

Mapping women hygiene through innovation

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Women's hygiene in India has always been a topic that has raised a lot of controversy and hearsay. Around 70 per cent of all reproductive diseases in India are caused by poor menstrual hygiene and women continue to put their health, livelihood and dignity at risk.

In a country where women have reached the frontiers of space, basic necessities such as access to clean drinking water, toilets, basic education, fundamental knowledge and products for feminine hygiene are still unavailable to women in rural areas.

In this context some entrepreneurs have taken the lead to make an impact. Saathi and USense, two healthcare based startups, are working towards providing better hygienic conditions for women in India.

Saathi- Saathi began in 2015, when its co-founders came together on a mission to create fully eco-friendly, compostable sanitary napkins using locally sourced banana fiber from the state of Gujarat, where Saathi is based. Saathi pads are Biodegradable & Compostable, using plant-based materials for the leak-proof outer layers of the napkin. Saathi pads are made with banana fibre because of its highly absorbent properties, and the environmental and social benefits of its supply chain.

“Our product can be used safely and responsibly by women everywhere because it is sustainable. It is an all natural product that doesn't cause any irritation or rashes or have longterm negative effects on women's health like the commercial chemical filled plastic pads. In that way, it is a healthy option. In addition to that, we are running our #onemillionpads campaign to provide pads to women in rural Jharkhand through our partnership with Ekal Vidyalaya and Arogya Foundation. This is the first step towards being able to provide these to rural women all over India”, shares Tarun Bothra and Kristin Kagetsu, co-founders of Saathi.

“Now the government and other large organizations are understanding the importance of feminine hygiene and taking

measures to improve women's health and hygiene. We believe it will take time but it is definitely improving. It is not just an issue about sanitary pad access and awareness but also about access to toilets as well so women have a safe place to use those products”, Bothra and Kagetsu add.

USense- Sachin Dubey invented USense, a credit card size test designed to detect presence of 4 major Uropathogens (E.coli, S.aureus, Klebsiella and Enterococci) causing 96 per cent cases of Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) in India. The innovative design allows for the detection of these organisms by a simple blue to red color change. The compact dimensions makes USense portable. USense boasts of innovative and unique features of being rapid with detection in only 30-60 minutes, affordable with nanofibers technology, portable and simple to use, making it reachable and usable in every setting and intellectual depth.

“Hygiene is a big word in India. While in some settings women enjoy safe, clean and accessible facilities, those in rural and semi-urban settings crave for a toilet, let alone them being clean and safe. Though the status of women hygiene has been steadily improving, India still continues to be one of the largest open defecating countries in the world. While issues of women menstrual hygiene are grave, bacterial infections due to filthy toilets, poor hand hygiene and open defecation lead to high number of Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) cases. With 1 in 3 women under 24 contracting a UTI, and over 150 million cases globally UTI continues to deeply affect women in India. Poor menstrual hygiene is the breeding ground for bacteria and can lead to UTI's. Due to unavailability of clean toilets on highways, many females either do not drink water or tend to hold urine in their bladder for increased duration severely increasing the risk of catching a Urinary Tract Infection”, points out Sachin Dubey, CEO and Cofounder, USense.

He adds, “while our technology does not build clean toilets or affordable sanitary pads, it does much more to alleviate the pain a women encounters when she is gripped by UTI. USense in its current version will aid doctors, clinicians and ANM's to ascertain UTI in females at the clinic or PHC and thus relieve them of the associated pain quickly. Often many females cannot go to work and lose daily wages further worsening their financial condition. USense in its later version would help females keep track of their wellness, allowing them to check regularly for UTI. This in turn is an indicator of good hygiene. Being affordable, rapid and easily usable in normal settings USense would mark the beginning of a time where Indian women take charge of their wellness.”

Recently, both Saathi and USense, along with few other startups, have been selected as finalists for the Design: Impact Awards ([DIA](#)) by Titan, in collaboration with Tata Trusts. DIA is a program that identifies, celebrates and supports innovative product designs that cause social change. Their aim is to recognize, support and promote visionary and transformative products and help them impact as many lives as possible.

DIA walks the journey with participants through an engagement-based program structure. The selected projects shall be supported with mentorship, advocacy, grants up to Rs 65 lakh per project and opportunities for seed funding up to an equal amount to ensure upscaling of the designs which eventually results in higher social impact. The final Awards function is to take place in Mumbai next month.