Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan – Episode 2: Voices from Assam, Nagaland, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Delhi

On 3rd October 2020, the second episode of Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan was aired. These Webinar Episodes are an effort to hear and document community voices (beneficiaries) and practices around menstruation - through a field lens. As the webinar series move forward the repository for individuals/CSOs/government platforms working in the menstrual space is shaping up. In continuation of the same, the second episode captured the voices of seven fields from two states of India: Assam, Nagaland, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Delhi and Rajasthan.

The details of the speakers were:

1. Salma and Rewati, Sukhibhava, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
2. Divya, Sukhibhava, Bangaluru, Karnataka
3. Neha, Eco Hub, Assam
4. Christina, Kudi, Community Learning and Business Resource Centre, Nagaland
5. Shahjahan, Mehrunisha, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Delhi
6. Bharti, Jatan Sansthan, Rajsamand, Rajasthan
7. Tara, Khushi, Jatan Sansthan, Udaiur, Rajasthan

Facilitated by Mr. Om Gayri and Ms. Smriti, the webinar began with the opening note by Dr. Lakshmi Murthy. Dr. Lakshmi shared the highlights from Episode 1. She reiterated the vision of the webinar series and reinforced the need of hearing the voices from the fields across the country. She congratulated all the community speakers and thanked them for the hard work they put into the cause. She reflected that there have been many insights and learning from the episode 1. The episode made us understand how communities are critically examining myths and taboos, how superstitions and management systems are being questioned, and how silence is being broken across the country in the field of menstrual health management.

The first speaker for the webinar was Ms. Divya from Bangaluru, Karnataka. Ms. Divya is a home maker and is associated with Sukhibhava since a long time. She shared the firsthand experiences of her daughter and the intervention by Hello Saheli, a missed call helpline by Sukhibhava. Ms. Divya shared that her daughter had a heavy white discharge problem since 1 year. She was connected to Ms. Violet, a coordinator of Hello Saheli initiative. The helpline provided moral support to her daughter. Along with this it provided a free doctor consultation. This was very helpful considering the corona times when the doctors as well as patients are hesitant for physical visits.

The next speakers were Ms. Salma and Ms. Rewati from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. The women are associated with Sukhibhava Madhya Pradesh initiative. They shared the outlook of the community on menstrual health in the basti where they live. They shared that the myths and taboos around menstruation are very rigid in their locality. Through the initiatives by Sukhibhava, they started talking
on this issue in their meetings. This platform provided them a space where they share their thoughts, explore MHM products and critically analyze the myths associated with the subject and break them one myth at a time.

The next speaker was Ms. Neha from Boka Ghat in Assam. Neha is associated with Eco Hub a social enterprise which produces reusable cloth pads, biodegradable sanitary pads, paper products, handwoven and kantha embroidered garments, home linen and stationary. They are the pioneers in the menstrual health space in the northeast of India and have been actively engaged in the menstrual health education since 2012 working with women, adolescent girls and young men - generating awareness on menstrual health management. Ms. Neha explained that her engagement within the menstrual space of Assam has been an interesting journey. Supporting environment friendly solutions, increasing awareness on the ground and engaging men in menstruation has been unique component with Eco Hub’s strategy. She shared that when girl attains menarche/puberty, it is celebrated and regional dance Bihu is played. "Tuloni Biya", the festival to celebrate menarche, is celebrated widely in their region. She also share that her engagements on the issue has been largely through training and workshops she received on menstrual health management. She also came to know about cloth pads and wanted to try different reusable products. Later she got interested and got involved in creating awareness among women and other menstruators. Her presentation pictured a wide scope in the menstrual health space in Assam.

Came next, Ms. Christina and Mr. Kudi from Community Learning and Business Resource Centre, Nagaland. Ms Christina explained how their groups are addressing menstrual health management in Nagaland. Their group took the strategy of awareness in their locality. Her group took up the issue of breaking the silence on the issue, giving information of disposing sanitary pads and importance of sun drying the menstrual cloth for a healthy body.

The second last speakers for episode 2 were from Jatan Sansthan Rajasthan. Ms. Bharti from Railmagra, Rajasthan has been one of the earliest women who were the collaborator for development of Uger pads. She took Cross Over Trials for uger pads and has continued this products for more than a decade now. She is also a PlusTrust Fellow. She explained that the ease, comfort of uger pads have been a prime reason to switch from sanitary pads to uger pads. She not only put this in her life but shared the same values with the women around her.

After Bharti, Ms. Tara and Ms. Khushi, two adolescent girls from Gogunda, Udaipur, Rajasthan shared their engagement with MHM. Both the girls are the members of adolescent girls clubs in their respective village. The youth clubs developed by Jatan Sansthan has given them the platform to share their thoughts, explore MHM products and critically analyze the myths associated with the subject. Ms. Khushi shared that though they have not started visiting the temples during menstruation but have stopped practicing other myths including touching the pickle, papad and entering kitchen. The experiences of Ms. Tara and Ms. Khushi were unique as they explain how life skills and collective consciousness can result in burst the myths around menstruation bit-by-bit.
The last speakers for the webinar were Ms. Shahjahan and Ms. Mehrunisha from Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Delhi. They are the health workers working in Nizamuddin Basti of Delhi. They shared that to begin work with muslim women on menstruation has been a big challenge in the beginning. It was a prevalent myth in the basti that if a woman bathes during menstruation, the water will enter her body through vagina. The gradual efforts of engaging the women on the discussion around menstruation have helped them attain healthy menstrual health and mitigated the chances of many infections. The work of Ms. Shahjahan and Ms. Mehrunisha has helped the participants understand the religious dynamics of religion and urban slums.

With the completion of all the presentations, an open session dedicated to question and answers was conducted. The attendees raised questions and shared their reflections on the webinar. The facilitators, presenters and Dr. Lakshmi answered each query. With heartfelt wishes to everyone, the Episode 2 for webinar series was completed.