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Bringing the issue out of the closet, adolescent girls launch a Guidance booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management

New Delhi 8 March 2008 In a function marking the International Women's Day and the International Year of Sanitation, young adolescent girls and women from villages of Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh released the Guidance booklet developed by UNICEF on Menstrual Hygiene Management and a short film on the same in New Delhi today.

The gathering included Mrs. Santha Sheela Nair, Secretary, Department of Drinking Water Supply, GoI, Mr. Gautam Budhha Mukherjee, Secretary, Tribal Welfare, GoI, Ann Hasselbalch, Deputy Director, UNICEF, Lizette Burgers, Chief, Water and Sanitation Section and many other officials from the government, other agencies and UNICEF India.

Although Menstrual Hygiene is an issue that every girl and woman has to deal with in their lives, there is lack of information on the process of menstruation, the physical and psychological changes associated with puberty and proper requirements for managing menstruation. The taboos surrounding this issue in the society prevents girls and women from articulating their needs and the problems of poor menstrual hygiene management have been ignored or misunderstood. Good menstrual hygiene is crucial for the health, education, and dignity of girls and women. This is an important sanitation issue which has long been in the closet and there was an urgent need to openly discuss these.

Delivering her address on the occasion, Santha Sheela Nair said "Being a woman myself, I found that besides every other need, there was also a huge issue of menstrual hygiene and women needed privacy and facilities for dealing with menstrual hygiene". Bringing the issue out of the closet was essential.

Equipping adolescent girls with adequate information and skills on menstrual hygiene and its management is seen as empowering them with knowledge which enhances their self-esteem and academic performance.

UNICEF developed the guidance booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management which will serve as a self reference and support girls and women in providing basic factual information about menstruation, its hygienic management will also clarify some of the myths and taboos centered on this issue.

A short advocacy film has also been developed that focuses on the importance of menstrual hygiene and low cost sanitary napkin production units.

Sharing her experience and the convenience low cost sanitary napkins has provided her, Mohana, a 8th standard student from Nemelli Village, Kanchipuram District of Tamil Nadu said " Earlier we did not know how to manage and were forced to go back home if our periods started in school. Now, we have to just keep an extra napkin in our school bag and thus are prepared anytime"

Impressed with the low cost sanitary napkin production and the vending machine installed in schools on an experimental basis, Mr. Gautam Buddha Mukherjee, Secretary Tribal Welfare saw its huge relevance in

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tribal society and schools. “I was so impressed by the way in which such interventions helped in building confidence and safeguarding the dignity of young women and adolescent girls”, he said.

With 2008 being the IYS, the Total Sanitation Campaign of the government of India acquires added importance. The focus on Menstrual Hygiene Management is an essential part of promoting hygiene and sanitation amongst adolescent girls and women who constitute approximately 45 per cent of the total female population.

Ms. Lizette Burgers stressed “From the age of around 12 and until she reaches the menopause somewhere in her 40’s, every girl and woman has to deal with it. Overall, she spends approximately 2,100 days menstruating which is equivalent to almost six years of her life. So, there is no question that girls and women need to be equipped with proper information on how to handle this issue best for their health and dignity.”