

World can Pause but Periods Cannot!

Dikshi Arora

Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab

The impact of COVID19 is not the same on all genders.¹ In the times of pandemic, when hygiene is of utmost importance, women are enduring a crisis of proper menstrual hygiene management. COVID19 has impacted the female's ability to manage their periods due to irregularity in demand and supply chain which has led to lack of basic sanitary resources like sanitary napkins, etc. Out of 1.8 billion (approx.) menstruating population, millions of them could not afford dignified, safe, and healthy methods of dealing with periods every month.²

No doubt that the lockdown has severely hit the poorer and vulnerable section of the society the hardest. Menstrual hygiene becomes the least priority when one is struggling to make both ends meet. The problem is not only helplessness to afford resources but also the inability of rural women to travel to far off places where sanitary napkins are available. According to Menstrual Health Alliance India (MHAI), the lockdown has tampered the potential of the women to manage and have access to toilets and a safe place to undertake cleaning and hygiene management in the presence of a male and elder member of the family. One is also prone to be a victim of stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional breakdown during COVID19 which directly impacts one's reproductive health. It may cause an increase or decrease in normal flow or even (exceptionally) one's cycle can get skipped or shifted or delayed.³

This year the Menstrual Hygiene Day was celebrated on 28th May aimed to break the negative connotation associated with menstruation. The menstrual cycle of a healthy

¹ Clarence Mendoza, *COVID-19 Lockdown: Impact on Menstrual Hygiene Management*, CNBC TV18, (May 28, 2020), <https://www.cnbctv18.com/healthcare/covid-19-lockdown-impact-on-menstrual-hygiene-management-6018721.htm>.

² UNICEF Brief, *Mitigating the Impacts of COVID-19 on Menstrual Health and Hygiene*, UNICEF (Apr. 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/media/69696/file/UNICEF-Brief-Mitigating-the-impacts-of-COVID-19-on-menstrual-health-and-hygiene.pdf>.

³ Jen Anderson, *Light Period All of a Sudden? COVID-19 Anxiety Might be to Blame*, HEATHLINE (Apr. 27, 2020), <https://www.healthline.com/health/hypomenorrhea#pandemic-stress>.

woman consists of 28 days and periods last to 4-5 days, hence it is celebrated on 28th May every year. UNICEF has initiated the #RedDotChallenge to break the culture of silence around periods and to reach out to girls and women through the social media platform. It also addresses the difficulty faced by girls and women during their menstruation amidst lockdown. Indian representative to UNICEF, Yasmin Ali Haque, has acknowledged the need to raise this issue now than ever before.⁴ Similarly, many Indian villages have initiated a red Mehandi challenge to be aware of young girls and boys and normalize the discussion on menstruation.⁵

Seventy percent of the health workers⁶, who are fighting COVID from the front stage, are women. They too are facing unavailability of menstrual kit and WASH facilities which refer to the provision of water, sanitation, health care waste management, hygiene and environmental cleaning infrastructure. Wearing PPE suits discourage and delay the next duration of changing menstrual products. Such delay to remove tampons and pads increases the chance of toxic shock syndromes. The woman continues to bleed in a protective suit⁷ without changing menstrual products due to workload and pressure. Suits must be made customized for menstrual women along with having a waste disposal mechanism, or contraceptive pills or injection can be used to avoid periods⁸ in this particular scenario (with the consent of women). Also, authorities need to ensure that proper supply, as well as disposal mechanism, is available in prisons, jails, camps, and hostels.

In a situation like a pandemic, menstrual management, education, and other facilities must be easily accessible to women of reproductive age. To cope up in this situation, the government as well as non-governmental organizations must come forward to ensure that the menstrual kit is available to every woman at a reasonable price. Some of the viable

⁴ PTL, *Menstrual Hygiene Day: Culture of Silence around Menstruation has become even more Evident in Pandemic*, says UNICEF, THE HINDU (May 28, 2020), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/menstrual-hygiene-day-unicef/article31694119.ece>.

⁵ Sib Kumar Das, *A 'red mehndi' campaign to promote menstrual hygiene*, THE HINDU (May 28, 2020), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/a-red-mehndi-campaign-to-promote-menstrual-hygiene/article31690933.ece>.

⁶ Brief, *Supra* note 2.

⁷ Virginia Kamowa, *COVID-19 and Menstrual Health and Hygiene*, WATER SAFETY AND SANITATION COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL (Apr. 20, 2020), <https://www.wsscc.org/2020/04/20/covid-19-and-menstrual-health-and-hygiene/>.

⁸ *Id.*

solutions can be that such essential products are placed in the category of necessity and a check is kept on storing and hoarding to ensure a continuous supply. Advocate for no tax policy on menstrual products or kit and give incentives and subsidies to producers to increase the supply. Consumers must avoid panic buying and consider shifting towards the menstrual cup and reusable pads. In third world countries like India, the much cheaper and eco-friendly alternative to pads such as menstrual cups are neither easily available in the market nor is the public aware of its existence. An average cup ranges Rs. 300-500 and can be used for the next 5-7 years. On the other hand, monthly expenditure on pads costs Rs. 50-100 and for the same duration, this method would cost in thousands.

For long term planning, the state must venture into providing a free menstrual kit which may be easily collected from public places such as schools, railway stations, etc. Everyone has a right to live a dignified life and services and products provided for basic hygiene must not be taken as a business. Let's dream of a world where a woman can enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights and not be restricted by her periods. She must not be held back because she bleeds.