



Part of the team from the Villupuram workshop. Every day the women cut the strips that surround the sanitary napkins.



INDIA

WOMEN ARE CHANGING THE RULES PERIOD

Yes, feminine sanitary protection can liberate women and even save a region from misery! **In India, the village women make sanitary napkins, and through it achieve health, independence and a small nest egg.** By Philippe Trétiack. Photos by Guillaume Herbaut.

It's a story of difficulties at the end of the month, a story of stomachaches, discomforts and bacteria. It is also a story in India of how some women taking action and a special doctor are attacking what is kept silent, kept hidden; sanitary napkins soaked in blood, which are full of taboos. When some NGOs rely on what is shiny and new, state of the art hospitals, air drops of provisions and helicopter rescues, these people have chosen the basics of humanity. They are only greater in their humility. The God of Small Things, spoken of by the writer Arundhati Roy, will watch over them.

Christine Eggs, from the association FXB (see box on p. 132), tells about how when FXB arrived in India to fight AIDS, they hired “the good Dr Raju,” a Brahmin who doesn't hesitate to relieve the miseries of the poorer classes. “Among the most common local diseases he mentioned to us were genital infections, which affected most women: irritation, ulcers, sterility, etc. We discovered that the women in the area used old cloths or the ends of saris for protection during their period, which they then washed and used again the following month.” “These cloths,” said Dr Raju, “did not absorb the blood. Therefore the women were subjecting themselves to constant moisture. At 40°C, this is devastating. Also, victims of prejudice, they hid in their homes during their periods. Teenage girls didn't go to school. This happened every month.” From this banal, yet ignored observation, a bright idea emerged – to create workshops to manufacture sanitary napkins. Several months later, two units were operating, and in the villages where they are operating, the condition of women has already made a huge turnaround.

Of course, ordinary life remains miserable. In Chepaluppada, in the Visakhapatnam district in the north of Chennai (Madras), as in Villupuram, further south near Pondicherry, homes are made of earth, and more rarely, of cement. Almost 80% of women are illiterate. Unemployment is a tragedy. In Chepaluppada, five women arrive very early each morning at a small workshop. There, working together, by hand, they make 400 units of sanitary protection per day. In work shirts, and with faces masked for hygiene reasons, they repeat the same actions in the semi-cleanliness of the laboratory. A worker gets the raw materials, a cotton-like wood pulp, imported from the

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Sanga Mitra compares the napkins that she makes today with the fabric that she used for the same purpose before.

United Kingdom, and places them in a washing machine that, with a terrible racket, breaks down the fibers. Another collects the fibers, weighs out exactly 8g and packs them tightly into a mould. One gram too much and 7 paisâ is lost (there are 100 paisâ in 1 rupee and 70 rupees in 1 Euro). Here we count small amounts because everything counts. Next she taps the mould with a mallet. It is a strange spectacle to see a woman manufacturing a sanitary napkin with a hammer. Then she makes the edges equal before passing this “cake” as she calls it, to the next operator. Sitting at a table, this woman arranges the various elements that make up the napkin: a waterproof layer, the molded section, a small patch of sky-blue deodorizer, and finally the strip that surrounds the sanitary napkin, which she then folds the sides of and seals with a piece of tape. In the adjoining room, the fourth operator hot glues the napkins using



A worker fills a mould with fibers that she will pack tightly with a mallet.

an electric machine. There is a “seam” in the middle, to provide better comfort to the users, because a seal around the edges could irritate the inner thighs. To finish them, the last operator places the napkins in a sterilizer. They are then packaged in packs of eight, with the brand name Suraksha (Hope) and stored behind a floral shower curtain. (See the video on the elle.fr website) The production cost for one pack of napkin is 14 rupees, plus 2 rupees for salary and 2 for benefits. “The government decided to buy our production operation,” said Kiran Kumar, who coordinates all the operations of the regional FXB unit. “The government officials asked us to cut back on quality to reduce the sale price. We refused. It would have meant sealing the napkins at the edges. There was no question.”

Since the village only receives six hours of electricity per day, work must stop when the current starts to fail. The five workers then remove napkins, their work shirts and return home to prepare the family meal. Then they go out to spread the word, to explain the benefits of what they are producing to women



The workers explain to HIV-positive women why they should use the sanitary.

who are as poor as themselves. In this region where snakes crawl through the rubbish, where the huts, look ugly under the blue plastic sheeting made necessary by the ravages of the driving monsoon, the women have traded Tupperware parties for underwear parties. Their presentation is well-practiced. “Before,” explains Jayalaxmi, age 22, the brains of the group, “we went into the woods to collect whatever we could to make a fire to cook rice. Now we have gas. Before, each month we used old saris to soak up our periods. We didn’t dare to leave the house. Well, now that’s over, thanks to this!” She holds up her package of sanitary napkins and passes them around. The women, focused on her words, are in disbelief. They hesitate. In these villages literally covered with excrement, where the custom is that people defecate in public before daybreak, where it is difficult to understand how these women can seem so clean, so distinguished, nearly nobody has ever seen a sanitary napkin before in her life. So these five demonstrators distribute them as samples. Satisfied, the “customers” will come back to pay for them. As this operation is also a business, the workers want to double production, and purchase machines. If only the government would provide them with electricity! Their stated goal is to create five or six production units to cover the twenty-six surrounding

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Dhana Laxmi, a pediatric nurse, sells the napkins to the mothers in the village.



The workers in front of the plaque commemorating the involvement from the ELLE Foundation.

towns. “We sell the pack of eight napkins for 18 rupees,” said Sanga Mitra, one of the workers. “It’s the same price as 1 kilo of rice. For those in the village who are rich, those who have sold land to property developers, we charge 20 rupees.” 2 rupees more, and that’s all that changes the future. “Save 1 rupee on the sweets you give to your children and invest in napkins,” recommends Jayalaxmi. “And you will no longer have to miss one day of school or work.”

“It goes beyond napkins,” explains Christine Eggs, “it’s the status of women that’s changing. Their independence accelerates the development of the entire community. They earn money, they consume a little, and they start to think about sending their children to school... These sanitary napkins are a springboard.” If India is caught up in the madness of economic growth, here, it is the management of menstrual periods that is enabling the society

to take off. Never has the expression “period of transition” been so well aligned to reality. These women are truly pioneers. Especially since, in fishing villages where unemployment has exploded since the tsunami in 2004 that devastated the stocks of fish, men have become masons and are overwhelmed with alcoholism. “Domestic violence has become common,” said D. Sunita, a woman suffering with AIDS who is promoting the use of napkins among patients like herself. “Men are happy that their wives are working even if they grumble when they leave in the morning without having prepared breakfast. Because of the electricity being shut off at a certain time, they must arrive at the workshop before 6:00 AM. When they see the money they earn, men end up showing them a bit more respect.”

In Villupuram, in the second village where FXB opened a workshop, production is a bit more industrialized than in Chepaluppada. With well-performing mechanical tools, the team of twelve women is able to produce six napkins at a time, and their daily production is about 700 units. Here electricity is not an issue. The workers are therefore planning to double production. Dozens of small stalls serve as distribution locations and some women volunteers, chosen by the state, sell the sanitary napkins. “It’s easier to come here than to buy them at a store run by a man, as is usually the case,” explains Renuka, the coordinator of the local team. Since her husband left her, she has been raising her two children on her own. The contrast between her windowless hut and the production workshop is striking, and it seems to be just a single concrete room, which to her must look like an operating theatre.

“Today,” said Dr Raju, “we are trying to convince women not to throw their used napkins away in nature. We provided them with a small bag made from newspaper, but that didn’t work. We have not yet found a solution.” One problem has been solved, but another has appeared, which is even more basic. To use a sanitary napkin, women have to wear underwear. Of course, but in these forgotten villages, the women don’t wear them. So in her advocacy for the napkins, Jayalaxmi followed her words up with actions. To gain the support of the women around her, she tore a page from “The Hindu,” the local Tamil newspaper, and crafted a pair of disposable underwear. Then she placed a napkin at the bottom and raised her arms so that everybody could see the demonstration. “You should sell a pair of underwear with each napkin,” someone shouted. “Three pairs will do for the three days,” responded another. Everyone laughed. Except Christine Eggs, who then realized that the next unit to be created would be a workshop for manufacturing underwear. According to our latest information we have heard, a large lingerie brand should agree to help with this challenge. When there is misery all around, we can aim below the belt and move mountains. Ph.T.

Foundations in the life cycle

Created in 1989 by Albina du Boisrouvray, the François-Xavier-Bagnoud Association (FXB) is present throughout the world. The two sanitary napkin production workshops in India are part of a larger program called « FXB-Village » - an integrated approach - including water and sanitation - allowing participants to become economically self-sufficient. To achieve this, FXB invested 190,000 Euros over three years and trained local teams. For this, it benefits from the support of various foundations, such as the Trafigura Foundation. In Villupuram, near Pondicherry, the workshop is, for now, fully financed by the ELLE Foundation, aware that women’s personal hygiene is a vector of development for the entire community.

• To support ongoing or upcoming projects from the FXB Foundation, visit them at www.fxb.org