

## Adolescents of Assamese tea communities learn to make sanitary pads



In 2020, as the first national lockdown was instituted in face of the COVID-19 outbreak, UNICEF Assam, in coordination with implementing partner, Bhartiya Cha Parishad (BCP) undertook an innovative initiative to orient and build the capacity of adolescent girls and mothers' group members of the tea gardens to make low-cost sanitary cloth-pads for their own use.

A survey conducted by the BCP team members found that most adolescent girls and women in the tea gardens were deprived of using commercial sanitary pads given the increasing unavailability, shortage and cost of sanitary pads due to imposed lockdown and COVID-19 protocols by the government and local administrations. All marketplaces remained closed. There was even a shortage in the government supply for the same, which were periodically delivered by the ASHA workers.

As a result, majority of the women and adolescent girls were compelled to use pieces of available household cloth as an alternative to sanitary pads. This endeavour of using random cloth pieces comes with its own risks and health-hazards, as the cloth might not be of a fully absorbent material. Further, if the material used is not clean, it could lead to rashes or skin infections; and if hygiene is not maintained, other health concerns may arise.

Given the situation, it was decided that adolescent girls be taught to make 100% cotton, low-cost cloth pads for their own use and given awareness on menstrual hygiene management.

To begin with, some of the BCP staff members were trained on making cotton cloth pads using household materials through a Training of Trainers (TOT) webinar session. In turn, the BCP facilitators trained adolescents, their main target group in the field. The objective of

the activity-based programme was to build capacity and skill the women on making sanitary pads for their own use.



As of May 2021, the initiative has reached 36 tea gardens, sensitizing as many as 456 adolescent girls and 29 adult women. Some of these adolescent girls also reached out as trainers to the interested left-out peer groups and women family members, increasing the count of the trainings' indirect beneficiaries. Further, these adolescent girls practiced making the same in their own households and showcased their final product to their respective tea garden facilitator –ensuring the success of the training programme while providing feedback.

Such trainings have proved to be an ideal platform to reach multiple participants with the key messages of menstrual hygiene management (MHM), breaking the stigma attached to menstrual hygiene among the communities.

With the use of the sanitary cotton cloth-pads, the BCP team has so far received overwhelming positive feedback, wherein reportedly the girls have found using the cloth-pads to be more comfortable than using the commercial sanitary products available in markets, due to its authenticity and quality of cotton used.

Also, making their own pads has been a matter of pride for them, one that they can display to the other members of their communities proudly. Moreover, in recent times, with the partial lockdown imposed due to second wave of COVID-19 (2021), adolescents have themselves taken the initiative to make cloth pads, and to talk, share and discuss the facts of MHM openly within their communities.

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