

# Menstrual Hygiene: Exploring an Emerging Dimension of Women Empowerment

**Dr. Jyotsana**

*Assistant Professor, Guru Kashi University  
Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda, Punjab*

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## Abstract

Millions of women across the globe experience ache, uneasiness, anxiety, and isolation every month during their menstrual periods. Girls in poor countries often use proxy material such as mud, leaves, or animal skins as sanitary products when menstruating as they have limited access to sanitary products. There is usually no adequate or sustainable infrastructure for waste disposal, washing, safe, private, and accessible toilets, and soap and water for washing clothes. Many adolescent girls miss school during their periods and educational opportunities for adolescent girls in rural areas where resources are scarce are lost because of social norms. Education is one of the primary condition for women empowerment and it enables the individuals to respond to the challenges in their lives. This study explores the linkages between women empowerment & utilization of hygienic methods during menstruation.

**Keyword: Menstruation, Menstrual Hygiene, Education, Women Empowerment**

## Introduction

Empowering women has been very important issue in the modern world today. In order to achieve sustainable development, it is crucial. The overburdening of work, along with the lack of power and influence that women face in all parts of the world, poses threats to women's lives, health and well-being. Empowering women means enabling them to gain economic independence, participate in politics and contribute to social development. Having a sense of empowerment allows one to recognize one's identity and abilities in every sphere of life. In order for people to be free, they must have greater access to knowledge and resources, to make their own decisions without being fettered by custom, belief, and practices.

A woman's empowerment facilitates her development as a person and as a society, while fostering in them a sense of sensitivity towards society's problems. There is a need to take specific measures to ensure that women are educated, healthy, and employed. Empowering women economically is critical to improving the female/male ratio, but education is essential to empower women economically.

Women are exploited and abused due to a lack of education. Illiterate women lack access to modern knowledge economy and technologies. Access to this knowledge would have improved their quality of life and enable them to adapt to social and economic changes. Education and literacy are the only means to give women access to the Indian Constitution and legislation that are meant to

support them. By educating women, we can contribute to the building of nations. In India and across the world, a small percentage of women currently hold powerful positions, but if more women are educated, there is still room for improvement. The conditions of the globe will probably improve with more women assuming leadership roles in a male-dominated political arena. What women desire is gender equity. And empowerment is the means of achieving it with dignity.

Menstrual-related school absences were also reported by Plan International UK. “One in ten girls aged 14–21 years in the UK can’t regularly afford menstrual products, forcing some to stay home from school, and 42% have resorted to using makeshift sanitary ware such as paper and socks.”

According to the Study of The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2018 “Approximately one third of girls in south Asia were unaware of their first period, and nearly half of Iranian girls believed menstruation was a disease”. It further highlights that “In the UK, nearly 80% of adolescent girls have experienced concerning menstrual symptoms (such as unusually heavy or irregular bleeding) but hadn’t consulted a health professional; 27% of those said they were too embarrassed to discuss the topic. The rooted silence surrounding periods is putting lives at risk.”

### **Education and Empowerment**

Women have been denied knowledge, opportunities for equal employment and power, status, control, decisions-making capabilities, self-knowledge as a productive tool for child development because of patriarchy. Because to societal norms, poverty, public awareness, reproductive health, poverty and religious beliefs, women lack influence in our nation. They do not have decision making powers. Thus, when a woman feels helpless, her self-worth and confidence are damaged.

Most of the women living in rural areas are isolated, fragmented and lack communication and sharing abilities. Educating the women will enable them to take more decisions and increase their participation. A person’s ability to achieve his or her goals and objectives depends on education to attain equal opportunity and status.

### **Education**

It is an effective instrument for lowering inequality as it can empower individuals to become independent. Since education enables women to take on any challenges, question their old roles, and pursue new interests, it is often seen as a significant step toward their empowerment. Education also helps to change their social position. In order to improve their livelihoods, women are empowered and their capacities are built, providing them with options for acquiring information and learning. Only when women are educated and empowered can we attain the status of a developed nation.

### **Education and Menstruation**

Millions of women across the globe experience ache, uneasiness, anxiety, and isolation every month during their menstrual periods. Girls in poor countries often use proxy material such as mud, leaves, or animal skins as sanitary products when menstruating as they have limited access to sanitary products. There is usually no adequate or sustainable infrastructure for waste disposal, washing, safe, private, and accessible toilets, and soap and water for washing clothes. Many teenage girls are forced by the circumstances to leave the school during their period due to a lack of facilities and fear of discussing about their menstruation. A quarter of the education opportunities for adolescent girls in rural areas where resources are scarce are lost because of social norms. Women’s menstruation is often viewed as a dirty, shameful weakness, fostering taboos and superstitions, this has been the case passed down from generation to generation. Women and girls who are menstruating are still often banned from the kitchen, the crop fields, and places of worship.

During field work in the Bharmour's tribal region of Himachal Pradesh, researcher visited 15 institutes of education including schools and found that most of the menstruation taboos are still prevalent in their society. From not entering the kitchen to prohibited entry to places of worship to sleeping in a different bed to not touching the pickle, all were found to be followed in a strict to lenient manner. Even though most of the girls use clean cloths, they still consider sanitary pads as a hygienic option and cloth as unhygienic. The further investigation into the reason why cloth is considered unhygienic, the answer came as a surprise. One of the respondents said "cloth is unhygienic because the teacher said so". other quoted "because it came in packets" and "pads are distributed by govt. not cloth, govt only provides hygienic material". Even in the session organized on menstruation the focus was on the use of pads and not on how can a cloth be a hygienic sanitary material. The Govt policies focus on providing low cost or free disposable sanitary pads which is not a sustainable solution for girls in this tribal area. These girls belong to a lower economic group and commercial sanitary pads are not an affordable option for them while the quality of low-cost sanitary pads is poor. But the concerning issue about these sanitary pads is their disposal. Most of these pads are non-biodegradable few are biodegradable but taking minimum of six months is appropriate condition to dispose. Incinerators installed in schools are either not installed yet or are not in a working condition. In a few schools they are placed in an area where girls don't want to go because of privacy issues.

On the other hand, traditionally, used cloth is easily available and pocket friendly. A cloth is also a hygienic option when washed properly with soap & water and sun dried in an open. It is considered to be a more sustainable option in this setting. But using cloth has also few drawbacks. Girls are hesitant to dry cloth used during menses in open due to the fear that someone might see it and do black magic or curse them with infertility or bad health.

Taboos related to menstruation, superstition and the unavailability of good & cost effective sanitary products sometimes led to girls missing out a few days in schools. Researcher found most of the girls do not miss their school due to menstruation but they would definitely miss the classes and would leave for home if they started menstruation in school. This is also the case even if they have to travel for an hour or more to reach home. For these girls this, the girls stated multiple reasons like unavailability of pads in schools or even nearby area, lack of space in toilet, inadequate lightning etc. More over if they would reach home before other, they can manage to hide it from their peers. Researcher also found that toilets are not up to the mark. Even though toilets are separate for both girls and boys but they mostly have only one cubical which is small and there is no or less light in the cubical which makes it difficult to see stains or check the soiled cloth or pad. Cubicles do not have stored water and mug inside, only one school out of 12 have regular water supply inside. Handwashing station are always outside the toilet and rarely have soap available. Girls while on their periods avoid using toilet for the above reason.

Adolescent girls need the support from governments so that they can access affordable sanitary products, have access to sanitary products that fit their needs, and to find gender equity at the government level. In addition to community leaders, health workers, and teachers, Teaching parents and other family members about local customs and superstitions that may be harming women and girls unintentionally as they are in the best position to eliminate the stigma around menstruation. But education is key to making social change sustainable. It is crucial to educate both girls and boys on menstruation and reproductive health, so they can speak comfortably and confidently about periods and sexual health.

There are health and education issues associated with menstruation. Women are reluctant to return to school due to reasons such as embarrassment, inconvenience, and ignorance related to menstruation, both intermittently as well as permanently. As the argument goes, menstruation

causes young adolescents in developing countries to leave education resulting in a decrease in their education and their future prospects. Menstruation is therefore perceived as a hygiene issue and a barrier to health and empowerment for young girls.

Women's menstruation and the notion of menstrual hygiene seem to be the greatest problem for girls, since it leads to absenteeism and sometimes even dropouts from school. Menstruation may not be the sole reason but it adds up to many other reasons like early marriage, sexualization of girls who have attained menarche, parents' worries for their daughter's wellbeing as they have to travel to remote areas to reach school, failure in a class due to burden of household work means an end to their schooling etc.

Women and girls around the world are taking steps to educate, empower, and engage local leaders, communities, and families about menstruation, and to highlight their right to manage their periods hygienically. This is an indicator of good policy making and implementation. Globally, child and adolescent health, maternal health, and women's rights have advanced tremendously. Still, this issue of 300 million menstruators is buried low on the global health agenda.

In recent years, India has paid a great deal of attention to menstrual hygiene management in its policies. In 2014, as a component of the Rashtriya Kishor SwasthyaKaryakram (RKSK) initiative, the central government initiated a menstrual hygiene awareness campaign for teenage girls living in rural areas. It also focuses on ensuring access to, usage of, and safe disposal of high-quality sanitary napkins. However, there is a significant problem with the government's plans. Field workers sometimes lack a thorough understanding of menstrual hygiene and its dos and don'ts. Awareness efforts must take into consideration the fact that cultural views around menstruation differ across the nation.

## Conclusion

Menstruators may find it easier if sanitary pad vending machines are installed in restrooms. In order to enable girls and women to practice cleanliness during their periods at school, home, and at work, water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities are provided. For out of school girls provide sanitary napkins at an agganwadi or health center with facility to dispose of them properly. Tackling the shame, superstition and stigma around menstruation should be prioritized. Sustainable option must be promoted for the benefit of girls and the environment. Even after providing all these facilities, education and awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management products will enable the girls to make an informed decision that can boost their confidence and comfort level. In order to increase public awareness, frontline workers have to have access to scientific knowledge in a language they can comprehend.

Finally, we must rid ourselves of the shame that surrounds menstruation. Normalizing and celebrating menstruation as a sign of good health, which is important. Numerous studies have indicated that education correlates positively with determinants that lead to women's empowerment. A healthy and confident girl in school performing well in her academics will lead to a stronger and empowered woman.

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