

# Menstrual Management and Low-cost Sanitary Napkins

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The provision of low-cost sanitary napkins to women in rural areas is not an answer to the myriad problems they face in menstrual management. Apart from the need for a mechanism for ensuring the quality of the products and reducing the environmental cost of non-reusable products, the need is for a change in the attitude towards menstruation. It is because this is a taboo topic ruled by religio-cultural conventions that rural women face not only discomfort but also problems linked to reproductive health.

**M**enstrual hygiene management (MHM) is a subject of deep concern in most developing countries, where women, especially rural women, face challenges in acquiring hygienic absorbents, clean water for washing and a private space for changing. Every month they are forced to opt for unhygienic ways to catch the flow and hide signs of menstruation, without caring for their own health and well-being.

With the advent of low-cost sanitary napkin-making technology, there is a cornucopia of governmental and non-governmental schemes and policies on procuring, producing and promoting the sale of these products. Known as the “menstrual man,” Arunachalam Muruganatham revolutionised feminine hygiene by designing a machine to make low-cost sanitary napkins and successfully marketing these napkins to rural women across the country. These pads are manufactured using wood pulp, thermo bonded non-woven fabric, polyethylene sheet, glue and release paper, and sold at an affordable price ([www.newinventions.in](http://www.newinventions.in)).

A few other initiatives are the Anandi Pads (Aakar Innovation), Mukti Pads (Society for Rural Industrialisation), Ssodashi (corporate social responsibility project by Jindal Power and Steel Plant) and Freedays (Government of India) that have also catered to smaller pockets in the country. Eco-friendly initiatives like washable cloth pads made by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) (Goonj and Eco-Femme) and biodegradable pads (Azadi Pads) are also helping women manage their menstruation hygienically. Though it cannot be denied that such projects have been fairly successful in turning the tide, there are a number of related issues that require immediate attention.

Good menstrual hygiene does not only refer to using factory made or locally made sanitary pads. The definition of menstrual hygiene management includes

(i) articulation, awareness, information and confidence to manage menstruation with safety and dignity using safe hygienic materials together with (ii) adequate water and agents and spaces for washing and bathing, and (iii) disposal with privacy and dignity (Patkar 2011). It also entails methods of handling and storage, not using the product for more than the acceptable duration, maintaining personal hygiene vis-à-vis managing daily life activities. Thus, provision of low-cost napkins is merely a band-aid on a large wound because first, the sanitation facility in villages is not women-friendly. Census 2011 reveals that 67.3% of the rural population lacks toilets, and the worst-affected states are Jharkhand (91.7%), Madhya Pradesh (86.4%) and Chhattisgarh (85.2%). Rural schools often lack functional toilets, or do not have water and provide the privacy required for changing pads. As a result, open defecation, bathing in dirty ponds or river water, reusing menstrual products, washing menstrual rags without using soap and not drying them in sunlight has become the norm (Das et al 2015).

A discernible escalation in the incidence of infections, especially of the urinary tract and reproductive tract, among women using conventional methods and those changing outdoors has been reported in the literature (Das et al 2015; Sumpter and Torondel 2013). Studies report that rural women store menstrual rags in damp dark corners of the house because of the culture of shame and embarrassment (Garg et al 2012; Dasgupta and Sarkar 2008). As this acts as a breeding ground for pathogens, replacing rags with low-cost napkins and abandoning the packets in those very corners will encourage the same vicious cycle of recurrent infections. Such unhygienic practices are handed down from one generation to the other and have a certain level of acceptance and societal sanction. Thus, unless there is a change in existing unhealthy and unhygienic behaviour patterns, a mere replacement of products will not deem sufficient.

The rural market offers a plethora of opportunities for marketing and selling low-cost menstrual products; sometimes under the guise of social service.

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Repeated bombardment of television and radio advertisement of factory made sanitary products etches an idea in the minds of the rural viewers that any piece of pleasant smelling, sparkling white absorbent, wrapped in an attractive packaging offers instant hygiene. However, this is far from reality. Most of the rural sanitary napkins making units are run by self-help groups (SHGs) with a short training and seed grant from the government, multinationals, or NGOs. After the initial training and set-up, the grant providers withdraw and the SHG is expected to run the programme as well as educate the buyers, and this is where the problem of lack of supervision arises. Without placing the blame on these stakeholders or funders, it is important to understand that the housing condition and storage facility in most villages is far from hygienic, and the mini-factories set-up in some well-wisher's house or the village clubroom, might not be an ideal place to manufacture sanitary napkins. In short, the pads might appear white and clean, when in reality they have been through rodent infestation, microbial attack and repeated handling with bare hands. Post-use disposal is another priority which the producers are conveniently overlooking. The trash produced from menstrual waste is humongous and is already presenting a big challenge for urban solid waste management. Though some schemes in Tamil Nadu offered incinerators in schools and villages, it is arguable whether incineration is the best method for disposal of plastic lined sanitary pads. A village usually has no facility for waste disposal.

Thus, it is imperative to question the actual benefit from the change. Are we correctly negotiating the environmental outcomes with women's health, or are we blindly denying the fact that in the near future a pile of unmanaged waste will mount up next to every village, just like they have in cities? Why are we not looking into better solutions like menstrual cups? We are not undermining the efforts made by these sanitary napkin manufacturers in educating women or the need of the consumers, but would like to point out that there must be a

mechanism, first, for ensuring the quality of the products meted out locally and second, for reducing the environmental cost of non-reusable products.

### Taboo Topic

We cannot forget that in a patriarchal framework, menstruation is a taboo topic kept outside the purview of polite discussions, which is by far the most important reason why menstruation is poorly managed in rural areas. This simple biological process is controlled and regulated by religio-cultural conventions, due to which myriad myths and taboos restrict women's communication, movement, precludes expression of menstrual needs and suppresses all attempts for change in favour of women. Rural women mostly do not earn and do not have a say in family expenditure and as a result they fail to spend on their personal needs, such that, even when menstrual products are available in the rural market, they lack the means and confidence necessary to make a purchase.

Women say that the shame associated with menstruation prevents them from buying products from male shopkeepers. As a consequence, the women SHGs marketing low-cost sanitary napkins have a better prospect as women would rather buy from them. Is this not feeding into the same loop of silence and disempowerment, which is at the very core of menstrual embarrassment? Why do women feel embarrassed or ashamed while making a purchase from a male shopkeeper or while drying rags in the view of men is a question that nobody asks. Shame is systematically ingrained into the female psyche. Can we change the mindset along with changing the product?

The solution to such a multidimensional problem cannot be straightforward and easy. But it lies somewhere in transforming the traditional mindset and explaining the benefits of good menstrual hygiene to not only women but also men. The doors of discussion must break open traditional barriers to allow change to permeate through. The beliefs and faiths that are deep-rooted will not change overnight and negligence towards menstrual needs will

not disappear in a day, but this should not act as a deterrent. Women's reproductive health is an important issue and is the cause of increasing maternal mortality. Rural women are reporting more reproductive tract infections than urban women (DLHS 3) and there is hardly any change in the trend in the last few years.

Low-cost sanitary napkins can be the revolution that every rural woman needs, but only when the problem is looked at holistically and engagement is made with other related issues like information dissemination, access to toilet, clean water, privacy for changing, confidence in making health-related decisions, and sustainable disposal of used products. Different organisations working on MHM should come together to learn from each other's experiences, and share their best practices. Good menstrual hygiene management is the right of every woman and nothing should stop her from reaching it.

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