

Girls Health and Hygiene Final Project Report

Shreya Ramesh

(Shreya is from Alpharetta, Georgia. Shreya completed her 10th grade in the summer of 2018 and subsequently enrolled in TNF Service and Education Internship)

Introduction:

Health and Hygiene is a very important consideration in one's day to day life, yet many of us do not take it seriously. Many girls in Tamil Nadu do not have access to the necessities for basic hygiene such as sanitary pads. Many lower- middle class and poor families cannot afford pads as they are expensive and not very accessible in rural areas, many girls and young women will resort to using unsanitary methods to cope with their menstrual cycles. The use of unsanitary methods leads to many girls and women to be more prone to infections that could have been prevented with increased accessibility to the sanitary pads. According to CNN in a 2017 survey, "Incidents of reproductive tract infections (RTI's) are 70% more common amongst women who do not use sanitary pads than those who do". This increase in infection rates then results in girls becoming school dropouts due to the lack of sanitary pads and other resources to deal with menstrual flow every month. Increased access to sanitary napkins means that more girls can attend school without menstruation being a major hindrance in their education and can break the cycle of poverty. As a part of my **TNF Service and Education Internship**, I studied this issue at rural (Vedaraniyam, Nagapattinam district) and urban (Ashok Nagar, Chennai) schools in Tamil Nadu.

KGKG School, Vedaraniyam, Tamil Nadu (Status Quo and Observations):

Currently, the KGKG Government Higher Secondary School purchases pads from the Tamil Nadu government at a fee of ₹15,000 per month for the 300 (approximately) students residing in the hostel (5th grade - 12th grade). The administration mentioned that the government will generally only supply pads for free for schools in rural areas. Since Vedaraniyam was deemed an urban area, the school administrators had to agree to pay ₹15000 per month for the pads by noting that a majority of the students who attend the school come from rural, low income areas. When the need comes, the students in the hostel will ask the warden of the hostel for pads when necessary and will dispose of the pads in the dustbins in the restrooms of the hostel. However, once the pads have been used and thrown into the trash, the administrators will burn the pads. This is another issue that should be addressed when continuing this project since burning the pads causes environmental issues, namely air pollution. Another goal should be to provide eco-friendly pads so the administrators no longer have to burn the pads after use.



Above are the images of the pads that I provided to the schools.



Above is picture of the packages of pads in the KGKG School.

The KGKG School in Vedaraniam has a large campus, with various different facilities including a chemistry lab, many new classrooms for the students, as well as new dorm rooms with new bathrooms. Many of the bathrooms are clean and neat, but one major issue is that many of them did not have soap, so students only use water to wash their hands. This is also another issue for the students who live in the hostel since they would not be able to use any other bathrooms and would not use soap to wash their hands. Many of the students already use pads at this school since the school also supplies government-bought pads for the girls, so many of the students understand the importance of hygiene and health and how to use pads and feel comfortable using such pads. When further expanding this project, TNF should also provide soap along with the pads so the students can properly wash their hands after changing pads.



(Clockwise): I gave a speech to all the 11th and 12th grade students about my project; tour of the school's classrooms; the main campus area of the school

The Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Ashok Nagar, Chennai (Status Quo and Observations):

The Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Ashok Nagar, Chennai was different in the sense that the families of the students in the school generally are able to afford pads for the girls. Each girl will bring her own pads to school and will bring a plastic cover as well to dispose of the pads in the bathrooms. If a student needs a pad, the teachers have extra supplies for the students to use as well. The teachers of the school mentioned that the overall attendance for each class does not fluctuate every month since the parents do not keep the girls at home while on their period. When a girl initially starts her period, she may stay home for a few days, but as the students get older, they continue to go to school on a regular basis. Although the school's syllabus does not teach about menstrual health, the school offers a Health Club, a club dedicated to teaching the students about different health issues, such as menstrual health.



Above is an image of me distributing the pads to the various classrooms.

Since The Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Ashok Nagar, Chennai did not have hostels, the students must bring their own pads and their own plastic covers to use while at school. Although there is a separate, newly constructed building for the bathrooms for the students to use with trash cans inside, some of the 9th grade students at the school mentioned that there is no running water in the bathrooms to wash their hands properly. Although the school had newer facilities such as a STEM Lab, engineering classes, a classroom with a projector, as well as other activities (sports, Health club), without running water, students are subject to unsanitary conditions as a result.



Above is the whole school during the morning assembly. I was able to give a short 4 minute speech about my project and the importance of health and hygiene.

Further Expansion:

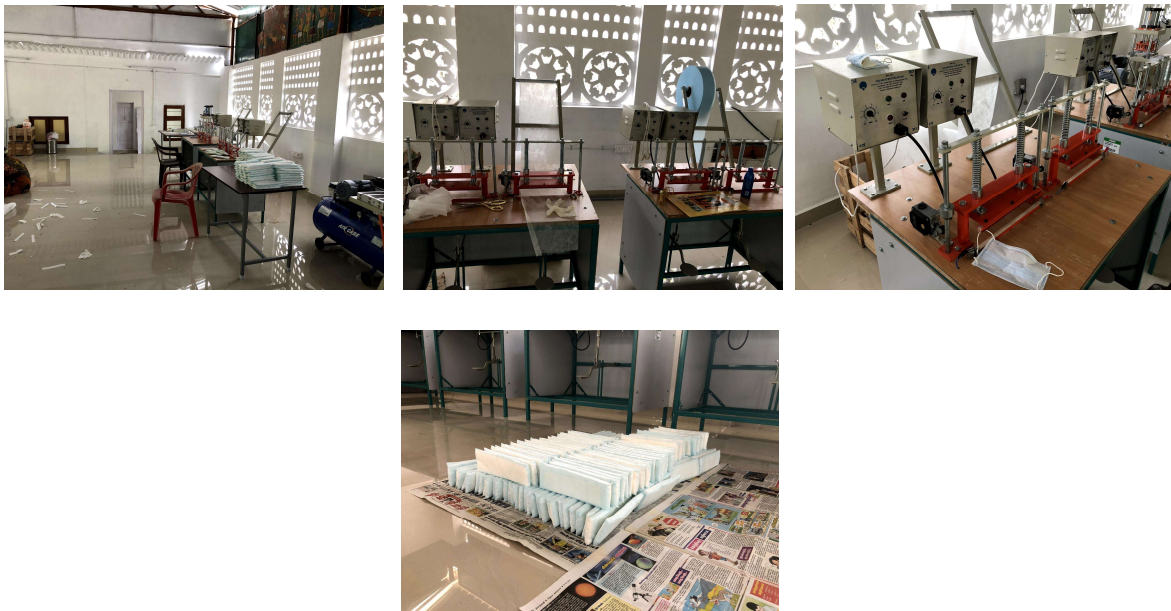
To further expand this project, we must observe various girls' schools around Tamil Nadu. If we target schools that are like the Vedaraniyam school (urban areas but most students are from rural towns), we will be able to easily expand the project to those schools by being able to provide resources for the students in rural areas. Even though the government provides pads for the rural area schools, we must take into consideration the quality of the pads as well as whether or not students use such pads and how frequent the pad shipments are. By providing pads, the schools would be able to spend money elsewhere by making infrastructural investments or by purchasing newer class materials. However, further observations are needed before implementing this project.

Project Sustainability:

To ensure to sustainability of the project, pad-making machines from Jayashree Industries are available for purchase and can be installed in schools where it may be useful for the local community. The machines themselves come in 2 versions: manual (₹ 1.5- 2 lakhs) and semiautomatic (₹ 2.5- 3 lakhs). However, this cost covers ₹15,000 of material (approximately 6,000 pads), installation, and training. The machine can produce up to 750 pads per day and is easy to use, even for students. Other external factors to consider when purchasing the machine are electrical costs and wiring, space to set up the machine, as well as buying the materials to make the pads. However, such machines are relatively expensive to purchase for the local

community and the investment may not be very profitable since the machine will not be used for commercial use but rather for personal use. If a machine is purchased, we need to ensure the maintenance of such machines as well as getting more money to purchase materials for the pads. One such example is the Irula Tribe project, which I was able to visit during my stay in Chennai. The project focuses on using such machines to produce pads to sell at roughly ₹3 rupees per pad. This project promotes women's empowerment and allows the members to be self-sustaining and providing a source of employment for the local women of the tribe. Similarly, by setting up a machine in the KGKG School or other future schools, the local women will be able to become independent, thus fostering principles of women empowerment.

However, there are also other alternate solutions to ensure the sustainability of this project. Cloth pads are one option in which students use 5-6 fabric pads during their period. Cloth pads from the company EcoFemme can last for 3-5 years (75 washes), making this option more sustainable as well. Although the cost of 1 pad is roughly ₹225, the overall long term cost will most likely be much lower than the cost of the maintenance and purchase of the pad-making machine since the pads are reusable for a long time. Another option includes purchasing pads from Saathi pads, where they make pads using banana leaf fibers. The pads are biodegradable and compostable, so they are also more environmentally friendly. The pads are also relatively cheaper at 6 pads for ₹180, even though we would have to purchase shipments every month for this option.



Above are images of the pad-making machines that the Irula Tribe currently uses to empower women as well as the finished products.