

An awkward encounter:

A young girl called Roopa walks into a pharmacy. Tightly clinging to the ends of her dupatta with sweaty palms, she feels the other male customers' gaze on her.

She briefly points to a pack of sanitary napkins on display. 'That one.' Keeping her eyes below neck level, she impatiently waits as the packet is wrapped in a brown paper bag and then wrapped again in a second white bag.

Roopa hands the man behind the counter the exact change and quickly leaves the store.

The stigma around female reproductive health and its implications:

A common scenario among pad users in Bangladesh is that they often send their husbands/partners to buy pads for them. A study found that only 6% of total pad users are self-reliant. Often, these encounters are awkward for women, even more so for teenage girls: the cultural stigma around periods makes it difficult for girls to broach the subject, as the vast majority of pharmacy shopkeepers are male.

From an early age, girls learn to speak of periods in hushed tones and to never discuss it with male members of the family. Even when women speak amongst themselves, often they will use phrases like 'mashik', 'shorir kharap', or 'namaz nai' to avoid using the word itself. In fact, only [53% of women are even aware of periods before their first time menstruating](#) according to a national hygiene survey in 2018.

The extremely natural phenomenon of menstruation enables the continuation of the human race; however, we are taught that it is impure and something to be ashamed of.

Since we are unable to utter the word 'menstruation', it becomes an even bigger challenge to discuss problems related to menstruation and reproductive health. A study by Square Toiletries Limited found that 97% of women in the country suffer from vaginitis due to poor menstrual hygiene. There is a big gap in knowledge and many misconceptions surrounding female reproductive health because of the lack of open dialogue.

EveWell: a woman-owned healthcare center for women

Women mostly rely on their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers for information related to reproductive health. And when they are inclined to seek professional help, they will visit

a gynecologist. However, women can put this off for various reasons. Often, healthcare facilities are expensive, inaccessible, or too far away.

But EveWell recognizes a major opportunity here: *female health entrepreneurs*.

Pharmacy shopkeepers play a vital and trusted role in the community. Many people turn to pharmacy shopkeepers for medical advice, as they are often more accessible than doctors in distant hospitals.

However, women may feel uncomfortable discussing their health issues with male pharmacy owners. Female health entrepreneurs can offer a safe environment for women to talk about their concerns openly.

EveWell trains women entrepreneurs and helps them establish affordable urgent healthcare centers locally. In doing so, they not only serve underserved communities but also empower female health entrepreneurs to improve their lives and that of their communities.

EveWell's Program Components:

- Access to primary care and specialist doctors, both on-site and through telemedicine.
- High-quality diagnostic tests provided by reputable diagnostic centers.
- Safe and genuine medications sourced from trusted pharmaceutical companies.
- Use of electronic health records to manage patients' medical histories.
- Home delivery of medicine and sample collection from home.

Benefits of female health entrepreneurs:

1. Women naturally exhibit higher levels of empathy. A study by Varun Warriar and colleagues at the UofCambridge indicates that women are generally more empathetic than men. Additionally, as a woman, personal experiences with reproductive health issues can create more relatability, foster trust between the health entrepreneur and patient, and enable personalized advice. This empathetic approach helps build strong, trustworthy relationships within the community, in turn facilitating conversation, education, and awareness about health matters.
2. A woman-owned pharmacy is likely to stock a broader selection of menstrual

hygiene products and healthcare items specifically designed for women's needs, improving access to quality options in areas where such products may be scarce or overlooked.

3. Female health entrepreneurs play a crucial role in educating communities about women's reproductive health issues, including menstrual hygiene, contraception, and maternal health, which helps dispel myths and misinformation. In Bangladesh, over 89% of women cannot afford disposable sanitary pads, leading many, especially female garment workers, to use fabric rags, resulting in infections and lost workdays.

Pharmacy entrepreneurs, being the most accessible, can provide valuable information about menstrual products, including their proper use and safety. They can guide women in making informed, cost-effective choices, including alternatives like reusable menstrual cups and discs, which offer long-term savings. Additionally, female pharmacy owners can raise awareness about the risks of using reusable cloths and promote the benefits of disposable sanitary products and reusable menstrual cups.

4. Female health entrepreneurs can educate women about common health issues that disproportionately affect them, such as urinary tract infections (UTIs), as well as raise awareness about STDs like HIV and preventative measures.
5. With adequate training, female health entrepreneurs can provide primary check-ups and screenings for conditions that women are at risk of such as breast cancer and cervical cancer.
6. Pharmacy entrepreneurs play a crucial role in building trust within communities, which is essential for reducing vaccine hesitancy. Female health entrepreneurs in rural areas can help improve vaccination rates.
7. Young, unmarried, sexually active girls may hesitate to buy emergency contraception, birth control, or condoms due to fear of stigma, especially in small communities where male pharmacy entrepreneurs might recognize them. A trained female pharmacy entrepreneur can create a safe space for these conversations, promoting safe sex practices and potentially reducing teenage pregnancies.
8. Pharmacies can serve as a confidential space for discussing sensitive topics like

domestic abuse, where a properly trained female health entrepreneur can offer counseling and connect victims with helpful resources.

9. Finally, female-owned pharmacies play a crucial role in empowering women and fostering economic growth. When women participate in the workforce, it leads to positive outcomes. They gain financial independence and access to training and education, which enhances their mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being. This sense of belonging allows them to feel they are making valuable contributions to their communities.

This impact extends beyond individual empowerment; these women will also share their knowledge and raise awareness about health issues among their families, including mothers, aunts, daughters, and eventually fathers and brothers. This can create significant shifts in awareness regarding women's health within the community and the nation.

Furthermore, EveWell has two models.

In the first model, EveWell will train the female health entrepreneurs and rent a pharmacy shop for them.

In more remote areas, EveWell will adopt the second model: they will set up a pharmacy close to the entrepreneur's house. This will enable them to find a balance between their entrepreneurial and domestic responsibilities since in rural areas it might be difficult for women to work far away from their homes.

Overall, EveWell's female-owned urgent healthcare centers facilitate important discussions about women's health, reproductive rights, and issues of abuse. The women who run these urgent healthcare centers not only achieve financial independence but also positively influence their communities through education and awareness efforts.

With this program, EveWell aims to widen the doors for community conversation regarding female health.

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