

Issues of Menstrual Health, Hygiene, and Sanitation of Women

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Abstract

Puberty or adolescence age is one of the important stages of anyone's life. This is the phase of life that develops the reproductive system in the body. Menstruation is a biological process of a woman's body that occurs approximately once a month. It is the stage when physical, social, and behavioural growth happens in a woman. Menstrual health is one of the major concerns in reproductive health, which has a greater impact on half of a woman's life span. Menstrual health, hygiene, and sanitation are associated with women's physical, mental, psychological, and socio-economic conditions. Menstrual health is dependent on various factors like social, political, economic, religious, cultural, educational, employment access, affordability of health care, etc. Till today menstrual health and hygiene are not considered a priority to deal with, discuss, or discourse. There is lacuna in the knowledge of menstruation in society which leads to unhealthy, unsafe, and unclean practices. Therefore, it is important to create awareness about menstrual health and hygiene to overcome unhealthy menstrual management, beliefs, taboos, and reservations about menstruation. How people and society treat and deal with menstruation tells how girls and women are treated in society. So the study on these issues throws some light on the condition of women in society.

Keywords: Adolescence, Menstruation, Health, Hygiene,

Introduction

"Menstruation does not make the woman the other: It is because she is the other that menstruation is a curse." Elizabeth Arvenda Kissling

The English term menstruation or menses is derived from the Latin word 'Mensis,' which means 'month,' and from the Greek word 'mene,' which means 'moon.' Arnold L Lieber, in his book, *The Lunar Effect, Biological Tides and Human Emotions*, notes that almost every aspect of human life is affected by the moon, including the menstrual cycle in women. (Sridhar P.25)

One of the names for menstruation in Sanskrit is 'rajasraava,' which loosely means 'flow of raja.' Though the term 'raja' here is often translated as 'blood, it may as well refer to 'rajas guna.' Rajas is one of the three Gunas. It denotes flow, movement, passion, energy, etc., and imparts a dynamic nature to the individual, but at the same time, it also increases a person's bondage to the worldly

cycle. In the physical body, 'rajasraava' represents the flow of menstrual blood, which contains blood, cervical mucus, vaginal secretions, and endometrial tissue that are being thrown out of the physical body. (Sridhar P.33)

James G Bailey, in his article 'By the Light of the Moon: Ayurveda, Yoga, and Menstruation,' writes about the connection between the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle as enunciated by the Ayurvedic texts: 'The phases of the moon and the constant transit from one to the other and back again are known as the lunation cycle.

Menstruation is when part of the endometrium, a mucous membrane filled with blood, is shed and expelled from the uterus without a fertilized egg; the membrane serves no purpose. This process involving the endometrium, which prepares the uterus for a potential pregnancy, occurs approximately once a month. It is an experience shared by more than two billion people in the world. Every day 800 million people menstruate. (Dahlqvist P. 9)

Health Defined

Health is not merely the absence of illness or any kind of deformity it's a multi-dimensional aspect of life which includes physical, mental, psychological, spiritual, and social health. Physical Health is the body's ability to function normally. Mental Health is the ability to manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Psychological Health is feeling good about oneself, feelings of fear, love, anger, jealousy, guilt, or worry. Etc. Social Health is our relationships and how we communicate with those around us.

Menstrual Health

Puberty or adolescence age is one of the important stages of anyone's life. This is the phase of life that develops the reproductive system in the body, and menstrual health is one of the major concerns in reproductive health, which has a greater impact on half of a woman's life span. Menstrual health is dependent on various factors like social, political, economic, religious, cultural, educational, employment access affordability of health care, etc.

Menstrual Health problems

Menstrual ill health takes different ways and different forms. Menstruation distress is associated with physical distress, toilet and sanitation issues, and depressed mood. The Menstruation discomforts include heavy bleeding, protection problems, leaking, and stain problems. The physical problem a woman faces during her menses takes the form of cramps, headaches, backaches, fatigue, dysmenorrhoea, stomach bloating, breast tenderness and swelling, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, pain in the lower back and pelvic region, improper use and maintenance of menstruation protection like clothes, pads, tampons menstrual cups may lead to urinary and other infections. Psychological problems of menstruation are anxiety, mood swings, peevishness, irritation, anxiety, embarrassment feeling, worthlessness, and hopelessness. Shy, self-doubting, low self-esteem, etc., The Social Health problems during menstruation are irritation, difficulty in accepting assigned roles, role limitation, dysfunction in family life, strained relationships, etc.,

Menstrual Hygiene

Hygiene is the condition, healthy practices, and etiquette that maintain the overall health and total well-being of menstruating women by preventing diseases that are caused due to unhealthy and unclean practices. So it is maintaining menstrual health through neatness and cleanliness.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) – What is it?

The comprehensive approach that includes a variety of menstrual-related topics and components is known as menstrual hygiene management. Here, women and adolescent girls can obtain and utilize menstrual products and materials, or they may collect menstrual blood. There is also enough infrastructure in place to allow them to change menstrual products in privacy at all times and at any place. It also includes having a place to dispose of their used menstrual products and a means to clean their bodies and menstrual materials. Beyond menstrual products and facilities, it encompasses an environment in which women and menstruating girls have access to fundamental knowledge and training so they can manage their periods with dignity, honour, and without fear.

Menstrual Sanitation

According to WHO and UNICEF: "Improved" sanitation facilities, include pour flush or flush toilets into a sewer, ventilated improved pits, and composting toilets, through the use of which pathogenic waste is likely to be removed from human contact. (Burt,Z., Nelson, K., & Ray, I. (2016). Inadequate access to basic sanitation services prevents the realization of a range of human rights and gender equality. The sanitation that serves all genders equally must be designed and planned explicitly for the unique needs of women and girls.

Issues related to Menstrual Health Hygiene and Sanitation

The norms and menstrual taboos in society impact the health, emotional and mental state, and day-to-day life of all menstruating women. The gender–unfriendly school culture and infrastructure and the lack of adequate menstrual protection alternatives and/or clean, safe, and private sanitation facilities for female teachers and girls undermine the right to privacy. There are health and hygiene issues also to consider relating to girls and menstruation. Over 77% of menstruating girls and women in India use old clothes, which are often reused. Further, 88% of women in India sometimes resort to using ashes, newspapers, dried leaves, and husk sand to aid absorption.[12] Poor protection and inadequate washing facilities may increase susceptibility to infection, with the odor of menstrual blood putting girls at risk of being stigmatized. (Garg and Anand P.185)

Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) is essential to the well-being and empowerment of women and adolescent girls. On any given day, more than 300 million women worldwide are menstruating. In total, an estimated 500 million lack access to menstrual products and adequate facilities for menstrual hygiene management (MHM). To effectively manage their menstruation, girls, and women require access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, affordable and appropriate menstrual hygiene materials, information on good practices, and a supportive environment where they can manage menstruation without embarrassment or stigma. (World Bank Menstrual Health and Hygiene May 12, 2022)

Why menstrual Health Hygiene and Sanitation is important..?

According to the UN General Assembly (2010 & 2015), safe sanitation is a human need and access to safe sanitation is a human right. Even in this day and age, most nations lack adequate and clean sanitary infrastructure. The majority of people still use dirty, unsanitary latrines, shared sanitation, and open defecation in rural areas. The condition of women using open defecation is miserable as they have to wait until nightfall to cover their bodies because of shyness and modesty. When the women are menstruating, the situation gets worse even. This makes the women in rural areas to refrain from taking sufficient water and food. Because of this, women in rural areas tend not to eat enough food or drink enough water. Due

to these habits, they become more susceptible to kidney-related issues, malnourishment, dehydration, and Urinary Tract Infections.

Though menstruation is a normal biological process for most women and adolescent girls, in most countries they still face many health, hygiene, and sanitary problems along with a lack of basic facilities and infrastructure. They also experience discrimination, stigma, seclusion, taboos, and imposition of discriminatory social norms just because they menstruate.

“Our bodies are celebrated when we bear children. But menstruation - a prerequisite for pregnancy– is something that we are expected to hide. Menstruating bodies quickly turn from miracle makers into polluters. The stain becomes a mark of shame.” (Anna DASHLQVIST P.10)

When the general well-being of women and menstruating girls is considered it is significantly impacted by cultural taboos and lack of awareness about menstrual health hygiene and sanitation. Leading to major health issues like pelvic inflammation, fungal infection, bacterial infection, Urinary Tract infection (UTI) toxic shock syndrome, etc. (Toxins released into the bloodstream by some bacterial infections subsequently reach the body's organs, serious harm and disease may result from this.)

Looking at Gender Equality, Menstruation creates apprehension in the minds of young girls because menstruation opens the door to sexuality and pregnancy; on the other hand, boys, when they enter puberty they, won't have any fears or apprehensions about their biological change (Houppert, K. 1999).

Sanitation needs are to be gender specific as there is a difference in the physiology and biology of each gender. Gender equality in sanitation cannot be accomplished solely through facilities and sanitation programmes but our social views, norms, taboos, and mindset about menstruation also have to be changed as well. Provisions for sanitary pads and adequate facilities for sanitation and washing should be made available at schools, colleges, and at workplaces with the gender perspective.

On the Socio-Economic sphere, many girls miss classes and drop out of schools and colleges due to lack of adequate menstrual management systems and sanitation. According to studies on Menstrual Hygiene Management, some of the main reasons for girls not attending schools/colleges and women not attending work are lack of gender-friendly and private sanitation and hygiene facilities, lack of menstrual products, non-availability of spaces for cleaning and changing their menstrual materials. As well as the cultural and societal stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation. This has a completely negative effect on the socioeconomic condition of the society.

Examining the problems related to the environment caused by improper and careless handling of menstruation and menstrual products because of insufficient facilities for disposing of used menstrual items, such as pads, tampons, cups, clothes, etc., results in environmental degradation. When pads and other used materials are thrown or burned in open public places, it pollutes the air, the earth, and the sewer system. It can also cause blockages and breaks.

Conclusion

Managing menstruation is a complex and complicated process for any girl or woman. Managing menstrual health, hygiene, and sanitation is not the sole responsibility of a woman, but it requires certain conditions and responsibilities from society, the government, and other national and international organizations as well. There is lacuna in the knowledge of menstruation in society which leads to ignorance of scientific

facts and reality. So it is important to create awareness to overcome the prejudice, stigma, superstitions, beliefs, and reservations about menstruation.

There is a need for multi-sectoral approaches to deal with menstrual health and hygiene. We need to link physical infrastructure and water and sanitation projects to health education and reproductive health programs and address the issue in more holistic ways. Menstruation is nothing but a very normal biological phenomenon, and adolescent girls and women should understand that they have the power of procreation only because of this virtue. (Garg and Anand P.186)

Menstruation is one of the important symbols of femininity. So how people and society treat and deal with menstruation tells how girls and women are treated in society. Proper Menstrual Health Management (MHM) hygiene and safe sanitation are the basic rights of a woman for her health, dignity, and gender equality. The talks and movements about menstrual management have been budding in recent years among NGOs, activists, media, etc. Thus the issues related to menstruation are coming to the limelight slowly.

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