

## **International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law**

### **Volume 1, Issue 4**

# **Delving into India's Abysmal Menstrual Health Management**

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## **Abstract**

*Given the fact that the menstrual cycle is a recurring occurrence for the majority of the reproductive ages, menstrual hygiene is of utmost importance as it is a basic human right of all menstruating individuals. However, globally and specifically in India, the stigma that clouds the minds of society, complemented by a myriad of other factors, hinders achieving adequate menstrual hygiene management. Through this paper, the authors attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the different obstructions in the menstrual hygiene system in the country by delving into the multifaceted reasons for the same. Further, the paper seeks to bring into cognizance the maligning consequences of the most conventionally used commercial sanitary products: disposable sanitary napkins. Consequently, information on the different alternatives to sanitary napkins such as menstrual cups and cotton pads is disseminated. Adding on to that, the paper additionally aims to highlight the shortcomings of the existing institutional framework and policies regarding menstrual health management; providing a workable course of actions that can be incorporated into the existing policies. The paper deduces that there is a pressing need for a multidimensional and holistic approach to tackle the problem of period poverty.*

**Keywords:** *Menstrual health management, Period poverty, Stigma, Taboo, Sanitary Napkins.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Menstruation is one of the most natural and biological processes that occur recurrently every month for most adolescent girls, women, transgender, and nonbinary individuals. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO) define menstrual hygiene as “the articulation, awareness, information, and confidence to manage menstruation with safety and dignity with adequate water, agents, and spaces for washing and bathing, and disposal with privacy and dignity”. Despite menstruation being downright natural, it is shrouded in stigma making it a “taboo” topic which augments the problem of period poverty. The shame, which is utterly intrinsic to periods, is so far deep entrenched in our society that it deters menstruating individuals from availing the required products such as sanitary napkins, menstrual cups, etc.

There are a plethora of menstrual products that are usually sold in India such as cloth pads, sanitary napkins, tampons, menstrual cups, etc.; however, sanitary napkins are the most conventionally used products. Other products such as menstrual cups and tampons aren't typically encouraged as they are looked down upon and a lot of individuals are simply not aware of such alternatives. Even though sanitary napkins are the "go-to" for people, a study by Nielsen in 2010 found out that out of 355 million Indian women only 12% were using sanitary napkins. This serves as a testimony of the sheer fact of how the social and economic conditions deter individuals from availing of safe menstrual products. Further, according to the National Family Health Survey, 2015-16, 42.4 per cent of women in India still do not have access to disposable sanitary napkins.

As long as the menstrual cycle continues to be viewed through the lens of impurity, grossness, and shamefulness it will persist to be shrugged off by society, posing further problems for individuals. One of the most recent instances substantiating the claim of lack of acceptance of menstrual hygiene in India occurred recently during the onset of the covid-19 pandemic. Initially, when the government announced a nationwide lockdown, almost all necessary items were added to a list of "essential services", however, sanitary napkins did not find a spot in the same. Even though the napkins were added to the list after 10 days, the conventional menstruation product was still sold at a price including the goods and services tax, no subsidies were provided on the product, unlike other essential services.

The impediments of an inadequate menstrual hygiene system are not limited to cisgender women. Menstrual hygiene is often perceived as a "ladies problem", which unfolds the issue of gender inclusivity as transgender and non-binary individuals also menstruate. Intersectional education is almost nowhere to be found in India. Right from the school level, segregation of students takes place; as only cisgender girls are educated about menstruation, people of other genders and sexualities are devoid of the same. Moreover, menstrual products predominantly cater solely to cisgender women and do not take into consideration the needs of the trans community. Thus, transgender and nonbinary people insist on wanting menstruation products to be marketed in a less "hyper-feminised manner" (R, 2019).

The road to achieving zero period poverty and an adequate menstrual hygiene system in India is indeed a long and tedious one. However, raising our voices and bringing awareness to the issue can go a long way as it normalises initiating conversations on the same rather than deeming it a “hush-hush” issue, which is what the authors aim to do through the medium of this paper. The paper entails a PESTEL analysis of the implications and impediments obstructing individuals from availing of menstrual hygiene products. The authors also touch upon the detrimental consequences of disposable sanitary napkins on the environment and health of the users, then alluding to alternatives of the same.

## **2.0 PESTELE Analysis of Problems barring people from accessing menstrual hygiene products**

### **2.1.0 Political**

Period poverty finds no mention in the political discourse and has rippling effects on the menstrual hygiene system as it continues being neglected in the political spheres which serve as the basis of all legislations. The grass-root level reason for the same is because the political system of the country is predominantly patriarchal; the policy-makers are overwhelmingly men. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, only 14% of the elected representatives were women which is merely 78 members out of the 352 elected members. The underrepresentation of women in the political arena serves as an impediment in tackling the issue of period poverty.

The social stigma also exacerbates the political obstacles in attaining menstrual hygiene. Not only are policy-makers majorly men but they also lack any understanding of menstruation and the need for an adequate hygiene system. Men are mostly raised in an environment devoid of education on the same and thus designate menstruation as a “women’s issue”, steering clear of conversations on the issue let alone devising policies on the same. A recent instance of the silence and unacceptance of devising policies in regards to menstruation was when Ninong Ering, a Lok Sabha MP from Arunachal Pradesh moved the Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017 in the first week of 2018 to provide “two days of paid menstrual leave each month and better rest facilities for women at their workplace during menstruation, however, the Ministry of Women and Child Development did not accept the bill; the bill was never discussed in either of the houses.

The silence isn't the only political hurdle faced by people who menstruate but also the policies that have been deemed as "unimportant" leading to policies that aren't well-devised due to negligence. In 2017 when the GST Council declared tax rates for items they legislated a 12% tax rate on sanitary napkins and towels, however on the other hand items such as sindoor and bindis were exempted, which aren't as essential as menstrual products. This came under scrutiny by women of the country including MPs like Sushmita Dev and Maneka Gandhi. Thus, on 21st July 2018, the Government was obliged to announce that sanitary napkins would be completely exempted from GST following heavy criticism and protests. There have been numerous other instances where the underrepresentation and unawareness had spilt over to the politics of menstruation resulting in the erasure of menstrual problems of the country.

### **2.2.0 Economical**

70% of women in India say their family cannot afford to buy sanitary pads (Greetz et al., 2016). The Government considers menstrual products as a luxury, utterly failing to understand that they are a basic necessity for all menstruating people. To logically calculate the costs, a person uses almost 15 pads per cycle, each pad costing a minimum of INR 10, making it a minimum cost of INR 150 monthly along with other added costs. Let us consider that the rural women are provided with subsidised pads, even then the cost would be approximately INR 50. Thus, most people choose to buy food products over menstrual hygiene products. Their priority is always to feed the family first. Moreover, the quality of subsidised products varies significantly due to the inconsistent enforcement of the guidelines given by the government. Most of the menstruating people in India, thus fail to avail of menstrual hygiene resources due to their high costs. The unaffordability of such products forces people to resort to the traditional method of clothes, newspapers, ash, hay, etc.

Even though certain organisations are providing free sanitary napkins, their areas of operations are smaller. Providing the underprivileged strata with more eco-friendly affordable products like cups or tampons can be a viable option but most women are not comfortable with products that have to be inserted. The social stigma that a woman loses her virginity while inserting the product makes it a less acceptable option. Another option of cloth pads is feasible but there are very few brands that are working on it.

In 2018, among the major companies operating in the country, Whisper by Procter & Gamble Hygiene and Health care Limited, held the largest market share (51.42%), followed by Stayfree and Kotex (Netscribes (India) Pvt Ltd, 2021). Due to fewer brands in the menstrual hygiene product sector, the prices are not so competitive and people have no option except for switching back to traditional products. Thus, due to high costs, few players in the Indian market, and limited availability of options it becomes almost impossible for the financially weaker section to afford premium commercial products.

### **2.3.0 Social**

The social stigma, taboos, and superstitions attached to menstruation date back to the Vedic time. From a very early time, different religions have forbidden menstruating women from taking part in various activities. Various anecdotes can be found in Hindu mythology stating that menstruating women are impure and should be isolated. Similar kinds of taboos and stigmas are also found in other religions like Islam, Christianity, etc.

Even today in the 21st century, the stigma and taboos associated with menstruation exist. A girl who starts menstruating around the early age of 10-12 years is made to believe that she is impure and dirty. Various restrictions are imposed on her like not visiting a religious place, not touching a holy book or other religious activities. They are also refrained from using the kitchen or cooking meals. Many girls are not allowed to go outside their homes and in some cases, they are even isolated in a separate room or hut. Such taboos and stigma make menstruation a cause of embarrassment and a hush-hush topic for most women in India.

The social obstructions contributing towards period poverty cannot go on without mentioning the link between the caste system in India and its repercussions on menstruating individuals. For thousands of years now Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been socially ostracised and suffered inhumanely at the hands of the patriarchal Brahmanic tradition. Despite the constitutional safeguards present so as to protect the interests of the aforementioned community, the rot of casteism and untouchability still runs deep in our society. Due to being socially marginalised, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes face rippling effects in their financial well-being as well.

A study by Ram et al. (2020) found that 41 per cent of women from scheduled tribes were in the poorest quintile, juxtaposed to only 9 per cent of general caste women. Coming from an economically weak household due to social exclusion stands in the way of availing menstrual products. This can be evidenced by the same study undertaken by Ram et al. (2020) which found out that although an average of 46 per cent of general caste women reported exclusive use of disposable absorbents, only 34.7 per cent of women from scheduled castes and 23 per cent of women from scheduled tribes reported exclusive use of disposable absorbents. The disparity was even more evident in central India where 33.2 per cent of women from general castes made exclusive use of disposable absorbents as opposed to 15.7 per cent scheduled caste and 9.4 per cent scheduled tribe women.

A study found that 71% of girls in India do not know about menstruation before their first period (Mahon et al., 2010). Hence, most girls tend to seek help from the women of their family i.e. their mothers, sisters, or grandmothers. But 70% of the women consider menstruation as “filthy”, further deepening the stigma in the minds of young girls. Mothers simply teach their daughters to use menstrual resources and the restrictions that will be imposed, leaving young girls in a dilemma of what is happening to them. Thus, having no knowledge of this natural biological phenomenon makes the first period for most of the girls a very horrific experience. Many girls feel fear, anxiety, stress, and perplexity after menarche. It is reported that most of the young girls did not know the biological reason behind their periods and considered it a disease. The hush around the topic refrains women from seeking out help and resources. Because of the social stigma, most women consider their monthly periods as an embarrassment and try to hide them from society. Forget about other people, women themselves do not discuss their menstrual problems with each other.

Due to the lack of awareness about menstrual hygiene and various products, women especially in the rural areas generally do not look out for products like sanitary napkins, tampons, cups, etc but stick to their traditional methods of using old rags, cloths, hay, ash, etc. Those who are aware of the products also avoid buying them because they have to be purchased from male salesmen. It creates a feeling of discomfort with a fear of judgment and harassment.

Most women have a negative association with menstruation not only because it is painful or inconvenient but also because of the social stigma and restrictions imposed on them. With a lack of education, exclusion from various activities, and stigma attached to menstruation, it becomes extremely difficult for people to access menstrual hygiene products.

#### **2.4.0 Technological**

Disposable sanitary napkins are costly and come at an unaffordable price for the lower strata of the country. One of the prime reasons for it is the high production costs due to the lack of domestic technological advancements. Currently, the sanitary napkins are manufactured through high-cost machines which are priced around 75 lakhs to 2.5 crores rupees (MSME - GOI, 2020), as a result, the pads come at high prices as well. Moreover, these machines are generally operated by multinational companies which have the biggest share in the market of the menstrual product. A study was undertaken by Netscribes (India) Pvt Ltd (2021), which found out that in India the menstrual market is dominated by several companies such as Procter & Gamble Hygiene and Health Care Limited, Johnson & Johnson Private Limited, Unicharm Private Limited, and Kimberly Clark Lever Private Limited; all are big MNC's houses deploying the aforementioned big-budget machines.

Arunachalam Muruganatham also known as the 'Pad man' of India came up with two models of machines to manufacture pads at low cost, the range of the machines varied from 1.37 lakhs to 2.37 lakhs depending on their operation. Mr Murganatham sets an example of the untapped technological potential the country possesses in order to tackle the issue of period poverty. There is a need to discover such technological alternatives to high-cost machines utilised by MNC's and give them an incentive to bring their operations to a macro level. Another technological hurdle that poses the problem of period poverty in India is the lack of proper disposal of used menstrual products as menstrual hygiene is not limited to the availability and affordability of resources but also adequate provisions for proper disposal of sanitary waste. The Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 by the Central Pollution Control Board gives several waste management options such as Low-cost, locally made incinerators, Electric incinerators, Deep Burial, etc., howbeit, lack of technical facilities and disposal systems aided with social stigma associated with menstruation continues to be an obstacle in the correct disposal of



sanitary waste in the country.

### **2.5.0 Environmental**

Period poverty is not just about unaffordable period products, it also focuses on the lack of basic sanitation and hygienic facilities. The frequency of changing products is an important indicator of menstrual hygiene and brings to focus the lack of sanitary facilities.

40% of all government schools lack a functioning common toilet and there are 636 million Indians who lack toilets, and more than 72% of rural people relieve themselves behind bushes, in fields, or by roadsides (Greetz et al., 2016). Most schools lacked water close to girls' toilets, none had soap, and few had to change facilities. WASH infrastructure specific for menstruating girls thus remains an unfulfilled component. Focus is not given to the lack of water and poor disposal options. This results in dirty toilets making MHM an unpleasant experience for girls, contributing to their absenteeism during menstruation (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine et al., 2016).

Most of the people from underprivileged strata live in houses that lack toilets or visit places like schools, workplaces, etc that lack public toilets. In such a case, disposing of a menstrual hygiene product is another added problem. The research found that almost every girl in rural India misses her school during her menstrual days due to a lack of toilets or a proper waste disposal system. In many not so well-developed places, women tend to either dump their used pads in the field or burn them all together after a complete cycle. Sometimes, these are even thrown into water bodies which contaminate the water.

Even when toilets are available, cultural practices and hygiene routines, as well as community attitudes related to menstruation, limit the use of existing toilets, particularly during menstruation (FSG, 2016). Thus, due to a lack of proper sanitation and waste management facilities, people generally tend to switch to their traditional methods rather than safer hygienic menstrual products.

### **2.6.0 Legal**

In the legal aspect of menstrual health management, the country has a long way to go to tackle the issue of period poverty. The needs of menstruating individuals have found little to no place in the legal framework of the country. Moreover, the existing policies such as the Shuchi scheme of the Swachh Bharat Mission's guidelines for menstrual hygiene are inadequate and need to be worked upon more. The laws for catering to the needs of menstruating individuals only exist in letter but not in spirit. The lack of toilets in the countryside or the absence of unisex washrooms for transgender individuals in almost all parts of the country is just another instance of the lack of implementation of the existing laws.

### **2.7.0 Ethical**

There is no shocking revelation about the fact that menstrual hygiene and education regarding the same are vitally important to eradicate the colossal problem of period poverty that continues to persist in the country. However, the shame intrinsic to the topic deters open conversations about the same and as a result, many individuals are devoid of menstrual education which is unequivocally a violation of basic human rights. The research by Mahon, T., & Fernandes, M. (2010) found that 71% of girls in India had no prior knowledge about menstruation before getting their periods which further evidence how unethical it is to deprive individuals of menstrual education. The state, the educational institutions, and families of individuals have a moral obligation towards young minds regarding educating them about the menstrual cycle and the need for proper sanitation during periods.

Depriving transgender individuals of menstrual educations and products because they do not fit into the binary gender norms is also extremely unethical as they have the same requirements as cisgender women. Transmen have shared their experience about sanitary products and have time and again made demands for "period-boxers" much like those made by the American Company "Seven Pyramids", as stated in an article by Rabindranath (2021). The same article sheds light on the sustained demands for gender-neutral bathrooms by trans and non-binary individuals, as the binary washroom system puts them in a dilemma and invalidates their gender identities which is just another instance of unethical erasure of menstrual needs of those who do not conform to the traditional binary notions of gender identities.

### **3. 0 The complications posed by the conventional products: Disposable Sanitary Napkins**

#### **3.1.0 Environmental Degradation**

The problems associated with menstrual hygiene not only limit themselves to the access of products and sanitation facilities but also the disposal techniques. With the increase in the usage of sanitary napkins in India, the grave issue of disposing of this hazardous waste is often overlooked.

A woman on average approximately uses 15000 sanitary pads or tampons in her life or we can say disposes of 125-150 kg of menstrual waste in her lifetime. Initially, pads and tampons were made majorly of cotton but in the need to create more durable and leak-proof products, brands started using greater amounts of plastic in both the pads and tampons. Over time, women happily started choosing these products over reusable ones without paying attention to the grave effects they will have on the environment. Each sanitary napkin takes appx 500-800 years to break down and it never truly decomposes because of the high amount of plastic used in it. Tampons take relatively less time but fall in the same category.

Data on menstrual waste management from the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (MDWS) shows that 28 per cent of such pads are thrown with routine waste, 28 per cent are thrown in open, 33 per cent are disposed of via burial and 15 per cent are burnt openly (Singh Sambyal et al., 2019). Although according to solid waste management rules, the menstrual product waste should be wrapped in paper and segregated in dry waste, people tend to not follow it. This exposes the sanitation workers to hazardous diseases like HIV, Hepatitis, etc.

Most of the waste that does not end up in landfills, goes into drains or water bodies. This not only contaminates the water but also is a great danger to marine life. The waste thrown openly again becomes a breeding ground for infections and can be consumed by street animals, thus eventually choking them. The waste disposed via burial on breaking down releases toxins and chemicals that contaminate the soil. The waste should be burnt in incinerators at 800 degrees Celsius according to WHO Standards but burning it openly is equally harmful as it releases dioxins and carcinogens in the atmosphere. While it is appreciable that people in India are opting for hygienic menstrual products, the detrimental effects that they have on the environment cannot be ignored. Thus, the issue of managing menstrual waste properly needs immediate attention.

### **3.2.0 Repercussions on the Health of Individuals**

The plastic used in sanitary napkins not only has a harmful effect on the environment but also on the user's health. The health effects are not seen immediately but are visible in the longer run. Most commercially available personal care products are made up of 90% plastics, dioxins, and other harmful chemicals. The synthetic sanitary pad may not only cause rashes, allergies, birth defects, cervical cancer but it will also lie in a landfill taking over 500 years to decompose. This is a lose-lose for the body and the environment (Kapoor, 2020).

All the sanitary napkins have to be changed within 4-6 hours depending on the flow of the women. If not, then the napkins can become a breeding ground for bacteria and cause infections and irritation. Apart from not following the basic hygiene practices, the major harmful effects on a woman's health are due to the various components of the sanitary napkin.

The cellulose gel that is a major part of the absorbent material is prone to cause cervical cancer. Moreover, dioxin that is used to bleach the absorbent part has been labelled as a carcinogen and pollutant by WHO. Dioxin mixed with blood through the vaginal membrane can disrupt hormonal balance. The plasticizers like BPA and synthetic linings of sanitary pads can result in an increased risk of exposure to bacteria and yeasts. Thus, leading to vaginal infections. Artificial fragrances or odours containing cheap harmful chemicals in the napkins are another major sources of vaginal irritation and allergy. These chemicals can cause complications in reproduction, to the extent of infertility (Kapoor, 2020). While modern women enjoy the comfort of sanitary products, little do they suspect the impending health threat that they are being exposed to is affecting their health.

### **4.0 Alternatives to disposable sanitary napkins: towards green menstruation**

Sanitary napkins are the most conventionally safe menstrual products that are used by menstruating individuals. However, they do pose environmental problems and health issues. One such study that talks about the detrimental consequences of using sanitary pads are by Muralidharan and WaterAid India (2018) stated that the sanitary pads may take over 500 years to decompose. Countless other studies further suggest moving away from sanitary napkins. A study was undertaken by Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and Youth Ki

Awaaz (2020) found out that 80.7% of menstruating individuals wished to move to eco-friendly sanitary products due to the environmental consequences of disposable sanitary napkins provided that the alternative options are affordable.

#### **4.1.0 Cotton Pads**

One environmentally friendly alternative to disposable sanitary pads is cloth pads. Preceding the use of disposable sanitary napkins, cloth pads were usually used by women in the past, and with time the option is gaining limelight again. There are several small-scale startups and NGOs that are promoting reusable sanitary cloth pads, such as Goonj and their “MY Pad” initiative under which they have reached out to 150,000 women and provided them with cloth pads. There always has been a discussion around the affordability and accessibility of cloth pads, however, one must keep in mind that most of the clothed sanitary napkins are reusable and can be washed again. A pack of 7 cotton pads by the company EcoFemme costs around Rs 1,500. The pads can be washed 75 times and can be used for up to 5 years if cared for properly. Although the cost of a one-time use of a single pad might be a rupee or two higher than the disposable plastic sanitary napkins, after doing the cost-benefit analysis cotton cloth pads are more preferable as they are eco-friendly and a healthier option (Singh Sambyal et al., 2019). Moreover, the production of cloth cotton pads generates more employment opportunities juxtaposed to the manufacturing of plastic sanitary napkins.

#### **4.2.0 Menstrual Cups**

Another reliable and healthier menstrual product is the menstrual cup. Despite their long existence menstrual cups are not as conventionally used due to the unacceptability of inserting them in the vagina in different regions and cultures in the world, especially in India. However, it was found out that menstrual cups seem to be an effective and safe alternative to sanitary napkins and relatively conventional as they have to be emptied every 4-12 hours depending on menstrual flow and capacity of the cup having a decade long life expectancy usually (Van Eijk, A et al., 2019). The same study also concluded, “An economic advantage of a menstrual cup emerged in qualitative studies, with participants (and families) citing monthly cost savings from not needing

to purchase pads or soap for laundry.” The cost of a menstrual cup in India ranges from 150-2500 Rupees depending upon the company. The initial cost of menstrual cups may be high for individuals but in the long run, have the highest benefits in contrast to other products.

Some other biodegradable sanitary pads and tampons may be at the costlier end of sanitary products but have proven to be more healthy and eco-friendly juxtaposed to plastic sanitary napkins. There is a need to spread awareness about such products and their benefits, if that is aided with subsidised prices of such products the consumers will have an incentive for availing alternative products.

## **5.0 Re-evaluation of Existing Infrastructure and Policies**

### **5.1.0 Restructuring Educational Institutions and their Infrastructure**

There have been numerous reports stating that solely making sanitary products would not suffice to combat period poverty in India. There is a need to bring about awareness and education on the same to propagate and encourage safe sanitary practices as well as to ensure acceptance of menstruation.

Research from Sivakami et al. (2019) showed that from a survey collected from three states only 34% of girls were reported to have received education on menstrual hygiene in schools, 82% of these girls were educated about the same during hygiene lessons separated from boys. This raises two issues that have a rippling effect on the societal view of menstruation. By segregating children on binary gender lines the education system streamlines menstruation as a “women’s issue”, and as discussed earlier this leads to social and political problems of period poverty. However, the lack of awareness and reserving menstrual education for girls is not the only problem posed by the education sector. The infrastructural facilities in educational institutes are far lacking and need to be improved upon. The aforementioned report (M Sivakam et al., 2019) also showed evidence of inadequate facilities for availing sanitary napkins, medicines for pain relief, washrooms, and proper disposal systems for discarding used sanitary products.

## **5.2.0 Critical Appraisal of existing governmental policies - a need for reformation**

### **5.2.1 The Shuchi Scheme**

The Shuchi Scheme was started in 2013-14 by the Central Government aiming to distribute free sanitary pads, claiming that every girl student will receive a pack of pads regularly. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under Shuchi 1.4 crore, adolescent girls were provided with 4.82 crore packs of “Freedays”. However, in 2017 it was reported by the leading newspaper outlet - “The Hindu”, that out of 97.22 Crore Rupees required to distribute sanitary napkins to 36.59 lakh adolescent girls the budgetary allocation was only 48.26 Crore Rupees. This led to two alternative problems, the first being that the pads were only distributed for five months out of the twelve months promised. On the other hand, the quality of the pads handed out was subpar as reported by Kavya Menon.

Governments at the central and state levels should be held accountable for the proper implementation of the Shuchi scheme as it is the first step, but not the sole, towards achieving an adequate menstrual hygiene system in the country. Moreover, the quality of the sanitary napkins should also be taken into account. The government can opt for introducing a policy for distributing cotton cloth pads which will be made with the help of unemployed individuals to generate employment and provide good quality pads to people benefitting from the scheme much like the NGO Goonj.

### **5.2.2 Swachh Bharat Mission guidelines for Menstrual Hygiene Management**

Swachh Bharat Mission is the first large-scale initiative taken up by the government to eradicate the taboo surrounding menstruation and aims to achieve menstrual hygiene management. However, a study was undertaken by Manorama S. & Desai R. (2020), which concluded that ‘A close reading of the SBA guidelines for MHM shows two critical gaps, namely (1) absence of culturally embedded gender-specific understandings of menstruation and (2) linkages with public health’. They stated that the MHM guidelines of the program fail to establish a connection between the menstrual cycle and basic health as it views Menstrual Hygiene Management in a restrictive manner failing to recognise the psychological and other sanitary needs of people during the menstrual cycle.

Thus, the guidelines of the Menstrual Hygiene Management under the Swachh Bharat Needs to be reviewed and need to be more inclusive of other factors rather than limiting to only one aspect of the issue. The policy should aim to provide psychological aid and other needed infrastructural facilities to individuals rather than solely sticking to providing sanitary napkins.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The shackles of patriarchy, taboos, social stigma and restrictions of society have bound women both physically and mentally. This promotes gender inequality by placing a biological process into the categories of shame, stigma, and taboo. Most people are unaware not only of the safer menstrual hygiene practices but also of various menstrual hygiene products like sanitary napkins, tampons, cloth pads, cups, etc. This is mainly because menstruation has always been perceived as a hush-hush issue and never discussed openly, not even in our education system. Thus, the lack of awareness and education promotes the stigma and taboo associated with menstruation. Moreover, due to the extremely high costs of menstrual products, it becomes almost impossible for the underprivileged strata of society to afford these products. People prefer buying food items for their families over menstrual products. Period poverty is one of the most neglected issues in our policymaking. Sadly, menstruation is considered a “women’s issue” and it is brushed under the carpet every time. Though some policies enable the people to be provided with subsidised products, there is a lack of reach and inconsistency in the quality of the products.

Other factors like lack of access to proper sanitation facilities and proper disposal methods have added to the misery of menstruating people. They feel constantly anxious about their privacy, changing their menstrual products, sufficient water, hygienic facilities, and harassment from other people. Most women are under the constant pressure of hiding their menstruation cycle from society. This affects their mental well-being.

Depriving people of Menstrual Hygiene Management facilities is morally wrong and a violation of human rights. It is the right of every person to have access to clean water, soap, toilet, products, and disposal facilities. The stigma around the topic and the traditional notions of gender further impedes providing adequate menstrual facilities to transgender individuals who are very much a part of the menstruating age groups of the country. The hush-hush around the



topic also limits the technological advancements in the field of menstruation and leads to a lack of research and innovation in the sector. The plethora of reasons stated above clearly makes it difficult for people to easily access menstrual products. Thus, not only affecting their physical well-being but also their mental well-being.

The paper also talks about how the use of conventional sanitary products like pads and tampons can have an effect not only on the environment but also on the health of the user. Studies have shown that due to a lack of proper disposal facilities, soiled napkins are a great threat to the environment. The menstrual waste is either openly thrown, dumped in water bodies or openly burned due to lack of awareness and negligence of the people and government. Thus releasing harmful toxins into the environment. And, exposing sanitation workers to various diseases like HIV, etc. Studies have also shown that various carcinogens and dioxides present in the plastic and materials used in the sanitary pads have had long-term effects on the user's health. They are more prone to infections, allergies, reproductive disorders, cervical cancer, etc.

Therefore, to create an effective holistic menstrual hygiene management system, we need to focus on various aspects. Moving towards green menstruation i.e. consciously choosing eco-friendly products like cotton pads, cups or biodegradable pads can help in improving the health and environment both. There is an immediate need to spread awareness and education about various menstrual hygiene practices and also make them inclusive to all genders of menstruating people. Menstruation awareness should not be limited to menstruating people but of per cent society in general to fight the stigma and taboos associated with it. The infrastructure also needs to be improved by ensuring proper sanitation facilities like toilets, clean water, soap, and menstrual waste disposal are available to all. The guidelines of current menstrual policies should be reviewed and more policies should be focussed on inclusivity, access, affordability, and proper disposal of facilities.

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