

Periods in the Pandemic: Menstrual Health & Hygiene in the Time of Covid

Nearly 23 million girls drop out of school annually after they start their periods, and only 48% of adolescent girls in India are aware about menstruation prior to their first period. This is due to the crippling social stigma and culture of silence around menstruation that we are still struggling to leave behind as a society.

The pandemic has exacerbated the situation further.

A survey conducted by the Menstrual Health Alliance India (MHAI) this year shed light on the fact that the lockdown had adversely affected millions of menstruators with respect to access to menstrual hygiene products and information.

The MHAI noted that various State and district governments have a school-based distribution of sanitary pads. With schools closing down, many such girls and their female family members had no access to sanitary pads.

In a crisis, which are the items that you prioritise and which do you 'forget'?

With the outbreak of Covid-19, India went into a 21-day lockdown starting March 24th, 2020. Essential commodities were the only items made exempt from restrictions but menstrual products did not make it to the list, making it difficult for millions of menstruators to manage their periods hygienically and with dignity.

The shortage of pads and menstrual hygiene products was felt across the country, with the problem more pronounced in semi-urban and rural areas, according to Shailja Mehta, who works at Dasra.

By the time menstrual products were included in the list on March 29th, 2020, there had been a massive disruption in manufacture and supply.



Source: Saral Designs

To what extent did women have access to menstrual hygiene products?

Ensuring access to menstrual hygiene products is a timeworn battle for most women in India. Post-lockdown, many women have gone back to using unhygienic practices, which can lead to urinary tract infections.

Saral Designs, a startup focusing on health and hygiene, works with a network of 500 door-to-door sales outreach agents (known as Sanginis) in Tier-2 and Tier-3 towns in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Haryana to provide sanitary napkins along with information on menstrual hygiene management (MHM).

"Curfew was imposed in certain locations to prevent the spread of the disease," Shivali Bagayatkari, Partnerships and Research Head at Saral Designs, tells us. "Our Sanginis had already stocked up sanitary pads and women could get access to them locally during the first few months of lockdown. However, with most of the businesses shut during the lockdown period, our Sanginis and the target population had to bear the brunt."

She explains that many of them belong to low income households; when their family members lost their jobs,

RED DOT CAMPAIGN



the women would reprioritise expenses from sanitary pads and choose, instead, to save for medical emergencies and food supplies. With support from Saral's multilateral donors, the organisation is now remodelling their strategy to provide free distribution of sanitary pads in the locations of their intervention areas.

Saral Designs has also been approached by the think tank Maharashtra State Innovation Society and NGOs in their network to provide free sanitary pads to the adolescents and women in informal settlements of Mumbai. "We collaborated with different partners in Mumbai to make this happen," Bagayatkar shares. "From April to June, 2020, we reached out to about 40,000 beneficiaries in the slums of Mumbai."

Has the financial cost of acquiring menstrual products increased since lockdown?

"Since a lot of people have lost jobs in this time, affordability has become a major issue," Shivali Bagayatkar tells us.

While a lot of data is not available regarding this issue, Saral Designs has maintained a constant price for their pads even though the cost of procuring raw materials increased.

To what extent is disposal of menstrual waste an issue?

Normally, when we talk about MHM, we talk about use.

But disposal is an equally important aspect, because used sanitary pads can be a potential biohazard due to the blood creating a culture for bacteria to grow. The community put at risk is essentially waste management workers.

The Red Dot Campaign was formally launched in Pune in 2018 by Pune-based NGO SWaCH. The city-wide project had a twofold objective: to raise awareness on disposal of sanitary waste and to make sanitary napkin manufacturers more accountable.

Today, there are 3, 500 waste pickers in SWaCH who are working all across Pune, servicing more than 8 lakh homes, offices, slums and properties. Each waste picker handles 76, 000 kgs of waste in a year — she handles 300 kg of waste a day, on an average.

"In the lockdown, waste generation obviously didn't stop," Suchismita Pai, who heads Outreach at SwaCH, tells us. "In fact, it only increased. We have been at work throughout — but at slums and areas where we work, people could not afford to pay the waste pickers. So although the work was happening, waste pickers were not receiving payment — kind of the converse of what we have been told (to pay informal workers, house help etc.)"

Is there enough openness and awareness in the community for alternative and sustainable menstrual products?

Every menstruator disposes of 200kgs of menstrual waste in their lifetime, and most sanitary pads end up in landfills. Since they are made up of non-biodegradable plastic, they can lie there for hundreds of years.

“In one of the communities where we carried out work, with women in agriculture in Maharashtra,” recalls Sonal Jain, co-founder of Boondh, a social enterprise that focuses on sustainable menstruation. “We initially observed that 8-12% of menstruators had moved to menstrual cups, which has risen to 76-80% now, which is heartening. The uptake is slow and gradual — which is only reasonable.”

Bharti Kannan, the other co-founder of Boondh, shares that the openness in the community is largely driven by behavioural change that is

intergenerational — so a lot of work needs to focus on creating that environment and a safe space; not just for menstruators, but also for parents, peer groups and the entire ecosystem surrounding a particular menstruator.

“In rural/semi-urban areas women ingeniously make cotton cloth pads themselves,” Bagayatkar says. “The current effort with MHM education providers is towards proper washing and drying of these cloth-based pads. Menstrual cups are still a very new concept for girls and women.”

Most girls have never seen a cup before and there is still a taboo related to insertion, which leads to an initial hesitation in trying it out. Menstrual cups have, however, started to become popular in urban areas, where access to individual toilets and clean water is not an issue.

The bottom line

Even though pandemic fatigue would suggest otherwise, the Covid-19 pandemic is far from over yet, and India may see a new daily rise as per some of the estimated public health reports.

As day-to-day operations are increasingly shifting online, it's worth thinking about this: a quarter of our population is being reached through schools, but what about schools in remote locations where facilities for online training are not yet available? “We conducted a survey with our existing network of schools and only 13% said they could facilitate online training,” Shivali Bagayatkar says. “Efforts are underway in providing access to MHM to the underserved population through various local collaborations.”

(inputs: Aditi Dharmadhikari)



Source: Boondh