a problem as open burning may
cause foul smell; it is not environment friendly and it requires open space where the taboo issue
comes up. Burying the used napkin is subject to digging by stray animals.

Using plastic bags for disposal of used napkins can slowly become an environmental hazard. A
public private partnership to manufacture environment friendly wrapping material for discarding
the napkins may prove useful. A cooperative Swach Coop in Pune makes available bags
manufactured by the rag pickers, made from newspapers at a cost of Re 1/- per bag. It was
suggested that the policy makers should identify methods of disposal which are practically
feasible and promote and implement the same.

**Economics of using the napkins**

In many parts, buying napkins is seen as expensive and there are instances when girls buy
napkins only for occasions or while travelling. According to a study, even a minimum user fee for
women is an additional cost since they have almost no access to economic resources and their
health is given least priority in households. The Government scheme to price separately the
sanitary napkins for BPL (Below poverty line) and APL (Above poverty line) adolescents needs to
be seen in the context of how many will be able to afford it. The purchasing capacity of women
from poor socio economic background and their financial freedom in terms of decision making for
her health and how these women manage their menstruation should be looked into.

**Awareness Generation**

The message should focus on what is a hygienic menstrual practice and options on how that can
be achieved. Good counselling should help the beneficiary/target population to know the various
options available to them, what behaviours they need to adopt for each option and choose what
they can use with convenience while ensuring their own personal and environmental hygiene.

Some of the suggestions which can be taken up-

- Awareness campaigns focusing adolescent girls on use of cloth as a napkin, washing, dry-
ing, storing, disposal etc as done in the School Education Program (SEP) for Adolescent
  Girls and Menstrual Hygiene Management Initiative in West Bengal
- Providing Information to girls and to their mothers and community at large on female
  anatomy, menstruation cycle, how to maintain reproductive health
- Addressing the socio-cultural constraints
- Conducting **Adolescent Group Meetings** or formation of **Adolescent Girls Clubs** as
  platforms to encourage discussions or using the already existing platforms in their villages
- Taking up a **Skill Development Programme** for girls to teach ways to make cheaper
  napkins at home for self use
- **Availability and Accessibility** of sanitary napkins at subsidized price in schools,
  Anganwadi centers and health centres

Involvement of non-conventional channels like AWWs (Anganwadi Workers), TBAs (Traditional
Birth Attendants), SHGs (Self Help Groups) and ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) is very much
needed. The attitude of service providers and also mothers and teachers can encourage girls in coming forward and taking care of their health at early stage in life.

Some of the members contested the idea of advocating for sanitary napkins as it is costly, not accepted everywhere, not re-usable and there are disposal issues. On the other hand, cloth is easily available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and re-usable. However, many felt that cloth can not be an option since many studies show the unhygienic practices followed for washing and drying the cloth which cause reproductive health problems.

The issues of menstrual untouchability and religious taboos in rural areas are very strong. Empowering women and girls through proper mobilization, awareness and training for promoting menstrual hygiene is a dire need of women in rural areas to break the culture of silence and discuss about their concerns related to reproductive and sexual health. There is a need to explore and study the local methods of dealing with menstruation and identify the better and hygienic methods which are environment friendly. The use of cloth or a sanitary napkin by girls and women is dependent on a lot of determinants, most crucial being the behaviour, availability, accessibility and the cost.

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**Comparative Experiences**

**West Bengal**

*Menstrual Hygiene Management Initiative by the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal in collaboration with UNICEF* (from Subhankar Bhattacharya, Consultant, Menstrual Hygiene Management, Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal and UNICEF, West Bengal)

The initiative started in the district of Purulia in 2007 by a Cluster of 5 SHGs through installation of a manufacturing unit. The programme was scaled up through setting up of Menstrual Hygiene Management Cell. The product manufactured by Federations / Clusters are sold under a common name 'Diya'. Capacity Development of women on production, marketing, awareness campaign and installation of incinerators in schools is being undertaken. The initiative has provided income generation opportunities for around 200 women

**Tamil Nadu**

*Mini Sanitary Napkin Making Machine, Coimbatore* (from Meenakshi Aggarwal, Research Associate)

A. Muruganantham from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu developed an assembly of low cost and portable machines that produce quality sanitary napkins at a low cost using wood fiber. It requires four persons to produce two pads per minute. This machine produces sanitary pads at the rate of Re.1 to Rs. 1.50 per pad approximately. A vending machine was developed in 2008 that can dispense single pads with the insertion of a coin and has a capacity of 25 pads. [Read More]

*Hygiene for Rural School Girls, Kancheepuram and Nemeli District* (from R.Sujatha, Shri Cheema Foundation, Chennai)

Shri Cheema Foundation is working on menstrual hygiene management with focus on education and awareness about menstrual hygiene, access to low cost hygienic napkins and safe disposal of used napkins. The Self Help group facilitated by the foundation manufactures and supplies low-cost sanitary pads for just Rs 2 innovatively through vending machines. A sanitary napkin
vending machine at a rural school has been installed in Nemeli by the state government and Unicef supported by the foundation as part of the menstrual hygiene programme. Read More

Sanitary Complexes with Sanitary Pads and Incinerators (from M. Sarah Priyatharini Ramya, INP+ (Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS), Chennai)
Under the Total Sanitation Program, construction of Sanitary Complex in most of the villages was made possible. These complexes had sanitary pads with incinerator and the facility was available in the panchayat schools as well. The Self Help Group women in respective villages need to refill the sanitary napkin box twice a month on rotation basis. It has become a practice in most of the villages and most school girls and women prefer sanitary napkins in these rural areas. Read More

Maharashtra

Life Skills Programme for Adolescent Girls (from Anil Paranjape, Rohini Sanap, Smita Pawar, Institute of Health Management Pachod, Pune)
The Institute of Health Management Pachod (IHMP) while addressing issues related to Reproductive Health of Adolescent girls and women, experienced that adolescent girls and women have limited supply of cotton cloth for using it during menstruation. Many other practical problems associated with washing, drying and re-using the menstrual cloth were observed. IHMP has developed a Manual for Life Skills Education for imparting education to adolescent girls during the Life Skills Education Courses. Read More

Karnataka

Menstrual Hygiene Project, Udupi District (from Anjali Rao, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, Karnataka)
Since May 2009, the Menstrual Hygiene Project in rural Udupi district is manufacturing sanitary napkins with the help of Self Help Groups consisting of rural women. The price of a napkin is Rs. 2 per pad. One packet contains 8 sanitary pads costing Rs. 16/- each. The rate is highly subsidized with no compromise on quality. Awareness sessions are also done for the rural women, ASHA trainees, Anganwadi workers, rural adolescent school girls.

Uttarakhand

Self-Designed Sanitary Napkins by Vikalpdesign included in the ASHA plus programme (from Lakshmi Murthy, Vikalpdesign, Udaipur, Rajasthan)
Vikalpdesign, since 1988, has designed visuals, sensitive to cultural and societal norms for non literate and low literate audiences. It designs, develops, produces and sells communication products in the area of sexual and reproductive health communication for rural adolescents. The Vikalpdesign has been using self-designed sanitary napkins in its programmes since 2000 and standardized the pattern in 2002. The pad was also included in the NRHM's ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) Plus Programme of Uttarakhand Government Read More

Mobile Health Van distributing Disposable Sanitary Pads free to the Female Beneficiaries, Nainital (from Aishwarya Pillai, Futures Group International, New Delhi)
Since 2007, the Innovations in Family Planning Services Technical Assistance Project is operating Mobile Health Van ( in 3 blocks) catering to the hard-to-reach areas of the district. Along with diagnostic and curative services, the van provides RCH services, which includes distributing branded disposable sanitary pads free of cost to the female beneficiaries with guidance on how to use and hygienically dispose off the napkins. Read More

Harayana
Study to Know Current Practices and Knowledge of the Menstrual Hygiene, Faridabad district (from Puneet Misra, Center for Community Medicine, AIIMS, New Delhi)
A study was conducted among 1000 rural females living in the Faridabad district, to know current menstrual hygiene practices and willingness to pay for low cost sanitary napkins. It was found that there was a high level of ignorance about the normal physiological process of menstruation in majority of population with only 30 percent of females using sanitary napkins and the rest were using cloth. The role of health sector was found to be quite low in this aspect and most were not willing to pay for sanitary napkins

Uttar Pradesh

WaterAid working on Menstrual Hygiene, Banda and Orai Districts (from Johnson Rhenius, WaterAid India, Uttar Pradesh)
WaterAid India partners did a short survey on menstrual hygiene in Orai and Banda districts and found that 94% of girls in Banda and 95% in Orai are using cloth during their menstrual periods. 96% respondents in Banda district dispose the cloth in open place with only 2% disposing it in a pit. 56% reported that they do not use sanitary napkins due to lack of awareness, 38% cited cost as the reason and 5% citing non-availability as the reason for not using the pads. Read More

Madhya Pradesh

Social Marketing of Sanitary Pads, Chambal (from Niranjan Bariyar, CINI, Ranchi)
Two female Sales Coordinator were appointed in each block to market the sanitary pads from HLFPPT. The coordinators attend Self Help group/Mahila Mandal meetings and orient them on Reproductive and Sexual health, Reproductive Tract Infections (RTI) and the use and advantages of sanitary napkins, through flip book. The demand for sanitary napkins is huge as it offers a door step delivery, at a lower price than any other branded products available. The product was offered at Rs 16/- for a pack of 10 pads.

Andamans

Terre des Hommes Foundation (TdH) improves menstrual hygiene management in schools by innovative communication strategies, Little Andaman and Baratang (from Charulatha Banerjee, Terres des Hommes, Kolkata)
Terre des homes Foundation partners PRAYAS in one of its Adolescent Health Programme in the Andaman Islands. The baseline report found that girls in little Andaman are aware about disposing off the napkin and washing the used cloth. 27% school going females reported making use of antiseptic while washing the used cloth and 43% dry the washed cloth in sunlight. In comparison, only 25% non-school going females reported washing the used menstrual cloth.

Orissa

Promoting Low Cost Sanitary Napkins through Social Marketing, Nupada District (from Meenakshi Aggarwal, Research Associate)
SRUSTI runs a social enterprise and low cost napkins are promoted in adolescent sexual health programmes with the help of four field NGOs. The SRUSTI works as MNGO for RCH in Nupada District and it has spread to other districts through the network of SRUSTI. The project involved Saathi clubs (adolescent groups) and field NGOs to promote this innovative concept. Each of our good quality and imported sanitary pads costs only Rs. 1.66 paise to the consumer. These are marketed through the Saathi Centres and ASHAS. Read More

Assam, Delhi, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh
Knowledge and Practices of Adolescent Girls regarding Reproductive Health with Special Emphasis on Hygiene during Menstruation (from Dinesh Paul, NIPCCD, New Delhi and Garima Sharma, Kalawati Saran Children’s Hospital, New Delhi)

The study undertaken by NIPCCD assessed the knowledge of adolescent girls regarding reproductive health and menstrual hygiene. The study revealed that majority of adolescent girls and mothers of adolescent girls were using cloth during menstruation. Only about a quarter of adolescent girls were using sanitary pads. Sizeable adolescent girls and mothers of adolescent girls were reusing the cloth after washing it, with only 61.6 % girls drying it under the sun. Read More

Multiple States

Adolescent School Girls Health-Education Programme (from Sharaf Abbas, Social Consultancy Services, Lucknow)

Social Consultancy Services is coordinating the Adolescent School Girls Health-Education Programme supported by Johnson & Johnson in six states of India. The program is aimed at promoting the importance of personal health and menstruation hygiene among the school going adolescent girls. The program is educational wherein issues like gender, girl child, menstruation, anaemia, right age of marriage, teenage pregnancy are taken up and discussed with the girls, under a healthy and friendly environment. Read More

Turning Unused Cloth into Sanitary Napkins (from Mukti Bosco, Healing Fields Foundation, Bangalore)

A first of its kind initiative; GOONJ after tsunami worked on over 2 million pieces of waste or undistributed clothes. Around 50 women worked for two years and converted every single unit of this massive wastage into a valuable cloth or product; right from school bags to sanitary napkins. Goonj also addresses a basic need of village women, by providing clean cloth sanitary napkins. GOONJ is actively campaigning in rural & urban India to generate awareness on this taboo issue. Read More

Related Resources

Recommended Documentation

Gender Dimensions of User Fees: Implications for Women's Utilization of Health Care (from Bijoya Roy, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi)

Article; by Priya Nanda; Reproductive Health Matters, Vol. 10, No. 20, Health Sector Reforms: Implications for Sexual and Reproductive Health Services, pp. 127-134, November 2002
Available at http://www.jstor.org/pss/3776333

   Paper looks at the implications of user fees for women's utilization of health care services, based on selected studies in Africa.

He wore a sanitary napkin to ensure good health of women (from Gayatri Maheshwary)

Article; by Sonal Matharu, Governance Now, 2 July 2010

   Article speaks about A Muruganantham’s extensive research on sanitary napkin-making companies in the US before starting to work on production of low cost sanitary napkin

From Meenakshi Aggarwal, Research Associate

Award Book – National Innovation Foundation
The book reports on the national award given to A Muruganantham from Tamil Nadu for innovating Mini Sanitary Napkin Making Machine

A Study on Menstrual Hygiene Among Rural Adolescent Girls
Article; by Drakshayani Devi K, Venkata Ramaiah P; Andhra Pradesh Agricultural University, Home Science College, Bapatla.; Indian Journal of Medical Science; 48(6):139-43; June 1994
Available at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7927585
Article concluded that before bringing any change in menstrual practices, the girls should be educated about the facts of menstruation and its physiological implications.

Menstrual Hygiene: How hygienic is the Adolescent Girl?
Article; by Dasgupta A, Sarkar M, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health, Kolkata, Indian Journal of Community Medicine; 33:77-80; 2008
Available at http://www.ijcm.org.in/article.asp?issn=0970-0218;year=2008;volume=33s;issue=2;spage=77;epage=80;aulast=Dasgupta
Concluded that educational television programmes, school nurses and teachers and parents can play a very important role in transmitting the vital message of correct menstrual hygiene to the adolescent girl

Recommended Organizations and Programmes

From Mukti Bosco, Healing Fields Foundation, Bangalore

Healing Fields Foundation, Andhra Pradesh
5-9-22, Manasarovar Complex, Secretariat Road, Hyderabad - 500063; Tel: 91-40-23232841/42; secretariat@healing-fields.org; http://www.healing-fields.org/index.php/our-methodology
Not-for-profit organization, works for the improvement of health care to be affordable and accessible for poor and working on the issue of menstrual hygiene

GOONJ, Delhi
J- 93 Sarita Vihar, New Delhi - 110076; Tel: 011 26972351, 011 41401216; anshugoonj24@gmail.com; http://www.goonj.org/milestones.html
GOONJ is actively campaigning in rural and urban India to generate awareness on menstrual hygiene and on clean cloth sanitary napkins

National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, Delhi (from Dinesh Paul, NIPCCD, New Delhi and Garima Sharma, Kalawati Saran Children’s Hospital, New Delhi)
5, Siri Institutional Area, Haus Khas, New Delhi – 110016; http://nipccd.nic.in/res-proj-frame.htm
The institute conducted a study on Knowledge and Practices of Adolescent Girls regarding Reproductive Health with Special Emphasis on Hygiene during Menstruation

Vikalpdesign, Rajasthan (from Lakshmi Murthy)
214, Pancharatna Complex, Bedla Road, Udaipur 313004, Rajasthan; Tel: 91 294 2451411; lakshmi@vikalpdesign.com; http://www.vikalpdesign.com/3_dimen.html
Designs, develops, produces and sells communication products in the area of sexual and reproductive health communication for rural adolescents along with trainings on use

Shri Cheema Foundation, Chennai (from R. Sujatha)
Shri Cheema Foundation, CSR Wing of TVS-Electronics limited, Ranga Square Sreeeman Sreenivasan Cross St Venus Colony, Alwarpet, Chennai 600 020, Tamil Nadu; Tel: 91 44 42005200; Fax: 91 44 22327577; http://www.tvs-e.com/napkin-machine.asp
Works towards increasing girls' attendance in schools by providing separate toilets for girls with napkin vending and napkin disposal facilities in rural schools

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), New Delhi (from Devashree, L.T. College of Nursing, Maharashtra)
73 Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110003; Tel: 91-11-2469-0401/1410; Fax: 91-11-2462-7521/9-1410; newdelhi@unicef.org; http://www.unicef.org/
Developed a booklet on Menstrual hygiene management and has initiated menstrual hygiene initiative in West Bengal

From Charulatha Banerjee, Terre des Hommes, Kolkata

Terre des Hommes Foundation, Switzerland
Avenue de Montchoisi 15, CH 1006 Lausanne, Switzerland; Tel: 41-58-6110666; Fax: 41-58-6110677; info@tdh.ch; http://www.tdh.ch/en/countries/india
In Andhra Pradesh and on the Andaman Islands, Terre des Hommes is supporting health and access to water and sanitation projects, including menstrual hygiene management

PRAYAS, New Delhi
59, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi 110062; Tel: 91-11-29956244; prayas@del6.vsnl.net.in; http://www.prayasonline.org/what_we_do.html
Working through the school hygiene committees on the island of Little Andaman and Baratang on the issues of menstrual hygiene management

Late Shriram Ahirrao Memorial Trust, Maharashtra (From Apoorva Ahirrao)
Late Shriram Ahirrao Memorial Trust, Betawad, Tal. Sindkheda, District Dhule, Pin: 425403, Maharashtra
Is implementing an intervention research project - SATHI – Project [Safe Adolescent Transition & Health Initiative Project] in Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health.

Institute of Health Management Pachod, Pune (from Anil Paranjape, Rohini Sanap, Smita Pawar, Institute of Health Management Pachod)
Sr. No. 32/2/2, Sonai Park, Kharadi Road, Chandan Nagar, Pune 411014, Maharashtra; Tel: 020-64100790/25120833; Fax: 020-27012562; ihmp@vsnl.com; http://www.ihmp.org/programmes_and_activities_pune.html#als
Implementing project on Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health and have produced a manual for Life Skills Education for adolescents

Child in Need Institute (CINI), Kolkata
PO Pailan, Via Joka, Kolkata 700104 West Bengal; Tel: 91-33-24978192/8758/8759; Fax: 91-33-24978241; cini@cinindia.org; http://www.cini-india.org/contact.asp
Engages in doing the Social Marketing of Sanitary Napkins to promote menstrual hygiene

Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust (HLFPPT), Noida
B-11, Sector-59, Noida 201301 Uttar Pradesh; Tel: +91 120 4231060/62; Fax: +91 120 4231065; hr@hlfppt.org; http://www.hlfppt.org/images/sakhi.pdf
Implements programmes to encourage healthy behaviour particularly menstrual hygiene to increase access to health products at affordable prices like low cost sanitary napkins

SRUSTI (Society for Rural Up liftment & Socio Technological Initiative), Orissa
SRUSTI, Main Road, Khariar, Nuapada, Orissa, India, 766107; Tel: 91 6671 232110; srusti@srusti.org; www.srusti.org

Runs a social enterprise and promotes low cost napkins in adolescent sexual health programmes with the help of four field NGOs.

**Recommended Portals and Information Bases**

**UNICEF’s Booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management** (from Devashree, L.T. College of Nursing, Maharashtra)
http://www.unicef.org/india/health_4048.htm

The booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management to serve as a self reference and support women in providing factual information about menstruation

**WaterAid India** (from Johnson Rhenius, WaterAid India, Uttar Pradesh)
http://www.wateraid.org/india/

Portal provides information on the activities undertaken by the WaterAid India enabling poorest people to gain access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education

**Total Sanitation Campaign, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Development, Government of Tamil Nadu** (from M. Sarah Priyatharini Ramya, INP+ (Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS), Chennai)
http://www.tnrd.gov.in/schemes/tsc.html

Portal gives information on the Total Sanitation Campaign with School Toilets, Anganwaadi Toilets, Sanitary Complexes and Rural Sanitary Marts taken up under the scheme.

**SWaCH Coop, Pune** (from Anil Paranjape, Rohini Sanap, Smita Pawar, Institute of Health Management Pachod)
http://www.swachcoop.com/

Cooperative of self employed rag pickers/waste collectors offering total solutions for wet garbage and dry garbage while giving them livelihoods as well as training

**Social Consultancy Services** (from Sharaf Abbas, Social Consultancy Services, Lucknow)
http://scsindia.org.in/key_assignments.html

Working on Adolescent School Girls Health-Education Programme in six states of India aimed at promoting menstruation hygiene among the school going adolescent girls.

From Meenakshi Aggarwal, Research Associate

**Government Approves Scheme for Menstrual Hygiene - 1.5 Crore Girls to Get Low-Cost Sanitary Napkins, Press Information Bureau, Government of India**
http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=62586

In June 2010, Government approved a scheme to increase access to and use of high quality sanitary napkins to adolescent girls in rural areas of India.

**Innovations in Family Planning Services Project (IFPS II)**
http://www.jhuccp.org/node/742

Addresses reproductive and child health activities at the national level and in three states in northern India (Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand).

**Related Consolidated Replies**

Inputs regarding the processes have agencies followed to develop communications strategies for MHM and the strategies/approaches and materials that have been developed for MHM communication.


Provides suggestions and feedback on the booklet based on members experiences and expertise on the content and approach and on integrating MHM with the TSC or NRHM.


Considerations and technologies for producing a low cost sanitary napkin and promoting it among rural Self-Help Groups.

Responses in Full

Sonvi Kapoor, International Centre for Research on Women, Delhi

Bio-degradable sanitary napkins are definitely a move in the right direction. In some places compact electric incinerators are used to burn used napkins or instead they are buried in deep pits.

However, the government initiative is promising a pack of 6 sanitary napkins @ Rs. 1 to girls from BPL families and at Rs. 5 to the rest (http://www.dancewithshadows.com/pillscribe/india-supplies-sanitary-napkins-for-village-girls-at-rs-1-per-pack-to-ensure-menstrual-hygiene/).

This government initiative could have an impact on the available market for sanitary napkins produced by your Self Help Groups if it will be targeting your target villages in the first phase of its initiative.

Devashree, L.T. College of Nursing, Maharashtra

I am also working on menstrual hygiene for blind girls. I read through many articles in relation to menstrual hygiene of Indian women. Many of them say that home made sanitary napkins are better only if you can ensure its cleanliness and washing it properly with soap and water and sun drying it. The problem is that we have lot of taboos related to menstruation. Thus a girl always wants to hide it from being seen by anyone else thereby keeps the cloth half dried, drying it in shadow, keeping it under the bedding, or storing it at other unhygienic places. It increases the risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections.

This is the reason it is always preferred that woman uses disposable napkins. Some of the better ways of preparing low cost napkins is widely available on internet. You can also have a look at UNICEF’s booklet on menstrual hygiene.
**R.K.Baxi, PSM Medical College, Baroda** (response 1)

Here are some of my viewpoints –

1. Why not teach how to use clean cloth, folded properly, use clean, sun dry and re-use. Socio-cultural constraints in doing so needs to be addressed more than anything else.
2. Sanitary napkins not disposed off correctly, has been a menace in urban areas as well with limited washing down/flushing facility. Most qualified (not educated) populations have neighbourhoods strewn with sanitary napkins all over. Mass educational campaigns are needed.
3. Deep burial in a pit to be covered with lime and mud like we do for any biodegradable, hazardous waste, sanitary napkin can be disposed off.
4. Please consider the economics of it too! Even low cost has some cost!
5. Schools with sanitary napkin dispensers are quite fancy, but prohibitively costly and where available, generally are not supported by clean facility with privacy and luxury of proper disposal of the used ones!

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**Mukti Bosco, Healing Fields Foundation, Hyderabad** (response 1)

We at Healing Fields Foundation conducted a 6 months Community Health Leader Contact training programme in Andhra Pradesh and will be rolling out the first batch in Karnataka and in Bihar. As part of the training we conducted a survey in Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes girl’s hostel on use of sanitary napkins/cloth. From our experience of what we have learnt is the following:

1. Young girls were provided sanitary napkins for Rs.5-Rs.10 per pack. They find using sanitary napkins easier and more hygienic than cloth which has to be reused. They dispose the sanitary napkins wrapped in paper and into the garbage which goes to an area where it is burnt periodically with other garbage.

2. In rural areas the women preferred using sanitary napkins to cloth. They find it difficult to use cloth as it is being reused and hygiene and cleanliness becomes a problem. There is no privacy to wash and dry it in the sun. Hygiene here is a major problem due to this and so there are repeated illnesses related to this. Houses in most rural areas neither have water nor toilets and this becomes a major problem.

3. One of the many reasons for hysterectomy (surgical removal of uterus) is the problem of water and lack of privacy and having to use the cloth which needs to be washed and dried during menstruation.

4. Women are willing to pay anything between Rs.5 to Rs.10 to buy disposable sanitary napkins or double use sanitary napkins.

GOONJ, a NGO has done studies in disaster affected areas on this. They also manufacture sanitary napkins with cloth. A pack contains 5 of these napkins with underwear and is available for Rs. 3 to Rs. 10. We have supplied these to our Health Leaders and the response has been very positive.

We need to look at the use of sanitary napkins from the perspective of the women who have no access to even clean drinking water, let alone other type of water, toilets or bathing rooms. Also in terms of use of cloth, the general use is of old cloth which is again dirty and at times using
their old clothes/blouses which could have hooks which could be rusted and there have been cases of tetanus induced deaths due to this. (This has been documented by GOONJ).

I think provision of sanitary napkins is a move in the right direction but we need to be able to use the indigenous machine developed by a NGO is Tamilnadu using locally available biodegradable material, wood pulp, and get the Self help group women to manufacture them locally rather than getting the multi nationals to supply them. This could become a livelihood development programme for the women in the villages.

_Wadgave H.V., PHC, Valsang, Solapur (response 1)_

It is very sensitive but very important issue which needs to be addressed. There is immense need for the sanitary napkins in the rural areas also. I have spent almost 19 years in rural areas and I have observed that girls use old pieces of cloths non-hygienically which is a very unhealthy practice. It may lead to infections and local irritation and has a psychological impact also. Media has influenced rural India also on sanitary napkins and cosmetics but that is not always affordable to their families, so my view is that –

- Sanitary napkins are need of hour for rural girls
- Napkins should be manufactured in rural area only so that income generation will occur
- Old clothes used as napkins should not include polyester cloth as it may cause allergic reactions
- Simple methods of disposal like burning or burial is also possible in rural area due to much space around the houses
- Awareness generation through _Adolescent Group Meetings_ is also needed for hassle free use of sanitary napkins by girls.

_Shreya Baruah, UNESCO, New Delhi_

Is there a need for sanitary napkins in villages? What has been your experience regarding the status of menstrual hygiene in villages?

In many rural parts of India, menstruation is considered as a pretext to treat women as 'untouchables' for seven days a month. The awareness of practices to maintain good hygiene during menstruation are generally found to be lacking in villages where majority of women still use cloth, which are reusable. Even now, in many villages, women are too embarrassed to talk about menstruation.

In one of my earlier project on a flood relief operation, one of our major activities was promotion of hygiene awareness among women folk. While conducting FDG's (Focus Group Discussions) I came across some women who felt really uncomfortable to be associated with menstruation. Many women further stated that during "those days", due to lack of space in their household, they were not able to wash the cloths used in menstruation regularly. Another issue was drying these cloths hygienically, since they were too embarrassed to dry them in sun, so instead they prefer dark places so that others can’t see.

In order to ensure improved sanitation, awareness about sanitary napkins needs to be introduced in villages. Another issue that we faced when we tried introducing sanitary napkin was lack of knowledge and social ethos attached. Many women refuse to use sanitary napkin due to lack disposal facilities.

Which one is better – a sanitary napkin or cloth and should sanitary napkins be offered to the village women and girls?
Sanitary Napkin is much better than cloth since it is more hygienic, comfortable and easy to use. Sanitary napkins should be offered to the village women and girls since the current practice that these women are following are not hygienic and they get exposed to various infection including reproductive tract infections (RTI).

**What different methods of disposal of sanitary napkins can be used at the village level?**

**Introduction of Incinerators:** Government has introduced Incinerator for the safe disposal of sanitary waste. For this cost effective user friendly, simple manually operated technology of incinerators was developed and installed for composite waste disposal of sanitary waste in schools. The use of incinerators has removed inhibitions among girls attending schools during menstruation.

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**Prakash Nayak, CARE India, New Delhi (response 1)**

Thanks to Sharmistha for raising a query on sanitary napkins in rural areas in Gujarat. I hope, through this discussion, you will get maximum feedback from practitioners those who are promoting hygiene behaviour and sanitary napkins.

In 2003, while promoting sanitary napkins in rural and tribal pockets of Kandhamal district of Orissa, through non-conventional channels like AWWs (anganwadi Workers), TBAs (Traditional Birth Attendants), SHGs (Self Help Groups) and ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) we came across with interesting experience which I thought of sharing here. As a communication manager, I accompanied frontline workers and vendors to see why products were not picking up as expected. We were exploring to identify barriers and bottlenecks in popularizing sanitary napkins in the tribal district.

“**Sakhi**” was the social marketing brand made available by Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust in Kandhamal. We inquired about the hygiene behaviour and practices of the area. According to people, **Rural Haats** are very much popular where people trade their product and services. It is a place where they spend a considerable time, share their thought and emotion. In some places, Haats are day long event and attract people from far flung places. People from all age groups come there including the adolescents. We were surprised to hear that **cotton stripes** were woven and sold by traditional weavers much before the popularization of sanitary napkins in these Haats since time immemorial. With the introduction of textile cloths, the weavers had switched over to other professions and hence the availability of cotton stripes is not there in rural Haats anymore. Here we need to explore and understand the traditional knowledge and practices.

While doing a reccy, you can initiate a participatory discussions with adolescent girls, newly weds, elderly women in the community. If possible do talk to people who have fairly long history of the village and the community. It would be unfair to say that people in rural and tribal areas are new to the concept of personal hygiene and sanitary napkins.

Hope this is helpful.

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**Jashodhara, SAHAYOG, Lucknow**

Many thanks to Sharmistha for raising a very relevant issue. SAHAYOG’s earlier experience with rural communities in the hills of Uttarakhand showed that menstrual “untouchability” is promoted on the grounds of hygiene as well as religious taboo. As a consequence, girls are not permitted
to dry menstrual cloths in any place where a man might see them. Cloths used included old rags or pieces from nylon saris. The level of absorption of folded cloth is also low, and does not serve women who have heavy flow.

There is a real need for menstrual hygiene promotion through easily disposable materials. However, cost and availability are barriers for girls in remote rural areas. Lack of toilets and water in rural areas mean that flushing them is anyway not an option. Buried material could be brought out by dogs, so burning appears to be the only way of disposal.

I would support the use of cheap disposable napkins heavily subsidized by the government for women, and provided free in girls’ schools, accompanied by educational campaigns on how to dispose them.

**Ch. Santakar, Journalist, Koraput, Orissa**
Use of disposable sanitary napkins is certainly better option for the adolescent girls. It could be important to train the adolescent girls in the schools on ways to make cheaper napkins. Especially this could be taken up as a *Skill Development Programme* for girls in the residential schools. While the girls could use it themselves, they would also carry the learning to their villages. Further they could be the trainers for other women and self help groups in their respective villages. In this way a consciousness could be spread to the user level.

**Veronica Peris, Centre for Governance, New Delhi**
Rural India has its needs, but I am absolutely sure that urban India also has a desperate need for Rs. 1/- sanitary napkins. This research has already been done by IIT Kanpur, CSR Division.

**Madanmani Dhakal, Medical Officer, Sikkim**
The first thing to know is the way women from poor economic background are handling their menstruation. Are they equipped with enough knowledge on how they should keep themselves during menstruation? Then the question arises how they are handling their present situation?

After knowing this, we can think of the usability of clean cloth and the sanitary pads. I feel this issue is more than just a safe disposal of sanitary pads.

**Lakshmi Murthy, Vikalpdesign, Udaipur, Rajasthan**
In response to Sharmishtha’s query, please find below my responses –

**Is there a need for sanitary napkins in villages?**

YES a good cloth one or a good commercial napkin (affordable one)

**What has been your experience regarding the status of menstrual hygiene in villages?**

Sanitary napkins are purchased only for using at special occasions like when they have to attend weddings and functions, when going out somewhere, when traveling etc. Buying napkins for the whole year is seen as expensive.
So cloth continues to be the most commonly used option. Occasionally the cloth will not entirely be cotton but with a polyester mix. Cotton fabric is expensive and is no longer as easily available at home as before.

Because menstrual blood is perceived to be “dirty,” any old rag is deemed sufficient to wipe off or to absorb the flow. The rags usually selected are dark in color to ensure that the dirty discharge will not be visible on a dark background. As a result, any other irregular discharge remains undetected.

Women/girls typically change twice a day once in the morning and once at night; sometimes the change is every 24 hours. The cloth is hung out to dry in a dark corner away from the sight of men. Women advise one another: “Hide the cloth. If men see it, they will lose their sight.” Once the period is complete, the cloth is put away, often between kelus (roof tiles), to be taken out the following month.

Women in many parts of Uttrakhand continue to be segregated in the "got" or animal shed during menstruation. There is much discomfort during those 3 to 4 days. It is cold in the got. They are not allowed to bathe, given only one blanket to name a few of the discomforts!

**Which one is better – a sanitary napkin or cloth and should sanitary napkins be offered to the village women and girls?**

Many adolescent girls throw away the cloth once it has been used. They report being too embarrassed to wash or too lazy to wash. A great combination could be cloth + disposable.

Rather than giving one option or stating which is better, both options should be given i.e Cloth and sanitary napkin. The cloth to be endorsed with the following messages- cotton cloth - light coloured - changed a minimum of three times a day - washed well and put out in the sun - stored carefully in clean place for next time.

See link to Sanitary napkin [http://www.vikalpdesign.com/3_dimen.html](http://www.vikalpdesign.com/3_dimen.html) that we have used in our programmes since 2000 and standardized the pattern in 2002. The langot style is not liked by adolescent girls who prefer the modern way to folding the cloth and placing into the underwear. Women prefer the langot as it allows for easy movement. This pad was also included in the NRHM (National Rural Health Mission) ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) Plus Programme, Uttrakhand Government.

**What different methods of disposal of sanitary napkins can be used at the village level?**

Dogs dig up the pit where the pad has been buried (if has not been buried deep enough) and carry it away to another place. Pigs and dogs nose out the pads from the garbage dump. What has worked is individual small tin drum or the “tagari” (iron wok used for construction). The tagari or drum - to be kept in the back yard or terrace - burnt soon – burn once a day. The common community burning spot will never be used. No one wants to announce that they are burning their commercial pads.

**R.Sujatha, Shri Cheema Foundation, Chennai (response 1)**

This is to share with you some of the experiences that we have with regard to the use of sanitary napkins and the concept of menstrual hygiene. Our foundation has been working in the area of menstrual hygiene since 2005 and we have found that awareness on proper hygiene practices during menstruation is rather limited among the rural girls.
A session on the physiological aspects of menstruation revealed that nearly 80% of the girls were not aware of the physiological functions of maturation/menstruation. Our foundation has been focusing on menstrual hygiene management with its three components –

- Education and Awareness of menstrual hygiene
- Access to low cost hygienic napkins and
- Safe disposal of used napkins

There are SHGs (Self Help Groups) manufacturing low cost hygienic napkins at the village level and can supply napkins to adolescent girls @ Rs. 2/napkin. The machinery that is being used is not hi-tech and is not capital intensive. Investments would be more on raw materials only. We have taken this programme first in Kancheepuram District of Tamilnadu. In addition to this we have trained many groups/NGOs across the country to adopt this holistic view of menstrual hygiene. International Learning Exchange programmes and teams from neighbouring countries have also gained from this rich experience of implementing this programme at low cost. Training SHGs to market and spreading the concept of good hygiene practices among school girls have proved to be helpful.

In Tamil Nadu, all organizations working in Menstrual hygiene have come together to form a consortium to take this programme at the state and the national level. Those interested can contact us for further information in this regard and we would be willing to share our experience and expertise.

_Aishwarya Pillai, Futures Group International, New Delhi_

One of the PPP (Public Private Partnership) launched by the Innovations in Family Planning Services Technical Assistance Project in the state of Uttarakhand is the **Mobile Health Van (MHV)**, which operates in three blocks of Nainital, catering to the hard-to-reach areas of the district (since 2007). Along with diagnostic and curative services, the MHV also provides RCH services, which includes distributing branded disposable sanitary pads free of cost to the female beneficiaries (who more or less form the bulk of the van's beneficiary population), with guidance on how to use and hygienically dispose off the napkins.

Women in the area, in general, do not wear sanitary pads during menstruation. They directly bleed into their clothes and separate themselves from the house during their periods. The ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activist) do educate them on the importance of maintaining hygiene during menstruation and using clean cloth pieces during their periods.

The female beneficiaries who visit the van are open to adopting disposable sanitary pads, but they need to be educated on how to use these, and more importantly, how best to dispose off the pads. If women's self help groups are to be equipped to manufacture disposable sanitary napkins locally, it is important to ensure that the quality of the products more or less measures up to the standard branded sanitary pad available in the market.

_Bhawani Shanker Kusum, Gram Bharati Samiti (GBS), Jaipur_

I absolutely agree with Jasodhara on her views about menstrual untouchability and religious taboo in rural areas. It is so strong in the villages (where we are working for past 15 years) that most of the girls (it is relaxed a bit for the married women) keep wearing the same napkin made of rags of old sarees for 4-5 days and in case heavy flow, dry them in a very secluded areas or dark places in the house. Lack of water and flushing toilets is again a serious problem which is not available for all the women and girls.
Empowering women and girls through proper mobilization, awareness and training for promoting sanitary napkins is a dire need of women in rural areas. Our experience says that we can do it successfully through Self Help Groups (SHG). It must be included in all kinds of programs run by Non government organizations with SHG whether it is on reproductive and sexual health, education, vocational training, micro credit or any thing else.

**Johnson Rhenius, WaterAid India, Uttar Pradesh**

WaterAid India partners did a short survey on menstrual hygiene in Orai and Banda, Uttar Pradesh. The results were interesting:

**Banda survey reveals:**

- 72% of respondents did not know about sanitary napkins and others came to know about sanitary napkins through Aganwadi workers and TV
- 94% of them used cloth
- 79% of them washed the cloth for reuse though 32% told they used only once

**Orai survey reveals the following:**

- 85% respondents are not aware about first menstrual period
- 45% respondents are aware about the use of sanitary napkin, in which 73% has received information about sanitary napkin from families and friends and 26% has received information from communication and 1% has received information from other source
- 55% respondents are not aware about sanitary napkin
- 95% respondents are using cloth during their menstrual period, where as only 5% respondents are using sanitary napkin
- 96% respondents dispose their cloth in open place, 2% respondents are disposing in pit, where as 2% reuse the cloth after washing and drying either in open sun or in the house
- 99% respondents uses the cloth for one time only
- 56% respondents reveals that they are not using sanitary napkin due to lack of awareness, 38% has sighted cost as the reason, 5% has reflected reason of non-availability and 1% has reflected reason of not comfortable in use
- 10% respondents are using toilet during their menstrual period in which 89% are feeling safe, hygiene and comfortable in using toilet
- Due to un-availability of toilet 89% respondents are managing their menstrual related activities in their house only and 7% are managing their menstrual related activities in agriculture field
- 13% are not attending class in which 92% have reflected health problems as a reason for not attending class during menstrual period
- 78% respondents work as usual during their menstrual period, where as 9% take rest during menstrual period and 13% work and take rest during their menstrual period
- 90% respondents not practicing hand wash behaviour
- 56% respondents are facing urinal problems in which 94% have reflected un-hygiene practices as reason for their urinal problems and 6% respondents have not given answer

Thus promotion of sanitary napkins is to be encouraged. Our partners have promoted use of sanitary napkins by producing them locally but the challenge was availability of raw materials at affordable cost. If the raw materials are available at ease and at affordable price, Self Help Groups (SHG) can manufacture them and promote them. But awareness is the key and the linkage with Anganwadi workers and ASHAs in promoting these. Recent announcement on promotion of sanitary napkins by Ministry of Health is a step in the right direction. Disposal is a
problem though at institutional level (schools, community toilets) incinerators can be promoted but at Household level disposal is still a problem.

With regards to the disposal of used material during menstruation, some interesting results came out:

- Used cloth thrown outside if smelled by the snake then there will not be any issue to the women concerned
- Used cloth can be taken up by the magician for his illicit use but still 96% respondents disposed the used cloth / napkin in open place

I am still watching out the mechanisms for safe disposal of sanitary napkins for in rural it is a challenge and the present practices are either burying behind house or burning.

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**Subhankar Bhattacharya**, Consultant, Menstrual Hygiene Management, Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal and UNICEF, West Bengal

Thanks for bringing a very relevant topic in the discussion forum. The programme has been taken up in West Bengal in a structured manner. Let me share the West Bengal experience. The Menstrual Hygiene Management Initiative is implemented by the SPSGSY Cell of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal in collaboration with UNICEF. Under this initiative, apart from raising awareness on Menstrual Hygiene issue, it has been planned to install at least one manufacturing unit in all 18 districts of the state by SHG (Self Help Groups) women members. Technical and financial support is provided by the Department. Technical support has also been provided to some NGOs for installation of production units.

The objective of the initiative is

- To improve health and wellbeing of adolescent girls and women through better menstrual hygiene practices, particularly use of hygienic low-cost sanitary napkins
- To improve socioeconomic status of women and girls by empowering SHGs to establish and run viable sanitary napkin production units

The initiative started in the district of Purulia in 2007 by a Cluster of 5 SHGs through installation of a manufacturing unit and the unit is operational. The programme was scaled up across the state through setting up of a Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Cell within the SPSGSY Cell, Dept. of Panchayat and Rural Development with UNICEF support.

In West Bengal, the SGSY (Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana) groups are federated into a cluster at the Gram Panchayat level. In some districts, Clusters are federated into Federation at the Block level. There are around 2,70,000 SGSY groups, 1447 Clusters in the state. 15 Federations have already been formed in 8 districts. All the Federations and quite a few clusters have their own building. The initiative is implemented through this structure. The fund for machinery, equipment and working capital is provided by the Government.

Since the inception of the Cell, two more units have been installed in two federations. Besides, another unit has been installed by an NGO with technical support from the MHM Cell. Preparations for installation of another six units in as many districts are in various stages of completion. Production capacity of each unit is around 20,000 packets per month each packet containing 8 pieces.

The manufacturing technology is semi-mechanised and the Special Purpose Machineries have been developed. The product manufactured by Federations / Clusters are sold under a common name ‘**Diya**’. The price of one packet of napkin is substantially cheaper than the cheapest
multinational brand available in the market. Around 40 women are engaged in a production unit in production, marketing, awareness generation, record and accounts maintenance and supervision. Capacity building is one of the key components of the initiative and training programmes are organized on regular basis on production, marketing and accounts maintenance and supervision.

Sales and Awareness campaigns are conducted in schools including KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya) schools, residential schools, colleges, health centres and at the community level with participation from SHG women and adolescent girls. Post-use disposal is another issue that is addressed in the initiative. There are two methods of safe disposal of used napkins: Deep Burial and Incineration.

- Deep burial: The napkins can be buried in a pit that can be dug near the household or at the community level.
- Incineration (Disposal through burning): Designs are available for convenient and cost-effective Incinerators that can be installed in schools, colleges, hostels and at community level. Estimated masonry cost of one Incinerator is around Rs. 2,500/-

Incinerators have already installed in schools in various parts of the state and they are used regularly.

The product is gaining acceptability among rural women and adolescent girls as the product is of good quality and cost effective. The initiative has provided income generation opportunities for around 200 women. This number is going to increase as more units are set up.

Any further queries are most welcome.

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**Bijoya Roy, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi**

Menstrual hygiene is very important aspect not only for adolescent girl’s health but also of adult women's health. Even today there are many taboos surrounding menstruation and its practices. Not only adolescent girls from rural areas but also from urban areas need safer and hygienic options for handling menstruation. There are many adolescent girls in the city staying as pavement dwellers having almost no access to health care unless and until any mobile health care unit reaches them.

The scheme to price separately the sanitary napkins for BPL (Below poverty line) and APL (Above poverty line) adolescents needs to be seen in the context of how many will be able to afford it. Nanda’s study has shown that even a minimum user fee for women is an additional cost since they have almost no access to economic resources and their health is given least priority. Secondly, sanitary products which cannot be easily disposed off can again be harmful to the environment. There is still a need to explore and study the local methods of dealing with menstruation and identify the better and hygienic ones which can be disposed off in an environment friendly manner.

Simply another public private partnership based on social marketing model cannot be seen as a solution to promote menstrual hygiene. Introduction of sanitary napkins by Self Help Groups in Tamil Nadu at Rs. 1.50/- needs evidence in terms of to which (caste, class) adolescent girls it has been able to reach out, could the girls from the BPL category been able to continue buying over the years and what has been its impact in terms of menstrual hygiene management?

Vikas Desai, National institute For Woman and Child Development (NIWCD), Surat

There can not be second opinion for the need for introducing sanitary napkins for girls and women in rural area. But the efforts of introduction need to be clubbed with proper guidance and facility for disposal of used sanitary napkins. In absence of this effort indiscriminate disposal shall lead to several health, aesthetic and social issues. In rural setup without sanitation infrastructure this is a challenge.

Prakash Nayak, CARE India, New Delhi (response 2)


Rajeev Bijalwan, Rural Development Institute, Uttarakhand

Menarche Management and importance of menstruation hygiene is one of key challenge during adolescent’s life. However, we found that the new generation is ready to manage their hygiene during the menstruation but still currently available alternatives and solutions are not in their budget. This is the main reason that they are still using cloth. It is clear that there is impact of social taboos also.

Second important fact is that market based sanitary napkin propagates only its few characteristics such as comfortable, absorption and size. Still they are not focusing the hygiene aspect, importance of maintaining hygiene during menstruation and its role in disease prevention. For that we have to work together and develop a cost effective sanitary napkin and disseminate it for its primary cause.

Sharaf Abbas, Social Consultancy Services (SCS), Lucknow

Greetings from SCS!

We are a development consultancy agency having its presence in several states of the country through consultancy assignments and projects. One of our major program is School Education Program (SEP) for Adolescent Girls especially on menstrual hygiene. We have been implementing this program in seven states of the country (urban areas). It comprises of an interactive session with girl students, briefing them about various aspects of personal hygiene and health, anemia, right age of marriage, female anatomy, nutrition, etc with the help of a booklet and a pictorial chart. Later, free samples of sanitary napkins are given.

What I want to put forward that why do we people are more interested in creating parallel
structures (Sanitary Napkins Manufacturing units), which may not be cost effective or hygienic nor sustainable. Just because we the social sector people don’t want to be seen as having an affiliation with any corporate, we get into unnecessary duplication of efforts.

I have tried to work out a pricing mechanism, whereas a branded (don't want to name a particular brand) sanitary napkin costs average Rs. 2 per piece for a social sector organization/SHG/CBO, which is very much within the price band of locally manufactured napkins that too when capital cost investment is not taken into consideration. But there are very few takers for this because so called agency is more interested in leaving behind a legacy! which survives only on funding agencies donation, that too till the project period and then vanishes. So I would suggest that the agencies really interested in working out for the needy, should work out on viable and sustainable options.

**Apoorva Ahirrao**, Late Shriram Ahirrao Memorial Trust's, 'SATHI' Project, Maharashtra

First of all I would like to appreciate your efforts in this regard. Our views regarding the same are as follows -

1. Absolutely there is a dire need for using sanitary napkins in villages as we have diagnosed and treated the Reproductive Tract Infections in women, and most of them were due to improper hygiene and use of unhygienic cloth during their menstrual cycle
2. As far as personal hygiene and women's reproductive health is concerned our prime duty is to promote/counsel the rural adolescent girls/women/ mother's-in-law and make them aware about benefits of using a sterilized/clean/hygienic cotton napkin. It will be beneficial for their own reproductive health
3. A simple method that can be used to dispose the used sanitary napkins at village level is to just wrap it in a paper and burn/incinerate the same at the household level.

For initiating the same we have to conduct FGD's (Focussed group discussions) regarding the use of sanitary napkins at village level and we have to discuss with the SHG's (Self Help Groups) regarding the production of sanitary napkins at village level which can be made easily available to the rural girls/women at village level at a minor cost.

**Shubhada Kanani**, M.S University of Baroda, Vadodara

Use of sanitary napkins is an important social and health issue; and it was encouraging to read about all the initiatives in the country. In addition, it is also an important environment issue; both in rural and urban areas and I would like to share these concerns:

1. Use of plastic bags to dispose of used napkins. Plastic bags of all shapes and sizes are increasingly creating environmental hazards and are used to throw off used napkins. While, on one hand makes sense (because if properly tied, it is not subject to being opened by prying animals; shuts off the odour, and seems a more ‘decent way’ to dispose off). This method of disposal is becoming common. However, this is another example of how plastics are becoming more entrenched in our life. We in our small way, encourage girls and women to use paper bags; or old newspapers. I was wondering if through Public Private Partnerships or any other way, it is possible to manufacture, along with the napkins, environment friendly wrapping material for discarding the napkins.

2. I have also been distressed at the careless disposal of napkins by outside visitors who visit rural villages or hilly areas – visitors for work and tourists. People not native to the village, perhaps requires as much awareness and sensitivity as the village women/girls, on this issue.
Pallavi Patel, CHETNA, Gujarat
Since years people are using cloth to absorb menstrual blood. As per my information in a desert area, women make special bag filled with sand and use it as a pad.

We may not be fully equipped with the information about different material being used by women and girls during menstruation. There are different practices being followed by women which need to be studied and their comfort level about the same needs to be understood. Also how they dispose of the used material need to be understood. Do these traditional methods lead to infection? Is sanitary napkin community's preference? We need to answer all these questions before we introduce sanitary napkins.

One needs to calculate the economics also. I am not in favour of sanitary napkins at this stage. We do not have disposal system in place and managing disposal of sanitary napkins is not easy. We are yet not ready for it. Even in urban area women are facing difficulties in disposing it. Regarding the benefit, this will sure go to the manufactures.

What is needed is to teach women and adolescent girls about the hygiene during menstruation. Encourage them to dry the cloth in sunlight. We at CHETNA promote the same in our training programme. We need to empower women and girls to break the culture of silence and discuss about their concerns related to reproductive and sexual health. This effort will sure benefit the women.

R.K. Baxi, PSM Medical College, Baroda (response 2)
Use of sanitary napkin doesn't equal to menstrual hygiene. In a country with "reuse' and "protracted n prolonged use" of anything even if disposable, due to cost constraints, where introductory price of anything is incredibly low followed by a huge cost escalations I would consider need assessment and a real check on affordability.

Can we ensure disposal for burial/incineration in a safe and scientific manner at one designated place in every village? Just as open field defecation is uncontrolled and unorganized, I fear sanitary napkin disposal also would be an unmanageable scatter!

It is the overall availability of privacy, health awareness and education, adequate water supply and acceptance of menstruation as normal physiology is what will eventually help.

Shrigopal Sharma, Shri Vatsalya Sasthya Seva Charitable Trust, Indore, Madhya Pradesh
Till the alternative way is established, the old practice of using reusable cloth napkins is workable. We can advise to boil the cloth napkins and dry them before use next time. Boiling is an easy and cheap method to disinfect the cloth.

Joy Elamon, UNDP, New Delhi
Many traditional and existing menstrual hygiene practices were shared during this discussion. There was also mention about causation of certain allergic reactions if synthetic clothes (like polyester or others) are used as pads. Are there any studies on the health impact of these kinds of menstrual practices or are there only anecdotal evidences?
When various kinds of sanitary napkins are being introduced to the village communities, we also need to ensure the quality of these products and the materials used. Are there any such practices on ensuring quality? This is also important in the context of the new programme by the government to distribute subsidized sanitary napkins in villages. There is a need to emphasize on the process of ensuring quality of the napkins (including the material used), both in the large scale programmes as well as in the local level initiatives.

**Anjali Rao, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, Karnataka**

Our team has been involved in Menstrual Hygiene project since May 2009 in rural Udupi district, Karnataka. The menstrual hygiene management was poor and the reason being rural women/adolescent girls were re-using cloth during menstruation leading to reproductive tract infections. The high cost of sanitary napkins made by multinationals was well beyond their reach. Hence, to overcome this problem we have started manufacturing sanitary napkins with the help of Self Help Groups consisting of rural women. The price of a napkin is quoted as Rs. 2/- per pad. Our resource person was Dr. R. Sujata of Shree Cheema Foundation, Chennai. We pack them in packets of 8 sanitary pads costing Rs. 16/- each. This is a highly subsidized rate with no compromise on quality. We have created awareness sessions for the rural women, ASHA trainees, Anganwadi workers, rural adolescent school girls who also procured these napkins made by skilled hands of rural women.

I would suggest that sanitary napkins be introduced in the ASHA kit so that ultimately rural communities are targeted for the beneficial effects of sanitary napkin usage along with awareness on its disposal. Disposal is taken care of by burning and incinerator. In rural schools napkin vending machines can be installed. These are some of the proposals which could be worked out especially where healthcare of women is given a priority.

**Jyoti Sonia Dhan, Child Rights and You, Kolkata**

It is very interesting to know about the initiative by Health ministry on menstrual hygiene with 150 crore scheme. The hygienic condition is very poor along with the social taboos which create more health problems for rural women and adolescent girls.

Sanitary napkins sound good but that is once again associated with water and disposal. We still find that despite awareness on use of toilets it did not work in many parts of areas especially the tribal dominated areas due to the water scarcity. I wonder how much acceptability will be there for this new approach. Many of the members have narrated about the traditional practices in rural and tribals areas, may be there is need to research that and find out the best way to implement which is sustainable.

Secondly, the issue of disposal, there are taboos related to menstrual blood, that the witches and magicians used the stain clothes which are buried or burned to spell some evils. So once again the question gets back to what was the traditional method in the tribal areas. If there is scattered disposal then it is an environmental issue which we can find in the urban areas also despite an organized disposal method.

I believe it is a good approach by government but it should be need based depending on the areas, as some parts will have high acceptability and others will not have. The ASHA workers in some areas might be highly active and some areas do not have workers. The outreach of the programme will be a challenge because in the tribal dominated areas, 80% of health related issues were cured through traditional practices. The reason behind is the accessibility and approachability due to long distances and cultural preferences.
Santosh Kumar Patra, Orissa
For prevention of Reproductive Track Infections (RTI), it is very essential to promote menstrual hygiene among the village women. While promoting the subsidiary sanitary napkins, I would suggest looking at two intervention models i.e -

- Social marketing strategies currently working effectively in prevention of HIV-AIDS and family planning measures. For this you may refer the social marketing strategies of PSI, OXFAM etc

- Second model is marketing strategies used by the corporate sector followed by the advertising techniques

It is also pertinent at community level to find out the best practices for menstruation hygiene. Since you are trying to provide subsidized napkins, still it is better to look at the purchasing capacity of women in your respective area and their financial freedom in terms of decision making for her health.

RTI is the alarming issue and directly affects the reproductive health status of women therefore; I would suggest you to experiment in a small patch and document each of the process with in a cut off time period and expand or scale up the program for larger well being of women in your region.

R. Sujatha, Shri Cheema Foundation, Chennai (response 2)
This is indeed a time to speak about standardization and quality control of the products distributed for ensuring menstrual hygiene. We have seen several cases where even products from standard companies were found to fall below the expected standards when it comes to such large scale procurement. We have adopted from our foundation certain basic procedures to ensure the quality of our products in the SHG (Self Help Group) production units:

1. We have tested the raw materials that are used
2. We ensure hygienic production methods
3. Absorbency tests across raw materials are carried out periodically
4. We ensure that the napkin is sterilized in a dry autoclave and packed immediately

In addition, we get the periodical testing of samples done for checking of pH levels and disposability of the napkins. This is the way that the SHGs which are manufacturing in the rural areas with support from our foundation manage the quality standards. Till date for the past 4 years, there have been no complaints from any of the rural women on using the product.

There is another train of thought on why we should create parallel structures like napkin manufacturing units; I have only one answer for that if hygiene practices have to reach the last mile, then production should also be at the grassroot level. Women become producers and the consumers. Looking back, we can see that the multinationals were unable to penetrate the market earlier in the rural areas and thanks to the SHG manufacturing units that the access and price have no longer becoming a issue in ensuring menstrual hygiene practices.

M. Sarah Priyatharini Ramya, INP+ (Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS), Chennai
I would like to share my experiences from the Tamil Nadu State. Under the Total Sanitation Program, construction of **Sanitary Complex** in most of the villages was made possible. Details can be viewed in the following website - [http://www.tnrd.gov.in/schemes/tsc.html](http://www.tnrd.gov.in/schemes/tsc.html)

These complexes had sanitary pads with incinerator. Even in panchayat schools this facility was made possible. Self Help Group women in respective villages need to refill the sanitary napkin box twice a month on rotation basis. Even in most of the villages this has now become a practice. Almost 95 percent of school girls and women prefer sanitary napkins in these rural areas.

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**Saurabh Singh, Innervoice Foundation, Uttar Pradesh**

During our field work in Uttar Pradesh (Ballia) and Bihar (Bhojpur) on water and health issues, we came across this issue on several occasions. While talking to villagers especially to women and girls, we realized that menstrual hygiene was indeed a major and an unaddressed issue which has not received enough attention of any group.

Most of the women and girls were suffering due to non availability of sanitary napkins and wanted to know how they could have access to disposable sanitary napkins. Some of them had heard about low cost sanitary napkins that could be used instead of cloth used at home which according to them was not safe. They also wanted to know if Government has any scheme to distribute napkins. Their suffering was also compounded due to the fact that in villages or at district hospitals, they don't have anyone to consult in case of any need or from where they can get the napkins. Most of women and girls wanted to learn how to make such napkins at home and they felt shy in discussing these matters with their family members.

We found that most of these women wanted to have access to disposable napkins. However, it was very pertinent to see that both in UP and Bihar, very little attention has been paid to menstrual hygiene.

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**Alpan Kumar Sinha, CEDPA, Jharkhand Regional Office, Ranchi**

I agree with **Mr. Sharaf Abbas** that instead of creating new structure we should try to strengthen the existing structure and services first and try to make it more responsive, affordable and accessible. Creation of new structure shall be the last resort particularly when it is available at the same price or lesser price when compared to the price offered by social sector organizations/SHG/CBO.

In this case the money available shall be used to develop the software of database of beneficiaries, so that they become more receptive to avail the existing products/services judiciously.

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**Puneet Misra, Center for Community Medicine, AIIMS, New Delhi**

Menstrual hygiene is an important issue that every girl and women has to deal with in her life. Recently we have conducted a study among the rural females living in the rural areas of **Faridabad district of Haryana**, to know the current practices and knowledge of the menstrual hygiene and their willingness to pay for low cost sanitary napkins.

The sample size was more than 1000 females, it is under process of writing and publication, and here are few findings -

- There was a high level of ignorance found about the normal physiological process of menstruation in majority of population
The role of health sector was found to be quite low in this aspect. Only 30 percent of females were found to be using sanitary napkins and the rest were using cloth. It was found that most of them were not willing to pay for sanitary napkins.

**Niranjan Bariyar, CINI, Ranchi**

I would like to share my experience of social marketing of sanitary napkins in the rural Chambal region. The product was of HLFPPT (Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust) and the basic sales strategy was to appoint two female Sales Coordinator in each block who would attend SHG (Self Help group)/Mahila Mandal meetings, orient them on Reproductive and Sexual health, Reproductive Tract Infections (RTI) and the use and advantages of sanitary napkins, through flip book.

The demand for sanitary napkins was so huge, that we would achieve our targets within 60% of the allotted time cycle. It had many reasons for generating new adopters as there was door step delivery, raised the social status of women and was offered at a lower price than other branded products available in the nearest market, for which they would have to travel. The product was offered at Rs 16/- for a pack of 10 pads. On an average each sales person conducted three meetings every day. The demand was such that these sales coordinators had to replenish with fresh stocks in the afternoon.

There were some quality concerns raised by customers, who would complain that they need to change the pads more than once a day, which actually equalized the cost factor. However, this never affected the sales figure as the feel good factor of using a sanitary pad was far more and also our customers were not from the ultra poor families. The local RMPs (Registered Medical Practitioners) and medical outlets also stocked the product to full capacity.

I want to point out that for the moderately poor and above, sanitary napkins are definitely preferred over clothes even in rural areas. On a few instances, we also found that it was disposed properly as mentioned in the flip books and as promoted by the sales coordinator; however there was no systematic study to prove the same.

**Prasant Saboth, Abhilasha trust, Bhubaneswar**

I am a pediatrician and a life member of Adolescent Chapter of Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP). This issue was haunting me for last 5 years. I always imagine huge quantity of used sanitary napkins as solid waste in my country. With the quantum of money spent by these multinational sanitary napkin manufacturing companies, imagine if only 5 crore napkins are used per month in the country, the profit by these companies will be at least 100 crore per month (Rs. 5/- per napkin considering average four menstruation days).

Think of the solid waste accumulating in the multistoried apartments and women hostels in the crowded cities and towns. But there are no regulations in our country to put pressure on these companies to educate people for solid waste disposal advertisements! It is a great step taken by this organization. The girls and women of our country should be educated on the use of sanitary napkins. A properly cleaned cloth (cotton/ cotton gauge – handmade), well dried in sun by a well aware women who will change the cloth every day (not one cloth for 4 days), there is no harm and no chance of infection. The process need to be explained to the girls that it is something the body wants to throw out from the body (blood products) and it is required to be cleaned. If hygiene is not maintained then the blood will become a medium for infection which needs to be prevented.
I appreciate your efforts to take this innovative and novel step. If the international agencies are really concerned about environment then they should also come forward and support this program.

Regarding disposal of the napkins, burning is the only method, suitable at the village level. Otherwise it will be a nuisance in the villages as happens in the hostels, when the dogs scatter them in the hostel and nearby roads.

Wishing you all the best!

 Sadhu Charan Panda, VSS Medical College, Burla, Odisha

There is no need for sanitary napkins in the villages. In villages, mostly cloth is used. However, knowledge, attitude and practice about hygiene is poor. Cloth is better than sanitary napkins because it is easily available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and it can be re-used. There is a need to create awareness on importance of menstrual hygiene to women and girls and on using properly cleaned and sun-dried cloth.

Disposal of sanitary napkins is a big problem. In urban settings also, disposal of sanitary napkins is an issue and imagine what will happen if it is introduced in villages. The entry of this new product in the name of women’s menstrual hygiene will be a profit making venture for various companies. The reasons for not advocating the use of sanitary napkins in villages is that it is costly, it is not accepted everywhere, it can’t be re-used, disposal is a problem and availability of raw material has to be ensured.

I would suggest a countrywide study on use of cloth and other indigenous materials used in villages and find out which one amongst them is scientifically sound, acceptable, available, accessible, affordable, biodegradable and can be reused.

That would be a cheap, social and culture friendly, climate friendly and local way of managing women’s health in terms of menstrual hygiene.

 Avnish Jolly, Chandigarh

While working at grass root, it is difficult to advocate for sanitary napkins, still people use most dirty cloth as sanitary napkin. Most of the adolescent girls like to use the branded sanitary napkins and they don’t have money for that. I find few adolescent girls who give indecent favours to others for branded sanitary napkins; and acquire STI (Sexually Transmitted Infections)/HIV or pregnancy. This leads to number of problems in their life.

Therefore it is required to teach them importance of health and hygiene along with counseling on STI / RTI, Reproductive health and Sexuality.

 Garima Sharma, Kalawati Saran Children’s Hospital, New Delhi

In 2005-06, I was part of an ICMR funded research project - Knowledge and Practices of Adolescent Girls regarding Reproductive Health with Special Emphasis on Hygiene during Menstruation undertaken by NIPCCD.

The objectives of the study were to : assess the knowledge of adolescent girls regarding reproductive health with special emphasis on hygiene during menstruation; ascertain different
practices adopted by them in maintaining hygiene during menstruation; study the socio-cultural, health, nutrition, sanitation, education, related practices that are considered essential for menarche and during menstruation by the community; study the source of information and health-seeking behaviour of adolescents with particular reference to menstrual health; and suggest locally available materials, which can be hygienic as well as cost effective to meet the requirements of adolescent girls during menstruation.

The sample comprised of 500 Adolescent girls, 500 mothers of adolescent girls, 93 women opinion leaders and 150 women functionaries of ICDS and Health system. The States covered were Assam, Delhi, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

Important Findings:

- The study revealed that majority (70.6%) of adolescent girls were not aware about menstruation till its onset. The main source of information for adolescent girls were Mother (37.6 %), siblings (32.8%), friends (27.6%). Though not in majority, school teachers (5.4%), ANM (3.42 %) and AWW (2.05%) were also among the information source for adolescent girls, who could be used as a medium for imparting education.

- Majority of adolescent girls (84%) and mothers of adolescent girls (92.9%) were using cloth during menstruation, which they were reusing, after washing it. Though the washing of the cloth was being done at a clean place by majority of the respondents, but only 61.6% adolescent girls and 45.6% mothers of adolescent girls were drying the cloth under the sun.

- Only 40 percent adolescent girls had access to toilet facilities. About 37.8 percent unmarried adolescent girls reported about vaginal discharge accompanied with itching (21.6 %) and foul smell (27.5%).

- About 46.6 percent of them felt that unprotected sex is the main cause of transmission of HIV. A preventive measure for HIV was only known to 50 percent of adolescent girls. In general, the knowledge of adolescent girls about prevention, early detection and management of RTI/STI and HIV/AIDS was found to be very limited, though majority (85.5%) had heard about HIV/AIDS.

- Majority of the respondents including adolescent girls, mothers of adolescent girls, women opinion leaders and women functionaries were of the opinion that safe sanitary pads should be introduced for the adolescent girls/women in the area. Suggestions for preparing sanitary pads included sanitary pads with gauze and cotton, sterilized cotton pads, cotton with plastic sheets etc.

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**Indu Kumari, Ranchi**

In villages cloths are a better option than sanitary napkins because:

1. Cloths can be reused by women making it easily available
2. It is hygienic if properly cleaned and disinfected

When sanitary napkins are available for free or at a lesser cost women do take/prefer it but the major problem with the sanitary napkins is the problem of disposing it off -

a. Most of the suggestions in the discussion suggested burning the napkins but the problem with it is that:
i. Open burning causes foul smell, its not environment friendly, it is not pleasant to eyes and it requires open space where the taboo issue comes up.
ii. Closed burning requires cost 
iii. Incineration is costlier 
b. Disposal of sanitary napkins in deep burial pit requires land and construction cost.
c. While cloths, after being cleaned and reused for sometime can be torn into small pieces and can be disposed off as they naturally degrade faster.

Therefore, the women should be given training on basic hygiene during the menstrual period, though wherever such investments/arrangements for proper disposal can be done, sanitary napkins can be promoted.

**Wadgave H.V., PHC, Valsang, Solapur (response 2)**

I am not in favour of the views expressed against the use of sanitary napkins for rural girls. As I have previously stated in the discussion, girls from poor families are using the same cloth daily during menstruation just washing it during bath which creates reproductive health problems like fungal infection.

My view is that there is need to study the advantages and disadvantages of sanitary napkins but if it is manufactured at local level through NGOs, CBOs it will cost minimum. Even government can contribute for the provision of sanitary napkins and it can be distributed through Anganwadi’s or through Sub-centre. I feel there will be no hesitation among the girls to use it as in rural areas also; media has influenced them enough on the use of sanitary napkins. The greatest need is that we must provide knowledge on how to use it through group meetings and try to minimize the cost by linking it with Adolescent Health Programmes.

It is the real need of rural India to have sanitary napkins accessible and affordable to every rural adolescent girl and every woman.

**Prantik Sarkar, Care India, Rajasthan**

We were purchasing pads at the rate of Rs. 5 per packet which consist of 10 pads in it but now the cost has been increased to Rs. 17 per packet which is costing us more now. We want to establish our own manufacturing unit. Please guide us in doing so or please let us know where it is being manufactured so that we can contact them and have a cross visit.

We are looking at technology sharing and training options but it should be low cost especially as it is for rural women.

**Dinesh Paul, National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, New Delhi**

The National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development undertook a national level ICMR sponsored study titled ‘**Knowledge and Practices of Adolescent Girls regarding Reproductive Health with Special Emphasis on Hygiene during Menstruation**’. The major findings related to menstrual hygiene is as follows:

- The mean age of menarche in adolescent girls was 12 years
Majority (70%) adolescent girls were not aware about the menstruation till its onset
Main sources of information about menstruation were siblings and peer group
Major reactions to menstruation were fear and shock
Main confidante of majority of adolescent girls were mother, sister and friends. Adolescent girls informed/shared about the onset of menstruation with their confidante immediately. About 11.4 per cent informed a day later, due to shock and fear
Onset of menstruation imposed restriction of movements for 50 per cent of adolescent girls within the household. The trend, though coming down among the present day adolescent girls is still prevalent widely
About two-thirds of adolescent girls were not prepared for menarche and menstruation
Food restrictions were imposed on fifty per cent of adolescent girls
Almost fifty per cent of adolescent girls were not in school. School not being in the vicinity, financial problems, menarche being equated to gaining knowledge, fear of ruining family honour, domestic responsibilities, etc. were the major reasons for pulling adolescent girls out of school
Adolescent girls had limited knowledge of pubertal changes that they would be undergoing/ experiencing presently
Menstruation was perceived as dirty by mothers and has passed the same feeling onto adolescent girls, as well.
Majority of adolescent girls and mothers of adolescent girls were using cloth during menstruation. Only about a quarter of adolescent girls were using sanitary pads.
Sizeable adolescent girls and mothers of adolescent girls were reusing the cloth after washing it.
Though the washing of the cloth is being done at a clean place by majority of the respondents; but only 61.6 per cent adolescent girls and 45.6 per cent mother of adolescent girls were drying it under the sun.
More than one-thirds of adolescent girls, nearly 50 per cent mothers of adolescent girls and women opinion leaders had vaginal discharge accompanied with itching.
Majority of the respondents including the adolescent girls, mothers of adolescent girls, women opinion leaders and women functionaries were of the opinion that sanitary pads should be introduced for the adolescent girls/women in the area.

Charulatha Banerjee, Terredeshommes Foundation, Kolkatta

Thank you for this very relevant discussion.

Terre des hommes Foundation Lausanne partners PRAYAS in an Adolescent Health Programme in the Andaman Islands. Young girls with whom we work on the islands of Little Andaman and Baratang mention using cloth and sanitary napkins during their periods. I quote on the specific issue of Menstrual Hygiene from the Baseline report which was done using PRA techniques. It was found that school-going and non-school going girls in Little Andaman use a cloth or a sanitary napkin during periods, and are aware about disposing off the napkin and washing the used cloth. 27% school going females reported making use of antiseptic while washing the used cloth and 43% dry the washed cloth in sunlight. All school-going females maintained personal hygiene during the menstrual cycle, and also regularly clean genital areas. In comparison, 25% non-school going females reported washing the used menstrual cloth, without antiseptic, amongst which 25% dry the cloth in sunlight while 75% girls dry it in a closed room in order to hide it from public eye. 7% non-school going girls also reported not bathing during their menstrual cycle, and 18% refused taking measures for genital hygiene.
Another experience that I would like to share is what I saw during a visit to an NGO in the Sundarbans where Self Help groups are making sanitary pads and looking for marketing opportunities. It sure has enthused these women who have realised that there is a potential market but are not able to access it. They also use an imported synthetic material which is supposed to have a high absorbent capacity and the availability of which is not always assured. So the sustainability of such a venture in the potential scarcity of material and inability to market is questionable.

The message that should be passed on is not what to use but to give them the information on what is hygienic menstrual practice and options on how that can be achieved.

The disposal of sanitary napkins is an issue we will install incinerators in schools and encourage burning the napkins/used cloths at home rather than burying them or disposing them in waste bins. Waste collection and disposal systems on the island are still to be regularised and in this condition disposing used sanitary pads in the public bins is not recommended.

Neeru Sharma, Cecoedecon, Jaipur

I work with Cecoedecon, Jaipur which is working on themes like economic justice, sustainable livelihood and basic rights in rural as well as urban areas of around 10 districts in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

I have been following the whole discussion with a lot of interest. In my view, the problem is with our patriarchal society wherein talking openly about many issues related to women and her health, her requirements, her needs are of least importance.

In my opinion, providing sanitary napkins alone cannot serve the purpose. Cecoedecon’s experience shows that information, awareness along with accessibility to services related to reproductive health and hygiene is the most important for adolescent girls in rural areas. Most importantly we need to provide Information on female anatomy, menstruation cycle, hygiene dos and don’ts etc to not only the adolescent girls but their mothers, family members and community as well. After that, it’s important to create Awareness on important physical, emotional and hormonal changes in adolescent girls (signal of motherhood) not as untouchables during the periods and kept in isolation. And after information and awareness we should ensure the Availability and Accessibility of sanitary napkins at subsidized price that too within their approach such as at school, at anganwadi centers, primary health centre, community health centre and sub centre.

Along with this, the attitude of service provides including teachers, ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife), AWW (Anganwadi Workers), and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) can also encourage girls in coming forward and start taking care of their health at early stage of life. Formation of adolescent girls clubs in villages can also provide an effective platform to encourage discussions.
Nirmala Selvam, Independent Consultant, Chennai

I fully agree with what Charulatha stated, "The message that should be passed on is not what to use but to give them the information on what is hygienic menstrual practice and options on how that can be achieved."

Good counselling should help the client/beneficiary/target population to know the various options available to them, what behaviours they need to adopt for each option and choose what they can use with convenience while ensuring their own personal and environmental hygiene. Very important in this discussion is first for girls and women to feel comfortable with their own bodies and their menstrual cycle. Learning to accept their own bodies especially their reproductive organs and what they shed every month, will help them to accept menstruation as natural and not an unclean part of their natural being. This first step will help them to deal with their personal hygiene better.

In addition, young girls and women need to learn to cope in all conditions during their menstrual cycle without compromising personal hygiene. Here, I am referring to town bred girls/women - they need to be aware and learn to adapt to environments, it is sorry sight to see used pads thrown out in the back streets in cities and at tourist spots also.

Several months ago, I was invited to give a guest lecture to female post graduate in a co-ed college. I was asked very specifically to include very subtly the topic of personal hygiene during menstruation and emphasize that the girls use the bins provided inside the toilets to dispose off the used napkins. The request in itself speaks volumes of the shabby conduct of some female students. It was an embarrassment for the management and staff to deal with sewage blocks caused by napkins being dropped in the flush, or deal with complaints from cleaning personnel that napkins were simply left strewn on the toilet floor instead of being put into the bin. This scenario is not uncommon in schools and sometimes in offices too. Somewhere along the line we need to include it in our school and college student counselling sessions.

For the more enlightened there is now reusable cotton sanitary napkins. As using plain cloth is not very comfortable, and there is much discussion on the health hazards of using disposable bleached napkins and tampons, some environment friendly health conscious educated women have designed and now produce readymade reusable cotton sanitary napkins that have wings and a fastener to be attached to panties. For women who work from home or stay at home, a good option is reusable sanitary napkins. It is healthier, environment friendly and economical too. If self help groups are planning on producing them I suggest they try making these products too.

Anil Paranjape, Rohini Sanap, Smita Pawar, Institute of Health Management Pachod

We at Institute of Health Management Pachod (IHMP) have been involved with the issue of Menstrual Hygiene for some time now, from two perspectives. Firstly, we have conducted Life Skills Education courses for young girls during which we prepare them for puberty and impart necessary knowledge and skills to manage their menstrual periods. Secondly, we have also implemented intervention research programmes that address issues related to Reproductive Health of Adolescent girls and women. Numerous respondents have mentioned washing and sun-drying of cotton cloth for the purpose of absorbing the menstrual flow as the ideal option in our country. However from our experience in the field we wonder if they are aware of the reality which does not encompass an endless supply of soft absorbent cotton cloth, ample water and abundant space to dry clothes out in the sun. We would like to share certain difficulties that arise in actual practice that we have observed and would necessarily inform any plans that are implemented in this regard.
Supply of cotton cloth

Cotton cloth for the purpose being discussed would necessarily come from old clothes, mainly sarees and herein lies the first problem. Not very many women wear sarees today and those who do prefer synthetic fabric for various reasons. Other clothing yields less cloth that can be used for this purpose. Suffice it to say that the supply of cloth is limited. Even if we consider a saree, in our experience the maximum number of cloths one saree can yield is four in number. In our programme we advise girls and women not to use one cloth more than three times and during a given cycle they are advised to change at least three cloths in a day (meaning a minimum of three cloths to be washed, dried and reused per cycle). Further they are advised not to use a given piece of cloth for more than three cycles. This implies that in a year the girl would require twelve pieces of cloth hence THREE sarees a year just for this purpose. Considering a large proportion of people in this country live with just about two sets of clothes one to wear and the other to wash and new clothes are bought once a year, this number of three sarees can be difficult to manage. Hence the possibility of old cloth being available for this purpose is again limited. Further as we have mentioned earlier more and more girls do not use sarees. Cloth used for other clothing requires more stitching and hence pieces of cloth are not easily available.

We emphasize this fact because the koli (Fishing) community with whom we have worked on the outskirts of Pune traditionally do not use any material whatsoever. They just let the blood flow onto their everyday clothes. We have also observed that in urban slum households it is a known practice for all the women (whether mother, sister, sister in law etc.) to use the same few pieces of cloth earmarked for this purpose when they are having their periods. The implications for infections need not be emphasized to this audience.

Washing and reusing cloth

Women do wash and re-use cloth to absorb the menstrual flow but practical problems related to this are:

1. While washing the cloth the resultant outflow of dark coloured rinse water makes it obvious to an observer that the cloth being washed has been used in place of a sanitary napkin. Clothes are washed out in the open by the majority of persons hence this washing would obviously have to be done while the girl is bathing
2. In this country, women rarely have the luxury of a bathroom hence there is limited privacy while bathing (that is why they bathe with their clothes on)
3. In an urban setting the availability of water for washing and also the lack of privacy is a major concern
4. As the cloth cannot be washed entirely clean (because of the above reasons and also the shame associated with the process hence less time, effort and diligence is applied) after being used three or four times it becomes stiff and rough and hence causes discomfort if reused
5. Further it usually tears after three or four uses.
6. Hence we tell girls and women to use a given piece of cloth only for three cycles.

Drying in the sun

1. Firstly in order to dry it in the sun one would require space. Something that is available at a premium in urban areas
2. Women are not comfortable drying these clothes in public view (similar to their perception regarding their undergarments)
3. Further there is a belief that if these cloths are seen by a dog or a snake the woman will not conceive.
4. As a result, women tend to dry these cloths in dark corners. If at all they do dry these in the open, they are invariably hidden under other clothes so that they cannot be seen. However, this also prevents any UV rays from reaching the cloth.

The advice we offer young girls as also the methodology to be used in this regard is available in our Manual for Life Skills Education (www.ihmp.org). Considering all of the above, we feel it is foolhardy to expect women to use cotton cloth, wash it clean and dry it in the sun. We, therefore, entirely support the move to supply women and girls with sanitary napkins at subsidized rates. However, we do share the concern regarding safe disposal.

**Disposal of Sanitary Napkins**

Pune is a city where the segregation of garbage is being enforced by the Urban Local Body. Further, the collection of garbage is to a great extent managed by a rag pickers union, the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Sangathan (KKPKS). KKPKS has created a trust named SWACH (www.swachcoop.com) which provides rag pickers and waste collectors with support.

SWACH recently attempted to safeguard waste handlers who are required to handle used sanitary napkins in the course of their work. The organization has announced that it is making available bags manufactured by the rag pickers, made from newspapers with a SWACH label at a cost of Re 1/- per bag. The organization has requested women to use these bags to pack used sanitary napkins and place the same in the garbage so that the waste-collectors do not need to handle the same. The bags are then disposed off with other non-recyclable waste.

However, in our experience, women are not comfortable with these bags as they can be observed by any passerby who can identify the contents of the bag too. While we once again express our support for the promotion of sanitary napkins, we request that necessary attention be paid to the issue of disposal too. We, therefore, urge policymakers to identify methods of disposal which are practically feasible and promote and implement the same.

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**Bency Joseph, Independent Researcher, New Delhi and Mala Ramanathan, AMCHSS, SCTIMST**

We at the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies (AMCHSS), SCTIMST have just completed a research on menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent school girls in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala. It was the MPH dissertation of one of the authors of this note (Bency Joseph). The study indicates that there is definitely a need for increasing awareness and importance of menstrual hygiene in both the rural and urban areas.

Our study among both rural and urban adolescent school girls of Thiruvananthapuram district showed that girls using cloth were at greater risk of acquiring hygiene-related reproductive infections. It also showed that irrespective of the sanitary protection that they used, there is a significant risk of hygiene-related infections if there is inadequate water supply to the toilets at school or home.

The hygienic use of cloth involves not only frequent changing but also methods used in drying and storing the cloth. It may be far easier to manage the sanitary napkin as it is disposed of after each use. Burning the used napkin seems to be the safest bet as burying it may lead to it being dug up by dogs and other stray animals. A girl adopts the practices that are taught to her at menarche and later may be wary of changing it. The practices of her mother/elder who is her role model may not be very hygienic either. If she is introduced to low-cost napkins at the first instance, half the battle is already won.
The Rural Development Department of Tamil Nadu Government with support from UNICEF has trained self help groups to produce low cost sanitary napkins. A low cost incinerator (Rs 1500/-) developed by the UNICEF has been installed at schools and toilets complexes in Tamil Nadu for safe disposal of the napkins. This can be emulated as this model has met with some success.

**Mukti Bosco, Healing Fields Foundation, Hyderabad (response 2)**

Cloth cannot be an option as there are enough studies to show the unhygienic practices during washing and drying the cloth has been the cause of major reproductive health issues. Therefore now from the forum we need to find how we could:

1. Make sanitary napkins available
2. How it can be disposed
3. Manufacture and sale of sanitary napkins which can become a livelihood programme

We need to collectively address this and make lives of girls and women easier month on month.

**Chandni Basu, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata**

This discussion has been very interesting. Maintaining personal hygiene during menstruation is an important issue about which adolescent girls are not advised adequately. I have heard of an innovative initiative taken by a person in making affordable sanitary napkins especially for rural markets. This initiative has been supported by National Innovation Foundation (NIF). The Sunderban Self Help Groups could get some ideas from NIF in this regard.

**Shivendra Mani, UP State Health Society, Uttar Pradesh**

In villages, most of the girls and women use cloths during menstruation. It is available in house without any cost and gets decomposed easily. It suits our village economy and environmental safety. But on other hand if we look at the present practices, cloths used are not prepared for this purpose. Women take any waste cloth available with them which may result in urinary tract infections among women and girls. At the same time, dependency on multi-national or business house for this basic need would not suit the rural economy.

Hence we need to change the mind set of rural population related to menstruation and train adolescent girls and women in preparing self made napkins that help to maintain personal hygiene and sanitation. They also need to dig the used cloth under soil rather than throwing openly to prevent the infections.

**Shreya Desai, SEWA-Rural, Jhagadia, Gujarat**

Students at SEWA-Rural recently surveyed 112 women of Jhagadia block, Gujarat to assess feasibility of use of low cost sanitary napkins in the predominantly tribal area. We would like to share pertinent findings.

12% of women, mostly adolescent girls are using sanitary napkins. There is obvious economic and age related gradient regarding willingness to use sanitary napkins with adolescents and relatively richer section of the society are more willing to use sanitary napkins. 33% women were willing to spend less than Rs 30 /cycle, 28% between Rs 30-50/cycle whereas 35% were not willing to spend anything to buy sanitary napkins. When asked, 54% said they would be willing to use it whereas 31% were still hesitant. 65% women were willing to use napkins if offered free of cost. 16% would buy only from sakhis (equivalent to ASHA), 23% only from market and 35
would buy from both. Women prefer to buy napkins from female shop-keepers or female health workers. 64% would dispose napkins by burning them and 12% would bury it. Most of survey participants were not aware about how to use napkins.

Lessons learned were: education regarding how to use napkins is essential, adolescents would be early adopters, disposal does not seem to be a problem as feared by many discussants, using current cadre of health-workers as sellers seems feasible and sellers should be females.

Many thanks to all who contributed to this query!

If you have further information to share on this topic, please send it to Solution Exchange for the Maternal and Child Health Community in India at se-mch@solutionexchange-un.net.in with the subject heading "Re: [se-mch] Query: Use of Sanitary Napkins in Rural Areas - Experiences, Advice. Additional Reply."

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