

PROJECT ADHIKAAR

Report on Event to Raise Awareness on Menstruation and Sexual and Reproductive Health of Girls and Women, Held on October 25, 2022 in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

ABSTRACT: The event was named Project Adhikaar and it was dedicated to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 which is "good health and well-being". The term "Adhikaar" is a commonly used Hindi word which translates to "Rights" in English and the event was named so because it is every one with active uterus right to be not tabooed for a biological process like menstruation and it our duty as a society to provide them the essentials. The purpose of the event was to create awareness about destigmatising menstruation amongst the people belonging to underprivileged section of the society as well as to sensitize the women of all age groups about menstrual health and hygiene.

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I. Concept Note [Same formatting as below, but bold]

"Menstruation is not a problem but poor menstrual health and stigma around it is"

The United Nations Millennium Fellowship 2022 and Symbiosis Law School, NOIDA provided a platform for conducting awareness programs to cater the needs of the society and to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Project Adhikaar was one such opportunity wherein awareness and sensitization event was conducted for menstrual health and hygiene.

The inspiration behind the project is a very disheartening survey conducted by Ministry of Health, Government of India in which it was reported that 88% of menstruating population uses absorbents like husk, soil, ashes and used clothes, what is even worse is the silence around the same. It's shocking to know that how 1 out of every 10 girl misses school during periods, 80% of menstruating population uses unsensitised absorbents and 70% suffers severe genital infections by putting these in undergarments sitting next to their skin. The worst is the stigma which is very prevalent in the rural area, it is heart aching to share how menstruating person is forced to sleep outside the house in a shed, not allowed to enter the kitchen area and can't even talk to the other men family member during the cycle. This is why, Project Adhikaar was envisioned to cater to the needs of people who are facing such issues on the account of lack of knowledge.

We are slightly at an advantageous position as we are well aware of menstruation but there are people associated with us like our domestic workers, staff etc. who are not privileged enough to have adequate education and knowledge on the same. The Project Adhikaar did its bit to this need by collaborating with NGOs operational in the Heartland of India such as Rural Uttar

Pradesh and Bihar to conduct awareness and sensitisation events for all genders and age groups.

II. Objectives

The primary objective of the event was to raise awareness about menstrual health and hygiene particularly absorbents, as well as to sensitise the target audience on how menstruation is just a biological process and there should not be any stigma around it which can have a negative physical and psychological impact on the menstruating person.

III. Preliminary Preparations

Before conducting the event, the organiser made the following preparations:

1. Researching and zeroing on an area outside of the city where persons were more likely to be underprivileged and less likely to be beneficiaries of other NGOs' schemes.
2. Preparing the action plan with the NGO, *Geeta Shukh Foundation*, which focuses on distributing essentials to socio-economically marginalised women.
3. Designing and preparing pamphlets.

IV. Conducting the Event

The event took place in the outskirts of Varanasi city of the state Uttar Pradesh. The area was selected because a research on the locations was done where most of the underprivileged section of the society resides. The event was conducted during the festival time and therefore, it was suggested by the local resident of the

society to visit during late evening as most of the people return to the homes around that time only and usually people prefer to gather at every few steps for daily talks during the same time so it is better to visit then for better reach and impact. So, I visited the area around 6pm along with the team of the Non-Governmental Organisation named "Geeta Shukh Foundation" which mainly focuses on providing essentials to women. The collaboration with the NGO helped to identify the target group better and since they frequently conduct events, people are not hesitant to involve in the process. Alongside, the NGO distributed essentials to the people gathered and that also helped in getting better involvement.

We took along 2 sets of Pamphlets, one set had the event name on it and the second set was to distribute as it has some pictures and instructions pertaining to menstrual hygiene. The crowd was not taking active participation in the event publicly as most of them considered menstruation as a taboo and showed their disagreement with the facts. Therefore, it was decided to visit the houses and then to address the gathered crowd because the herd mentality was observed.

The event had twofold goals, first was to make the crowd, irrespective of the gender, understand what exactly menstruation is and for that the biological process was discussed. This was necessary for breaking the stigma regarding menstruation. Second was for the people with active uteruses because they are prone to genital infection because of lack of education on menstrual health and vulnerable to mental trauma because of the stigma in their households. Therefore, it was discussed with them what all absorbents are safe to use and what should be the ideal recourse while menstruating.

The event was concluded with the final discussion on genital infections and the target group was shared with a list of symptoms on when they should consult a doctor. The audience came up with many questions which were duly answered by the team.

V. Response of the Target Population

The target population of the area were not aware about the basics of menstruation. As a result, the concept was unsettled, and it had to be pursued in order to raise public awareness. Majority of the target audience had never attended school thus lacked the knowledge and the section of the audience which are literate were still unaware about the topic of menstruation as they were never taught the same. As a society with almost equal menstruating population, this exhibited us the need of the hour.

Majority of the target audience seemed very rigid about their understanding of the concept of “bleeding” believing that menstruation is nothing but impure blood and that is why the menstruating person should stay away from the kitchen, religious places and men around them. The team made them aware about how it is just a biological process in which the person menstruating has no control and it is as normal as other life processes like breathing and should not be a taboo for anyone.

The response was mixed in nature, half the audience took keen interest in understanding the concept and the other half negated the same by giving the reason that it is an age old concept of alienating the menstruating person during the cycle.

VI. Future Plan of Action

Despite the rooted stigma in the minds of the people, the event was still successful in instilling the audience with the knowledge on menstrual health and hygiene. It can be concluded that it will take some time and constant efforts to bring everyone on the same page regarding menstruation and with such awareness - sensitisation events we are taking one step closer to the primary goal. The team hopes to conduct further such sessions in the future.

VII. Conclusion

This event proved to be an excellent opportunity for the organisers to also learn about the social realities of this country. It was eye-opening not just for the target population, but also the organisers. Internalised misogyny and self-flagellating stigma are hard problems to overcome, but with concerted action at both grassroots and national level, the population of the country can become better informed and women can regain their dignity and achieve the highest attainable standard of health, which is their right under the Constitution.

GLIMPSES OF THE EVENT

