# Recognising relief for reproductive rights

KANNALMOZHI KABILAN

Study after study points to the fact that women are the worst hit during any disaster, and their needs are the least met; especially women from marginalised communities. We've seen this time and again in our midst, every time a storm hits or floods ravage entire cities. While NGOs and women in relief work have been working to correct this imbalance, it has been no different during the lockdown. While everyone has been quick to recognise the shortage of cash, food and medical supplies in the deprived sections of society, that the women and girls are left without access to clean toilets and sanitary napkins is unfortunately not common knowledge, says Renuka of Centre for Women's Development and Research (CWDR). Being an organisation that works with young girls on Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), Renuka and team are working to address this concern through their 'Periods Don't Stop For Pandemic' initiative.

"At a time when we talk about health and hygiene, young girls in slums — where the family doesn't even have money for food — are made to use a folded-up cotton sari as napkins. Cotton 'pads' are good; but, in slums, they don't have space to hygienically clean it and reuse it. Besides, many slums do not have toilets. So what the girls do is put in the first 'pad' early in the morning and keep it till it gets dark enough for them to change. And public toilets don't have a water facility and are never clean. So such a basic right is denied to them," explains Renuka.

Aware of such dismal conditions, CWDR — in association with Snehidhi and their collective network of NGOs



Through this initiative, sanitary napkins are distributed in four districts of TN

across the districts of Chennai, Tiruvallur, Kanchipuram and Chengalpet — distributed free sanitary napkins to around 15,000 students. With the second wave bringing in yet another lockdown, they have launched this drive again. "In these times, people hesitate to give away money. While everyone is ready to give food (to those in need), no one is willing to consider this issue. If we ask for people to get us napkins, even women think "*Iyyo, enna asingama pad vaangi kuduka solranga*". That perspective is still there," she says, adding that even diverting the funds they receive for this cause was met with the same inhibitions.

But, with everything moving to the virtual space, they figured it would be asking for a lot less to get people to use e-commerce to deliver the sanitary napkin donations to their office. All you have to do is order as many as you can or want and send it to their address; as and when the donations pile up, they will be distributed to the slum-dwelling adolescent girls in the four districts. This would go to serve many children in real need, she says. "There's one girl who's a single mother, earns a salary of ₹3,000. With this, she has to care for her two daughters. Among the three of them, they buy just six sanitary napkins. Where is the money for more?" narrates Renuka.

"This is a basic right. When an adolescent girl comes of age, we have to create a protective and safe space for her. Parents have to do it; when they cannot, the government should be able to provide it," she declares, hoping we will be able to come together to do our part.

*For details, contact: 9962011129 or cwdrindia@gmail.com*

### How you can help

Send sanitary napkins (preferably not tampons or menstrual cups or reusable pads, given the low level of awareness or comfort with these alternatives) to:

**CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH**

23, Jayaram Street, Vasanth Apartments, D Block 1st floor, Kuppam Beach Road, Thiruvanmiyur, Chennai - 600041



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@vbalkrish

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