Improving the Ecosystem for Menstrual Hygiene Management

The Problem

Menstruation is a normal biological phenomenon. However, there are various socio-cultural and infrastructural limitations that restrict many adolescent girls and women managing menstruation effectively. Lack of awareness, taboos and indiscriminate disposal of sanitary waste are few common problems of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in most of the low- and middle-income countries including India.

A 2014 report by the NGO Dasra titled Spot On!, found that nearly 23 million girls drop out of school annually due to lack of proper menstrual hygiene management facilities, which include availability of sanitary napkins (SN) and logical awareness of menstruation. The report also came up with some startling numbers: 70% of mothers with menstruating daughters considered menstruation as dirty and 71% adolescent girls remained unaware of menstruation till menarche.

Our MHM Interventions

As Menstrual hygiene management is an integral part of sanitation and hygiene, FINISH Society through its WASH programmes, works on MHM as an important intervention in communities and schools. Our work on MHM includes:

- Awareness generation/Social and Behavior Change Communication & Education on MHM to women and adolescent girls in schools and communities.
- Training and capacity building on safe MHM practices.
- Ensure safe and hygienic space/facility for women in communities and adolescent girls in schools to manage menstruation.
- Creating awareness on safer disposable options for sanitary waste including availability and usage of incinerators in schools and communities.
Impact Stories

Dignity room- Curating their own space for MHM

Staying on top of personal hygiene specially during periods is very important. Women and adolescent girls are slightly more vulnerable to bacterial infection during menstruation. So, washing and cleaning twice a day not only means being confident that you are clean, but also that you aren’t at the risk of any type of urinary tract infection, fungal infection, reproductive tract infection, infertility & cervical cancer. But in order to practice clean MHM, there has to be a clean toilet with the basic facilities which is rarely the case especially in tribal residential schools/ Ashramshalas where the girls have limited or no knowledge about the topic. Coyness and shyness around this topic keep the girls away from acquiring knowledge and right information about MHM.

Though few of the Ashramshalas do have toilets for girls they are in insufficient quantity or are very unhygienic with no proper facilities. Most of the times the toilets are blocked/ choked with stones, cloth, papers and other sanitary materials. Availability of water in the toilets is also a concern in almost all tribal schools of Nashik. Girls have no choice but to either miss their class during menstruation or use dirty cloths and throw them in open drains or outside school premises. All such bad practices lead to harm our environment and animals.

To address this issue, FINISH team formed groups of adolescent girls guided by female teachers and trained them on usage and management of proper menstrual hygiene with recognized UNICEF modules on MHM. The girls were shown animated informative videos on MHM, made to play and participate in interesting innovative games, debates, drawing and painting competitions, essay writings, as a tool of behavior change communication and to break the taboos around periods. But just communicating the importance of practicing safe MHM was not enough, it was important to provide them with clean toilets and adequate private space in Ashramshalas for the girls. The team came up with an idea to refurbish and change their existing toilets into Dignity Room (local Marathi language called Pratishtha Kholi).

Since most of the girls during menstruation lose their confidence for various reasons like foul smell, fear of blood stains, physiological changes, etc. This creates a negative impact on their overall personality development and hence the term "Dignity Room" where they can use a clean toilet with the basic MHM facilities including incinerators. A dignity room was developed with help of school administration in selected tribal schools, maintained and managed by an Adolescent Girls group. Many girls were unable to maintain proper hygiene due to lack of clean facilities and hence having a clean toilet encouraged them to use it frequently and thus preventing them from infections.

The girls from these schools do not miss any of their classes during menstruation and feel free to talk about periods with their friends and families. Some of the girls have also tried to raise awareness about MHM in their families back home during vacations. They did have tough times convincing their mothers and grandmothers but they are still happy that they can talk about it unlike before.
Now let’s look at what a Dignity Room should have?

- A designated clean & dry toilet with name plate written as "Dignity Room"
- A bucket with water
- A mug
- Soap hanged in a mesh bag inside the toilet
- Paper cut outs hung on a metal string to wrap used pad
- A hook with a bag to keep new pad while cleaning
- A dustbin (Pink or red color especially for MHM waste)
- A cleaning checklist inside the door
- Poster on disposal of sanitary waste inside on one of the walls.

(From a WASH program implemented in Ashramshalas schools of Nasik in partnership with NSE Foundation & WaterAid)
My first period in my school

Mahar Jain is a 13 year old girl, studying in 7th Std of Senior Secondary School Arankheda from Kota, Rajasthan. Mahar is very bright and always scores good marks in the class. She lives with her mother, father and a younger brother. Her father is a farmer and mother is a housewife.

She had her first menstruation only a couple of months ago in her school, and like many other girls, she was clueless about the changes happening to her body. She was flummoxed by the sudden behavior change of her mother and her grandmother towards her. She was asked not to touch her father and brother, not to worship, not to sleep on her bed, stay in a corner of the house and not to roam around during the ‘bloody’ days. The only reason that came to her mind was that she has now become dirty and impure because of this curse that has fallen on her.

She felt ashamed of herself and her confidence dipped. The most disturbing fact was that she could not share it with anybody. But as they say, every dark cloud has a silver lining, and Ms. Rama from DCM Shriram Swachhagrah programme came to her rescue. Rama is a community mobiliser specialized in Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and she was conducting MHM trainings and sessions with adolescent girls in all government schools where DCM was operational. When she arrived in Mahar’s School, she was surprised to see the forthright manner in which Rama was talking on this topic. Rama told them about the myths and taboos associated with menstruation and showed them some videos. She also discussed with them her own story and her first experience. Mahar and her class mates started calling her Rama Didi and they became very comfortable talking about menstruation to her.

DCM Shriram Swachhagrah and FINISH team transformed one of the class rooms of her school, as a pink room which was like a dispensary with provision of a small bed for resting during cramps, medicines, few packets of sanitary napkins, set of cloths for changing. The room was decorated with wall mounted informatives, colourful charts and diagrams explaining safe menstrual hygiene management practices. This pink room turned out to be a boon for all girls, they were happy that they do not need to rush home when period occurs during school, they have space to change, rest and take medicines.

One fine day, the field decided to conduct an essay writing competition on the topic “My first period” for adolescent girls of Arankheda school. The result showed that almost all the girls wrote about their first experience without hesitation. Mahar wrote one of the best stories in her class and she was asked to read it out in front of her class. She read out her story with pride and without showing a hint of shyness. In the process, she stole the hearts of everybody in her class.

Mahar says that she has gained back her lost pride and confidence. She realizes that she was ignorant of the fact that periods are normal. She has made a promise to herself that she will fight against this taboo and will inform people around her on the myths of menstruation.

(Mahar’s story is from a WASH in School program supported by DCM Shriram in Kota, Rajasthan)