

# Today women are interconnected in different countries in the world-International Human Day 28 May

by JENNY SVENSSON



Selvi keeps going through the various steps of the cycle.

Photo: © Jenny Svensson.

Im in Garikaiyur village in Tamil Nadu, southern India. Floral fabric binders are sent around among the women gathered to get information about people and sex. While a taboo subject is globally, it is therefore important to create rooms where women feel safe talking about people. International Human Day has been founded to draw attention to the fact that while being linked to health and gender equality problems around the world, it is important to break the silence about the subject.

"While an area is not usually talked about," said *Selvi Nanji*, one of the employees at the *Keystone Foundation*, which runs to villages and schools around Kotagiri, conducting talks about intimacy with women from indigenous peoples.

Selvi starts the information call by talking about the menstrual cycle. She is holding a picture on a womb. The women whisper to each other and scratch. The image of the uterus is followed by more pictures to step by step see what happens in the body throughout the menstrual cycle. She talks about everything from migration to ovulation to menstruation and when the chance of getting pregnant is greatest.

**Improve health during mens.** When Selvi asks about what they use for human protection, it is common for her to respond that they use the same sanitary napkin throughout the day. Many do not have the money to buy more binders. Using a sanitary napkin for so long is something that in turn can affect women's health.

"When we met in a city, the women realized that the binders contributed to health and environmental problems. One woman told her that she had skin irritations that probably came from the binders she used, says Selvi.

The women sitting next to me on the ground feel and squeeze the different fabric binders that are being sent around. The fabric tie, unlike sanitary napkins, is reusable and is part of Keystone Foundation's collaboration with the *Eco Femmes* project *Pads for Sisters*.

"Many people change to sanitary napkins and it's not good for either health or the environment. We thought that fabrics could be good at working in our area because we work with women from indigenous peoples," says Selvi. She explains that Pads for Sisters is aimed at strengthening marginalized women and that they can buy them at a reduced price that does not cost more than a few sanitary napkins.

**Strengthen women globally.** In the city of Auroville, outside of Pondicherry, the organization Eco Femme has its office. As I walk through the gate, I meet women sitting in a ring and discussing fabric bindings.

"We want to make it available to everyone and link women in different countries of the world, regardless of differences and social status.

**We all have men! I see it as a universal empowerment, "says Nikki Venkatesan, working at Eco Femme.**

Even Nikki is poaching around and believes that there is a silence culture about the subject and that taboo can also be linked to traditions and culture.

"We fight most against harmful to women's health," said Nikki, adding that one must respect cultures and traditions, but by communicating to distinguish between what is healthy and not.

**Lack of toilets.** In the city of Coimbatore, the Keystone Foundation, like in Kotagiri, will launch call groups and information on while improving women's health. Prior to launch, they perform focus groups to find out what communication and information is needed. I'll follow Elizabeth on one of her focus groups on Mens and Female Hygiene.

"Akka, Akka," says my colleague Elizabeth Prasanna, peeking through a door in a town that counts to the Coimbatore's slum area.

Akka means sister in the local language tamil. The woman comes out of the house and we ask if she has time to participate in the focus group. She says yes and after a while, most women have gathered around us and the conversation can begin.

The slum area we visit consists of 70 households, of which only three have a toilet attached to their own accommodation. The availability of a proper toilet is also something that affects women's hygiene during the day. According to UN statistics, 60% of the world's population, 4.5 million people, have no toilet at home or have one that does not handle waste products safely.

Elizabeth tells me that those women in the focus groups who do not have access to the toilet say it's difficult for them to execute their needs outdoors when they have one. They may get up early in the morning when it is still dark for no-one to see them.

**Access to information** -Taboo around people is a continuous theme during my conversations and Elizabeth is also returning to the subject. Her goal is to improve and strengthen women's health through access to information.

**"I think the small societies have more social taboos around urban areas.-ELIZABETH**

Even though we often think that the urban areas do not have taboo, they have it. In rural areas, women do not get as many updates on new things to deal with health during menstruation, "says Elizabeth Prasanna, who heads focus groups in Coimbatore.

She continues and says that she herself had difficulty talking about while she was young and that after working with it, she felt stronger and wanted to strengthen other women while taking a long time to break taboo around.

"First of all, we have to think of the older generation as being over the loss of the new generation. When the older generation does not think that while taboo, then the younger generation may see it more in a relaxed manner and it will affect their handling of hygiene during human beings.

Elizabeth raises a number of restrictions young girls have during menstruation. When she made a focus group in a school, she met with taboos such as one unable to visit religious temples, eat some food, play with friends, and not touch plants. While there is a willingness to break taboo, focus is on working to improve women's health and hygiene among people. Talking about one can in turn be a step in the way that it is not as taboo-based.

**Hopeful for the future.** Back to the village of Garikaiyur where the conversation about man begins to end and the women begin to gather around Selvi. They want to recognize the floral fabric tie again, ask questions, laugh and give her praise.

Although the fabric tie is better for both health and the environment, there is a barrier to the fact that all women in the villages will switch from sanitary napkins to wearing a garment only.

"One problem is that women hide their bindings. They do not want others to see them after they are washed and hanging dry. That mentality we must change! But it will be time, Selvi concludes but hopefully.

**Fact box:**

*International Menstrual Hygiene Day* was founded by *WASH-United* to create awareness that there is a global problem when it comes to hygiene management among people, but also to highlight the challenges women and girls face when they have a human being. The date, 28/5 was chosen because the women's men's cycle is usually 28 days, of which the average is 5 days with men. 2014 was celebrated on International Human Day for the first time. (Source: <http://menstrualhygieneday.org>)