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### **Rural Village Water Resources Management Project, Phase III**

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## Sanitary Pads in Action – Menstrual Hygiene Management Training, Reusable Pad Making and Use

Pamela White and Manju Bhatta

### Introduction

The Rural Village Water Resources Management Project (RVWRMP) operates with the Rural Municipalities of Sudurpaschim and Karnali Provinces (with funding from the Governments of Finland and Nepal, the European Union, local government and users). It has been promoting water supply, sanitation and hygiene activities for many years, among other activities. This includes menstrual hygiene management (MHM) activities at school and community level, and support for Dignified Menstruation Management (DMM) under the auspices of the local governments.

Women and girls face considerable barriers due to menstrual taboos in the project working area. While these practices are applied in many places in Nepal (such as preventing menstruating women from entering the kitchen or attending temple), the harshest forms of the so-called *chhaupadi* practices are applied in the project area. Religious and cultural practice holds that menstruating women are unclean, and therefore should not touch taps or use toilets (as both involve touching water, and water is God). They traditionally couldn't stay in the house but had to sleep in *chhaupadi* huts, outside of the home, during their menstruation, couldn't touch other persons or work in the kitchen, and shouldn't eat milk or curd (for fear of making their cow or family members sick). These practices also interfere with women and girls working outside the home or attending school during their menstrual period. Most women lack knowledge of how to safely manage their menstruation, and have no access to sanitary pads. While these discriminatory practices are gradually reducing, MHM training and also the development of DMM policies with the RMs have been important activities for the project, as part of a human rights-based approach.

The project decided to conduct a survey of participants from MHM and reusable sanitary pad production workshops, and sanitation supply chain workshops. The aim was to establish whether commercial or reusable pads are used widely, who is producing them (and in what quantity) and whether any problems have emerged. In this way, the project and RM could know whether support for pad production is a viable option, and if so, to work to strengthen the private sector (local tailors) to produce more pads in the future in a sustainable manner.

### Literature and Background

Studies have demonstrated the benefits of access to sanitary materials regarding the ease of movement, school attendance and confidence among girls and women. For instance, the WASH in Schools Virtual Conference in 2012, including a session on Nepal, studied the challenges students and female teachers face in achieving good MHM at school. Adhikari and Maharjan (2017) studied menstruation management in schools in Nepal and found that menstruation is a hindrance for schoolgirls. They proposed provision of sanitary pads in schools for emergency use during periods, in order to prevent girls from feeling shame or staying away from school. However, it is noted that Oster and Thornton's study in Nepal (2011) argued that this impact was not as strong as others had reported.

Garikipati and Boudot, 2017, studied sanitary practices in urban slums in India. They found a spread of use of traditional cloths, reusable and commercial pads, as in our project area in Nepal. They identified three core issues - price, choice and disposability. While many women liked to use sanitary pads for reasons of comfort, the cost of commercial pads was a large deterrent. Disposability was a serious issue, with increasing commercial pad use leading to a significant problem of solid waste. Many women were choosing reusable pads over commercial pads or traditional cloths. They concluded that the only solution to these problems was for the government to support increased use of reusable pads.

Tudu (2020) described the increasing use of commercial disposable sanitary pads have a devastating effect on the environment. The article quoted the significant quantity of used pads and other sanitary materials discarded by women over their lifetimes, which end up in sewage, landfills, fields and water bodies, causing environmental pollution. These non-biodegradable pads contain chemicals, toxins, and plastics, which decompose very slowly remain in soil up for a long time.

Since 2017, RVWRMP III has facilitated Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) workshops in rural municipalities (RMs) of Sudurpaschim and Karnali Provinces. These have included training directly to community members and specific interest groups such as school groups, Training of Trainers, Training of Tailors, and MHM Supply Chain Training. RVWRMP staff have also been invited to train Health post staff and NGOs.

These workshops have involved information sharing regarding anatomy, menstruation, menstrual taboos and methods for managing menstrual flow and maintaining good hygiene. One of the methods demonstrated is a reusable cloth sanitary pad.

Traditionally women in the RMs have used old cloths and saris to absorb menstrual blood. This is uncomfortable, restricts movement of the woman, as well as not being very discrete, nor hygienic. In recent years, commercial disposable sanitary pads have become available for purchase in larger centres. They are gradually spreading to the mid hills and mountains, and have only very recently become available in the project areas. They have the advantage of being light and absorbent. However, they are quite expensive and difficult to obtain in remote areas, and they carry a large risk of environmental pollution. There is usually no established rubbish collection or landfill in rural areas, therefore the only options for disposal are burning, burial or illegal disposal. If used pads end up in roadsides or rivers, this is likely to lead to a backlash against women.

An option supported by RVWRMP is locally sewn, reusable sanitary pads. They are probably not as absorbent as commercial disposable pads, but are affordable and have less pollution risk. They are hand washable and reusable, yet not bulky. There are commercial versions available in some countries, of high quality<sup>1</sup>. However, these are generally not available in the hills (GIZ is exploring production in the Terai, and some NGOs are producing at a small scale). For this reason, RVWRMP III has included reusable pad making in the MHM workshops with community members and schools, using available materials. Other options such as menstrual cups and tampons are discussed and demonstrated in workshops, but to date have not proved culturally acceptable for most potential users in the project area.

Until December 2020, the workshops have been held 87 times (in 22 Rural Municipalities - Ramaroshan, Turmakhand, Thalara, Talkot, Chhabispathivera, Sayal, Bogtan Fudsil, Gaumul, Swamikartik, Ajaymeru, Aalital, Chure, Pancheswor, Dilasaini, Marma, Naugad, Apihimal, Bhairabi, Naumule, Bhagwatimai, Kharpunath). The participants include teachers, health workers, women's group members, activists, tailors, other shopkeepers, and female employees of the RM (see a photo to the right with participants in a training, Figure 1). Around 860 women and school girls have participated in the MHM workshops, and 144 tailors and shopkeepers have been trained in producing reusable sanitary pads and the supply chain for sanitary products (see Table 1 below with the breakdown of participants by November 2020).



Figure 1. Participants in a Sanitary Pad Making Training in Bhairabi RM

Table 1. MHM Awareness-raising workshops and Sanitary Pad Making trainings

S.N	Activities	Target groups	No of events	Participants/Beneficiary (Population)							Output
				Dalit Female	Dalit Male	Janajati Female	Janajati Male	Other Female	Other Male	Total	
1	MHM awareness campaigning	Community people and students	55	1249	695	1621	810	4789	3421	12585	Awareness raising on MHM at community and school level
2	MHM (along with sanitary pad making) training/ workshop/ interaction	Women, school girls, FCHVs/health sectors, mother groups, tailors, elected representatives of	27	121	29	38	4	493	173	858	Awareness raising on MHM at community and school level and women/girls access increased to the menstrual hygiene management

<sup>1</sup> most famously by the Indian 'Pad Man' - <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26260978>

		local levels, child clubs, adolescent groups etc.									
3	MHM supply chain training	Tailors and local shop keepers	5	9	1	9	1	48	76	144	Availability of sanitary pad at local level ensured. Trained people taught other people to make reusable sanitary pad.

The material used is easily available cotton material. This is important for sustainability, to ensure that the cloth is available in the future when the project is no longer there, however it may have some limitations for absorption. (Some models being trialled elsewhere in Nepal include imported filler, or banana fibre). Several models of pads have been used, and participants are encouraged to modify the designs to suit. The standard pad is prepared with 'wings', a separate pad to insert, and a press-stud or button, to wrap around the gusset of underpants. In order to make the pads suitable for women who don't use underpants (the majority of older women in the hill villages), a longer version with long strings attached to tie to a waistband has been also produced.

The MHM training for health workers, community members and schools aims to:

- Give the participants the skills to facilitate the dignified menstruation activities.
- Support participants to understand proper menstrual hygiene management, including basic anatomy, natural processes, and menopause
- to understand the range of sanitary materials available (rags, reusable pads, commercial pads, tampons and menstrual cups), their use and proper disposal.
- to develop skills to make reusable sanitary cloths pads at home, and their appropriate use and care

Depending on the level of the participants, they may also be given the competencies to facilitate on MHM, DMM and reusable sanitary cloth pad making processes to other community girls and women.



*Figure 2. Participants in an MHM Workshop, Marma RM*

The MHM supply chain training falls within the total sanitation training. The training aims to:

- Permit the participants to understand the Project's indicators, its activities and products related to the sanitation and hygiene.
- Analyse the supply and demand flow analysis of sanitation and hygiene products.
- Analyse the possibility of making sanitation, hygiene and MHM materials accessible to the remote households.

Some other organisations have also provided training, hence we asked the survey respondents to identify who they had received training from.

### **Example from a Sanitation Supply Chain Workshop**

A Sanitation Supply Chain workshop was held in Chure RM in January 2020. There were 18 participants in the workshop, comprising of a cooperative manager, Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHV), shopkeepers, teachers, Social and Health Promoters, a Livelihood Resource person, Water Resources Technicians and two Dignified Menstruation Facilitators. As well as initial MHM training, the group carried out brainstorming on the situation analysis, especially to understand the market situation and demand analysis, and formulation of strategy. A practical session was conducted on reusable cloth pad making.

The entrepreneurs recognised that there was insufficient knowledge about menstrual hygiene options and most women were still using old cloths during menstruation. They explored ways to raise awareness and make their materials available in the community, using publicity, identifying their service area, and promotion of message about the use of products such as sanitary pads. They suggested that use of local indigenous techniques for washing cloths (i.e. using organic materials) should also be considered. The Industrial Commerce union committed to fair pricing of sanitation materials.

Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) could be potential key institutions to promote the supply chain of these materials, if they have the interest to start their business on sanitation and hygiene materials. These volunteers are accessible, and girls and women feel comfortable to communicate with them about menstruation issues. They can instruct how to use these materials.

It was agreed that support was needed to continue awareness-raising on total sanitation, hygiene, MHM and pad making events in the school and community.

### *Box 1. Sanitation Supply Chain Workshop*

## **Survey Methodology**

The survey was undertaken between August and October 2020. Survey questions were developed and then transferred to Kobo Toolbox. Social and Health Promoters carried out the survey (18 SHPs), visiting households in their rural municipality (RM). In total, 693 interviews were carried out (673 female and 20 male respondents). The respondents included women and girls residing in the RM, tailors, shop keepers, and persons in the supply chain for sanitary materials (the latter two categories had not all attended training). There was also a group who were using reusable pads (whether or not they had attended the training), and therefore had more knowledge about them, and could potentially serve as resource persons.

The survey took place in 13 RMs and seven districts. These were Apihimal, Naugad, Marma (Darchula); Aalital, Ajaymeru (Dadeldhura); Chhabis Pathibhera, Talkot (Bajhang); Gaumul (Bajura); Ramaroshan (Achham); Bogtan Fudsil (Doti); Naumule, Bhairabi, Bhagwatimai (Dailekh).

COVID restrictions slowed house to house visits at first. Originally it was planned to have further follow-up interviews with respondents, however, due to COVID-19, this was not feasible.

Findings from some workshops held on MHM, DMM and Sanitation Supply Chain are incorporated, as well as some field visit findings.

## **Findings**

In total, 640 respondents had participated in training on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and sanitary pad making (some attending training with more than one provider). The majority had received training via RVWRMP (607) (Figure 3). Of those, the majority were women or schoolgirls who participated in trainings in pad making in pad making training in school, ward level, community and mother groups (88%); or were persons who had received training of trainers, and would be facilitating other groups.



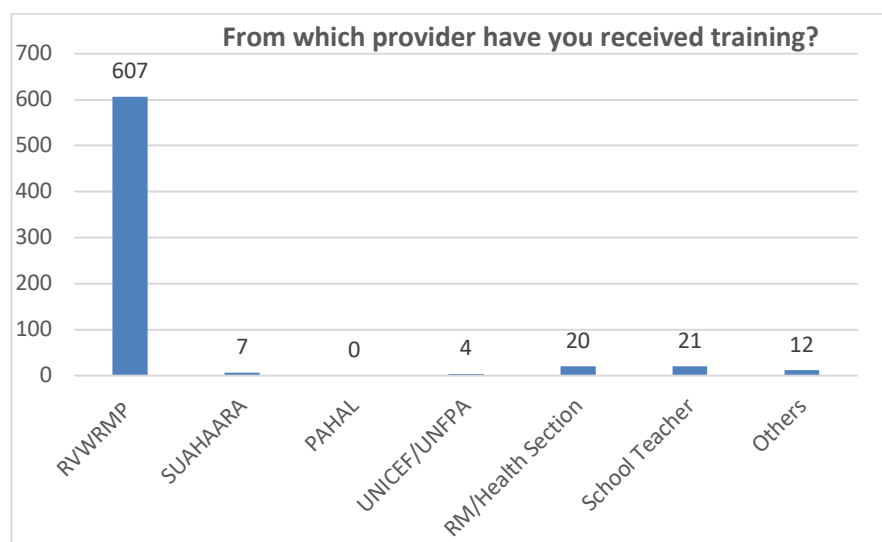


Figure 3. Who provided training to the respondents?

As can be seen from the responses below (Figure 4), women and girls considered the most important element of the training to be the different methods to sew reusable sanitary pads, and the second most important element was the ways to dispose safely of commercial pads. Interestingly, for tailors, who already had some ideas regarding how to sew sanitary pads, the most important aspects were the chance to discuss menstrual taboos and gain more information on normal menstruation.

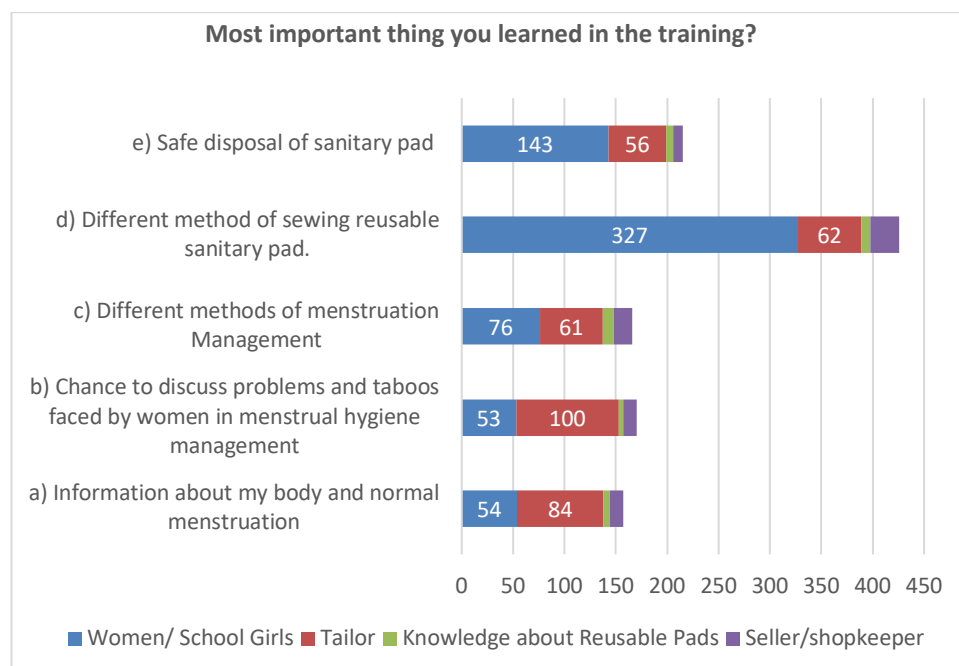


Figure 4. Key learnings

When asked what issues they needed more information about, the chance to learn and discuss problems and taboos faced by women in menstrual hygiene management was highlighted by most respondents.

Prior to participating in the training, most respondents used predominantly old saris or rags as sanitary materials. There was a noticeable difference between before and after situations. Prior to the training, 43.4% of respondents said that they used old rags during their menstruation, while this had fallen to 17.4% afterwards. The number of reusable sanitary pad users went from 29.5% prior to the training (in fact, surprisingly high), to 68.4% after the training.

The respondents were asked about their feelings once they started to use pads (whether commercial/ disposable or reusable). The main issues expressed by all groups of respondents were that they could maintain their hygiene much more easily; and that they could travel and attend school or work without any hesitation or hindrance.

Of those who were using pads (either commercial or reusable), 83% of the women and girls' group, and 100% of the other group respondents said that they didn't experience any difficulties.

The knowledge gained in the training was being put to good use. When asked if the respondent had sewed any reusable pads after the workshop, the answer was overwhelmingly affirmative (Figure 5).

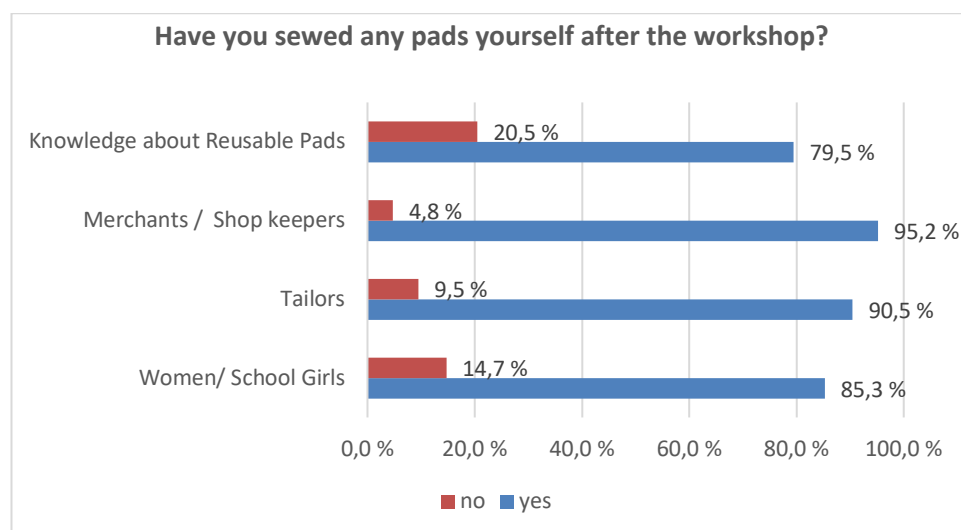


Figure 5. Have your sewed any pads yourself after the workshop?

More than half of the participants knew of others who were using reusable pads, even if they hadn't participated in the training event themselves. In that case, around 55% had purchased or been given them by others, while 45% made them themselves. Overall, 41% of the participants had also purchased reusable pads themselves since the training.

92.5% of respondents reported using reusable pads. Of these, 98% reported that they were comfortable to use and 96% said that they could trust that the pads didn't leak. This is significant, given that the pads are made to a fairly simple design, from easily available materials.

However overall, 27% of respondents did report problems with the design – with a much higher rate of problems reported by the tailors, shopkeepers and more knowledgeable respondents. Many other householders did not persevere with making pads as they were busy at home, and were already in the habit of using old cloths. Some said that they felt they lacked the skills to make the pads, even after participating in the training as they had forgotten the design. Seemingly, a refresher course by community facilitators would be useful.

A tendency of dependency also emerged – with some women saying that they were only interested to receive a free pad, while the approach of the project was to teach women to develop the skills for themselves. According to some tailors there was also a problem that women could see the commercial pads available for 45-80 NPR/packet, and therefore they considered a cost of perhaps 80-85 NPR/reusable pad to be excessive. However, this is obviously a false economy as the fabric pad is reusable and will last many more times than a packet of commercial pads.

The issue mentioned by some respondents of the lesser absorptive capacity of reusable pads, is definitely problematic and further work is needed to identify more absorbent cloth that is easily available. Some women felt embarrassed about needing to wash the reusable pad cover and cloth pads and dry them in the sun, though most found this acceptable. Commercial pad users are increasing in some locations. However, it is clear that the situation varies between municipalities. In some, such as the remote RM of Api Hima (Box 2 below), the reusable pads have been popular among adult women, though younger students prefer commercial pads.

**Rajmati Thekare** (photo to the right) is one of the tailors of the Api Himal RM. She operates from a shop in the RM headquarters selling cosmetic goods and commercial pads, as well as reusable pads made in her tailoring centre. Before the training, she had a tailoring shop only, and sewed ladies' clothes items. After attending the MHM training and developing pad-making skills, she started sewing cloth reusable sanitary pads in her shop and selling them in the local market. She also decided to stock commercial pads for sale, because the higher secondary school is located near the shop. The school has installed a sanitary pad vending machine, and the demand for commercial pads has been increasing. Rajmati reports that female students mainly want to purchase non-reusable (commercial) pads, but other community women want to buy the cloth reusable pads. She sells the reusable pads for NPR 80-85 each.



These days menstrual hygiene materials are easily available in the local market. One tailor is selling in the local market so far, while other tailors have produced pads for their own use or for limited sales. The tailor makes different styles of reusable pads and sells them to girls and women. School girls and some other organisations have demanded that reusable pads are marketed to other communities as well, as there is an increasing demand for MHM materials in the local area.

### *Box 2. The situation in ApiHimal RM*

Of particular interest were the findings regarding the use of commercial (disposable) pads, and the problems they are causing for environmental sanitation. Overall, 74% of respondents had used a commercial pad. The most common sources were - 65% had bought them in the local market and 16.5% in the district headquarters. 6% had received them from a project.

In the scheme areas, staff find that women want to use the cloth pads because they have problems with safe disposal of the commercial pads. Burying the commercial pads in the typical disposal pit is not a good solution as they don't decompose easily. Some women collect the soiled pads and at the end of their menstrual period they burn them in a fire in a safe place, though some are putting them in the pit. On the other hand, most women reported that the reusable pads are easy to wash and dry under the sun, and they are environmentally friendly.

Disturbingly overall 10.4% of the respondents to the survey admitted to having disposed of the soiled commercial pad in the toilet or in a crack in the toilet wall. Another 3.8% said that they had disposed of the pad in the environment (riverside or in the jungle). (Figure 6). Overall, 65% of respondents thought that the way that other persons disposed of soiled pads was problematic. The main issues were the visually unpleasant sight of the pads, though also some complained of the smell of them burning). Given that the women could recognise the problems associated with inappropriate disposal, it is presumed that the number who inappropriately disposed of their own soiled pads could be even greater in reality than these answers demonstrate.



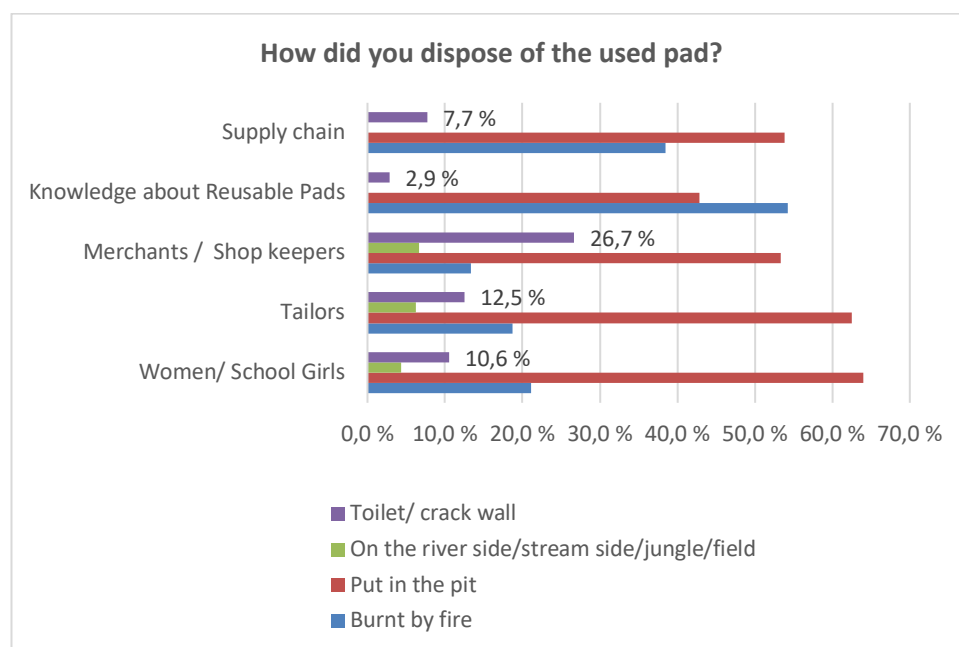


Figure 6. Disposal of soiled commercial pads

When interviewing the tailors who had participated in training, 79% said that there was interest among the women in the community to purchase reusable pads (although 27% of those, said that while women were interested, most didn't actually purchase them). 81% were producing the 'short' style of reusable pad, while 19% were producing the 'long' style (for older women not using underpants). The majority of the tailors began to produce the reusable pads as a result of receiving the training from RVWRMP (59%), while 38% began as a response to the demands of buyers. More than two thirds were interested to expand their business in this area.

The surveyed tailors reported that they were selling between six to 100 pads per month (for instance, 100 pads sold with a special order from a school).

### Discussion and conclusions

In general, there have been very positive responses to the trainings delivered on Menstruation Hygiene Management and Sanitation Supply Chain Management. Women and girls are enthusiastic to learn about options for MHM, as well as how to sew reusable cotton pads. Many reported sewing other pads after the training.

Increased use of both commercial and reusable pads has been reported, making the lives of rural women easier and giving them more confidence to travel or attend work or school.

Tailors are generally satisfied and have incorporated reusable sanitary pad making into their repertoires, as well as developing different styles of pad.

Some problems remain. These include the absorptive capacity of standard cotton used in reusable pads, and how to improve the designs and marketing. There is a dilemma as to whether to rely on imported materials, with potentially better absorption, but unreliable access and potentially higher price. This is especially important given that the price point of reusable pads can be the deciding factor as to whether women purchase these or commercial pads.

Even more importantly there is a need to develop appropriate means of disposal or destruction of soiled commercial pads. As noted by Tudu (2020), there is a significant problem with increasing environmental waste from discarded sanitary pads. She is studying India, but in Nepal there is a similar problem, including in the studied communities. At present the increasing use but inappropriate disposal of pads, risks environmental contamination; but even more significantly, the risk of a backlash among community members.

RVWRMP has worked with municipalities and secondary schools to purchase and install sanitary pad dispensing machines, supplying commercial but potentially also reusable pads. Following a pilot process<sup>22</sup> with a very positive response, 26 schools have installed the machines and 31 are waiting to install them. In combination with awareness-raising in the school, this has had a very positive impact on school attendance by girls during their menstruation, as well as decreased feeling of shame and increased confidence. However, as they mainly dispense

<sup>22</sup> Blog post May 2020, RVWRMP website - [Effectiveness of User-Friendly Toilets and Pad Vending Machines for Dignified Menstruation \(rvwrmp.org.np\)](https://rvwrmp.org.np/effectiveness-of-user-friendly-toilets-and-pad-vending-machines-for-dignified-menstruation)

commercial pads, it is vital that there are functional disposal methods at the school – for instance incinerators or a system of burning the use pads.

RVWRMP has worked with the RMs to develop Dignified Menstruation Management (DMM) strategies, incorporating training and awareness raising on sanitary pad production, use and disposal of soiled pads. The hope is that this will be a means to achieve sustainability. The roll-out of the strategies has been delayed somewhat due to the COVID-19 pandemic inhibiting community meetings.

Respondents were asked about their opinions regarding the ideas for future training and awareness raising on menstrual hygiene management and the use of sanitary pads (Figure 7). All groups of respondents considered it important that the MHM awareness-raising activities were continued by the RM. This should include refresher training events, counselling by women of their acquaintances, and discussions in meetings of the mothers' groups and school girls. If pads are available for purchase in the local market, this will encourage use. Finally, FM radios could be used to encourage healthy attitudes towards MHM.

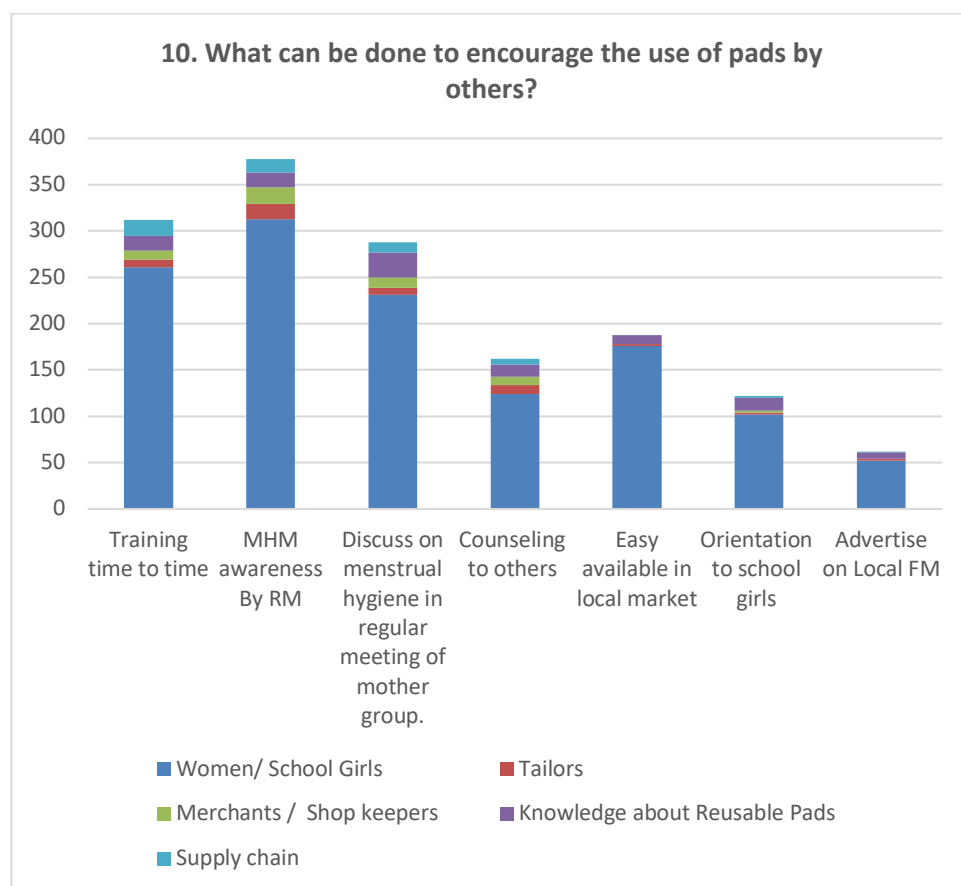


Figure 7. How to encourage the use of sanitary pads?

The Dignified Menstruation Management Strategies developed by the RMs will be rolled out during 2021. Work will continue on awareness-raising and training, with the aim of improving the lives of women and girls in remote communities.

#### Names of interviewers (SHPs)

1. Damanti Rokaya- Apihimal RM, Darchula
2. Gyanendra Dhami - Naugad RM, Darchula
3. Nandgi Thagunna, Darchula
4. Roshani Rawal- Aalital RM, Dadeldhura
5. Tek Raj Pathak – Ajaymeru RM, Dadeldhura
6. Basanti Bhandari – Chhabispathivera RM, Bajhang
7. Ammara Joshi - Talkot RM, Bajhang
8. Jairaj Jaishi - Gaumul RM, Bajura
9. Urmila Khanal, Kalusingh BK- Ramaroshan RM, Achham
10. Kalawati Chimala, Pabitra Tadi- Bogtan Fudsil RM, Doti

11. Devi Sapkota- Naumule RM, Dailekh
12. Laxmiwan Sanyashi- Bhairabi RM, Dailekh
13. Dipendra Kumar Thapa- Bhagwatimai RM, Dailekh.

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