

Menstruation: Role of NGO'S in Promoting Menstrual Health and Hygiene in Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a normal biological process. Around 1.8 billion people menstruate. Menstrual health is very crucial for woman's well-being but socio-cultural customs and institutional biases prevent women from getting the care they need regarding their menstrual health. Like many other countries, menstruation is still considered a taboo in Indian society. Many cultural and social practices related to menstruation create major hurdle in ensuring that the girls are given proper knowledge on menstrual health and hygiene. However, change can be seen in the menstrual hygiene management over the past few years in India. National family and health survey found that 58 percent of Indian women (15-24 yrs) use a hygienic sanitary protection, increase from 12 percent using pads in 2010. In Jammu and Kashmir, 50.5 percent of women aged between 15-24 use sanitary protections, an increase from 48 percent using in 2015-2016. Along with number of initiatives taken by government like Menstrual Hygiene Scheme, there are number of NGO's working across India to provide health, hygiene and comfort to women, especially in rural areas. The present paper has highlighted the various NGO's working in Jammu and Kashmir, which played a crucial role in promoting awareness regarding menstrual health and hygiene, providing sanitary products at door steps and breaking culture of silence that surround menstruation over the years. Results show that there are 5 major NGO's that are working in Jammu and Kashmir emphasizing menstrual awareness and providing hygiene products to girls especially in rural areas. These NGO's are playing a crucial role in tackling menstrual health challenges bringing together education and awareness on menstruation, providing hygiene products and promoting right to health, dignity and gender equality.

Keywords: *Menstruation, NGO's, Jammu and Kashmir, Taboo, Sanitary Pads.*

Menstruation is a natural biological process, in which blood from the uterus exits through vagina. It first occurs in girls usually between the age of 11 to 14 years (menarche) and until she reaches the menopause somewhere in her 40's (UNICEF India, 2008). Though menstruation is a natural process but still it is considered as unclean and dirty. Menstruation is not an unusual or rare experience; but in many cultures it is a private and largely hidden one. It is associated with various misconceptions and practices which results into adverse health outcomes (Omidvar and Begum, 2010). Across different

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cultures around the world, various restrictions are imposed during menstruation. Women are not allowed to touch sacred things, to enter kitchen, cannot touch pickle, cannot sleep on the bed. Even in some cultures women lives in menstrual huts during periods and are not allowed to utter the word periods. Menstruating women and menstrual blood is considered as dangerous, poisonous and polluting (Jamadar, 2012).

The menarche is a significant marker of the life cycle of women that may mark the physical transition of becoming a women- as a rite of passage. Earlier this rite of passage was usually presented to young women through clear framework of meanings and ritual practices. But in modern industrial societies the dominant frameworks of meaning have fractured and hence the menarche is experienced in complex and ambiguous terms. Women are exposed to range of discourses that are often in tensions with each other, like those of consumerism, of health professionals, of teachers, of the mothers knowledge and beliefs and of peer groups. The reinforcement of taboos concerned with secrecy and pollution present in advertising, serve to delegitimise the everyday experience of many women and conversely legitimize the stigmatic identity (Britton. J. C 1996).

Menstruation is not an unusual or rare experience; but, in many cultures it is a private and largely hidden one. Menstruation was literally unmentionable because there are no words in the man made language which could be used to describe the experience. The only discourse which they can use to describe their experience is medical one which describes pain, distress and untidiness. Unless these girls have period pain, or difficulties obtaining sanitary towel, they have nothing to say (Walker, 1997). Jamadar (2012), argues that there exists an unspoken “culture of silence” with regard to menstruation. Restrictions imposed during menstruation have excluded women from their daily activities. This exclusion is every month’s exclusion for most of the women around the world.

In the cross-cultural studies of many societies, everything associated with menstruation has been simply seen as negative. Menstruating women and menstrual blood have been identified as being dangerous, poisonous and polluting. Menstrual women were believed to contaminate whatever they come in contact with: horses, food, hunting gear, weapons, canoes, water, and in particular the wealth and spiritual items of men. They were believed to spoil men’s “luck” in hunting and gambling. Most of the cultures have different beliefs and myths related to menstruation. Some reach a level of especially labeling it as “the curse”, “on the rag”, “weeping womb”, “bloody scourge”, “the red plague”, “under the weather”, and “being unwell” (Costos et al, 2002).

People do not talk about it openly as it is matter of disgrace. On the one hand women bodies are celebrated when they bear children. But menstruation a prerequisite for pregnancy is something that we are expected to hide. Menstruating bodies quickly turns from miracle makers into polluting. The stain becomes the mark of shame (walker, 1997).

Menstruation is not just a biological phenomenon but a social one and continues to be a barrier to gender equality. Menstrual health outcomes of young girls and women are deeply impacted by their education level, economic status and geographical location. In the recently released national family health survey-5, in India in the age group of 15-24 yrs, 64% of women use sanitary pads, 50% use cloth and 15% use locally prepared napkins. Overall, 78% of women in this age group use a hygiene method of menstrual protection. However, the use of unhygienic menstrual methods of protection among women of rural area is almost three times that of their urban counterparts. Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, 60% of

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women use cloth for menstrual protection. J & K also ranks lowest in north India with only 74.5% of women using hygienic methods for menstrual protection (National Family Health-5).

In recent times, Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) has witnessed an encouraging improvement in asserting the need for breaking the silence that has strengthened the highly integral patriarchal socio-cultural system in India. Arunachalam Muruganatham, the real *Padman* of India is one such person who challenged the regressive taboos that surround menstruation. Not only giving women a chance to become entrepreneurs, but also helped women to challenge the social outlook. The documentary, *Period: End of Sentence* won an academy award for best documentary short in 2018. the film, tells the story of women workers in Hapur village who develops low-cost sanitary napkins thus gaining both empowerment and employment. Similarly, Initiatives like the great **WASH yatra**, books like **Menstrupedia**, **Code Red Project** and people and organizations like **Shyam Sunder Bedekar**, **Maya Vishwakarma**, **Roshini foundation**, **Mythri speaks** has placed emphasis exclusively on de-stigmatizing menstruation to move forward and reclaim the fundamental right to life, equality, and dignity for women. Hashtags on social media like #happytobleed #periodsarenotaninsult are part of menstrual activism challenging and eradicating stereotypes of women's bodies, through blogging or posting pictures. It has allowed young women to cast normal female bodily processes in a more positive light (Irine, 2015).

The work around MHM by individuals and NGO's involves breaking the silence around menstruation, normalizing the periods so as to create a conducive environment for girls to be comfortable, building capacities of community level health workers to address menstrual health issues, making mothers aware about their menstrual health, making low cast and environmentally friendly options for managing menstrual flow available in the community. The NGO's work with adolescents, their parents, teachers, community-based leaders and the relevant line departments. Social businesses are also playing a major role in production of a variety of sanitary napkins. The options could vary from low cost disposable sanitary napkins to reusable cloth napkins. Vatsalya, Jatan Sansthan, Aaina, Goonj, Eco-femme, Gandhigram are some NGO's and social businesses involved in MHM at national level (MHM, 2019).

Similarly various NGO's and social Businesses in J&K are involved in menstrual hygiene management making people aware about menstrual health and hygiene. NGO's like Disha Foundation, Live For Others- Being Helpful, Aaradhana- a Ray Of Hope, Samast Eco-Alternatives and people like Irfana Zargar, Peerzada Aquib Nazar, Dr. Augfeen Nisar are the Pioneers in this Direction Of Menstrual Health And Hygiene Awareness.

These people and NGO's are creating menstrual awareness campaigns to make people aware about menstrual health and hygiene. They provide information to dispel myths and taboos surrounding this issue. They provide them with know-how to handle menstruation improve knowledge of personal hygiene and boost confidence by answering unanswered questions through interactive and engaging training methods.

Social business like Samast Eco- Alternatives in Jammu not only creating awareness regarding menstrual health and hygiene but also providing to women of rural areas for sanitary napkin production like Reusable cloth napkins. Irfana Zargar, hands out free sanitary pads to young girls in Kashmir city. Peerzada Aquib Nazar has broken the record by supplying organic sanitary pads across the Kashmir valley at nominal prices.

Therefore, these initiatives reflect a change that is coming from within. An informed discourse around menstrual hygiene has gained momentum in J&K. It has allowed young women to cast normal female bodily processes in a more positive light in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir.

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Conflict of Interest

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