

Menstrual Health Awareness Journey in India

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Issues pertaining to Indian Society

Within Indian society, several issues have surfaced as major concerns some of which are as follows-

- **Social issues-** Communalism, gender inequality, and elderly neglect are some concerns that India faces.
- **Economic issues-** Poverty and unemployment are rampant in India which lead to corruption and human trafficking.
- **Educational issues-** India still lacks a good education infrastructure, especially in the rural areas.
- **Criminal issues-** Violence against women is a common concern in India. Nowadays, cyber-crimes have also become widespread.
- **Environmental issues-** Air and water pollution is a major concern which in turn leads to many health-related issues.
- **Healthcare issues-** Healthcare facilities like clean sanitation and awareness about menstrual health do not reach the marginalized population because of a lack of adequate funds allotted and ignorance of the people.

In my opinion, the most important issue among the aforementioned ones is healthcare. Unfortunately, like money, health is not valued until it is jeopardised.

Theme-Health

Menstrual Health Issues in Indiaⁱ

In India, the most common health issues of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes which result from poor diet, lack of exercise, and genetic factors, respiratory issues which are a direct byproduct of air pollution and household cooking practices, malnutrition which is a result of undernutrition and various deficiencies, cancers like oral, lung, breast, and cervical cancer because of limited awareness, late-stage diagnosis, and lack of advanced medical facilities, maternal and child health issues due to substandard healthcare, and waterborne diseases cholera and diarrhoea because of unhygienic sanitation and contaminated water sources. Mental health issues are also a major concern and because of social stigma, people do not approach counsellors. Malnutrition is another pressing problem.

Strangely, while I was researching the net to find the different types of diseases In India none of the sites mentioned any diseases related to menstrual hygiene. India is a culturally rich country which is a benefit. However, when such vital topics like menstrual hygiene are shrouded in shame in the name of culture, it is certainly not good for women and the country's progress in general. Culture should push us forward, not backwards!

The message is loud and clear—Menstrual health has yet to gain the importance it demands...

Description of the Issue- Menstrual Hygieneⁱⁱ

It is ironic that we need to explain a concept as basic as menstrual hygiene as it is regarded as a taboo topic and hence, films like Padman were frowned upon.

Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by adolescent girls and continues till menopause. If the total duration of these days is added up, it comes to 7 years of our lives. Figures state that on any given day, approximately 800 million women are menstruating around the globe.

Let us look at some of the challenges.

- 63 million rural adolescent girls in India reside in homes without toilets.
- 2 out of 5 schools in India do not have separate toilets for girls which is a major inconvenience as space for storing menstrual products and to change is limited.
- Menstrual waste amounts to 580,000 tons every year, most of which ends up in water bodies.

Now, let us **compare rural India to urban India under a report published in September 2021.**

In urban areas, a variety of menstrual hygiene products like sanitary pads, tampons, and menstrual cups are available as compared to rural areas where girls usually use cloth. Awareness related to proper disposal of sanitary products, maintaining personal hygiene during menstruation is more in girls of urban areas as compared to rural. Sanitation facilities like clean and private toilets equipped with running water, which can contribute to better menstrual hygiene management are available more in urban areas as compared to rural areas. Social stigma and taboos related to menstruation are stronger in rural areas which impact the psychological well-being of girls.

Let us see what initiatives have been taken to deal with these issues so far....

In the 80s and early 90s, MHM (Menstrual Health Management) was not on the government agenda at all as talking of menstrual issues was considered a sin. Hence, access to health facilities was limited and so were the choices of products. In progression, in the next decade, people opened their minds to the importance of MHM a little more. NGOs came forward to create awareness.

By 2010, with the launch of the National Rural Health Mission, MHM gained momentum. Many reusable products were designed and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) started manufacturing napkins at low cost. Moreover, advertisements propagated disposable pads.

After 2010, a few significant changes have taken place. Pad-making units have been installed in a few states in India and government initiatives like the Nirmal Bharat Yatra have gained popularity. Incinerators for safe disposal of pads have also been established and sanitary napkins have been prioritized through Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan.

However, a lot more needs to be done as the situation is far from 'healthy' y

Causes of Bad Menstrual Health in India

➤ **Myths**

In many parts of India, menstruation is still considered 'dirty' and hence, girls are not allowed to enter temples, kitchens and many public places during these days. In the Vedas, menstruation has been explained as it has been associated with India's killing of Vitras who was a Brahmin. The guilt of this unholy deed appears as bloodshed every month. Menstruation is as natural as digestion or urination but such myths lead to secrecy, shame and eventual health compromises.

➤ **Lack of awareness and Societal Taboos**

Many girls in India are unaware of what to expect during menstruation and because of societal taboos do not know whom to ask. Parents are highly uncomfortable discussing sexuality, reproduction and

menstruation. Adult women, especially in rural areas, are not aware of good hygienic practices. 71% of girls report not knowing about menstruation before their first period which is alarming.

➤ **Affordability**

Qualitative studies and an analysis of the product market indicate that premium commercial products are unaffordable or not consistently accessible for women and girls in low-income communities, especially since it is a recurring expense.

➤ **Lack of adequate facilities like water supply, toilets**

A study in West Bengal conducted on school-going girls in rural West Bengal found that the main reasons for girls' absence from school during menstruation were lack of proper disposal facility of sanitary napkins (75%) and lack of continuous water supply for washing (67.5%) in their school. Another factor that aggravates this problem is the lack of toilets. The private space required to change and dispose of is still a luxury even in urban areas. (Satija, Kauser, & Kukrej, 2017)

➤ **Flawed policy implementation**

Policies and programs that specifically address menstrual health and hygiene are coming up but the benefits are not passing on to the marginalized communities because of poor implementation, corruption and social mindset.

➤ **Nutritional Deficiencies and Gender Discrimination**

Poor nutrition and deficiencies in essential nutrients also lead to menstrual health problems. Lack of access to nutritious food can lead to irregular menstrual cycles, anaemia, and other health concerns.

Gender norms that downgrade women to specific roles lead to women overlooking their health, including menstrual health.

An Analysisⁱⁱⁱ

The day May 28th is observed as the Menstrual Hygiene Management Day.

However, according to the Menstrual Hygiene Management: National Family Health Survey 4, 2015-16, in the age group of 15-24 years, 42% use sanitary napkins, 62% use cloth, and 16% use locally prepared napkins.

Let's take a closer look.

In the rural areas 71.4% of women (15-24 years) use cloth, 33.6% use sanitary napkins and 14.8% use locally prepared napkins. Here, it is easy to understand why such a huge percentage of girls use cloth-ignorance of the hazards of infection and poverty.

Moreover, women with more than 12 years of education were found to be four times as likely to be using a hygienic method as women with no schooling which translates into 80% versus 20%. Moreover, 48% of rural women use hygienic ways of menstrual protection as compared with 78% of urban women. (Melinda Gates Foundation, 2016). Hence, the importance of education in enhancing menstrual health can be proven from these figures. Urban women are more educated and financially better off than rural women and hence, they are more aware and vigilant of the right menstrual practices.

The social taboos around menstruation and the thought process that 'it's a woman thing' is detrimental to progress in this direction as the awkwardness that women face while buying sanitary pads especially if it's a salesman and not a saleswoman makes it even more difficult to address such topics. An NGO worker from Rajasthan, brought this issue to the forefront while talking about a review meeting conducted by the government in Chhattisgarh, wherein the men said that they would rather put in their money in buying

sanitary pads than to talk publicly on such issues that are against their culture. The regressive mindset wherein discussing man-made challenges like alcoholism, terrorism and smoking related issues are acceptable but something as natural as menstruation isn't is the root cause of all problems.

The aforementioned factors lead to diseases like the follows-

- Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs)
- Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs)
- Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) which is caused by leaving tampons inserted for too long
- Skin irritations which come from using inappropriate materials for menstrual protection
- Fungal infections such as candidiasis (yeast infection), bad odour, anaemia
- Psychological stress.

Recommendations for a better future

There are a few ideas that if followed can lead to better menstrual health in India, I believe.

➤ **Hands-on projects**

Primary care physicians point out that bad menstrual practices can lead to negative implications on reproductive health. Not bathing during menstruation which is a common practice can engender reproductive tract infections. In schools, Biology projects should be given to girls related to such topics as young girls will imbibe a scientific outlook towards menstruation then.

➤ **Self-help strategy**

In Delhi, there are an estimated 132 public toilets for women which translate into only 8% of the number of 1534 for men. In the capital city, if this is the ratio, we can imagine the state in other places, especially rural areas. Women should participate actively as legislators and push such bills asking for a fairer ratio forward and to become a legislator. Girls must embrace education instead of depending on their brothers, husbands and fathers. In this context, social media can also be used to spread awareness and educated girls should come forward to do so.

➤ **Sharing privileges**

In rural areas, the cost of sanitary napkins is a major issue that leads to unhealthy practices. The Government of India has approved a scheme to improve menstrual hygiene for 1.5 Crore adolescent girls under the National Rural Health Mission since 2010 but this plan is not functional yet. As citizens, we should make it a point to not only distribute clothes, books and toys to the poor but also sanitary napkins. Clothes and books can be reused but sanitary napkins cannot! Hence, the need for napkins shall always be more than other items. There are extremely few studies in the Indian context mentioning the use of tampons or menstrual cups which are cost-effective and safe.

➤ **Change in style of upbringing**

Increasing the role of the male partner in fighting deep-rooted social beliefs and cultural taboos is essential to bring a brighter tomorrow. Men need to support their wives, daughters, female colleagues and mothers.

➤ **Professional help**

Besides, adolescent-friendly health services clinics should be equipped with trained professionals to educate young girls on hygienic practices. In essence, every point of contact that a girl may approach before, during or even after puberty should try to create the right awareness.

➤ **Encouraging innovation**

Finally, matters of disposal are still major concerns in most places in India.

Advanced incinerators should be provided in all schools, colleges and public toilets. The expense of research work and installation cannot be more than what is incurred on health issues that result from such neglect

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