

**THE MAKING OF A NIRMAL MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MODEL VILLAGE
WOMEN LEAD WAY**

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CASE STUDY

“No more washing, cleaning and missing school every month. I can now use the napkins made by my own village women at just Rs. 2 and what more I get it easily in my own classroom from the vending machine! We even dispose it off in my school incinerator”

Jayanti, Class X student,
NEMILI Village, Kancheepuram District
Tamil Nadu

“ We make our own sanitary napkins at such a low cost with simple materials like cotton , cloth from our village in our fully sanitized Sanitary Napkin Production Unit. We have gained respect from not only the women and girls of our village who find them cheap, hygienic and easy to buy and use but even our men! After all we also now add money to our family income. How could we do this without the help of our Panchayat and our TVS Group friends. ”

SHG group members
Sanitary Napkin Production Unit, Tiruvidenthai

Prophetic words not spoken by highly educated urban, women but from simple school girls and village women who have proved that through ingenuity, dedication and organization women can best understand their own sanitation needs and lead the way to developing innovative models of addressing them.

These are the achievements of a unique public- private- community partnership between the SSHE programme of the Total Sanitation Campaign undertaken by the Panchayati Raj Members and the State Government, TVS Motors a local Corporate company and the, and the dynamic youth, children, girls, women and village community of Thiruvidadai Panchayat and Nemmeli Village Panchayat of Kancheepuram District of Tamil Nadu.

Background

Thiruvidadai Panchayat located in Thiruporur Block of Kancheepuram district with a population of 1636 most of whom are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood is as much known for its ancient temple as for it being the Nirmal Gram Puruskar awarded Village-the Open defecation free Clean Village with all its schools and anganwadis and 354 households having toilet and sanitation facilities. The village is self sufficient in its drinking water needs which come from three overhead reservoirs of 30,000 Ltr capacities with 65 public taps.

The most Unique feature of this village is its fully sanitized Sanitary Napkin Production Unit managed by the Womens Self Help Group Members and it being a centre for an innovative Menstrual Health and Hygiene Education Programme with young school going girls and women in several other villages like Neimili. The Womens Self Help Groups also manage Solid Waste Management System with compost shed and an Integrated Women and Children Sanitary Complex.

The Making of A Nirmal Gram

These remarkable achievement of becoming a role model in rural sanitation particularly women's sanitation began when the village community along with the a Doctor couple Dr. Narsimha and Sujatha working with a local private Company TVS Motors realized that their women, young girls were facing the indignity of defaecating in the open, children falling ill frequently with water related illnesses like diarrhoea due to the cesspool of open faeces, waste water and dumped garbage in their village. The Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) launched by the Government of India provided an opportunity to address these critical sanitation problems and the Panchayat members led by the village community particularly women in partnership with TVS Motors initiated

a massive community mobilization and motivation programme in the village to build toilets in all households, schools and anganwadis and adopt good health and hygiene practices. With financial support from TSC for toilet construction financial support for innovative community mobilization strategies like sanitation mapping, womens self help group micro-credit and enterprise formation and technical support for solid and liquid waste management from TVS Electronics, political will and involvement of all Panchayat members under the leadership of women's Self Groups, youth, students, teachers and of the school and the community the village achieved full sanitation coverage and was awarded the Nirmal Gram Puruskar (Clean Village Award) in 2006.

The Making of a Nirmal Menstrual Hygiene Model School and Village- Women lead way

During the implementation of the School Health Hygiene Education Programme of TSC in the village it was observed that while the provision of separate toilets and urinals for girls certainly provided them with a certain privacy and dignity in use of toilet facilities, lack of availability of clean napkins, personal cleanliness during menstruation, and unsafe disposal of sanitary napkins in bins or in open or sometimes in the toilets themselves remained a big problem. The School Principal mentions "Many girls would skip schools for three to four days every month and their interest would also drop in studies. Their academic performance would suffer and some would even drop out".

The traditional method of using cloth and washing it to take care of the menstrual needs of the girls and poor personal health and hygiene during this period also resulted in reproductive tract infections. Sanitary Napkins which were hygienic and affordable were not easily available in these areas. Thus lack of effective mechanism of menstrual hygiene management in schools and community affected the education, health, dignity, self confidence of girls and women.

Therefore instead of being complacent in reaping the fruits of the hard won Nirmal Gram Puruskar, the SSHE programme of TSC was upscaled to initiate an Integrated menstrual Health and Hygiene Education Programme financial and Capacity Building support from both Total Sanitation Campaign and TVS Motors and with the technical support from UNICEF. The trigger was an event organized in the Nemili School of Kancheepuram

where in an icebreaker session toilets use was linked to the need for privacy and dignity for girls specially during menstruation and they wondered what safe methods they can use for protection during this difficult period and how can they dispose it without shame. This set the tem thinking "why not make our very own sanitary napkins in the village in a hygienic way and some way to dispose them off".

This led to the setting up of the Tiruvidenthai Sanitary Napkin Unit as a joint venture Unit with tripartite investments from the Shri Cheema Foundation the Corporate Social Responsibility of a local company- TVS Electronics of Rs. 70,000, the Government of India Rs. 21,000 and Rs. 12,000 from SHG women already formed in the village during TSC implementation. The unit has started in 2007 with a twin objective of providing low cost high quality napkins to the rural women and adolescent girls in their vicinity itself and providing livelihood and income generation opportunities for women. The basic training for the unit was provided by Ms. Nagalakshmi of the Mother Teresa Group, Giruam bakkam. Unit set up, managerial and production facilitation is by TVS electronics. The unit has also innovated in producing a variety of models beltless, belt model, maternity special, wings model, and baby diapers all made from simple locally available materials like cotton, cloth etc. The napkins are all produced in a sterilized and hygiene environment with all women wearing uniform, gloves, caps, mask and using clean and sanitized cloth and other raw material.

The cost of the napkin is just Rs. 1.50 to Rs. 2 per pad one tenth of the cost of the napkins available from the market. More importantly the women of the village feel proud to produce, use and market these sanitary napkins in their own and neighbouring villages as one of the mother daughter duo says I started buying the napkins from the group on trial basis after my daughter told me about it .When I started feeling it is very cheap, clean and comfortable I started using it regularly and this way I can chat with the women of the self help group also!"

Saranya, a young girl says, " We had to go to Kovalam (a nearby tourist hamlet) to buy napkins from the medical shop. There we had to make sure boys were not around before asking for a packet. But bow napkins are available in our own village and that too with our own village women and we feel comfortable. "

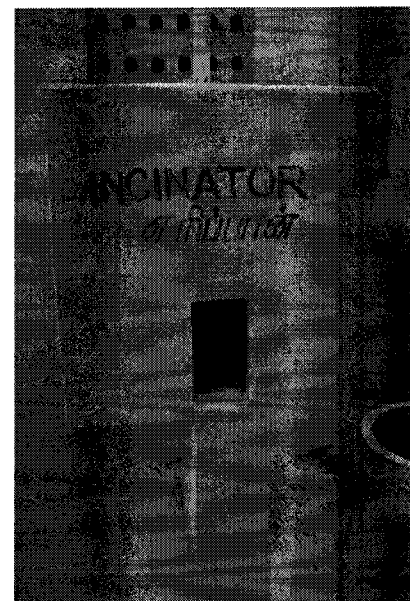
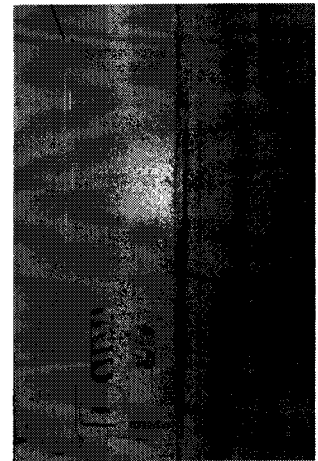
The napkin is being marketed locally and efforts are underway to market it outside. The enterprise has also diversified into new products like baby pillows, baby beds, hosiery items to cater to the periods when demand for napkins is low. The unit is economically viable and though the profit margin is very low it serves an important social and economic purpose of making the village women self sufficient in their sanitation needs. .

To make these napkins easily available in schools and enhance their usage an innovative concept of vending machines were developed by UNICEF and TVS motors and these were set up in secondary and higher secondary schools wherein girls can purchase napkins by dropping a tow rupee coin in an automatic vending machine as you easily as they purchase a toffee or a snack!

Sanitary Napkin vending machine

Mohana, Class IX student from Nemili confidently says “ Now I don’t have to run away home whenever my monthly periods start or feel uncomfortable or scared when they are about to come. I know our class vending machine can give me a readymade napkin whenever I like!”

The next challenge was to safely dispose off the napkin. For this cost effective user friendly, simple manually operated technology of incinerators was developed and installed for composite waste disposal of sanitary waste in schools and women’s sanitary complexes. Set up at the cost of Rs 1200 to 1500/- the incinerator is made by local masons and consists of two chambers an emission control system along with a door for firing and removal of ash and is made from locally available material like country bricks, cement, sand, weld wire mesh etc. The use of incinerators has removed inhibitions among girls attending schools during menstruation and there is no blockage of toilets or disposal in open or mixed with garbage.



The disposal of napkins that came along with garbage in the village is also managed by the Solid waste Management Team. An incinerator with top loading concept has been constructed outside the compost shed and three of them are also napkin producers so they feel that "sustaining their venture means that if napkins are to be produced and sold in the village it should be thrown about. If that happens this being a temple village we will be pushed out of business" Makes perfect business sense!

Apart from the hardware component, a comprehensive Menstrual Health Hygiene Education programme is also being undertaken in not only the schools of this village but several other villages of Tamil Nadu. This includes awareness and counseling on personal health and hygiene during menstruation, myths regarding this so called 'woman's problem!', reproductive health, HIV/AIDS etc. Regular health and hygiene womens camps are held in schools and community in coordination with the Doctors and ANMs from the health department and even private hospital like Apollo. UNICEF along with the foundation launched a national level training programme for teachers, women's groups, NGOs, Government officials on Menstrual Health Management with a focus on education and awareness on problems of menstrual problems and use of hygienic methods of protection like napkins and their safe disposal.

The journey of this unique women led Clean Village Campaign and Model of women's sanitation has not been without challenges. As the Womens self help member says " It was very difficult to convince women to shift from traditional cloths to using these napkins. They doubted it advantage, the cost. But through our clean production and persistence specially through the menstrual health awareness programmes in schools and colleges we convinced them to use them" Dr. Narsimha explains that finding donors and developing cost-effective technology was a constant struggle while Sujatha found it difficult for the women and young girls to openly express their special sanitation needs. Building convergence with Capacity building programmes of UNICEF, TSC, Health and Education Departments and pooling funds from the Panchayat and private donors they were able to achieve success. They give maximum credit the children and youth of the schools who became the change agents for up scaling the SSHE programme to other villages and many other districts of Tamil Nadu

In just a year this innovative and successful women's enterprise on women's sanitation needs and integrated menstrual health hygiene Education programme has not only transformed this small temple village of Tiruvidenthai into a women led and women based Total sanitation Village "Nirmal Gram" but also become a role model for many other villages across several states in India to upscale SSHE programme through public private partnership in order to actively address women's sanitation needs which have been so far neglected .

As Amrita, a young college girl who has been at the forefront of the programme since her school days sums up " My dream is to become doctor and to take care of the health of my village women . These simple sanitary napkins made my the self help group women has made me feel confident and helped many girls in my village to continue with their studies without being shy. I wish that all girls in India are able to use these napkins and feel confident both socially and economically."