MedicalXpress

US consumer giant seeks to smash India menstruation taboos

October 3 2014, by Abhaya Srivastava

The latest commercial for Procter & Gamble's top-selling brand of sanitary pads in India ticks all the usual boxes—a young woman jogs happily in pristine white trousers, before effortlessly winning a tennis tournament.

But unlike most adverts of its ilk, this 30-second clip seeks to dispel the myths surrounding women's periods in a country where deep-rooted social taboos around menstruation still persist.

It ends with the catchphrase "touch the pickle", a reference to the widely held belief that a jar of pickle touched by a menstruating woman will spoil—and an exhortation to young Indian women to reject such superstitions.

Procter & Gamble, the US consumer goods giant behind some of the world's biggest brands, said it was astonished to learn that such "primitive practices" remained prevalent in modern-day India.

A survey by the company and market researcher IPSOS showed that 59 percent of urban women still follow their grandmothers' advice not to touch the earthenware jar of pickles found in kitchens across India.

"Not touching a jar of pickle because your body is undergoing a natural biological process is nothing but laughable," a company spokeswoman told AFP.

The practice stems from the belief—still widely held in India—that menstruating women are "impure". In rural pockets, many are still made to sleep separately and eat from plates set aside especially for them during their periods.

Other taboos include entering temples and watering plants like basil that are considered holy.

Aditi Gupta, who started a website called menstrupedia.com two years ago to provide young people with information, said such beliefs were pervasive throughout India.

"The myths get passed on from one generation to another without any questioning," she told AFP.

"It's got nothing to do with how educated people are. There is an inherent shame which inhibits people from even talking about the taboos."

Encouraged by the response to the website, Gupta has launched a comic book to help people "overcome their own shame" and discuss menstruation openly.

Gupta said she was motivated by her own experiences of growing up and the challenges she faced as a teen.

"Although I belonged to a very well-to-do family, we had to use discarded cloth during periods, which we had to wash and reuse," she said.

"It was not about affordability. It was because of the shame associated with buying sanitary napkins."

Dispelling shame

A. Muruganantham has made it his mission to dispel the shame surrounding menstruation in India.

A school dropout from a poor family in southern India, he invented a simple machine to make cheap sanitary pads—revolutionising menstrual health for rural women in the process.

Muruganantham was inspired by the realisation that lack of access to affordable sanitary products meant his wife had to use dirty rags instead.

He went to great lengths to test his invention, creating a fake uterus from a football bladder by punching a couple of holes in it and filling it with goat's blood.

In his course of his research, he came across some villages where menstruating women were confined in a small room with no lights.

"While many of these restrictions are not followed now, the basic idea of a woman being impure is still deeply ingrained in the minds of people," he told AFP.

"Some 10-15 women are cramped together in a small room. Food is thrown at them from the door and they are forced to eat like dogs from one plate."

Both Gupta and Muruganantham believe the myths can only be shattered through better communication and awareness.

"It sends shivers down the spine to think that some things have not changed in India despite the progress we have made otherwise," said Muruganantham.

"We have to bring the napkin out of the closet. We have to encourage women to speak out loud 'yes I am having my periods, so what'?"

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Citation: US consumer giant seeks to smash India menstruation taboos (2014, October 3) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-consumer-giant-india-menstruation-taboos.html

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