

Challenges to Menstrual Hygiene Maintenance (MHM) among the Adolescent Girls and Women in India related to COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown: A Review

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Abstract: COVID 19 Pandemic has so much of devastating impact on our society especially due to complete lockdown state in almost all parts of India. During this critical situation, one of the worst-hit sections of society is women who menstruate. National Family Health Survey 2015-2016 estimates that there are 336 million menstruating women in India. The ongoing lockdown to contain the corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is severely challenging womens' and girls' access to menstrual hygiene products and toilets for managing menstruation. The major challenges faced by women and adolescent girls in India related to maintenance of menstrual hygiene during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown are unavailability of sanitary pads, unavailability of sanitation facilities, anxiety and stress over how to manage menstruation, inadequate production and supply of menstrual hygiene products.

Keywords: Challenges, Menstrual hygiene, menstrual hygiene products, COVID-19, lockdown

1. Introduction

Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) or menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) is about access to menstrual hygiene products to absorb or collect menstrual blood, privacy to change the materials, and access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. It can also include the "broader systemic factors that link menstruation with health, well-being, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment, and rights". In developing countries like India, menstrual hygiene management can be very much challenging for girls and women, where clean water and toilet facilities are often inadequate. An estimated 1.8 billion girls, women, and gender non-binary persons menstruate, yet millions of menstruators across the world cannot manage their monthly cycle in a dignified, healthy way. Where menstrual hygiene management was quite challenging prior to Covid 19 pandemic due to many social and economical factors, the situation got more worst after the outbreak of Covid 19 and complete lockdown state in different parts of the country. The ongoing lockdown to contain the corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is severely challenging womens' and girls' access to menstrual hygiene products and toilets for managing menstruation.

2. Challenges to MHM in relation to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Lockdowns in India have not just led to closed borders, shuttered businesses, and movement of migrant workers but have far-reaching consequences for some people. During this critical situation, one of the worst-hit sections of society is women who menstruate.

Fernandes Kasmin in her article "Menstrual Hygiene Day 2020: Periods don't stop for pandemics" on May 27th 2020 has stated that before the COVID-19 pandemic started, more than 500 million women worldwide did not have what they

needed to manage their periods, according to data by FSG (a social change organization). The current pandemic highlights and further exacerbates the menstruation-related challenges many women and girls face around the world. In India, the lockdown and its extension impacts access to menstrual hygiene products and the ability to maintain hygiene during periods in privacy and with dignity for millions of girls and women.

A rapid response survey conducted by the Menstrual Health Alliance India (MHAI) which is co-chaired by WaterAid India among 45 organizations spanning NGOs and manufacturers that either manufacture or distribute sanitary products across India has revealed that the key challenges related to menstrual hygiene during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown are continuing taboos and restrictions related to menstruation, limited access to sanitary pads, limited access to social support, restricted access to sanitation facilities, anxiety and stress over how to manage menstruation, disrupted manufacturing of menstrual hygiene products, broken supply chains for menstrual hygiene products. Around 82 percent of organizations noted that there was either no access or severely restricted access to sanitary pads due to non-operational production units and around 58 per cent of the small and medium scale manufacturers were not able to operate whereas 37 per cent were not operational at all. This survey also revealed that several organizations supporting production units had switched to producing face masks which has impacted the production of sanitary napkins.

Population Foundation of India (PFI) reported that COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated women's deprivation of menstrual hygiene products, amongst several other basic needs. The lockdown has resulted in restricted access, mobility and freedom for women and girls making it even more difficult for them to manage their monthly cycle in a dignified, healthy way. PFI's NGO partners working in the

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field with adolescents in Bihar and Rajasthan reported stock-outs of sanitary napkins at local shops for the month of April. Since Aanganwadi centres, which are a major access point for sanitary napkins and iron and folic acid (IFA) tablets for girls were also closed hence there is no weekly IFA supplementation and no sanitary napkin distribution.

A survey conducted by Plan International among three quarters of health professionals of 30 countries revealed supply shortage, while 58 percent complained of rising and prohibitive prices of sanitary products. Around half the respondents cited reduced access to clean water to help manage periods, and a quarter worried about greater stigma or discriminative cultural practices linked to menstruation for women who were trapped at home by lockdown.

Muralidharan Arundati and Mahajan Tanya in their study reported on 17th April 2020 that starting March 24, 2020, access to essential menstrual hygiene items was curtailed for millions in the country for the duration of the 21-day lockdown. Production and distribution of sanitary pads was stopped or slowed down significantly. For low-income households and those in the informal sector and daily wage workers who have lost their livelihoods, affordability comes to the forefront again, with families struggling to purchase enough pads for regular users in the family. In relief camps and shelters where food and water are of primary concern and in quarantine and isolation facilities where testing kits and essential medicines are the necessity, menstrual products for women are not considered an essential item. Women and girls may use their menstrual products for longer than recommended, or turn to unhygienic alternatives such as old cloth or rags. Irrespective of what is used, changing menstrual products regularly, washing reusable cloth pads, cleaning the body, and disposing of used materials, is now more challenging than usual. In slums, where many are dependent on community toilets, social distancing measures and mobility restrictions makes it difficult for girls and women to use toilets as frequently as they need to during their period.

3. Measures to overcome the challenges to MHM related to COVID-19 pandemic

UNICEF Brief on April 2020 summarizes the essential considerations to ensure continuation of MHH during the pandemic as: 1. Ensure MHH supplies and WASH facilities are in place for healthcare workers and patients. 2. Mitigate the impact of lack of access to menstrual materials and WASH facilities by providing menstrual materials in NFI and food assistance for girls and women with limited movement or in camps or institutions. 3. Provide basic WASH facilities and services in communities, camps, and institutional settings.

Muralidharan Arundati and Mahajan Tanya stated four simple and essential sets of actions which can enable women and girls to manage their periods hygienically within their constrained settings: Firstly, access to essential menstrual products must be eased through private and public sector channels. The government must ensure that the sanitary pads are distributed to girls in the community

via its large network of Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) along with support from the ASHA frontline workers. In addition, subsidized sanitary pads can be made available for sale through the ration shops. Secondly, for girls and women who are unable to access disposable sanitary pads in required numbers, information on making, using and maintaining homemade cloth pads safely is critical. Thirdly, sanitary pads and underwear must be made available in isolation and quarantine facilities. Separate and safe toilets for women in these facilities, with sufficient water must be established. Dustbins for immediate disposal and downstream management of menstrual waste from the facilities are also necessary. Lastly, information on hygienic use of disposable and reusable menstrual products is needed. Messaging on storing water for washing and maintaining personal hygiene and hygienic maintenance of both disposable and reusable products is needed.

4. Conclusion

In India, the lockdown and its extension impacts access to menstrual hygiene products and the ability to maintain hygiene during periods in privacy and with dignity for millions of girls and women. It is the need of the hour to ensure a gender-sensitive and inclusive response to the COVID-19 crisis so that the menstrual health and hygiene needs of women and girls are met especially the most marginalized and hard to reach populations. The health care professional must take initiative to create awareness among public regarding the need of safe practices and adequate maintenance of menstrual hygiene. Government should adopt new policies so that adequate facilities and uninterrupted supplies of menstrual hygiene products can be made available for all the women and adolescent girls of the country.

5. Declaration

a) Acknowledgement

The author of this review would like to thank the management of Nemcare Group of Institutions for their support.

b) Suggestions

Extensive awareness program need to be initiated by the health care workers among the adolescent girls and women regarding safe practices of Menstrual Hygiene Maintenance.

c) Conflict of Interest

The author of this review reports no conflict of interest.

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