Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan –
Episode 1: Voices from Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan

On 26th September 2020, the first episode of Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan was aired. The Webinar Episodes are an effort to hear and document community voices (beneficiaries) and practices around menstruation - through a field lens. With the aim to build a repository for individuals/CSOs/government platforms working in the menstrual space the first episode captured the voices of six fields from two states of India: Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The details of the speakers were:

- Shobha Kumari - Doosra Dashak - Rajasthan
- Pisilu Singhpo, Chanta Singhpo - Bordumsa Mahila Mandal – Arunachal Pradesh
- Tirap Women’s Development SHG - Arunchal Pradesh
- Raj Basumatry - NERCORMP, Shillong
- Monica, Om Prakash– Dungarpur - Jatan Sansthan - Rajasthan
- Sonu Kumawat, Sangeeta Shrivastav – Udaipur, Neemach Kheda Basti, Jatan Sansthan - Rajasthan

Facilitated by Ms. Smriti and Mr. Om Gayri, the webinar began with the opening note by Dr. Lakshmi Murthy. She’s the additional director or Jatan Sansthan. She is a pioneer in the menstrual health space and the innovator of Uger Cloth Sanitary Pads. Dr. Lakshmi shared that Jatan began its work on MHM more than 15 years back. That was the time when not many CSOs or Government prioritized this theme. Jatan developed followed the strategy of conducting training at different levels, prepared effective IEC on the theme. She shared that she’s happy that the IEC prepared more than a decade ago are still relevant and are adopted by different platforms including WSCC. Having spent a long time in the field, she shared that she’s delighted that a lot many CSOs, Individuals, designers and government has started prioritizing MHM as a right.

The facilitators called Dr. Kailash, Executive Director of Jatan Sansthan to share the organization’s journey through its efforts on MHM. Dr. Kailash shared that Jatan’s efforts in initially establishing the normalcy around this tabooed issue have been the biggest challenge. These outgrow the organization as a strong field based, reliable platform where youth and menstruators started sharing their concerns. The raised concerns have helped Jatan in improving and fastening their strategies. This also helped us rise as the pioneers on the issue.

The first speaker for the webinar was Ms. Shobha Kumari from Desuri, Pali. Ms. Shobha is a peer educator trained by Doosra Dashak, Rajasthan. Shobha comes from the village dominated by OBC and Raika community. She shared that the myths and taboos around menstruation are very rigid in her locality. The youth clubs developed by Doosra Dashak has given them the platform to share their thoughts, explore MHM products and critically analyze the myths associated with the subject. She shared the case of her friend who broke the myth of not entering inside the house during
menstruations. The experiences of Shobha were unique as they explain how life skills and collective consciousness can result in burst the myths around menstruation bit-by-bit.

The next speakers were Pisilu Singhpo, Chanta Singhpo of Bordumsa Mahila Mandal, Arunachal Pradesh. They shared the outlook of tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh on MHM. They shared that though their tribes do not put restrictions on the mobility and daily activities of the menstruators but this is not enough to negate the unease of menstruators during those days. They shared that they took training from Jatan Sansthan on UGER pads; they call them Pyo Pads (Pyo means happiness in local language of the Singpho Tribe. They shared that initially it was a challenge to establish the market for Pyo pads. They started doing awareness and advocacy on the same and steadily there is an increase in market for Pyo pads. The experiences of Bordumsa Mahila Mandal were helpful in reiterating the importance of working on reusable cotton pads as a solution to sustainable menstrual health solutions.

The next speakers were women from Tirap Women's Development SHG, Arunchal Pradesh. The SHG showcased a successful model where production of disposable sanitary pads is done. Not limiting to the production, the SHG also moved a step ahead of the awareness in the localities including the urban slums. Their experiences are the response to the increasing demands for disposable pads and urgent need to solutions for MHM in their area.

In the next speaking list was Mr. Raj Basumatry from NERCORMP, Shillong. He explained the strategies and activities adopted by their institution to address the issue. He explained the urgency of addressing the issue and involvement of men in the talks. Next, Ms. Monica and Mr. Om Prakash from Jatan Sansthan, Dungarpur explained the lives of menstruators in their region. Populated with Bhil and Meena communities, Dungarpur have strong myths and taboos associated with MHM. Through their adolescent boys and girls clubs, Jatan Sansthan is following the principles of UGER i.e. breaking the silence, informed choices and increasing information on sustainable menstrual health management.

The last speakers for the day were Sonu Kumawat, Sangeeta Shrivastav from Neemach Kheda Basti, Udaipur. The women are associated with UGER center run by Jatan Sansthan in their locality. They shared that for more than five years they are associated with UGER and have been stitching cotton pads and other cotton products. They could recall changes in them as they started working on the issue. They started educating women and young girls around them on the benefit of reusable cotton pads and discontinue practicing years old myths and taboos associated with MHM. Their experiences are exemplary reflection of local change makers who smash the patriarchy each effort at a time!

After all the presentations completed, an open session dedicated to question and answers was conducted. The attendees raised questions and shared their reflections on the webinar. Some needed clarity on usage of cotton reusable pads and regular disposable pads, some asked for the details on collaborating with UGER, and some were curious to know more from Bordumsa Mahila Mandal. The facilitators, presenters and Dr. Lakshmi answered each query. With a heartfelt wishes to everyone, the Episode 1 for webinar series was completed.