Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan –
Episode 3: Voices from Odisha, West Bengal, Gujarat and Rajasthan

On 10th October 2020, the second episode of Menstrual Health: Bharat Darshan was aired. This Webinar series is an effort to hear and document voices from the community (beneficiaries) and an extension of 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 third episode captured the voices of four states of India: Odisha, West Bengal, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

The details of the speakers were:

- Nima Choden Tamang, DLR Prerna (West Bengal),
- Prisha, Rangeen Khidki Foundation (West Bengal)
- Jayanti Baruda, Deepa rani Nayak and Rashmita Kobasi, Bado Didi (Odisha),
- Jayshreeben Patel, Varshaben Thakkar, Bhakti Sankhala and Taralben Patel, Coastal Salinity Prevention Cell-CSPC (Gujarat),
- Nasrin Mansuri and Dr. Neha, SEWA Rural (Gujarat),
- Suman Salvi, Jatan Sansthan (Rajasthan)

Facilitated by Ms. Payal, the webinar began with the opening note by Ms. Smriti Kedia. Ms. Smriti shared the highlights from Episode 2. She reinforced the objectives 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 past two episodes. These episodes made us understand the unanimity in the silence around menstruation. Voices from the forefront suggested that the silence impacts girl’s and women’s health. The two episodes witnessed how communities are critically examining myths and taboos and breaking the superstitions around the theme.

The first speaker for the webinar was Ms. Nima Choden Tamang from Padeng busty, Bijanbari Block, Darjeeling, West Bengal. Ms. Nima is associated with Darjeeling Prerna (DLR Prerna) since 2016. She comes from a small village, far from Darjeeling town. Most of the people in her village practices agriculture. She shared that like many societies, taboos and myths associated with menstruation also exist in her community including the practice of not allowing women to attend puja by the water source. She attended a training of trainers conducted by DLR Prerna. She started creating awareness around the informed choices on menstrual health management. Some of the girls made a switch to cloth pads and some started using menstrual cup. During the campaign she also tried to involve men of the community. She feels this area needs more efforts in the coming times.
The next speaker was Ms. Prisha from West Bengal. Associated with Rangeen Khidki Foundation Prisha is a 16 years old adolescent. Prisha shared that she remembered that she was very shy about menstruation before connecting with Rangeen Khidki. She shared that even in a metro city like Kolkata taboos like not touching the plants, going to kitchen and more is prevalent. She shared that if, out of discomfort, a girl misses her school 5 days a month due to periods, which means she misses 60 days in a year! This adds up to a huge loss for her studies. She shared that she, along with her peers are breaking these myths and creating awareness around menstruation

The next speakers were two adolescent girls associated with Bado Didi organization working in Malkangiri district of Odisha. Jayanti Baruda, Deepa rani Nayak, assisted by Rashmita Kobasi shared that they belongs to Koya community of Penukonda village of Malkangiri block. The villagers do farming and very few are involved in other occupations. In their community, when a girl gets menarche, she is asked to stay at home for 7 days. All women from the village visit her and shower blessings, give her gifts. There is a feast given to villagers. She has to sit in one corner or in one room. No man can visit her. Deepa Rani shared that the pads used by the girls and women of their community are buried secretly since it is believed that if someone sees the burning of blood soaked pad can result to not getting their next period and they won’t be able to conceive later. The girls shared that the initiative by Bado Didi provided them a platform where the girls and women 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 Nasrin Mansuri assisted by Dr. Neha from SEWA Rural, Jhagadiya, Gujarat. Nasreen shared that they now use cups as they feel nothing after wearing them. Young girl who can't use cup, they tell them to use falalin cloth pads. They also give them menstruation kits including soaps. As a part of their awareness campaigns, they educate both girls and boys especially during Makar Sankranti festival with the key messages on MHM over the kites.

The next speakers for the episode 3 were Jayshreeben Patel, Varshaben Thakkar, Bhakti Sankhala and Taralben Patel, from Coastal Salinity Prevention Cell-CSPC (Gujarat). They explained that as a part of drinking water program in their village, CSPC started conducting community awareness on Menstrual health management. This way they started gather the women and formed the groups under the MHM program. Their community imbibes myths and taboos related to menstruation including not touching the trees, not entering in the kitchen, not touching the pickle and more. Discussions around them in their clubs, they realized that these are not relevant in the current time. They also learnt to make their own cloth pad and use them. They reflected that by the discussions around menstruation, they have become more vocal and advocate for the topic. Now they can discuss this topic even with the male members in the family.

The last speaker for the session was Suman Salvi from Sahada block of Bhilwara District. She is associated with Jatan Sansthan since more than 4 years. She is a member of adolescent girls clubs of her village. The adolescent girls clubs developed by Jatan Sansthan has given her the platform to share her thoughts, explore MHM products and critically analyze the myths associated with the subject. Suman shared that though she has not started visiting the temples during menstruation but have stopped
practicing other myths including touching the pickle, papad and entering kitchen. The experiences of Suman were unique as they explain how life skills and collective consciousness can result in creating awareness on a silenced topic and burst the myths around menstruation bit-by-bit.

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. The participants were highly curious on understanding the functioning, pros and cons of menstrual cups, falalin reusable pads.

This episode witnessed a strong convergence of organizations and cross learning on re-usable menstruation products. With heartfelt wishes to everyone, the Episode 3 for webinar series was completed.