



IMPACT ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation or Menstrual Cycle is a common and natural gift of god to every female human being. So, whatever the situation may occur in its current context, this natural process of every woman and girl will not be paused. As such, in this very new COVID-19 pandemic for every woman and girl in the society the key concern was about menstrual hygiene during their monthly period, no doubt how struggling and worst the situation was. Even during the period of stringent lockdown from March the women and girls of whole India and world managed their menstrual hygiene amidst many challenges including supply hurdles and shared facilities among others.

In India there were huge and major supplies of safe and hygienic menstrual products which have impacted by the spread of COVID-19 pandemic as a whole. During the COVID-19 pandemic there was an increase in the price of sanitary napkins. There already exist some places and areas where peoples face lots of problem and difficulties in availing supply of good water which have now become more profound during COVID-19. The young and adolescent girls having limited information on their first period and menstrual hygiene management as health centres are important access points for women and girls to access information on MHM and their sexual and reproductive health. As more than half of the populations of the refugee camps, slum areas and displaced people are women and girls it has become difficult for them to dispose their waste products and sanitary napkins during the COVID-19 pandemic. The stigmatization and shame



during the COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious risk to women and girls' access to essential services and scarce resources as well their mental health and well-being. It depicts the impact of menstrual health and hygiene amidst COVID-19, the importance of menstrual hygiene is given to those victims who were lacking proper menstrual hygiene during the pandemic. Overall during the Corona virus pandemic, there were also increased challenges for all girls and women in Indian society to access period products and avail safe and hygiene menstrual products. After the pandemic of COVID-19 slows down we must not return to our old habits as keeping ourselves safe and hygienic would be worth addressing towards gender equality.

Introduction:

Menstruation or Menstrual Cycle is a common and natural gift of god to every female human being. So, whatever the situation may occur in its current context, this natural process of every woman and girl will not be paused. How far and hard the situation may become, periods do not let any situation to stop. As such, in this very new COVID-19 pandemic for every woman and girl in the society the key concern was about menstrual hygiene during their monthly period, no doubt how struggling and worst the situation was. From a study it was estimated that over 1.8 billion girls and women menstruate. Even during the period of stringent lockdown from March the women and girls of whole India and world managed their menstrual hygiene amidst many challenges including supply hurdles and shared facilities among others. As it is very much familiar to us that COVID-19 is totally a new disease and has created lots of evidences so its virus is thought to spread out mainly from person to person, face to face contact and through respiratory droplets and contact to these droplets on the surface. COVID-19 does not spread through faeces or blood, especially menstrual blood. Corona Virus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus. The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. Though there is no direct impact of COVID-19 on girls and women on menstruation, but it had and is still having some secondary impact on the ability and responsibility of the girls and women in managing their menstrual health and hygiene. And at the end the most affected are the poorest section of the society along with all those practices of gender inequality, social discriminations, cultural taboos and poverty. As a result whatever the pandemic may be, menstruators are the ultimate sufferer and victims due to various issues such as lower income, restricted mobility, limited water facilities, school dropout, low cost of supply, stress, anxiety, etc. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are the first line of defence against COVID-19. It's widely recognized that access to clean, running water and soap for hand washing is a critical need that must be met in our global response to the pandemic, and however there are other essential aspects of WASH that should not be forgotten at this time. People living in the slum areas and people who are living as refugee in camps or are displaced from one place to another, especially the adolescent girls faced lots of problem during their menstruation as they did not have proper access to menstrual supplies. Women and girls with disabilities in particular are



likely to be severely impacted by the pandemic and their ability to manage their periods safely and with dignity significantly got affected.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LIMITED ACCESS TO MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS

In India there were huge and major supplies of safe and hygienic menstrual products which have impacted by the spread of COVID-19 pandemic as a whole. During the COVID-19 pandemic shortage and unavailability of menstrual products were found due to various production and distribution issues such as transportation and communication which were restricted from one place to another. Strict lockdowns were imposed all over the world, 144 Red alerts and night curfews were started. Many companies and factories deducted and suspended number of staffs from their offices, a huge amount of shortage of raw materials were seen which made the whole country economically uncertain. Many companies and factories which used to make menstrual products such as sanitary napkins did not suspend their production; rather they modified their machines to produce surgical masks for various health workers and other normal face masks for the population. This move impacted the production of sanitary napkins. People also started avoiding going to local markets or supermarkets to obtain essential supplies in fear of exposure to COVID-19 in public places. This lack of access to safe sanitary products during COVID-19 poses a real threat to the health and safety of people that menstruate.

RISE IN PRICE OF SANITARY NAPKINS

During the COVID-19 pandemic there was an increase in the price of sanitary napkins. Due to lack of production of sanitary napkins in the factory, unavailability of workers and raw materials, limited supplies of sanitary napkins, etc the shopkeepers; grocery store and medical stores who had the old stock of sanitary napkins raised the price of sanitary napkins as compared to the price of sanitary napkins before COVID-19 pandemic. With the pandemic significantly affecting livelihoods and household incomes, it is harder now for people, including adolescent girls; to afford to buy sanitary products than before the COVID-19 pandemic began, even when products are available. As such individuals (women and girls) were forced to resort to using unhygienic alternatives that might increase their risk of reproductive and cause urinary tract infections.

WATER AND SANITISATION FACILITIES

There already exist some places and areas where peoples face lots of problem and difficulties in availing supply of good water which have now become more profound during COVID-19. They spend half of their lives with huge scarcity of clean and safe water which is also very essential for managing menstruation safely and hygienically for the females. Ladies specially women and girls of the households who used to collect household water had to walk long distances to do so were strictly stopped from doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic which created a havoc in their lives and deprived them of maintaining their hygiene during their menstruation. During the



time of pandemic the people especially the slum area people and the people of the refugee camps and displaced people were much more harassed as there was also scarcity of resources such as the basic item; soap had also become difficult for them to find for hand washing. With male members at home more often, there was reduced privacy for women and girls to menstruate with dignity which has resulted in challenges with washing, drying or changing pads for the women and adolescent girls during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LIMITED ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE DUE TO LOCKDOWN

As there were heavy and strict lockdowns all over the country and world during the COVID-19 pandemic all schools and colleges were shut down and imposed online teaching method throughout the period. As of all the children and student of the urban and town areas could avail the facility due to high socio economic status and background. Whereas those children and students of the rural and village areas were unable to avail the facility of online teaching method as they did not possess any smart digital appliances due to poor income level and low socio economic background of their family. As such these children and students of the rural areas stayed disconnected with all teachers, schools, friends, health centres, and other family workers etc. This resulted to the young and adolescent girls in receiving limited information on their first period and about menstrual hygiene management as health centres are important access points for women and girls to access information on MHM and their sexual and reproductive health.

UNHYGIENIC ENVIRONMENT DUE TO DISPOSAL OF SANITARY PRODUCTS AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

As more than half of the populations of the refugee camps, slum areas and displaced people are women and girls it has become difficult for them to dispose their waste products and sanitary napkins during the COVID-19 pandemic. They became unaware and got trouble in knowing where they could comfortably dispose of their periods products. Issues were created with disruptions to hygienic management of periods. They started burning and burying the sanitary napkins and products some distance from their home which may in turn lead to increased risk of environmental contamination and increase risks of disease transmission. This type of unhygienic movements and waste management procedure makes the environment dirty, unhealthy and polluted which embarrasses the people in the locality.

STIGMA, TABOOS, HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES WITH MENSTRUATION

According to some cultures and traditions menstruations for them is considered to be impure and menstruators are systematically excluded from their daily activities and are discriminated against. As such, in some case if someone amongst them has been suspected or has been diagnosed with COVID-19 disease, the stigma becomes much more difficult to change and the same shame and cultural beliefs remains fixed. This stigmatization and shame at this point of time poses a serious risk to women and girls' access to essential services and scarce resources as



well their mental health and well-being. So, this stigma, taboos and harmful cultural beliefs and practices about which the girls and the women lack much knowledge and information regarding menstruations can lead to serious health risk and can also result in poor mental health outcomes. As a result spending on menstrual products is also often seen by male partners as an unnecessary expense in the context of scarce financial resources. For instance in Uganda women in a refugee camp reported that their partners beat them after they cut up distributed blankets to make cloth pads.

IMPORTANCE OF MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY AMIDST COVID-19

As usual Menstrual Hygiene Day is observed on 28th May every year. On this very special and important day various awareness programs on menstrual health and hygiene are created for access to safe and hygienic menstrual products for every female section of the society. As such, here in this article as the point comes to the impact on menstrual health and hygiene amidst COVID-19, the importance of menstrual hygiene is given to those victims who were lacking proper menstrual hygiene during the pandemic. Overall during the Corona virus pandemic, there were also increased challenges for girls and women in India to access period products. Almost all the girls and women in each and every corner of Indian society faced the challenge of availability of safe and hygiene menstrual products. The school going girls, the women in quarantine, the women in relief camps and refugee camps, the women migrant workers who were also in need of vital information related to menstrual hygiene and access to proper sanitation facilities. There were also many such places in India where the shared toilets made it challenging for the menstruating girls and women to manage proper and safe menstrual health and hygiene.

KEY CHALLENGES TO MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DURING COVID-19

During the drastic period of COVID-19 pandemic people all over the world faced lots of serious challenges in their scheduled life which led their life into an unhygienic world. Apart from the people those living in the urban sectors, the poor and the rural peoples faced dangerous challenges and threat to life throughout the whole pandemic. Relating to their day to day normal hygienic matter the people, especially the adolescent girls and women faced much more problem in the time of their menstruation. They failed to maintain proper menstrual health and hygiene and afford the safe and hygienic menstrual products. They had to face a lot of challenges to run their life.

- In some places and societies people who still believed in social stigma, taboos and harmful cultural practices related to menstruation faced serious problems in health risk factor during the time of their periods in the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Due to lack of supply chains, restricted transportation, shortage of raw materials and scarcity of resources the access to sanitary pads became less and the factories those used to produce sanitary napkins started production of face masks in huge amount. As such, disrupted manufacturing of menstrual hygiene products occurred and switch to cloth pad.



- Access to social support among the society and individuals themselves during the time of menstruation became limited.
- Access to sanitation facilities were also restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic as the people who lived in refugee camps, slum areas and are migrant workers shared the toilets together.
- The adolescent girls and women who menstruate started to lead a life of anxiety and stress over how to manage their menstruation and menstrual health and hygiene during the pandemic as Menstrual Hygiene Management was much more important.

RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 has not been over yet and is still in an ongoing process in some places. It still has an adverse effect on menstruation and menstrual health and hygiene which in turn can lead to various health hazards for women and girls. Out of the total population of the world it is seen that one third of the world's total population menstruates. So during any hard and tough situation along with all other packages of emergency products menstrual products should also be added. It is seen that in government relief supply packages all products are included but menstrual hygiene products are not included. During the COVID-19 pandemic all government buses were provided to distribute food items and necessary hygiene information but the very necessity of the women and girls that is the menstrual hygiene products were not provided. Shortage and scarcity of resources of menstrual hygiene products were going on during the pandemic, but the women and girls with no choice had to manage themselves by using old clothes and rags. Due to these restricted access and availability and affordability of disposable menstrual products, some menstruators have shifted to reusable products, reinforcing the need for awareness around safe washing and drying practices for cloth. COVID-19 came out to be a deadly disease which infects public health when one person comes in close contact to the other person who has been infected by this virus. As a result it has created a drastic situation in the needs of the people over the world. Along with this existing situation the basic needs and desires of the people who menstruate are getting left out and the situation is only getting worse. The voice of the menstruators regarding their menstrual health and hygiene are getting ignored and they are under the quench of maintaining hygiene. So it is the key responsibility of the government to look over and give preference to the women and adolescent girls, listen to their health and hygienic needs while creating programming and awareness about public health. The pandemic is still far from over as it continues to spread, and the length of lockdowns remains unknown. We must learn from each other to understand and prioritize the menstrual hygiene needs and learn new ways of adapting it during the pandemic. So, menstrual health and hygiene is very much important for every women and girls over the world and cannot be ignored. As the cases of COVID-19 are still on and lockdowns are still imposed in some parts of the world, we should increase our efforts towards maintaining menstrual hygiene and keep ourselves safe, healthy and hygienic throughout the pandemic. After the pandemic of COVID-19 slows down we must not return to our old habits as keeping ourselves safe and hygienic would be worth addressing towards gender equality.



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