

Review on Some Taboos and Need for Menstrual Hygiene Products Among Women with Low Socio-economic Resources

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Abstract

In most cultures, menstrual health is still considered a taboo subject, even though around one-fourth of the world's population is of menstrual age. Since ancient times, it has been stigmatized and subject to discrimination. One has a very significant probability of contracting an illness if proper hygiene is not practiced during the menstrual cycle. To maintain a hygienic atmosphere during menstruation, several products have been developed in the modern era. The goal of this review is to discuss the availability and utilization of the menstrual hygiene products available for women belonging to lower socioeconomic background. Infections of the reproductive tract brought on by poor personal hygiene during menstruation are a topic of very little or no knowledge among women. Women belonging to the areas of lower socioeconomic backgrounds either lack access to sanitary products, know nothing about their types and methods of use, or cannot afford them due to their cost. As a result, they largely rely on washable, reusable cloth pads. It should be necessary to inform and educate people about the health risk and environment degradation they pose. Utilizing contemporary methods like incineration can aid in waste reduction. At least 500 million women and girls around the world do not have access to adequate menstrual hygiene management products. Teachers lack support, peer teasing when they accidentally stain clothes with menstruation, lack of family support, lack of cultural acceptance of alternative menstrual products, limited economic resources to purchase inputs, and inadequate water and sanitation facilities are among the challenges to improve the menstrual hygiene. To address these, the government of various countries should provide adequate information and easy access to menstrual hygiene products.

Keywords: Menstruation, Taboos, Solutions, Incinerators, Tampons, Menstrual cloth, menstrual cups.

1. Introduction

The word menstruation is derived from Latin word means month, which is turn related to Greek mine means moon.[1] Menstruation is the natural bodily process of releasing blood and associated matter from the uterus through the vagina as part of the menstrual cycle. [1,2] Although each person's menstrual cycle is unique, the average is 28 days. Teenagers, for instance, may experience 45-day periods, whereas those in their 20s and 30s may experience 21 to 38 day cycles. [2] Menarche is the onset of menstruation, the time when a girl has her first menstrual periods. The four phases

of menstrual cycle are menstruation, the follicular phase, ovulation, and the luteal phase.[3] In the past era, the older generation was not well informed about it, from menarche to until menopause due to lack knowledge, education and unawareness.[4] Most of the girls and females around the globe go through their periods every month because menstruation is marketed as smutty, owing of gender stereotypes and social taboos.[5] In quiet, several women go through their periods and without access to the tools they need to manage their health and safety.[5,6] According to Hinduism, women are not allowed to engage in regular life activities

while menstruating such as performing puja, making puja, making she is permitted to return to her family and carry out her daily tasks, she must be tasks, she is regarded as a harmful situation in Islam too, and men avoid women during their periods and would not approach them until they are clean. Menstruations women are considered impure, made to live under strict rules, and are prohibited from participating in social and religious activities, entering temples and shrines, and even using the kitchen. [6] According to Jewish beliefs, Jews Consider women who are menstruating to be [middy], and they forbid them from performing certain activities. As per their belief, a person becomes ritually unclean if he/she touches anything she has sat on. There are still bathing prohibitions in some areas of the nation, as well as a taboo against burying menstrual pads or cloth that have been bloodied.[5,6] Additionally, it was advised that women wash the cloth they wear during their periods only at night when everyone else is asleep because it was thought that menstrual fluids could be used for black magic.[7] Teenage girls either bury or burn their clothes in various locations prevent them from being used by evil spirits or anyone who practice black magic.[6,7] There is a misconception in some areas of India that food prepared by menstruating women is contaminated. She is not permitted to pick up foods that are sour, such as pickles. In countries with low economic resources, the health is not given the priority it needs, therefore creating a big problem in health sector. [8] The health is still considered as subject of taboo, especially in poor countries. The major reason behind it is the lack of education among general countries. There is a complete lack of adequate products to be used for menstrual hygiene in countries having low economic resources.[1,3] Though the government of various countries are making efforts to combat it but these are not that much sufficient to fulfill the demand. Unhygienic menstruation can lead to many infectious diseases which may further exaggerate the situation. [9]

2. RATIONALE

Menstruation is natural and essential biological process, yet it remains surrounded by taboos, misconceptions, and social stigmas that have adverse effects on the well-being of women and girls worldwide. These stigmas are often rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, which can lead to discrimination, exclusive, and barriers to access to menstrual health resources. In many cultures, menstruating women are subjected to restrictions that affect their participation in daily life, including religious activities, social interactions, and even basic functions such as preparing food. Such beliefs perpetuate inequality and limit women's autonomy, further hindering their personal and professional growth. Moreover, a lack of proper education about menstruation, especially in low-resources settings, exacerbates these challenges. In many parts of the world, especially in underdeveloped countries, women and face a dire lack of access to menstrual hygiene products such as sanitary pads or tampons. Lack of proper infrastructure, sanitary products, and education in these regions contributes to the broader public health crises, perpetuating cycles of inequality and poverty. By addressing this topic, we can raise awareness about the importance of menstrual health, challenge harmful cultural practices, and advocate for better access to menstrual hygiene products and education. This not only promotes better health outcomes but also fosters gender equality and social inclusion for women and girls worldwide.

3. ACCORDING TO UNICEF

Menstruation is the naturally bodily process of releasing blood and associated matter from the uterus through the vagina as part of the menstrual cycle.[3] Menarche is the onset of menstruation, the time when a girl has her first menstrual period. Menstrual hygiene materials are the products used to catch menstrual flow, such as pads, cloths, tampons or cups. Discrimination on the basis of gender and various social stigmas may be contributing factors for such

circumstances.[4] Along with these factors cultural taboos and poverty are additional factors cultural taboos which may increase it drastically. Social stigma may lead to harassment and social isolation of the menstruating girls. [5] Menstrual hygiene management [MHM] refers to management of hygiene associated with the menstrual process. WHO and UNICEF joint monitoring programme [JMP] for drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene has used the following definition of MHM. [6] Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body. [10]

4. MENSTRUATION AND SOCIAL TABOOS

Menstruation is a natural bodily process experienced by teenage girls and females begins from menarche to menopause. Millions of girls experience their period each month all the globe due to social taboos and gender stereotypes that stigmatize menstruation as filthy, many women still experience their periods in silence and without access to the tools they need to manage their health [9, 11,12]. It is regarded as a harmful situation in Islam, and men avoid women during periods and won't approach them until they are clean [13]. Menstruating women are considered impure, made to live under strict rules, and are prohibited from participating in social and religious activities, entering temples and shrines, and even using kitchen. As per their belief, a person becomes ritually unclean if he/she touches anything she has sat on [14, 15]. 21 years old women from Nepal suffocated after lighting a fire to keep warm in the hut. She was exiled to for the duration of her period known as *chauupadi*, a longstanding custom that mandates that people who menstruate stay in a small shed outside while they bleed. Although the Nepalese government made this practice illegal in 2005, many communities [16]. According to the international Planned Parenthood federation

IPPF, among the *twa*, Zulu, *himba*, and Niger delta communities in Africa, one alarming misconception about menstruation is that the start of a period indicates the beginning of sexual maturity, which in turn denotes that child is prepared for marriage [17]. Girls in their adolescence engage in customary puberty rituals that include education about sex, motherhood, and marriage obligations. Although menstruation is sign of biological fertility and the start of puberty, it does not indicate that girls have reached sexual, physical, intellectual, or emotional maturity [24].

5. SOLUTIONS

Improving access to hygiene menstrual hygiene management products lack of access to the facilities that can help women and girls manage the logistical as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. [7] They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear. Menstrual hygiene management is a very important health aspect when we talk about the health of adolescent girls and women. [4] Poor hygiene management can lead to several bad consequences on reproductive as well as overall health. There is a need to teach the adolescent girls that the menstruation is a natural phenomenon and it is a very important function of our body. [1] Awareness among the general population will help the girls to embrace their femininity Inadequate hygiene management is a very huge problem to be looked for in the countries especially with low socioeconomic resources because it can lead many kinds of infections which ultimately lower down the economic status of that country [5].

Major challenges which are seen in the society regarding the menstrual hygiene are lack of support from the teachers (majority of them are males), lack of proper sanitation facilities in the schools for washing, privacy, and disposal of the products are significant cause of absenteeism seen in the schools. [8] Certain menstrual

hygiene products are not culturally accepted may also be a barrier in hygiene management. Lastly, but significantly, the poverty is the most prominent barrier in the menstrual hygiene management.[6] Menstruation comes with a lot of pain, cramps, and discomfort, travel difficulties, and fear of embarrassment as many people tease make fun of the having blood stain on her clothes.[6,11] Information regarding sanitary napkins, napkin vending machine, method of napkin disposal, and incinerators. Most of the women in India, even in today's scenario use cloth as their primary method of protecting the menstrual hygiene.[9] Not only developing countries, developed countries also have similar kind of stigmas regarding the menstruation. India had started menstruation hygiene management programmer to manage all the issues and challenges coming in the way of maintaining a healthy lifestyles during menstruation. [10] Many NGOs are also involved in it. In India, may 28 is observed as the menstrual hygiene management needs during their menstrual cycles causes them to suffer Many women struggle to find monthly or even one-time funding for disposable sanitary products. Many people who can afford to pay do not because they detest having to beg for things. [18]

6. EXEMPTIONS FROM GOODS AND SERVICES TAX

Sanitary napkins are not a women's luxury item. However, the discriminatory tax bracketing tax bracketing of sanitary napkins prevents a significant portion of vulnerable women from having access to this basic entity. Condoms and contraception's are already exempt from tax, but sanitary napkins are still subject to it. [19] The government has deemed Hindu marital symbols like sin door, bangles, and bindis to be tax exempt. By eliminating the levy on sanitary napkins, millions of women's personal hygiene would improve and their access to them will be increased. [Sinhala RN, Paul B. Menstrual hygiene management in India: The concerns. Indian J public Health 2018; 62; 71-4]

6.1 ROLE OF TEACHERS

A recent study by UNICEF stated that 71percent of adolescent girls in India remain unaware of menstruation until they get their first period. In the standard six, the class where children are first introduced to reproductive health, some girls experience their first period earlier. Boys in that class actively engage in discussions about reproductive health in general and menstrual health in general and menstrual health in particular, whereas girls are more likely to be reserved. [3, 6] Many girls in south Asia are surprised to get their period without understanding what is occurring to their body or why [13]. Some girls begin menstruating as young as nine years old, although most begin around the age of twelve. It is the duty of the teacher to impart important knowledge about menstruation. Teaching a girl about menstruation before she gets her first period is the best way to ensure she understands what will happen, why she should not be afraid, and that she will continue to attend class. Teachers should create an environment in which girls feel at ease. [20]

6.2 ROLE OF FAMILIES

Families should foster an environment in which girls are not afraid to express their feelings to their parents. Families should discuss menstruation and explain that it is a natural process that every girl through once her reaches puberty. Parents should teach their children that menstruation is not a disease. Girls can have normal menstrual cycles, go to schools, play with their sisters and friends, eat and drink whatever they want, and attend social gatherings.[21]

7. ISSUES

One in every five girls drops out of school after their period. Every year, approximately 23 million girls drop out of schools in India. When menstruation begins, families remove their daughters from school because they have reached reproductive age. [15] However, on several occasions, they forced to drop out because the schools fail to provide proper washrooms to meet

their needs. Lack of adequate toilets and proper hygiene in schools are major barriers to children's attendance and education, particularly for girls. [7] Children spend a significant portion of their day at school, and the quality of water, sanitation, and hygiene (Wash) services at the educational institution can have an impact on their learning and health. The availability of high-quality wash services in school is also critical for girl's health and dignity school drop out rates, particularly among girls, are directly related to toilet hygiene facilities. Separate toilets for boys and girls, hand washing facilities, continuous water supply and menstrual hygiene maintenance for girls, among other safe sanitation infrastructure at schools, can significantly reduce school dropout rates, particularly among girls and increase enrollment numbers. (16)

8. MANAGEMENT OF MENSTRUAL WASTE

Disposal of menstrual waste is of measure concern as it has the potential to affect the health as well as environment. The menstrual hygiene products should be made of ecofriendly materials such as bamboo fiber, banana firewater hyacinth and sea sponges, should be encouraged so that proper decomposition may occur without producing much pollution to the environment. (23) To maintain the privacy of the women, an isolated collecting system should be installed. The container or collecting bins should be covered the lid. Government role is also crucial informing policies and regulations regarding menstrual waste management. Many NGO's are doing the great jobs in this field on their own bases. Girls and women should be aware of the danger of flushing or throwing away used menstruation products in public rest rooms. The bathrooms should have trash cans with secure covers (16, 10).

8.1 INCINERATORS

It may be better option for efficient disposal such as waste, but it should be operated with great care so that it does not harm the surroundings

environment. It should be installed at various public places such as schools, institutions, slum areas, etc. [10]

Quality and supply of sanitary napkins with rising societal and medical knowledge of menstruation hygiene in India, the demand for sanitary napkins has skyrocketed. The use of high-quality, environmentally friendly raw materials in the production of these pads help to drive market expansion. However, as demand and usage increase, the necessity for suitable disposal measures becomes more important, as all of these pads get polluted with human blood, posing a biohazard that can cause substantial harm to human health and the environment. A single sanitary pad takes around 800 years to decompose naturally, and the plastic and super absorbent polymers (SAPs) in sanitary pads are non-biodegradable and can take decades to degrade. Waste management technologies including pyrolysis, gasification, and resource recovery can be used to manage [37].

Role of health professionals with 54 participants out of 75 invited professionals, the medical staff survey had a 72% response rate. Just 7% (4/54) of employees regularly inquired about menstruation products (MP), whereas 54% (29/54) were worried about how patients would pay for MP. 90% (186/207) of respondents to the patient survey reported having mental health instability, which was linked to yearly income less than \$30,000 ($p < 0.01$); 45% (85/186) missed appointments during menses [38].

Health rights issues one underappreciated obstacle to human rights is menstrual hygiene. The difficulties women encounter in controlling their periods in environments with minimal resources has been brought to attention by activism and early studies. Menstrual treatment, however, is terribly understudied despite the field's fervor and the spread of numerous interventions [39]

On-site trash management, waste reduction, and pathogen treatment can all be accomplished in this way. Incinerators that are adequately vented

and have a chute that connects them to the toilet area offer a discrete and efficient method of getting rid of menstrual absorbents. [12] This review found only a few studies about the usage of incinerators in LMICs, which is probably because it has not been studied much. There are numerous technologies with pros and cons, ranging from simple ceramic pots to intricate energy-recovery systems when choosing which type to use, a lot of variables must be considered. [24, 25]

8.2 MENSTRUAL CLOTH

To absorb menstrual flow, cloths are reusable pieces of fabric that are worn on the outside of the body, in underwear, or fastened around the waist [14]. They are constructed using fabric that has either been newly acquired mainly cotton or clothes can be reused for an unspecified amount of time: however, it is widely accepted that this should not exceed a year. They must periodically be evaluated for supply, availability, and pricing because they are consumables [15]. [16, 17] In most situations, cloth is affordable and accessible. Disposable pads are progressively taking the role of cloth for MHM, [18] cloth is still commonly used in low-income nations and is frequently given out as part of humanitarian aid. [19, 10, 9]

8.3 TOILET PAPER OR TISSUES

Many women use toilet paper in the form of sanitary pads even today which is a poor hygiene practice during menstruation. it carries a serious public health risk. There is an increased risk of infection in the reproductive organs which may lead to other health complications. The infection may spread to the bloodstream through the vagina; women should abstain from such practices to avoid such health complications [25, 27].

8.4 REUSEABLE PADS

Reusable pads are worn outside the body in underwear to absorb menstrual flow and are typically fastened with snaps. They can be created with a number of organic or artificial

materials [11]. They are used for about a year before being cleaned, dried, and reused. Since they are consumables, it is necessary to regularly evaluate supply, accessibility, and affordability [18]. The prevalence of use is largely dependent on availability, cost, and awareness. Reusable pads are made by a small number of large-scale manufacturers, and because of supply chain restrictions, they are not frequently accessible. There are several programmes that teach women and girls how to make reusable sanitary products for personal or commercial use, albeit with various degrees of quality and scope [26, 27].

8.5 DISPOSABLE PADS

Disposable pads are worn outside the body in undergarments to absorb menstrual flow. Since, they must be discarded after a maximum of 8 hours, they must regularly have their supply, accessibility, and pricing evaluated [29]. The layered structure of ads, which come in a variety of sizes, absorbencies, and materials, is built of mixtures of polymers, rayon, and cotton. To stop leaks and keep the pad more firmly in public place, pads should include wings. [30] Disposable pads are typically readily available in most situations, but not in really distant regions, making local procurement simple and affordable [10]. There are occasionally locally made disposable sanitary products available, ranging in quality. There aren't many inexpensive, premium disposable biodegradable pads available [29, 30]. Lack of a consistent supply of disposable pads and additional difficulties with disposal and the handling of solid and liquid waste are issues during emergencies. The distribution of both disposable and reusable pads simultaneously could be investigated. Distributing enough pads and ensuring replenishment are critical [30].

8.6 TAMPONS

Tampons, which are put into the vagina to absorb menstrual flow, are absorbent fabrics made of cotton and/or rayon. They enlarge when wet, preventing leaking. They can be worn for up to 8 hours before being taken off with the removal

string and thrown away [31]. They are available in a range of sizes, materials, and options for an applicator to help in insertion. Tampons consumables, therefore it's important to regularly monitor their supply, price, and accessibility. In low-income nations tampons are rarely used and frequently unavailable. [32]

8.7 MENSTRUAL CUPS

A non-absorbent bell-shaped device called a menstrual cup put into the vagina to collect menstrual flow. The walls of the vagina hold it in place while forming a seal. The silicone used is often of a medical grade [33]. It must be evacuated every 6 to 12 hours, washed, and then reinserted because it holds three times as much blood than pads or tampons if facilities allow [34]. The cup needs to be boiled for five to ten minutes after each monthly cycle. At least two sizes are often offered by manufacturers, and various shapes are becoming more prevalent [34, 35]. The lifespan of a cup is 5 to 10 years. Although menstrual cups are still not generally advertised in low-income nations, there is growing interest in them and mounting evidence of their acceptance [35, 36].

9. CONCLUSION

Menstrual hygiene remains a significant challenge for many women, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Socioeconomic disparities often limit access to basic hygiene products like sanitary pads, tampons, or menstrual cups, forcing women to resort to unsafe alternatives such as rags, old cloths, or even newspapers. This lack of proper menstrual products can lead to health complications, including infections and reproductive health issues, further exacerbating the vulnerability of women in economically disadvantaged communities. Additionally, cultural taboos surrounding menstruation create an environment of silence and stigma, discouraging open discussion and education on menstrual health. These taboos not only perpetuate misinformation but also contribute to the isolation and shame that many women feel

during their menstrual cycles. The intersection of these social taboos and economic constraints highlights the urgent need for comprehensive solutions, including increased access to affordable menstrual hygiene products, public awareness campaigns to breakdown the stigma, and policy changes that prioritize menstrual health as critical aspects of women's overall well-being. Addressing menstrual hygiene in low-income communities is not just a matter of providing products but also a broader effort to foster social change, eliminate taboos, and create a more equitable and supportive environment for all women.

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