

Unleashing courage: boys defying taboos to make sanitary pads available amidst the pandemic!

Move over, Akshay Kumar, we now have our own 'Padmen'!



They are Abdul, Aakash, Shoab and Hafiz – 17- 18-year-old boys from informal settlements in Kalwa (Thane district) – who recently carried out distribution of sanitary napkins among adolescent girls in the community.

EHSAS (Empowerment, Health and Sexuality of Adolescents), SNEHA's adolescent and youth intervention, had been conducting group education sessions on 'Reproductive Health' for adolescents in these vulnerable geographies. In these sessions, the processes of menstruation and menstrual hygiene were explained to both boys and girls in scientific terms. Since menstruation and everything associated with it was a taboo subject, initially the sessions had to be conducted in sex segregated groups. During the sessions the boys sniggered uncomfortably while the girls hid behind shamefaced silence. Undeterred, through many conversations with adolescents and their parents as well as through community campaigns, the programme team continued to reiterate the message that menstruation was a normal biological process, not something shameful or abhorrent.

During the current COVID 19 crisis and the subsequent lockdown, families (mostly of daily wage earners) of the adolescent participants of EHSAS, were among those worst hit. **When there was no money even to buy food, buying sanitary pads for the daughters at home was out of the question.** In this situation, SNEHA tied up with the NGO, 'Red Is the New Green' to distribute sanitary pads in the community. Team members collected the pads, and deposited them in a centrally accessible location in the community. However, distributing the pads to different households

The story in brief

As a strategy to lessen the stigma surrounding menstruation, the Kalwa staff requested Abdul, Aakash, Shoab and Hafiz, 17 to 18-year-old boys actively engaged in the volunteering activities of SNEHA, to undertake sanitary pad distribution in the community. To overcome their initial refusal, the staff had to remind the boys of all that they had learnt during sessions on sexual and reproductive health. The staff also had to counter their parents' objections to their sons being involved in such "*shameful activities.*" Finally, when they agreed, they were trained on safety measures to be followed during the distribution.

The boys soon overcame their initial hesitation, convinced that *,there was nothing undignified in what we were doing'*. Each of them distributed 30 packets of sanitary napkins to households already listed out by the staff. When girls would feel shy to accept the packets from them or when scandalized onlookers in the community mocked them, they responded, *,A sanitary pad is like any other thing that you need, like talcum powder and hair oil, what is there to do feel shy or to mock?!*

At the end of the day, with 112 packets of sanitary napkins distributed, the boys were quite proud – they had broken an obsolete societal custom and were ready for a second round of distribution!

spread across the settlements was not possible without local voluntary support.

A group of youth participants, both boys and girls, were already involved as volunteers distributing

“After getting over the initial hesitation, we were convinced that there was nothing undignified in what we were doing,” they said later, talking about their experience. When girls would feel shy to accept these packets from them or when scandalised onlookers in the community mocked them, the boys responded, “A sanitary pad is like any other thing that you need, like talcum powder and hair oil, what is there to feel shy or to mock?!”

dry ration, but for the distribution of sanitary pads, the team deliberately decided to request only boys. The boys refused at first, wanting to be involved in SNEHA’s food distribution efforts, rather than distributing these *“ladkiyon ki cheezein (girlie items).”* Our community organiser, Megha had to remind them of all that they had learnt during the group education sessions, and also had to counter their parents’ objections to their sons being involved in such *“shameful activities.”*

Megha, with her persistence emphasised that *“We want to change the attitude of the society towards menstruation,*

and we need to start with ourselves.”

Finally, four boys came forward – Abdul, Aakash, Shoaib and Hafiz. Aakash used to chaperon his sister when she would come to attend programme activities, which were initially meant only for girls. Gradually he himself got interested in the programme and joined it when EHSAS started enrolling boys from 2018. Shoaib's sister was enrolled in the beginning, but he never allowed her to come for the programme sessions. In order to tackle this, programme team members had started working with him directly and with time, involved him in all the programme activities. Hafiz, on the other hand, was motivated to join the programme by his sister, who was already an active participant. Abdul had always been actively engaged in all the volunteering activities.

After being trained on safety measures to be followed during the distribution, each of these boys distributed around 30 packets of sanitary napkins to households already listed out by the programme team.

At the end of the day, when 112 packets of sanitary napkins had been distributed, our “padmen” were quite proud of themselves, of being brave enough to break an obsolete societal custom, and were willing to undertake a second round of distribution!

This was a sacrilege in a community where sanitary pads remain a commodity that girls buy furtively, bring home stealthily, keep concealed, and after use, dispose of cunningly without letting any male member of the family or the neighbourhood notice!

About the partner

SNEHA is a non-profit organisation that works with women, children and public health and safety systems. The organization strives to improve the health and nutrition of women & children living in the most vulnerable urban informal settlements. The organization works four large public health areas: maternal & new-born health; Child health & nutrition; adolescent health & gender equity; and gender-based violence against women & children. The above case story is a product of SNEHA’s Empowerment Health and Sexuality of Adolescents (EHSAS) project that seeks to address health & wellness of adolescents & youths (aged between 10-21 years). The goals of the project are to enable these target adolescent youths healthy, gender sensitive & responsible citizens and to create an adolescent friendly ecosystem.