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Pad woman of Jhajjar

MENSTRUAL HEALTH and hygiene is the last thing women want to talk about in a district like Jhajjar in Haryana, which still battles gender stereotypes in an inherently patriarchal set-up. With 782 girls per 1,000 boys, this Haryana district records one of the worst child sex ratio in the country. "Going to schools is still a dream for many girls," says Kavita Sharma, a 45-year-old resident of Bhadana village. So in 2010, when J K Lakshmi Cement Plant helped her to set up a self-help group, she decided to make products that women can use as well as sell to make money. "We started making cloth bags, phenyl and woollen clothes. I also wanted to manufacture affordable sanitary pads. Most women in our villages use and re-use old rags as pads which makes them susceptible to infections. Girls also stay away from schools during menstruation," says Sharma, who had to discontinue studies after eighth grade. But getting them to talk about menstrual hygiene was an even tougher task.

"Every day I would visit women, explaining them the importance of using sanitary pads. But they would either dismiss me or taunt me. Many also stopped talking to me and my family," Sharma recalls. "Their approach towards me changed in 2013 during a Saras fair held in my district." Organised by the Union Ministry of Rural Development, this annual fair provides a platform to rural artisans to showcase their skills and develop a

For over a decade,
Kavita Sharma
has been striving to
break the taboo of
menstrual health
in Haryana

ANIL ASHWANI SHARMA

market for their products. Sharma's desire to make sanitary napkins struck a chord with the officials at the fair. The Chhattisgarh government's Women and Child Development Department nominated her for a three-month-training on sanitary napkin manufacturing. After her return, J K Lakshmi Cement gifted her a sanitary pad manufacturing machine which she installed at her residence.

Brimming with confidence, she continued visiting women in her village and also in adjacent villages and explained to them how sanitary pads are made and why they are more hygienic than used rags. This had an impact. Women started visiting her to learn the process. "So far, I have trained over 80 women from Bhadana and nearby villages who now work from their homes. We sell a packet of five pads for ₹20. This is four to five times cheaper than what is available in the market. To school-going girls, we offer it for ₹10," says Sharma. "But the taboo around menstruation is so strong that a lot of women conceal their identities while visiting me." But Sharma remains undeterred. Taking her mission forward, she now visits schools, busting myths around menstruation and making girl students aware of menstrual health and hygiene.

In 2018, Sharma was felicitated by Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar for her contribution towards women empowerment.

