Low Cost Feminine Hygiene in Rural India

In India 97% rural women use old cloths instead of sanitary napkins leading to vaginal infection & diseases. Low cost Feminine hygiene is a priority. The project Sanitary Napkins for Health is an Arogya Maternal Care initiative where ThinkWell has the privilege of advising. They have proposed a rural Women Self-help Group to raise public health awareness for feminine hygiene and they propose to manufacture & distribute low-cost sanitary napkins. I wondered why a project for sanitary napkins mattered. I understood engaging local initiative but why sanitary napkins???
Could The Increase of Sanitary Napkin’s use in rural women Result in Fewer Infections, Child Birth Issues & possible cervical cancer?

When I was asked to evaluate and recommend this project I was shocked to find that in rural India, 97% of women lack access to basic hygienic means that allow them to stay clean throughout their menstrual cycle. Women resort to unhygienic alternatives like old cloth rags, husks, sand, or even ashes which results in vaginal infections often leading to chronic Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs), pelvic inflammatory diseases, Child-Birth issues and sometimes life-threatening cervical cancer.

A countrywide survey conducted AC Nielsen and Plan India, among women and adolescent girls all throughout India revealed that nearly 70 percent of women said that their families cannot afford sanitary napkins and that over 88 percent of women resorted to shocking alternatives such as cloth, ashes and husk sand during menstruation, thereby causing severe reproductive health problems. The study showed that Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) was 70% more common among women using unhygienic practices while 12% of women who use napkins are at a lower risk of cervical cancer which is the most prevalent form of cancer among women in developing nations.

Barriers to Feminine Hygiene in Rural India

- Little awareness of proper reproductive hygienic practices and the consequences for health of neglecting this practice. This is probably the biggest barrier for adoption, as reproductive hygiene education and sexual
education is not part of any education system in India. The adolescent girls only form of such education is from her mother and grandmother, who themselves had practiced the unhygienic behaviors for years and thus do not see any harm in the practices of using old cloths during menstruation. Though in urban India the trend has changed in recent years, but in rural India, these topics remained significantly taboo among all, irrespective of social and economic status.

- Poor Accessibility and Social barrier. Sanitary Napkins are only available in the Pharmacies generally situated in the largest village in that area. Without transportation, it is very difficult to reach the marketplace. On top of that, social issues prevent women from obtaining sanitary napkins at local pharmacies due to social embarrassment about the topic. As all pharmacies are run by men, women feel socially uncomfortable asking for these products from male pharmacists.

How Will Sanitary Napkins for Health Be Implemented?

- They will educate women about importance of safe, sanitary menstrual practice using local physicians and health workers.
- Community workers and volunteers will offer the products and health information door to door to raise awareness and communicate with women in their own dialect and cultural setting.
- Along with napkin courtesy packs women will get much-needed information about how to care for themselves in areas of feminine hygiene and will learn the signs of cervical cancer, infections and reproductive problems.
- Hospitals and social workers are ready and waiting to incorporate the low-cost sanitary napkin options in their educational programs and hospital courtesy packs.
- Acquisition & Installation of a low-cost sanitary napkin
machine, invented by A Muruganantham (http://goo.gl/Xx9IJv) will provide work for local women and vending machines will be set up for low-cost easy access as previously these product were only available in the city.

Congratulations! The project is now a Dell Social Innovations Semi Finalist!

You can read more about low-cost sanitary napkins for health and even support the launch via the Dell Social Challenge Page.

How Will We Know it Helps?

The team is planning research evaluation of the pilot project in the village. We at ThinkWell applaud them as they help the women of India and hopefully women in other parts of the world too. The PLOT-IT Platform can contribute to research design where Indian women contribute to research about feminine health changes that are important to them. The most important question will be does Low Cost Feminine Hygiene in Rural India help women have better quality of life and health and could this project be useful for other rural areas and nations.