

Sub-theme 2: Women, Work and Livelihood

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Title:

Nightingales Lead: An account of a Federation’s work during the COVID 19 Pandemic

Introduction

Menstruation does not halt itself, in normal circumstances or during a calamity that we now face such as COVID 19. Menstrual absorbents are required in all situations. The spread of COVID 19 however, has given rise to new needs of protection wear, essential items such as, masks and PPE¹ suits. During these past few crucial months, 10 women from the Nightingale Federation, Bordumsa, Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh associated with Bordumsa Mahila Mandal (BMM) have emerged as providers of biodegradable essential items. Not only has the Federation responded to a global emergency, members of the group have had been able to generate a steady source of income for themselves and have been able to support their families throughout the pandemic. The production of cloth sanitary napkins, cloth masks, cloth PPE kits and plastic face shields did not begin suddenly; there is a story behind the effort of the Nightingale Federation. They recognised early that disposable sanitary napkins absorbents cause huge amounts of menstrual debris and that the North East region’s rich bio diversity has to be preserved. Responding to this, BMM lead the establishment of a cloth sanitary pad production unit for the Nightingale Federation at Bordumsa. This was through a collaborative effort between Jatan Sansthan², NERCORMP³, STINER⁴, DoNER⁵ and RuTAG⁶, IIT Madras, supported by the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India. Jatan Sansthan provided the technical support. Today, the Federation’s

¹ PPE – Personal Protection Equipment

² Jatan Sansthan: An NGO at Udaipur in South Rajasthan, www.jatansansthan.org

³ NERCORMP - North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project

⁴ STINER - Science and Technology Interventions in the North East Region

⁵ DoNER - Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region

⁶ RuTAG – Rural Technology Action Group

effort is seen as an example of resilience and self-reliance that can be replicated by other groups.

The Process: Forming a Production Unit

BBM formed the Nightingale federation in April 2017. Currently, the Federation has 12 SHG groups and a total membership of 148 women. The members are from the Singpho, Khamti tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the Kachari tribe of Assam with the primary occupation being agriculture. The Federation is associated with the Government's NERCORMP project. Jatan Sansthan is based at Udaipur in Rajasthan, and has been working in the area of sustainable menstrual health for over twenty years. They conduct MHM⁷ training programmes and have established a production unit making bio degradable cloth sanitary napkins called *Uger*⁸ Pads, children's nappies and other essential health care items. In January of 2019 a team from the Federation travelled to Udaipur to learn about MHM and get trained in cloth pad production techniques at Jatan Sansthan's production unit. Subsequently a baseline survey and follow-up trainings were done by Jatan on location at Bordumsa and with stakeholders in Guwahati and Shillong. Jatan's trainings provided insights on establishing and running a production unit, quality control, marketing and sustainability. The Federation initiated its work with a focus on MHM awareness within communities and the urgent need for using eco- friendly absorbents. Simultaneously a user trial was conducted wherein 15 women used *Uger* pads over their 3 menstrual cycles to test for performance, cultural acceptability, comfort and most importantly scope for future market potential. The results of the trial indicated acceptance and potential for scale up. A proposal for establishing a cloth pad production unit was accepted by the supporting agencies that provided machines, raw materials and space for starting work (Refer image 1). Soon production was well under way; the Nightingales began producing cloth pads, called "*Pyo*"⁹ pads. Marketing support came in from the local administration (Refer image 2); the Deputy Commissioner ensured that cloth pads reached all schools and hospitals under the Government schemes.¹⁰ . With the increased demand for cloth pads, Jatan was able to negotiate for another consignment of raw materials for the federation from the supporting agencies. Jatan also supported the Federation to streamline its supply chain locally so as to make it a cost effective and locally grounded

⁷ MHM - Menstrual Health and Management

⁸ Uger Pads – Uger means a new beginning in *Mewadi* language of southern Rajasthan

⁹ Pyo – means “happy” in the dialect of the *Singpho* tribe

¹⁰ Schemes – School Health and Hygiene Programme; Hospital Rogi Kalyan Samiti Medical Fund

model. The funds generated through sale of pads made of raw material received from supporting agencies helped establish a rolling fund for the Federation to continue production independently.



Image 1: Production Unit in Bordumsa Image 2: *Pyo pads at Special Handloom Expo 2019*

Responding to the Pandemic

With the pandemic playing havoc, the Nightingales did not sit back, they consulted the *Uger* Production Unit at Jatan Sansthan to understand possible strategies and how they were managing their *Uger* cloth pad unit at this critical time. The *Uger* unit had in the meanwhile already started responding to COVID 19 needs by producing reusable cloth masks. In March 2020, they were already supplying to community health workers, clinics, banks, and mining units and also to retail outlets. The *Uger* masks were endorsed by the Government of India's Mask Manual¹¹, this information and making techniques were shared with Nightingale Federation who took immediate action. Under the initiative of "Vocal for Local"¹² they submitted a proposal to the Deputy Commissioner of Changlang District for manufacturing of eco-friendly cloth masks and PPEs for local supply. In April 2020 the Nightingales had started responding to other local relief requirements such as PPE suits and face shields, with the backing of the local administration at Bordumsa and a local supply chain for procurement of raw material. Refer table no. 1 for production and supply details. Refer Images 3, 4, 5 and 6 for products. The federation had to take a call on the face shields as they were of non-bio degradable plastic, but decided to go ahead in response to the emergency at hand. During the

¹¹ Government of India Mask Manual : <http://164.100.117.97/WriteReadData/userfiles/FINAL%20MASK%20MANUAL.pdf>

¹² An initiative of the Government to encourage local brands and products

pandemic women stitched from home and their partners helped in many ways in order to meet the product delivery deadlines. Refer images 7 and 8.

Item	Number supplied	Design development support	Supplied to	Income
Pyo Pads	5760	Uger, Jatan Sansthan	Government Schools and Hospitals, Local Administration, Police Frontline workers, CRPF ¹³ , Assam Rifles Army, Quarantine centre - Bordumsa, Flood affected areas in Assam.	Average monthly income made by federation women engaged in production during the pandemic is Rs. 9,000
Masks	8500	Uger, Jatan Sansthan		
Face Shields	745	Dr Singjat du Singpho - Veterinary Hospital, Bordumsa, Dr Devansh Yadav Deputy Commissioner, Changlang		
PPE	41	From the internet		



Image 3: Pyo Pads



Image 4: Pyo Masks

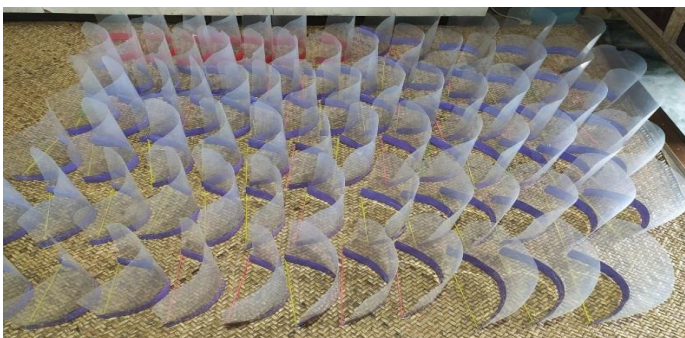


Image 5: Pyo Face Shields



Image 6: Pyo PPE kits

¹³ Central Reserve Police Force



Image 7 and 8: Partners of women assisting with cloth pad production to meet deadlines

Key learning and way forward

When Nightingales production unit was initially established, they had clear objectives; encourage entrepreneurship to make women economically independent so as to support family's income. The other objectives were to break menstruation taboos, work along with men to change mindsets and promote eco friendly menstruation management products. The COVID 19 pandemic resulted in a deviation which was positive benefiting an emergency situation.

We used the “Positive Deviant” (PD) approach to analyse our learnings. Leadership advisor Richard Pascale defines PD as *“individuals who live and work within the same limits and constraints as the rest of us, but who find a way to succeed against all odds.”*

In this context the PD for Nightingale as a Federation has been many fold:

- Vision, willingness to try new ideas, strong leadership, personal will and determination of founder of BMM, Pisilu Singpo.
- Continuous proactive dialogue and partnerships with local administration
- Continued active financial, managerial and monitoring support from NERCORMP
- Mentoring support from the technical agency Jatan Sansthan, well beyond the scope of the original terms of reference.
- Team work and collective idea generation within the federation.

- Disaster response, quick and agile thinking - no delay in implementation
- Positive response from men in the community to supporting women

Through Nightingale's work a model that supports health and livelihood of women and a disaster response team has been established. As such Nightingale's work has been considered an example to scale up. With the assistance of Deputy Commissioner, the federation received a grant from SAMARPAN Mumbai for expanding their work. They now have tie-ups with ICDS¹⁴, ASHA¹⁵/Anganwadi¹⁶ Workers and line departments like schools and health sectors to market the products. Future plans include more awareness programmes on MHM and environment issues, male participation in MHM and identifying a prominent person who will play the role of an ambassador for eco-friendly products.

We see another important outcome in the area of 'Positive Deviance'. PD initially appeared in the nutrition research literature in the 1960s. Based on its early successes, with initiation in the sectors of Public health, Health Care, Education and Child Protection the approach has scaled-up since 2001 globally in diverse sectors. However in the current study period, published projects using PD approach in the labour sector or skill education could not be traced. The research could also be an opportunity to contribute to the literature available on PD for responses to calamities.

¹⁴ ICDS – Integrated Child Development Services

¹⁵ ASHA – Accredited Social Health Activist

¹⁶ Anganwadi – Government established centres for children between 0 to 6 years

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