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Prasanna S,

Chairman of Institute of Legal Education

No. 08, Arul Nagar, Seera Thoppu,

Maudhanda Kurichi, Srirangam,

Tiruchirappalli – 620102

Phone : +91 94896 71437 – info@iledu.in / Chairman@iledu.in



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MENSTRUAL HYGIENE: A VITAL STEP TOWARDS GIRL CHILD EMPOWERMENT!

AUTHOR – ADV. SIDDHI GOKULDAS NAIK, ADVOCATE/ ASST.PROF IN LAW AT V.M.SALGAONCAR COLLEGE OF LAW

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INTRODUCTION



“Menstruation is the only blood that is not born from violence, yet it is the one that disgusts us the most!”

-Maia Schwartz

Adolescence is the phase of transformation from puberty to adulthood. Menstruation is a naturally occurring phenomenon in a woman's reproductive life that marks the beginning of her sexual years. Also termed as Menses, Menstrual Cycle, or Period, it is the monthly discharge of blood from the vagina of a woman. Despite being a significant event in a woman's life, it continues to remain a monthly challenge for millions of young girls around the globe including India, thereby having a drastic impact on their health, education, and daily life. To understand the whole scenario, we need to first know the basic aspects concerning Menstruation.

WHY DO WOMEN BLEED EVERY MONTH?

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon that is regarded as a physiological and psychological milestone in a woman's reproductive life. Girls menstruate at an average age of 12 years. However, some can get the same as early as 8 years or as late as 16 years of age. To explain conceptually, Menses occur because of the hormonal changes in a girl's body. The release of hormones like Estrogen and Progesterone from her ovaries forms the inner thick lining (i.e. endometrium) of her uterus (also known as the womb). This makes the uterus ready for an egg to fertilize and give birth to a baby after

coming in contact with sperm. However, Menstruation occurs if there is no fertilization of the egg. The lining of the uterus breaks and results in the discharge of menstrual fluid through the vagina which contains Blood, Endometrium Cells, and Mucus. It typically lasts for a period of 3 to 5 days. The cycle keeps repeating after every 28 to 29 days. Women generally stop menstruating (menopause) at the age of 45 to 50 years after which there are no chances of getting pregnant.

SO WHERE LIES THE CHALLENGE?

As per the Census 2011 Report,²¹⁹⁰ approximately 336 million females in India are of reproductive age and menstruate for 2-7 days every month. However, over the years menstruation has always been surrounded by taboos and myths, especially in India. Menstruating females are excluded from many aspects of the socio-cultural life such as cooking, work activities, sexual intercourse, bathing, worshipping, eating, and even touching certain food items like pickles. Even slight contact with menstruating women is considered toxic. Studies²¹⁹¹ have revealed that in certain parts of the world menstrual waste is linked to witchcraft and danger and is therefore buried. It is believed that if the menstrual cloth is found by the witch then it will make the woman infertile.

There is an unnecessary shame and embarrassment attached to it that makes people awkward to talk openly on the topic. These exclusions severely impact the lifestyle, emotional state, and most essentially the reproductive health of young girls. This further expands the low level of knowledge and understanding amongst youth on puberty, menstruation, and reproduction.

FACT CHECK-

Despite being a healthy and normal part of a girl's life, menstruation is still viewed as impure and dirty. This is one of the reasons why girls find it difficult to manage their period every month. Below is the harsh reality of India, a progressive country yet regressive when it comes to menstrual hygiene.

1. LACK OF AWARENESS:

"Many women fail to educate their daughters on Menstruation on account of the taboo attached to it. Hence least information is passed on to generations in India!"

-Supriya Khanna, ICMR

According to a 2012 study by the Indian Council for Medical Research, about 71 % of the adolescent girls in India have no idea about Menstruation until they get it themselves and only 38% speak to their mothers about the same. Mothers themselves are unaware of how it is to be explained to their daughters and what could be regarded as menstrual hygiene management. The study revealed that 70% of mothers considered menstruation to be dirty and a curse. Schools and teachers in villages were also found least helpful and abstained from talking about it. This indicates the negligence of the parents and teachers to prepare their daughters/students for the same which results in extreme anxiety and distress amongst girls. Cultural taboos associated with menstruation prevent them from seeking help and protection. Lack of support from the families increases their domestic responsibilities adding to the misery of unhealthy periods.

The UNICEF Report, 2014 stated that 79, 66, 56, and 51 percent of girls in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal respectively were ignorant on menstrual hygiene.

²¹⁹⁰ Suneela Garg, Tanu Anand, *Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it*, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE, (Feb 12, 2025), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4408698/>.

²¹⁹¹ Rajanbir Kaur, *Menstrual Hygiene, Management, and Waste Disposal: Practices and Challenges Faced by Girls/Women of Developing Countries*, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE, (Feb 12, 2025), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5838436/>.

2. LOW ACCESS TO SAFE MENSTRUAL ABSORBENTS AND OTHER AMENITIES:

"In rural areas, two to three women will use the same cloth after washing or drying it. Even if sanitary napkins are available women are discouraged from using them!"

-Meenakshi Sharma, Coordinator

Menstrual Hygiene Management, WASH alliance.

Access to sanitary products is another major affair. One sanitary napkin costs between five to twelve rupees in India. A menstruating girl requires a minimum of three pads per day and an average of 15-20 pads per period which comes to around Rupees 80-100. However, considering the [Census 2011 Report](#), 70 percent of India's population is living in rural areas and is dependent on manual labor, 75 percent of which survive on Rupees 33 per day, therefore the monthly menstrual expenditure remains far beyond their reach.

A [2012 study](#) revealed that only 12% of menstruating females in India utilize sanitary products while others rely on ash, leaves, old rags, cloth, mud, and some even fill up old socks with sand and tie them around their waists to absorb menstrual blood. Millions of families are unable to afford basic menstrual kits. According to the [2014 study](#) by Dasra, a charity that works for this cause claimed that nearly 23 million girls drop out of school every year due to lack of access to sanitary products, adequate water, and clean toilets. Girls often fear getting stained due to the leakage of blood and body odor and being made fun of by their classmates. This leads menstruating girls to absent themselves from schools.



The poor condition of a toilet in one of the Indian schools

TYPES OF MENSTRUAL ABSORBENTS USED:

The preference of menstrual absorbents varies according to the preference of every woman. In the rural, slum, and tribal areas, girls mostly prefer reusable cloth pads, mud, dust, ash, cow dung, animal skin, leaves, and rags. *The sad part is, they put soil in their undergarment which has direct contact with their private part.*





Some of the menstrual absorbents used by rural women



An Indian woman washing bits of cloth used by her during her menses

While in urban areas most of the girls prefer using **commercial sanitary pads**. These pads are expensive as compared to cloth pads and are non-reusable, and can cause harm to the environment. According to various studies the deodorized and non-deodorized sanitary products contain chemicals like **Organochlorines**. These bacteria cause a delay in the decomposition of these products in the soil. This is one of the reasons why experts have suggested **organic pads** over commercial pads.

Nowadays girls also prefer using **tampons** which provide internal protection. They are a kind of soft material (mostly cotton) inserted into the vagina to absorb the flow. Again these are expensive and not easily degradable.

Girls are also choosing **menstrual cups** over pads. These cups are made of silicone rubber which can be folded and inserted into the vagina for collection of the blood. They can be

worn for 6-12 hours depending upon the flow and can be reused. It provides a sustainable and environment-friendly option where sanitation conditions are not appropriate.

Water Hyacinth Pads sold under the trade name, 'Jani' are also preferred as they are cost-effective and biodegradable.

Banana Fibre Pads made from the waste of banana tree fiber sold under the trade name, Saathi is provided to rural women as they are eco-friendly and decompose within six months after use.

Bamboo Fibre Pads made of bamboo pulp are also preferred by rural women as they are affordable, easily decomposable, and also possess antibacterial properties.

3. IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

While the whole world has been affected by the pandemic, it has also worsened the menstrual health of women. The imposition of lockdown has led to inadequate production and supply of menstrual hygiene products not only in the rural areas but also in the urban zones.

CONSEQUENCES OF POOR MENSTRUAL HYGIENE-

Unhygienic menstrual conditions often lead to numerous health problems amongst women. The **surveys** conducted by the **Ministry of Health** in 2002, 2005, 2008, and 2012 revealed that these issues are preventable. However, Menstruation is such a hush affair in India that it becomes difficult for women to seek medical help or even maintain proper hygiene. Approximately 120 million Indian adolescent girls encounter menstrual dysfunctions. Following are the impacts of bad menstrual hygiene.

1. Introduction of bacteria or fungi through bad cloth, rags, or mud can cause infections in the reproductive and urinary tracts which can also damage the kidney if left untreated.
2. There is a delicate balance of good and bad bacteria that live in the Vagina. An

imbalance in pH of the vaginal secretions can lead to Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) which mostly affects women when they are trying to conceive. Genital infections are 70 percent more frequent in women using unsanitized menstrual absorbents.

3. The vulnerability to Cervical Cancer (Cancer of the Cervix, i.e. the Mouth of the Uterus) also increases due to these infections. As many as 60,000 cervical cancer deaths are reported every year, two-thirds of which are due to poor menstrual hygiene.
4. Women can also turn infertile due to poor cleanliness.
5. Other issues associated with the same are irregular periods, prolonged or short periods, heavy or little flow periods, dark or light-colored periods, painful periods, and psychological problems such as anxiety, embarrassment, and shame.

A GLIMPSE INTO DIVERSE MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCES-

1. ***"Sometimes my periods are delayed for a month or two. And when they arrive, they are extremely painful!"*** says Pinky, 14 years old living in Kanpur with her family. Just like her mother she too uses cloth as a menstrual absorbent. She disposes of the same in the field where she goes to defecate. She stays at home on the days she gets her period. Her brother and father are told that she is ill or has a fever.
2. ***"I wish Menstruation would never happen to me. Since I got my periods I am bound by restrictions at home!"*** says Priya, 13 years old who lives in a peri-urban area of Kanpur. She hates going to school on the days she menstruates because the school toilets are dirty with no water.
3. ***"I play volleyball even when I am on my periods. I am mean why not? My***

periods cannot be an excuse to skip my favorite sport!" says Kaveri, 12 years old who lives in Tamil Nadu. Her school provides sanitary pads free of cost which are of poor quality. However, she says they are useful in an emergency.

4. ***"When I got my periods for the first time, I didn't understand what was happening. My mother asked me to use bits of cloth which I had to hide from my father and brother!"*** shares Guddi Kumari from Bihar when asked about her first period.

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES INTRODUCED TO PROMOTE MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN INDIA-

A. The Right of Children to free and compulsory Education Act, 2009:

This act provides for standards of drinking water and separate sanitation facilities for every boy and girl in schools.

B. The Jan Aushadhi Suvridha Oxo-Biodegradable Sanitary Napkin scheme:

This seeks to provide biodegradable sanitary pads for Rupees One per pad.

C. SABLA Program:

The Program launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development focuses on health, hygiene, and sexual health.

D. National Rural Livelihood Mission:

This mission was initiated by the Ministry of Rural Development to support self-help groups to manufacture sanitary pads.

E. Menstrual Hygiene Day:

It is an annual awareness day marked on 28th May initiated by a German-based NGO, WASH in 2014 to highlight the importance of menstrual hygiene management. It is widely observed in India.

F. Menstrual Hygiene Management: An Initiative Under The Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan:

Menstrual Hygiene Management is a constitutive fragment of the Swachh Bharat Mission Guidelines (SBM-G) which are issued by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation to help all adolescent girls and women to manage their Menses effectively. These guidelines provide the duties of the State Government, District Administrations, Engineers, and Technical Experts in Line departments, School headmasters, and Teachers towards the same. A few of the guidelines are as under:

1. Funds to be collected and used to raise awareness on Menstrual Hygiene at all places, especially in schools.
2. To spread awareness on menstruation so that every adolescent girl, woman, and their families including adolescent boys and men are informative about the same. Nodal Officers, Anganwadi Supervisors, and Workers to be trained for the purpose.
3. Develop electronic models to meet the demand for sanitary napkins or other menstrual absorbents (Pads, tampons, or menstrual cups).
4. Provide access to a separate toilet with private space for cleaning or washing.
5. Provide access to adequate and sustained water supply and soap.
6. Provide access to safe disposal of menstrual absorbents.

Although these schemes and missions were introduced with an excellent perspective. However, there are a lot of loopholes in their implementation. Action and investment are still needed. Millions of girls in India still do not have access to hygienic menstruation due to several factors such as the unsettled supply of sanitary products or poor sanitary products, lack of

water and sanitation facilities, and limited awareness amongst teachers and other frontline workers involved in the mission.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The gap between effective planning and successful implementation of the existing policies has to be reduced. There is a strong need to follow a strategic approach in combating these issues:

1. One of the prime barriers towards usage of sanitary products especially in the rural areas is often the price and also the unavailability. Women from the highest quintile are more than four times as likely to use a hygienic method as women from the lowest quintile (89% versus 21 %). The COVID-19 pandemic has further added to the misery due to loss of income and livelihood.

To overcome this barrier, low-cost napkins (organic- which are safer and environment friendly as compared to the regular pads available in packets) locally produced by self-help groups can be a better option. Providing sanitary napkins free of cost at public places can be of great help.

2. Training adolescent girls and women on using sustainable products such as organic pads and conducting campaigns on hygienic ways to manage their menses is a must.
3. Creating awareness on the frequency of changing menstrual absorbents regularly during the day and understanding the negative symptoms and when to access healthcare.
4. In schools, due to lack of sanitary facilities, girls throw their pads in the toilets or leave them there without being washed due to a shortage of water. This makes the toilets dirty, breeding a place for flies, pathogenic germs, and mosquitoes and also making it unhygienic for the toilet users and

cleaners. There is a need to install menstrual waste disposal machines (incinerators) and provide girls with proper knowledge on various disposal techniques.

5. There is a need to ensure comprehensive sex education for all genders both in schools as well as out of schools so that they will not resort to unreliable sources to fetch answers to their curious questions. This will improve their knowledge of significant aspects like puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health.
6. There is a strong need to break the silence revolving around menstruation. Menstrual hygiene management cannot be addressed only by the schools. It is an important area that requires the support of the wider society, communities, and families.
7. Celebrities, public figures, and political leaders are mighty voices that can help in drawing attention towards this subject. Bollywood Movie 'Padman', starring Akshay Kumar and Radhika Apte is an example of how this aspect can be removed from the barren lands of stigma by producing national interest and attention.

ROLE OF BOYS/MEN IN MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT–

The involvement of boys/men in menstrual hygiene management is significant. There is a strong need to educate them on the topic so that they can confidently raise the issues on the same. The traditional silence around it has to be destroyed by encouraging the participation of men in conversations and campaigns intending to break stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation. Men and boys can influence experiences of menstruation of women and girls through many roles including fathers, brothers, husbands, teachers, community leaders, employers, co-workers, and policymakers in

domains such as household, work, school, and the community at large.

Their support can be extended towards advocating clean and sufficient toilets, providing/buying sanitary products for their friends/wives/daughters/co-workers without any disgust or shame, creating a period positive environment, communicating care and empathy, and also keeping a check on their health.

CONCLUSION–

In India, unnecessary things are sold openly and a sanitary pad is concealed in a black or translucent bag before being sold. This itself highlights how attention on menstruation remains negligible. This has to be stopped. There shouldn't be any shame attached to menstruation. It is biological. It is therefore a responsibility of society to observe and participate in ensuring menstrual hygiene for it is not a tough task. A guilt-free and healthy period is the basic right of every girl. All we need is a little effort to support the cause. PERIOD!

PICTURE SOURCE–

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