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Redefining Menstrual Equity

Greeshma B Raj & Arathy A

ABSTRACT

The seminar paper intending to study on the topic menstrual equity and various dimensions. This paper is made on the view to create a new definition or plot for menstrual equity. From decades ago as well, we are talking about menstruation, gender equality, menstrual hygiene and many other menstruation related topics. But still there are problems globally which arise only due to menstruation among reproductive persons. The starting point of all these issues are at the mindset of people till today. From past itself menstruation is defined with impurity, physical and mental unhealthiest etc. The whole problem can only be solved by changing these mindsets. Many movements from the part of Governments, NGO'S, and other voluntary associations are taken place from time to time. Still persists menstrual inequity. The seminar tries to study the causes of these problems and to get a solution. It studies menstrual equity as a human right issue.

KEYWORDS: Menstrual equity, Human right issue associated with menstruation, redefining the term.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF along with the help of the medical departments of the government and other various non-governmental organizations(NGO's) try to bring a better menstrual hygiene management(MHM) among the women of various age groups in the under developed and developing countries.

Women are categorized in four life stages viz; unmarried woman, recently married women, married woman and older women. One of the major challenges faced is the lack of awareness and education among women and another one is the lack of paper water supply and the sanitation facilities. Besides conditions such as lack of social awareness, privacy, availability of clean materials, superstitions beliefs and customs among the certain religious cults and groups, lack of facility in providing both rooms etc also face difficulties in addressing MHM. Among the poor and the downtrodden people, clean and good materials, clothes etc are not available. Besides necessary facilities for cleaning clothes, washing, drying, changing etc are less and they may not be in a position to use disposable materials due to the lack of financial condition.

Thus the MHM requires not only the provision of giving adequate physical conditions and suitable materials, but also social and individual awareness and to give a clear idea on the physical condition overcoming superstitions and age old customs and practices.

The women of younger age groups are especially facing a multitude of barriers in maintaining Menstrual Hygiene Management. There are several social challenges as well as structural challenges. Young girls should be given proper hygiene classes and understanding on how to manage this physical condition. These should be provided at the school level and by other elder's and women's organizations. They may also be aware of the various materials available now and its proper dispensation and disposals.

Structural Challenges include inadequate provision of clean water, sanitation infrastructure, privacy, material resources management etc. Many NGO's working among women can provide several steps to improve MHM among the women of middle and lower income groups who are more vulnerable and is not getting adequate education and structural facilities.

MENSTRUATION

Menstruation is the process in which the uterus sheds blood and tissue through the vagina. This is a natural process for girls and women of reproductive age. It is also known as "periods" in several countries. It is 2-7days continuing health issue. When body of person begins to menstruate, this is called menarche. It is a cycle of biological changes in the reproductive system of females, makes them capable and potential to pregnancy. Menstruation is the shedding of the lining of the uterus and the remnants of the unfertilized egg. It continues with an increase in the hormone estrogen, and the lining of the uterus becomes thick and spongy again (typically days 6-8). An egg is released from one of the ovaries, called "ovulation" (around day 14, but this can vary), then the egg moves through the fallopian tube towards the uterus (typically day 15-24). If the egg is not fertilized, it will not be implanted in the uterine wall but instead fall apart, and hormone levels such as estragon and progesterone, will drop. This process is followed by the start of a new cycle.

WHAT IS MENSTRUAL EQUITY?

Menstrual equity simply refers as equal access to menstrual hygiene products. It is rather than a simple access but, about health and dignity of person. It's about making sure that everyone who needs them will have access to menstrual products that are safe, clean, and free from any unnecessary ingredients. The phrase "menstrual equity" was coined by attorney Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, vice president at Brennan Center for Justice and author of "Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity."¹ Period equity says that periods or bleedings are not to hold anyone in back. Menstrual equity dreams a society where everyone has fair access to menstrual products and these products are once excluded from the list of luxury products and included in basic amenities. It also refers that all people with periods have access to the information needed to make informed period product decisions that are best for their bodies. And it's the focus of a variety of new laws and policies to provide menstrual products in prisons, shelters, schools etc..

¹ <https://www.seventhgeneration.com/blog/mission-menstrual-equity>

MENSTRUAL EQUITY MOVEMENTS

Dr. Julitta Onabanjo, the regional director for the United Nations Population Fund in East and Southern Africa, said there has been a groundswell of advocacy around menstrual health management.² As part of it, Kenya and Uganda abolished sales tax on menstrual hygiene products, Zimbabwe subsidizes local manufacturers. The Kenyan government is also providing funds for pads in schools for growing youth of the country. Technological advancements also paved a route from burdensome aspects of periods.

U.S. Congress introduced a bill in 2017 to provide a refundable tax credit to low-income individuals who regularly use menstrual hygiene products, require each state to provide menstrual products to all female inmates and detainees at no cost, and require employers of 100 or more employees to provide menstrual hygiene products to female employees at no charge. Unfortunately, it was not passed.

Maine, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and New Jersey as well as in New York City and Chicago have eliminated what is often referred to the "tampon tax," the sales tax on menstrual hygiene products.³

Movements for menstrual equity has started from decades ago. But, a remarkable moment in the history is in February 29, 2016 where New York Time magazine reported the growing voices of empowered ladies for their menstrual equity and rising publicity for menstruation. It also pointed out that while the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides funds in emergencies for such things as toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, and other "everyday" toiletries, but still no funds for feminine hygiene products.

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In U.S, the nation's first Period Day, a collection of rallies Oct. 19 aimed to bring awareness to periods as the movement aligns itself with both #MeToo and the broader, largely youth-driven, post-Trump activism energy and push to equate menstrual equity with gender equity.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/22/health/tampon-tax-periods-menstruation-nyt.html>

³ <https://impact-products.com/news/understanding-the-menstrual-equity-movement>

Eliminating the sales tax on period products, including pads and cups, a levy that exists in 35 states, has been the signature push for the movement. So far, though, while legislators in 22 states introduced bills.⁴ Apple announced in a year that its new Apple Watch will have a built-in menstrual cycle tracker.

Activists are pushing state legislatures to make menstrual products tax-free. Last year the government of India scrapped a hefty tax on sanitary napkins. In the Washington region, Maryland has exempted menstrual products from state taxes since 1980, and late last year D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) announced the nation's capital would do the same.⁵

MENSTRUATION IN RURAL INDIA

Menstruation prevents them from going to school or to work, and sometimes from performing daily activities like cooking, praying, exercising or even being in their own homes. Menstruation is embedded in myths and taboos. Due to cultural and religious beliefs, menstruation is perceived as dirty, impure and even unholy. Because of this, menstruation is surrounded by a culture of silence and shame. There are restrictions in access to temples, kitchen, prepared or cooked foods. There is no adequate awareness about menstruation, products availability etc. makes the Indian girls the feelings of shy and shame. Even the mother herself is unaware.

Menstrual inequity leads to less percentage in data among Indian girls or women who use sanitary products. They often used cloths, it may be hygienic or not. They are more victims of reproductive organs related infectious diseases. The inappropriate management of menstruation has a negative impact on the education of girls. It is estimated that around 20% of girls drop out of school after reaching puberty, and many more are absent for the entire duration of their period. The reason behind this is lack of adequate public toilets, lack of access to proper menstrual products, social taboos, shame etc... Among 1.33 millions of people 355 million is menstruating women but, the reality is that about 70% can't able to afford sanitary pads. So the remedy to them is cloths and ashes.

⁴<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.inquirer.com/news/menstruation-movement-period-poverty-equity-me-too-trump-national-day-20191007.html%3foutputType=amp>

⁵ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/01/28/activists-call-education-secretary-devos-take-action-menstrual-equity-schools/%3foutputType=amp>

Of course movements were also takes place in India as well. #HappyToBleed social media campaign that took India by storm in 2015.⁶ The campaign is called The Red Cycle which aims to publish the period poetries in social media that are collected from school children, teens etc.

PERIOD EQUITY

✓Tampon for all, not in the list of luxury products.

✓Clean and green period products for safe period on environment friendly climate.

CHALLENGES FOR MENSTRUAL EQUITY

Menstrual health is not just a women's issue. Globally, 2.3 billion people live without basic sanitation services and in developing countries, only 27% of people have adequate hand washing facilities at home, according to UNICEF. Not being able to use these facilities makes it harder for women and young girls to manage their periods safely and with dignity.

In Nepal, for example, menstruating women are seen as impure by their community and banished to huts during their cycles. The non-governmental agency "WoMena" conducted a study in Uganda and found many girls skipped school while on their period to avoid teasing by classmates.

Tampon tax also known as "pink tax" charged by the Government another main issue. Many countries included tampons in the category of luxury products which create period poverty. In Bangladesh, many families cannot afford menstrual products and use old clothing, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). And in India, only 12% of menstruators have access to sanitary products, leaving the rest to use unsafe materials like rags and sawdust as an alternative, the Indian ministry of health reported.⁷ Young girls who do not receive an education or awareness classes are more likely to enter child marriages and experience an early pregnancy, malnourishment, domestic violence, and pregnancy complications as a result. That is unawareness create another bunch of hurdles to menstruating women. Non-affordable price to menstrual products, lack of toilets to keep hygiene and improper

⁶ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.glamour.com/story/girls-in-india-are-writing-amazing-poetry-about-periods/amp>

⁷ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-poverty-everything-you-need-to-know/>

mechanism for waste disposal make Indian situation more worse. Even though there is "swach mission" for waste disposal and toilets to all, the rural India is still facing menstrual hurdles.

The waste collectors are showing reluctance to menstrual waste. Then introduces "send it back campaign" but, activist want to protect the interests of its stakeholders. Organizations such as "Jatan Sansthan" are mobilizing local women to produce and use affordable, reusable sanitary pads. It is in southern Rajasthan. In the state of Tamil Nadu, UNICEF (PDF) has developed an affordable incinerator that uses firewood to handle sanitary napkin waste at schools. But the actual problem is these measures are located only in small geographical limit of vast India.⁸

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has recently introduced a scheme that aims at spreading awareness of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls (10-19 years) in rural areas. The objective of this scheme is to; increase menstrual hygiene awareness, increase access and to promote the use of high quality sanitary napkins, and to ensure that disposal of sanitary napkins are done in an environment friendly way. Under this scheme, sanitary napkins are also sold to adolescent girls at very low and affordable rates (₹6 for a pack of 6 napkins) by Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA). But, aware and access was less.

Religious restrictions (not going to temple, etc.) were common, affecting 88% of girls overall in India. Additional facilitation (pain relief, pad provision, point person for menstrual hygiene management.

MENSTRUATION AND HUMAN RIGHT ISSUES

Due to phenomena of Menstruation by reproductive system in the girls, cause them to face gender inequality, discrimination, status degradation, Extreme poverty, humanitarian crises, harmful traditions etc.. We can discuss more human right Issues.

- Exclusion from public life
- Barriers to opportunities
- Barriers to access sanitary products and hygienic environment. That is sanitation and health.
- Heightened vulnerability, violences and atrocities.

⁸ <https://www.rand.org/blog/2014/08/womens-menstrual-hygiene-in-india-the-health-and-environmental.html>

The above-mentioned points means human right violations of

*Right to get dignity for life.

*Right to get educated.

*Right to non-discrimination and gender equality

*Right to work.

*Right to get an adequate standard of health and sanitation.

REDEFINING MENSTRUAL EQUITY

Menstrual equity can be defined not as an equal access to get menstrual hygiene products. It can be redefined as equal education about Menstruation, sanitation, health. Menstrual equity is more about basic fundamental human right. It is a basic equity issue, is a public health concern, is a gender equality issue, is a part of reproductive justice. Menstrual equity is needed in homes, employment space, public space, schools, prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers and other detention facilities, and in every walk of feminine life or reproductive life. Menstruation is not all about readiness to marriage, sex etc.

CONCLUSION

Menstrual equity is defined simply as equal access to menstrual hygiene products. But in large as the seminar put forward it is not simply as equal access to menstrual hygiene products it is related to health, dignity, human right of a women. The world is facing many social, economical, political, cultural, demographical issues only due to menstruation among reproductive people. Menstruating people are not getting enough space for healthy, safe, dignitarian life. Period poverty, cultural differences, religious drawbacks, social avoidance, imbalanced opportunities, lack of menstrual education, non-availability or inaccessibility of menstrual products, inefficient waste disposal mechanism etc. lead to menstrual inequity. Menstruation is studied in the world with impurity and weaknesses in all the years passed. Article 14 deals with the Right to Equality and equal protection of all. Article 17 deals with freedom from untouchability. Article 21 deals with the Right to Life with the human dignity. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution deals with the right to profess, propagate and practice any religion. It defines and gives us the right to follow any religion. So, all these Articles are also related to equity before the law and discrimination against none. All the fundamental rights must need to be protected in a well defined manner, upholding the constitutional morality. Menstrual equity could be obtained only by changing the mindset of people towards menstruation. The eyes of the society that view menstruation as a taboo and impure⁹ must be changed. Courts, Judiciary and the governments should play their role actively to improve the life of women and girls. The high costs for the menstrual product is the violation of the basic human right of women/girl. There must be distribution of menstrual products in schools and educational institutions free of cost.¹⁰ Our education system should be enhanced to play a vital role in the growth and development of a child by allowing them to respond to the changes and challenges they are facing.¹¹ Women friendly toilets must be designed and built.¹² There are institutions with sanitary napkin vending machines which are semiautomatic and can be operated by inserting coin on it, such technologies and practices must be spread. In order to reach the concept of menstrual equity the men, society and those barbarian customs should change and development of the society is possible only through changes towards betterment.

⁹ A. Dasgupta and M. Sarkar, "Menstrual hygiene: how hygienic is the adolescent girl?" *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, vol. 33, no.2, pp.77-80, 2008.

¹⁰ R. Garg, S. Goyal, and S. Gupta, "India moves towards menstrual hygiene: Subsidized sanitary napkins for rural adolescent girls – issues and challenges," *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, vol.16, no.4, pp. 767-774, 2012.

¹¹ A.O. Fatusi and M.J. Hindin, "Adolescents and youth in developing countries : Health and development issues in context ," *Journal of Adolescence*, vol.33, no.4 pp.499-508, 2010.

¹² M. Kjellen, C. Pensulo, P. Nordqvist, and M. Fogde, "Global review of Sanitation System Trends and Interactions with Menstrual Management and Sanitation System Project, Stockholm, Sweden, 2011

The judiciary may act as a channel to bring quality of life among all the citizens by upholding their rights in leading an esteemed life by all individuals irrespective of caste, creed, gender, faith etc. Upholding wrongs, only because they form a part of the customs and the rituals is not the way legal rights are to be protected. Whenever the fundamental and religious rights of an individual come before the judicial preview, the rule of law should be upheld based on a scientific and pragmatic outlook and rooted on constitutional morality. The initial opposition to such game changing judgments will subside with the course of time and the society will accustomed to the modern practices and the country will become a better place to live.