The 3A’s of Non Usage of Sanitary Napkins in Rural India

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ABSTRACT

India is a nation which comprises of two nations. One is the uber cool urban India and the other one is the rural India which still struggles with the day to day needs just to survive. It also is surrounded by many social taboos which is a result of years of illiteracy and social stigma that Rural India still finds itself in. On one hand we have women like Indira nui, Sonia Gandhi, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw etc. who are recognized globally for their futuristic approach and on the other hand we have the rural Indian women who still have to walk 15 kms daily just for water, who have to cook for the entire family, who have to work in the fields and when their menstrual cycle starts they are barred from entering the kitchen or the temple and they have to sleep outside with the cows. By using a piece of cloth or ash during the menstrual cycle, they invite various reproductive tract infections which may grow to huge proportions if not detected at an early stage. Hence the question arises, why don’t they use sanitary napkins? Here is where the 3A’s come into picture. They are: affordability, accessibility, awareness. This paper is a humble effort to find out what is the main reason for non-usage of sanitary napkins in rural India.

KEYWORDS

Rural, India, hygiene, menstrual, sanitary napkins

INTRODUCTION

India is a country which boasts of a rich heritage of diverse ethnicities, cultures and languages. If we look at the demographics of the country, we will find that it is separated by two strong factors: (one) it is clustered and not scattered and (second) these clusters can further be separated as urban and rural. Urban India has its fair share of negatives like pollution, stress, health problems whereas rural India suffers or rather struggles with a different set of problems altogether like poverty, lack of knowhow of modern agricultural practices, and most importantly (in context of this paper), taboos. Taboos like animal (and sometimes human) sacrifices, separate village laws (with no respect for Indian judiciary), caste system, etc. These taboos do not let rural India come out of their paranoia and still continues to affect their growth. The worst affected by these taboos are the rural women, especially during their menstruation cycles. They are not allowed inside the Kitchen (sometimes the house itself), they are not allowed to worship and treated as if they have committed a big crime. Also, they don’t even use sanitary napkins during their periods. What is the main reason behind their unfriendly attitude towards sanitary napkins? Are men to be blamed for this? Is affordability an issue? Are these women even aware of sanitary napkins?

THE SURVEY

To get the answers to these questions, a survey was conducted at Mendua village which is in Raisen district, India. A random sample of 126 females was taken and questions were asked on the issues of affordability, accessibility and awareness. Here are the results:
ON AWARENESS

- When the sample was told about the usage and advantages of sanitary napkins and asked if they wanted to use it, 98% females said yes and remaining 2% still wanted to use the conventional methods.

- When asked whether they will face any problems from the males of the house, 64% said no, 18% were not sure about it and 12% said yes.

ON ACCESSIBILITY

- When asked whether the sanitary napkins are available in their village the entire sample said no and added that they do not know as they have never asked the local shopkeeper.

- When asked the reason for it, they said as the local shopkeeper is a male they are reluctant to enquire about it.

ON AFFORDABILITY

- When the females were asked whether they have ever purchased a sanitary napkin, 96% females said no while remaining 4% said yes. When asked the price of the napkin they purchased, those 4% told that the price was between 24-30 INR for a pack of eight napkins (they purchased it from the nearby city).

- When asked the sample whether they are willing to shell out INR 15 for a pack of six napkins, 65% of the females (mostly under 30 years of age) readily said yes and the remaining 35% were still reluctant to buy it. When asked whether the reason was affordability 90% said no and added if the shopkeeper is a woman they will buy it.

ANALYSIS

The salient points of the mini survey are as follows:

1. Despite the common belief, affordability is not the major factor for non-usage of sanitary napkins. Rural females today are willing to shell out anywhere between INR 12-20 for a pack which shall suffice them for a month.

2. The main reason, according to survey was the accessibility of napkins. Even if the local shopkeeper sells napkins, the rural females will not buy from him as he is a male.

3. Also, the awareness about the usage and advantages of using sanitary napkins is minimal. As soon as the females were told about it, the willingness to use it and know more about it increased manifold.

4. The males of the house are not open about it in the family; hence there is a lot of confusion and dilemma regarding their stand on the usage of sanitary napkins by the females of the household.

5. There is a clear difference amongst the young and old females regarding the importance of usage of sanitary napkins. While the young rural females were more enthusiastic in their approach of knowing about it, the older lot seemed to distance themselves from it. They did not want to talk about it in open.
RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- There is a clear demand for sanitary napkins in rural India. The localized production of these napkins (manual machines are available) will greatly reduce the transportation cost and logistics problem and also ensure employment of rural females.
- Anganwaadi’s (Government body to provide basic health care for rural females and children) will play a pivotal role in distribution of sanitary napkins. They can buy from local manufacturers at a subsidized Government rate and females can buy from these anganwaadi’s.
- This will also solve the problem of rural females of not buying sanitary napkins from the local shopkeeper as he is a male (anganwaadi workers are all females).
- Awareness about the usage of sanitary napkins is very less amongst rural females due to lack of education. Napkin advertisements by MNC’s on television is beyond the understanding of a typical rural female. Government and NGO’S need to start awareness campaigns through anganwaadi’s.
- Government needs to provide sanitary napkins at subsidized rates so that it can be affordable.
- The males of the house need to change their approach and attitude towards the females of household during their periods. Furthermore, they should go to the local shop and purchase napkins for their wife and daughters.
- The village head (Sarpanch) needs to ensure that anganwaadis are doing their job properly.

CONCLUSION

Rural India comprises of 66% of the total country. There are about 38 crore rural females in India. Most of them do not use sanitary napkins and resort to unhygienic menstrual practices. The reason is not affordability, but the awareness and accessibility of it. There is a dire need to educate these women and make them aware of the benefits of the usage of sanitary napkins. Another problem which was found during the survey was that majority of rural females do not wear undergarments. It is shocking but true and a sanitary napkin cannot be used without an undergarment. So one can imagine from where one has to start. First, there needs to be an awareness about the advantages of wearing an undergarment and then comes the benefits of sanitary napkins. Rural India is the backbone of this nation and rural females are the backbone of rural India, they need to be strengthened and empowered if this nation wants to be a superpower in coming years.

REFERENCES

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