

# **Promoting Women's Dignity and a Sustainable Future: Environmentally Viable Alternatives for Menstrual Hygiene Management for Waste Pickers in Pune City, India**



**3D Program**  
FOR GIRLS & WOMEN

*Case Studies in Convergence Series, No. 4*

## Case Studies in Convergence Series, No. 4



**Kashtakari Panchayat (KP)** was registered in 2010 primarily to support waste pickers and their families and their collectives. The support ranges from direct financial assistance to indirect support in the form of training, facilitation and research. KP is best described as a bridge, connecting people to each other, ideas to people, and people to resources, to implement those ideas. The main objectives of KP include providing training and technical support to waste pickers and their organisations, advocating for the rights of workers in the informal economy, improving livelihood opportunities for the working poor and assisting waste pickers and their organisations for sustainable waste management and recycling.

**Website:** <https://kashtakaripanchayat.org>



**Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP)** is a trade union in Pune, India, that brings together waste pickers, itinerant waste buyers, waste collectors and other informal recyclers. We recover, collect, categorise and sell scrap materials for recycling. We also provide garbage collection, composting and related waste management services. Our members are self employed workers. **Website:** <http://www.kkpkp-pune.org>



**SWaCH** is India's first wholly-owned cooperative of self-employed waste collectors and other urban poor. It is an autonomous enterprise that provides front-end waste management services to the citizens of Pune. Our mission is to engage an entrepreneurial workforce of waste pickers into an efficient, responsive and accountable organisation and work in partnership with the municipal solid waste management system to transform the SWM situation in Pune. SWaCH envisions a society that is socially just, economically equitable, culturally plural, politically democratic, environmentally sustainable, peaceful and humane. **Website:** <https://swachcoop.com>



**3D Program**  
FOR GIRLS & WOMEN

The **3D Program for Girls and Women** advances gender equality and girls' and women's empowerment by helping local governments work more efficiently across departments, and with civil society and the private sector, to increase economic opportunities for girls and women and address their health, education and safety needs.

**Website:** <https://the3dprogram.org>

This report is part of the 3D Program's Case Studies in Convergence Series which documents insights and lessons learned from pilot initiatives implemented by the program and our partners to demonstrate convergent solutions to advance gender equality and generate recommendations for stakeholders in government, civil society and the private sector. Pilot initiatives are being implemented in response to priority issues raised by girls and women through collective platforms in Pune City and District, Maharashtra, India.

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## Foreword and Acknowledgements

This case study documents findings from an initiative to meet the menstrual hygiene needs of waste pickers and their family members in Pune City, India during the COVID pandemic, and to introduce environmentally sustainable menstrual hygiene products. The waste pickers of Pune City, 80 percent of whom are women, face a range of personal, health and environmental risks as they manage their own menstrual hygiene and health and the collection of menstrual waste. By engaging them and learning from their experiences and insights, we hope to capture their unique perspective on both consumer and environmental aspects of menstrual hygiene management.

The 3D Program for Girls and Women was honored to support this initiative conducted by the waste pickers cooperative, SWaCH, together with its union, the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) and its administrative partner, Kashtakari Panchayat (KP). The program began before the COVID-19 pandemic but continued during the lockdown period to distribute both disposable and reusable cloth sanitary pads to meet a critical menstrual hygiene need, while also advancing the goals of the initiative. We are grateful to Essity for supporting this important work.

Many thanks to Aditya Vyas and Lakshmi Narayanan for authoring this case study. We are grateful to Atul Bhalerao, Sayali Savita Pradeep, Aditya Vyas, and the entire team at SWaCH for implementing the program under very challenging circumstances. Special thanks also go to the full leadership team at the KKPKP for their visionary work. Thank you, too, to the Yuvatis, Kashtakari Sanghatikas, Sunbais and other community mobilizers who reached out to the waste pickers and their families, educating them and learning from them about the best ways to advance environmentally sustainable menstrual hygiene management. This report captures their stories, too, and the courage and commitment they showed in serving as role models for others. Finally, we extend our admiration and gratitude to the members of KKPKP and SWaCH, who continue to demonstrate the power of collective action in bringing about transformative change in Pune City.

**Sia Nowrojee**

Executive Director, 3D Program for Girls and Women

### INTRODUCTION

Healthy menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is essential to maintaining women's reproductive and sexual health. The waste pickers of Pune City, 80 percent of whom are women, face a range of personal, health and environmental risks as they manage their own menstrual hygiene and health and the collection of MHM waste. Their insights provide a unique perspective on both consumer and environmental aspects of MHM.

Women waste pickers and their family members face a range of challenges in managing their menstrual hygiene and health. Most sanitary products are expensive. The cost of two disposable sanitary pads is INR 25 and women require at least six regular sized pads during a menstrual period that lasts an average of three days. To save money, many waste pickers use sanitary napkins only when their menstrual flow is heavy or when they have to leave their home. At home, they tend to use rags, which may or may not be sanitized. Additionally, due to the cultural taboos associated with menstruation in India, many waste pickers face the added challenge of discreetly disposing of used pads.

Professionally, waste pickers routinely face the indignity of collecting and sorting exposed sanitary waste. According to SWaCH, the waste picker-owned solid waste collection cooperative, 20 tons of sanitary waste is handled by waste pickers on a daily basis in Pune City, India. Over the years,

waste pickers have spoken about how, even while working in upper class neighborhoods, they have had to separate sanitary waste from wet waste. Not only is this inhumane and degrading, it also exposes waste pickers to considerable health risks. Many waste pickers report contracting bacterial infections as a result of this exposure. It is from the testimonies of these waste pickers that the need to create more awareness around sanitary waste disposal emerged. SWaCH's Red Dot campaign is an initiative designed to address these concerns. The campaign encourages citizens to dispose of their sanitary waste wrapped in paper marked with a single red dot to alert waste pickers to the nature of the waste.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated risks related to sanitary waste handling, as well as waste pickers' ability to access sanitary products for their own use. It also created the impetus for generous support from donors who offered Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits and dry food rations to the waste pickers. Disposable sanitary pads were included in the PPE kits, recognized as priority items that waste pickers could neither access nor afford to purchase, particularly during the strict lockdown. This highlighted the tension between the urgent need to accept these donations to enable waste pickers to have access to sanitary pads and the knowledge that in the long-run disposable sanitary pads are not the most environmentally sustainable option, given how long they take to decompose and

the high amounts of fossil fuel generated energy required to process the plastic back-strip used in disposable sanitary napkins.<sup>1</sup>

Given all the economic, social and environmental considerations of using disposable sanitary pads, especially with respect to waste pickers during the COVID pandemic, SwaCH and its administrative partner Kashtakari Panchayat started an initiative to promote MHM education and cloth sanitary pads among women waste pickers.

### PROGRAM COMPONENTS

#### The Pilot Study

The nationwide lockdown was announced in the last week of March 2020 during which the waste pickers' ability to access sanitary pads was compromised. In June 2020, SWaCH and Kashtakari Panchayat launched a pilot study in slum communities<sup>2</sup> in the wards of Kothrud and Warje in Pune City, to meet the following objectives:

- Fill immediate MHM needs for waste pickers during the COVID pandemic
- Increase awareness about the disadvantages of using disposable sanitary hygiene products or unsanitized rags
- Offer other hygienic and sustainable solutions for MHM

The study engaged waste pickers and introduced menstrual hygiene education and reusable cloth sanitary pads, which are considerably cheaper than disposable pads, do not require disposal, are environmentally friendly and offer a hygienic alternative. The study also explored the ideal pricing of cloth pads for waste pickers.

A total of 200 cloth pads were given to waste pickers in Kothrud and Warje communities. A packet of four pads was priced at INR 500, which we sold to them at the subsidized cost of INR 50 in order to encourage them to buy the product. A cloth pad, if maintained properly, can last for up to three years, thereby cutting the costs of MHM products by more than half, since most waste pickers claim to spend anywhere between INR 70 and 100 per month on disposable pads. Several waste pickers informed us that in addition to lower costs, cloth pads are much better than anything else they had used previously.

Before distributing the packets of cloth pads, we conducted an educational session with waste pickers, sharing information on menstruation and MHM and answering questions. The following topics were covered during the session:

- Female reproductive system and menstruation, including the changes that occur in the body when women get their period, how to deal with these changes, and the importance of good nutrition.

<sup>1</sup> <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/268415363.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In Kothrud it included the communities of Sainath Nagar, Lokmanya Nagar, Sagar Colony and Kishkinda Nagar and in Warje, it included the communities of Ramnagar, MHADA colony and Gosavi Vasti.

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- The disadvantages of using plastic sanitary pads,<sup>3</sup> including the physical discomforts of abrasions and rashes, the problem of proper disposal and the environmental costs.
- Information on cloth sanitary pads, including how to use and maintain them by washing and soaking them in room temperature water with detergent for at least an hour and drying them properly.
- The risk of infection associated with wearing wet or moist underwear and sanitary cloth pads or rags.
- Identify and help waste pickers critically examine the taboos associated with menstruation
- Document the sanitary products used and identify their relative advantages and disadvantages as reported by waste pickers
- Raise awareness among waste pickers of alternatives available for MHM, including cloth pads and menstrual cups, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each
- Increase awareness of the financial and environmental implications of each product
- Train waste pickers on the use of alternative products to disposable sanitary pads

### The MHM Program

Encouraged by the positive reaction from waste pickers during the pilot, a program was designed to promote the use of cloth pads among over 5,000 waste pickers across Pune City. The program engaged youth leaders from the community and field coordinators and was supported by various organizations (see Appendix 1).

The program had the following objectives:

- Increase waste pickers' understanding of the female reproductive system and menstruation, including the changes that occur in the body when girls and women get their period, how to deal with these changes, and the importance of good nutrition

The program included the following components: a survey of waste pickers after the distribution of cloth pads, together with a pricing study, training and capacity building activities for outreach workers, and developing IEC materials.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'plastic sanitary pad' is used for commercially available disposable sanitary pads that have a plastic insert to protect against leakage.

### The Survey and Pricing Study

After the distribution of cloth pads to waste pickers, a study was conducted with 186 waste pickers to better understand their attitudes towards various menstrual hygiene products. The study was conducted from June to December 2020. Community mobilizers interviewed the waste pickers using a door-to-door survey. The data collected was digitized and analyzed in Excel. Waste pickers who had started using cloth pads were interviewed, along those who were non-users. The key points covered during the study include:

- Products used during menstruation
- Reasons to use particular products
- Annual expenditure incurred by different products
- Experience of using cloth pads
- Demand for cloth pads among waste pickers and their families
- Understanding willingness and purchasing power of waste pickers with respect to cloth pads

The findings from the study informed our broader outreach plans. Key findings and insights include the following:

- The annual expenditure incurred on commercial sanitary pads ranged from INR 300 to 1,200, with an average annual expenditure of INR 400
- Out of the total waste pickers interviewed, 41 percent used disposable pads during menstruation

- Waste pickers identified the following concerns about using cloth pads: possibility of leaking and staining, insufficient protection for heavy bleeding, discomfort with washing cloth pads, and loss of absorbency from repeated use
- During the lockdown, waste pickers were willing to spend INR 143 on average for cloth pads that could be used for three years and felt they could spend on average INR 172 with their anticipated increase in earnings once the lockdown ended

Based on these findings, to make cloth pads affordable for waste pickers and their families, the price for a packet of four cloth pads that would last up to three years was set at INR 100.

### Training and Capacity Building

During the multiple COVID lockdowns in Pune, schools and colleges have remained closed. College-going children of waste pickers felt a sense of loss of work and complained about restlessness and anxiety. Regular youth group meetings also had to stop and it took some time to adjust to online meetings on Zoom. Youth leaders were initially involved in distributing PPE kits and food rations in slum communities but given their eagerness to support waste pickers, we decided to involve them in the process of promoting sustainable menstrual hygiene products. A training program for female youth leaders or Yuvatis was held to educate them on alternative menstrual hygiene products and train them to work

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as menstrual hygiene educators for waste pickers. This gave them a sense of ownership over the program and allowed them to earn a small honorarium for their work, providing them with some financial independence during the lockdown. Box 1 illustrates the impact of the training and the opportunity to educate others on MHM options in the words of one Yuvati, Monika Kamble.

The goal of the training was to raise the awareness of participants about the many options for MHM and the impact on the environment of using disposable sanitary pads. The program began with a short introduction to set the context for the meeting and the need to work towards an environmentally viable solution for MHM. The Yuvatis were asked to share their own experiences of menstruation, followed by a short discussion on the taboos around it and how they result in various restrictions placed by society on girls and women. Many misconceptions held by the Yuvatis were clarified in the discussion. The differences between sanitary pads and cloth pads were also explained and discussed.

The participants expressed their willingness to hold similar discussions regularly with more participants and some of them were clearly capable of holding such training sessions for others in their own communities. In the words of one participant, Yuvati Prerana Havle:

“I never knew that our bodies are so complex and need to be understood well. That is how the societal conditioning and superstitions will go away. I feel like I am in the right age to make a conscious decision to work towards creating a sustainable environment.”

### **Developing Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) Materials**

Another part of the outreach activity included creating context-specific educational information by and for waste pickers. This was done through various mediums and then circulated to the waste pickers.

1. Waste pickers shared their experiences after using cloth pads in a video recording. This was then shared through different Whatsapp groups with all field workers and the waste pickers who had smart phones. More importantly, this was screened to waste pickers during any meeting in the community, followed by a discussion.
2. Leaflets were printed and distributed to all waste pickers with details regarding cloth pads, their cost, and contact details on where to obtain them.
3. Flipcharts were used by community mobilizers during educational sessions with waste pickers. The charts included visuals that helped to facilitate productive discussions.

### **Revised Program Model**

Despite the best of intentions, by January 2021, it was clear that the Yuvatis were facing significant challenges in training waste pickers and convincing them to use more environmentally sustainable menstrual hygiene products.



The key challenges were:

- The Yuvatis did not have experience as community mobilizers and did not have a good rapport with all the waste pickers. This made it difficult for them to engage with the waste pickers in this new capacity.
- As the Yuvatis were younger than the waste pickers, they found it difficult to convince the waste pickers to change long-standing attitudes and behaviors.
- The Yuvatis did not have sufficient experience in facilitating training sessions.

In the words of one program coordinator, Atul Bhalerao:

“For any project to be successful, the loop of feedback from the field is really important. For a project like this, defining success is not easy but my learning is that when we realized that Yuvatis are finding it difficult to lead the outreach, we involved different staff members who readily pitched in. They now feel more confident and also know what areas they need to improve on, in order to be able to reach out to waste pickers.”

In order to overcome these challenges and ensure that the end goal was not compromised, we decided to make some changes in the plan. While the Yuvatis continued to reach out to waste pickers of their area, we decided to use field workers who work for the Kashtakari Seva Kendras, set up by the Kashtakari Panchayat to increase waste pickers’ access to government benefits and entitlements.<sup>4</sup> The Kashtakari Seva Kendras are decentralised, easy to access, and are conveniently located

close to the homes or the places of work of waste pickers and other informal workers. Each KSK has a community mobilizer called Kashtakari Sanghatika, who are daughters or daughters-in-law (or sunbais) of waste pickers. They were deployed to help implement the MHM program. This included conducting door-to-door surveys, meeting waste pickers at their workplace and engaging in a dialogue to promote cloth pads. The Kashtakari Sanghatikas served as the main point of contact for all waste pickers for any cloth pad related training and transaction (see Box 2).

Additionally, 107 SWaCH field coordinators were also involved in outreach and data tracking. In February 2021, training sessions were organized for all coordinators and a plan was made to reach out to all 3,500 waste pickers through door-to-door contact. Online training with coordinators was organised to explain the process and address the queries from the field. As coordinators are regularly in contact with waste pickers, they were asked to distribute pamphlets and explain the reasons why cloth pads are more environmentally sustainable and financially viable. A survey was designed and all coordinators were trained to record data in Excel. The following data were collected through this process:

- Whether there was anyone in the family of waste pickers of menstruating age
- Number of waste pickers informed about the cloth pads
- Number of waste pickers willing to buy cloth pads

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Kendra model see: Services Within Reach: Breaking Down Barriers for Informal Workers, Case Studies in Convergence Series, No. 2, Washington DC: 3D Program for Girls and Women

### TESTIMONIES OF OUTREACH WORKERS

#### **Box 1: Monika Kamble, Yuvati**

Monika is a confident young girl pursuing Law from Yashwantrao Chavan Law College. She is the daughter of Jayashree Kamble, a waste picker from Bhawani Peth Area of Pune. Over the last year as she entered the third year of her graduation, she realized the importance, as well as the need to be financially independent. In November she had an opportunity to attend a series of training workshops around menstrual health and hygiene. She was introduced to alternatives to sanitary pads, one of them being a cloth pad. "The cloth pads are made of cotton and can be reused for a period of 4-5 years. I was shocked to know that a sanitary pad takes up to 800 years to decompose. My mother has to handle sanitary napkins on a daily basis and listening to her has been triggering as well" exclaims Monika. She has been promoting cloth pads to the families of waste pickers by conducting meetings in the communities.

These pads are being made available at a subsidized cost to the waste pickers by EcoFemme, an organization from Tamil Nadu. "The first time I met a group of waste pickers and tried to demonstrate the usage of cloth pads, they avoided eye contact with me and left even before I could complete. But there are people who are beginning to understand what I am saying, the other day a girl called me up after a week and said that she had a good experience using the cloth pad and that just cheered me up. The best thing about these pads is that they can be folded to resemble a wallet or a purse that makes it easier to navigate the societal taboos around it". Monika is extremely mature for her age and knows that a change in behavioral patterns of people is a long and tortuous path. Her face lights up all of a sudden and she says, "The important thing is that I am convinced about this and that is how I will be able to influence people to contribute in building a sustainable future for us all."

## TESTIMONIES OF OUTREACH WORKERS

### **Box 2: Savita Kakde, Kashtakari Sanghatika**

When I first heard about the menstrual cup during our training around menstrual hygiene and products, I felt extremely uncomfortable. The fact that it has to be inserted inside the body scared me. Gradually, through the training as we learnt about how it is a safe, environmentally viable option, I decided to try using it. I have been using it for the last seven months" shared Savita, who is a Kashtakari Sanghatika and has been closely involved in the program. "When I inserted the cup for the first time, I was worried but after keeping it in warm water for some time it wasn't difficult at all. We as women are conditioned to not speak about issues like menstruation. I learnt so much about my body after using the cup" added Savita.

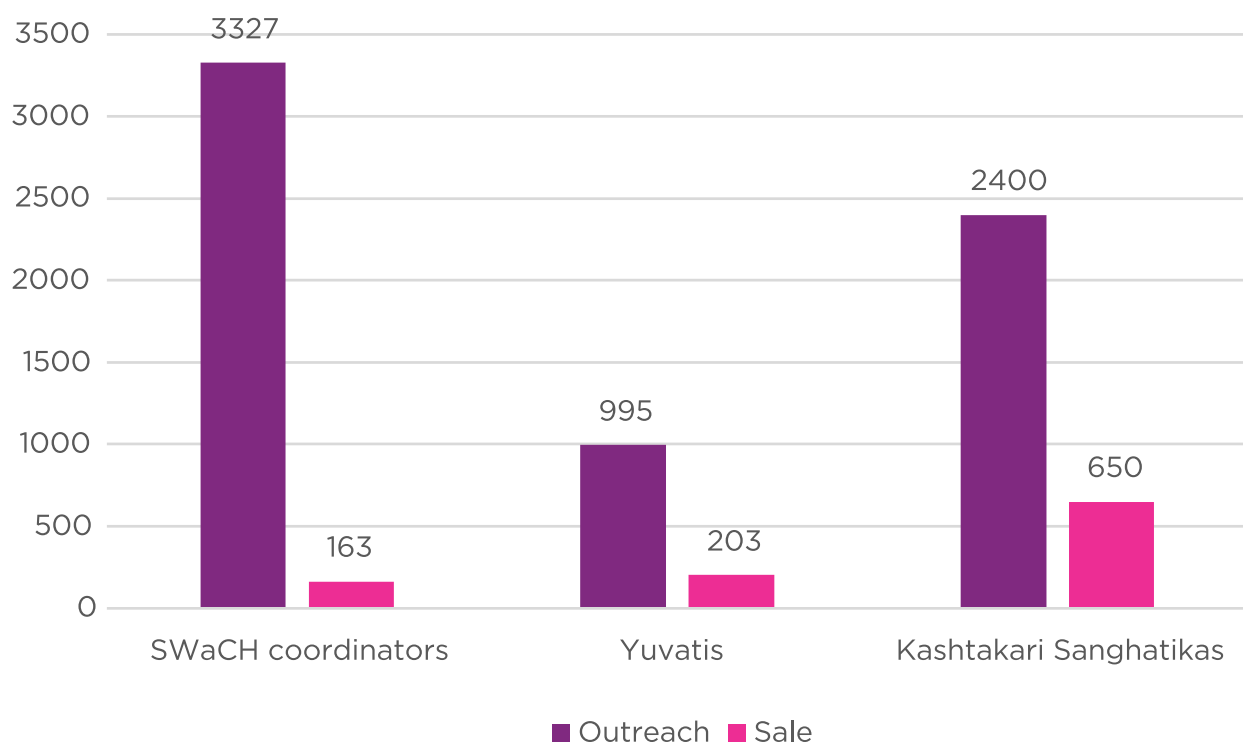
Growing up, she has seen her mother rummaging through garbage bins and handling sanitary waste. Even now when the waste collection has become a door-to-door process, many times waste pickers have to handle sanitary pads that are not disposed with care. Savita feels that it is a grave insult to do so. She feels strongly about exploring alternatives and says that the youth are a good age group to start these conversations with. "Through this project I got to meet so many waste pickers who are willing to encourage their daughters to make some bold decisions," she concludes.

### RESULTS

Over 5,500 waste pickers were reached through the program in a phased manner, through different points of contacts. The details of outreach by the three types of

mobilizers. SWaCH coordinators, Yuvatis and Kashtakari Sanghatikas is provided in Figure 1. Together they distributed over 1,016 cloth pad kits.

**Figure 1. Number of waste pickers reached by type of community mobilizer**



The SWaCH coordinators alone reached a total of 3,327 members, which is over 95% of the total membership of the SWaCH cooperative. Of those reached, cloth pads were distributed to 163 members. (Figure 1).

The distribution process was slowed down due to the rising cases of COVID-19 and the travel restrictions across the city. However, the waste pickers who have shown interest in understanding how to use cloth pads are now being contacted to ensure they get access to them.

### Feedback from the Waste Pickers

Testimonials from waste pickers who participated in the study illustrate the support generated for the use of cloth pads:



We spend from INR 70 to 100 on a packet of sanitary pads depending on the size. It is very expensive for us but there were no other options. Before getting married, we would use cloth rags, but there were problems of slippage and hygiene issues with those. These cloth pads work very well for me. They are much cheaper and each is supposed to last for up to three years depending on use. That's really good! When I am working collecting waste, picking up unwrapped used sanitary pads is disgusting and I felt like vomiting, but there is no way out of it. I come back home, wash up and bathe to forget about it.

**Jayashree Wani, a waste picker**

The main advantage to the cloth pads is that they are soft and don't poke or cause itching or rashes. Using disposable sanitary pads always has this huge disadvantage. Also, while disposing of these sanitary pads there's always that fear of people in the family coming to know. It would be too embarrassing. So, I end up throwing it somewhere or the other and not disposing it off properly. There have been so many discussions about appropriate disposal of sanitary pads and if I also end up doing the same, what's the point?

**Swati Kasbe, a waste picker**

The cloth pad is really good! The feeling of the material itself is so comforting and soft. Those disposable sanitary pads are very abrasive and poke and causes rashes on my inner thighs. Cloth rags made at home are very unsteady and I am always scared that it might fall off! These sanitary pads come with straps, which keep them safely fastened so there's no fear related to falling off either."

**Sarika Tanaji Kadam, a waste picker**

### Feedback from Community Mobilizers

Personal testimonials from program coordinators illustrate the impact the project had on them and the insights they gained from their experience:



I was raised by waste pickers and have seen their work very closely. It is one thing to talk about waste segregation but to put your hand in a garbage bin and handle a used sanitary pad is something only a waste picker can experience. The least we can do is to make sure that gradually we influence people to make rational decisions. I immediately took this upon myself to convince waste pickers in my area that the cloth pads would be beneficial for them. Every day I took rounds of the slums and confidently engaged with adolescent girls and women alike.

**Mina Kamble, Kashtakari Sanghatika**

I grew up in an atmosphere where I was constantly reminded by my family members to speak softly while my brother raising his voice was consider 'normal'. Somewhere, it ends up affecting your confidence. In our training, I struggled to speak up and ask questions, but everyone was so encouraging. Being a daughter of a waste picker, I knew how difficult it is to handle sanitary waste, I have heard my mother speak about it so many times! In this whole process of conducting meetings with waste pickers, I got to work on my facilitation skills as well. I have started to use the cotton pads myself and gradually I am sure that the more I speak about my experience, the better it is for others around me to take this decision.

**Divya Chavan, a Yuvati from Patil Estate Slum, Pune**

## INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The campaign provided critical insights about the factors that contribute to the use of cloth pads and the effectiveness of different outreach and educational strategies.

**Age as a determinant of use:** The women who found it easiest to change from disposable to reusable cloth pads were those between 25 and 40 years of age, whether that was the waste pickers themselves or other members of their families. More radical choices, such as the use of menstrual cups, were made only by the younger generation, the sunbais, who were also ready to play the role of champions of such change and products, and were ready to speak out publicly and have their posts shared on social media and their videos circulated among other members.

**Perceived advantages of cloth pads:** The most commonly cited reasons for a change to cloth pads were that they were easy to use, secure, soft and comfortable, and prevented infection, allergy and rashes, did not stain easily, and dried fast. Although the shift to cloth pads is relatively new, it seems that those who have adopted their use are likely to continue to use them only if the product is easily accessible.

**Affordability is a key determinant of use:** For cloth pads to be used, they have to be available at a reasonable price. This is especially true of those who changed from commercial disposable pads bought from medical stores to cloth pads. Most waste pickers thought that a reasonable price for a set of four cloth pads, that would last three years, was between INR 100 and 150. Based on commercial prices of cloth, reusable

pads, this means that subsidizing cloth pads would be necessary.

**Other determinants of use:** Although the price of cloth pads will play a role in their acceptability, access to water, spaces to dry cloth pads, and the opportunity to discuss menstrual hygiene and products openly, are likely to have as great an impact on the use of cloth pads.

**Personal experience with the product by mobilizers affected impact:** All outreach was much more impactful when those engaged in outreach and educational activities (i.e. sunbais, yuvatis, SWaCH coordinators) had tried the product, and were convinced about its quality, superiority over other products, ease of usage and cost effectiveness.

**Age and marital status of community mobilizers a determinant of success:** There was a resistance to accepting suggestions from single, unmarried, young girls, even if they were relatively more educated than their slightly older, married counterparts within the community.

**Working as community mobilizers was empowering:** All the yuvatis and sunbais who conducted educational sessions and promoted the alternate products said they learned about their bodies, the menstrual cycle, and menstrual hygiene products, and also developed their own communication and outreach skills. Their experiences made them more articulate, confident and outgoing.

**Impact of IEC materials varied:** Face-to-face meetings, conversations, and videos were far more impactful than leaflets which provided the same information. The group and one-on-one interactions allowed for questions to be answered and for open and frank discussion among the waste pickers which helped convey the information more effectively.

### CONCLUSION

This program provided the opportunity to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of waste pickers and their family members on MHM, while addressing a basic human need during the COVID pandemic. The experiences and insights of waste pickers are shaped by their unique position as both consumers of MHM products and as solid waste management service providers. Their insights can help inform MHM programs both during COVID and as we build back better and ensure that program and services effectively and sustainably address the needs of girls and women.

Participants confirmed the need for clear and contextualized education on menstruation and menstrual health for women of all ages. Both participants and mobilizers benefitted from the education sessions, which challenged long-standing taboos around menstruation.

Additionally, participants showed that MHM choices are desirable and welcome. To date, many existing MHM interventions simply distribute disposable pads, often of questionable quality. While a secure supply chain is important, particularly during a crisis, the program participants confirmed that they already use different MHM methods based on their different needs. Often these methods are not ideal. Women need to have access to a range of high-quality options, disposable and reusable, to help them manage their periods.

The study also confirmed that women will use reusable cloth pads if the cost is subsidized. Since the shift to cloth pads significantly reduces solid waste management costs of the municipality, it is reasonable to demand that cloth pads be subsidized by the government, and extended producer responsibility is enforced on polymer-based, disposable cloth pads.

Menstrual hygiene management is vital to women's health and dignity. Making MHM products accessible and affordable and giving women a choice of options, depending upon their need and preference, should be a priority for all governments. It is equally important that the ecological impact of the products promoted be recognized and the necessary investments be made to develop and distribute environmentally sustainable options.



## APPENDIX 1: SUPPORT

The program brought together support from different organisations and individuals. This was because of the nature of the program as it cuts across various themes. During the lockdown, organisations came forward to support waste pickers with PPE kits, which included sanitary pads. Other organisations provided support for the training sessions and capacity building of staff. As the project emphasised health and sustainability, we also received support from organisations committed towards achieving the same goals. Financial support was received from other partners which enabled us to procure high quality cloth pads for waste pickers. The details of support are below:

### **Yardi CSR**

- Donated 120 cloth pads for waste pickers

### **Ms. Maya Kamble (Yardi)**

- Training of field workers around menstruation and hygiene
- Support and guidance in conducting sessions in vastis

### **Badlaav Social Reform Foundation**

- Donated 17 cloth pads and 3 menstrual cups to field staff

### **Ms. Radhika Dhingra (Badlaav)**

- Training and capacity building support for all field workers

### **Ecofemme**

- 8,000 cloth pads at a subsidized rate for the project

### **Amara**

- Support in vasti meetings and trainings

### **Mercedes Benz**

- Financial support for procuring 8000 cloth pads

### **Allforasmile Human Empowerment Foundation**

- Donated 381 environmentally sustainable cloth pad kits (4 per kit) for waste pickers

### **Essity via the 3D Program for Girls and Women, United Nations Foundation**

- Outreach to 5,000 waste pickers with high-quality, low-cost, environmentally sustainable options to manage their menstrual health and hygiene needs
- Support to 2,500 waste pickers for cloth pads
- Project coordination cost including research, documentation and over heads

### IN MEMORIAM

#### **Sandhya Jangam**

**June 23, 1987 - May 29, 2021**

Sandhya Jangam made her mark as a community mobilizer during COVID-19, helping her community of waste pickers protect themselves from infection. Never did she imagine that she would be a victim of COVID herself.

Only 32 years of age, Sandhya was a Sunbai or daughter-in-law (as the community mobilizers are fondly referred to) of the waste pickers who looked forward to her daily visits to their homes with messages of support, advice and sometimes just a warm smile over a cup of tea, as they unleashed their worries and burdens on her. Sandhya did it all - distributing food rations, convincing vaccine hesitant waste pickers to take their shots in the interest of protecting their own health and that of the citizens whose waste they collect, ensuring waste pickers could access state support for their children's education, increasing their access to credit to ease the financial burden and distributing food rations to the most vulnerable! Through the challenging months of 2020 and 2021, she was a front-line worker serving other front-line workers until a week before she died. She leaves behind a seven-year old son, a caring husband and an aging mother.

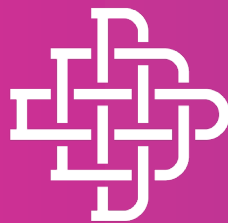
The 3D Program salutes Sandhya Jangam for her service and commitment to her community. We will miss her. May her memory be a blessing.

Partnerships lie at the heart of the 3D Program.  
We are grateful for the support we receive from  
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