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Breaking the Silence: Let's Talk about Menstrual Hygiene

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Abstract: *Menstruation is one of the most important and unique experience occurring in the life of a woman. Experiences revolving around this are among the most important issues determining health of women. Menstruation, a word, that often comes with a veil of secrecy surrounding it. It is often not talked, forget about discussion, in most of the Indian families. Although it is an integral and a very important part of women's health, less importance is given on management of the phenomenon. Periods, are one of the signs that shows that a female body is functioning healthily, but this time of the month is generally greeted with sighs for various restrictions that are imposed during this time, dread for the cramping and other painful processes related to menstruation. Studies indicate that as many as 50 % of the girls in the country do not have any prior knowledge before they experience their first period. The result is a feeling of fear and disgust around periods, affecting girls' self-worth as they associate their bodies and identities with negativity, and this further hinders them from talking about health concerns when they arise.*

Key Words: Menstruation, Experiences revolving, determining health, Menstruation, management, phenomenon.

Menstruation is not only a symbol of sexual maturity but also one of the girl's future status as a woman. Various factors like cultural and social restrictions, myths and misconceptions are associated with menstruation. Poor knowledge and presence of mistaken beliefs on menstruation give rise to ignorance of maintaining proper hygiene during this time.

There are many negative cultural attitudes associated with menstruation, including that menstruating women and girls are 'contaminated', 'dirty' and 'impure.' In many societies, women and girls are forced into seclusion, are not allowed to come out of room / house and face dietary restrictions, in form of what to eat and what not to eat during their periods. As a result, most of the time, women and girls consider menstrual process as burden and tiresome.

Women and girls all over the world face difficulties accessing clean water, sanitation and affordable menstrual products. Cultural barriers and stigmas further compound these issues, often leading to social exclusion and a lack of education on menstrual health. Safe hygienic practices during menstruation are one of the important determinants of reproductive morbidity in women. The kind of absorbent material used during menstruation is of prime concern as reusing them would result in infection. Poor menstrual hygiene can lead to urinary or reproductive tract infections and affect the well-being of students. Girls may avoid attending school during their periods due to fear of bullying and inadequate toilet facilities. Also their concentration is lost when they face discomfort and menstrual pains. Thus, lack of privacy and inadequate toilet facilities pose a challenge to girls during their periods. Due to this, menstrual hygiene has been neglected or ignored.

In India, about 50 percent of women use old clothes during menstruation, which is not classified as hygienic protection, according to National Family Health Survey (2019-21). In addition to this, according to some recent researches, around 60 percent of girls in the country change their menstrual pads / clothes once a day only. This may pose a risk to their health as many bacterial infections might come up due to keeping the pads for a longer time. According to the doctors, pads should be changed at least 3 times in a day. There are instances when the cloth pads are not washed properly with washing bars or detergents and are dried in dark places where nobody can see. This lets the fungus grow in the pads due to wetness and result further in occurrence of fungal infections. Even many reports have suggested links between poor menstrual hygiene and occurrence of urinary or reproductive tract infections. Many a times women of the households may not give importance to buying sanitary pads for their daughters due to poverty or poor financial conditions. Thus, there can also be a situation where women may not have money to buy sanitary pads, or have to use money that would have been used for food or other necessities, then girls are often compelled to miss their schools, or use unhygienic materials, thus making them susceptible for many kinds of infections. Using unclean rags can support growth of unwanted bacteria that could lead to infection and the risk of infection is higher than normal during menstruation.

Without a safe, private space, with adequate facilities for washing the body, menstrual materials and clothing, women and girls face difficulties in their daily lives. In many schools that are situated in villages, proper water facilities or a separate toilet for girl are not there. This lack of privacy and the necessary infrastructure for cleaning and washing, the fear



of staining and smelling, and the lack of hygiene in school toilets are the major reasons for being absent from school during menstruation, and have a negative impact on girls' right to education. Thus this is a major cause for absenteeism during periods for many girls. Therefore, more efforts should be done by the school authorities to provide such facilities to girl students.

Menstruation is a natural process linked to the reproductive cycle of women and girls. It is not a sickness but if not properly managed, it can result in health problems which can be compounded by social, cultural and religious practices. Keeping this in mind, WHO observes "World Menstrual Hygiene day" on 28th May every year. The day is observed on the 28th day of the fifth month of the year because menstrual cycles average 28 days in length and people menstruate an average of five days each month.

Ensuring good hygiene during this time is very important. This is only possible when topics related to menstruation are discussed and proper information is given to girls and women. Awareness camps in schools, villages, etc need to be organized so that the 'taboo' nature of the subject itself gets eliminated. Efforts should also be made by women at household levels to educate their daughters, sisters and other women in their families about maintaining proper hygienic habits during this time. Good menstrual hygiene enables woman and girls to continue with their daily lives with minimum disruption during menstruation, stay healthy, avoid embarrassing or stressful situations where menstrual blood leaks. Providing proper disposable / washing facilities would help women and girls making these times a bit comfortable.

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