



# Sacred Shame: Menstrual Hygiene, Cultural Superstitions, the Path to Menstrual Justice

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**Abstract:** Menstruation is surrounded by deep-rooted cultural and religious taboos, which in fact affect the health of women and their overall well-being. The stigmas surrounding menstruation acts as an obstacle in discussing it openly. Seclusion practices prevailing during menstruation as well as the temple bans, shows how customs continue to promote discrimination despite legal interventions. It is prevalent not only in rural regions but also in urban areas. With the advent of education, young women are capable of breaking the chains of menstrual restrictions, but still, this is not the case for the entire female population of our country. Due to awareness campaigns, women are becoming more aware of the importance of menstrual hygiene. An attempt is made to study the practices prevailing all across the world, with an emphasis on India, where these taboos and stigmas surrounding menstruation are deeply entrenched in cultural traditions and practices. It also aims to highlight how this stigmatisation leads to psychological and structural violence against women, undermining their constitutional rights. Besides the study also undermines the need to re-examine multi-dimensional approach and the role of government initiatives in identifying the pathways to achieve menstrual justice, dismantle harmful cultural stereotypes, promote gender equality and ensure sustainable waste management.

**Keywords:** Cultural taboos; Gender Equality; Government initiatives ; Menstrual hygiene; Sustainable management

## I. Introduction

India is a land where different religions, customs and traditions coexists and known for its cultural diversity. Each group upholds its unique beliefs and practices, often shaped by geographical and historical factors rooted in its rich cultural heritage. In

many regions, these customary beliefs and religious norms significantly influence societal attitudes and perceptions. One area where this influence is evident is gender discrimination, which varies across regions and cultures.

Menstruation, a natural and hormonal process experienced by women worldwide is often burdened by stigma and taboos in Indian society. This stigma is largely the result of gender stereotypes reinforced by traditional mindsets, leading to silence, disgrace and inadequate menstrual hygiene management.

For such a natural thing, beliefs and customs plays a very crucial role in propagating violence towards the women. Even talking about it is also taken as a taboo in an Indian society. There are many restrictions and isolations during mensuration for women. In Turmakhand, Nepal there is a village where girls are kept socially excluded from the society during the time of mensuration. They are kept in a hut in a very unhygienic surrounding. Girls and women are dying in that village every month because of the treatment they are getting during mensuration.

People are not realising that by doing this, they are indirectly committing murder and women, by accepting and following these harmful practices, are being pushed towards committing suicide. Their death is not natural but they are murdered by the imposed superstitions and faith which is very irrelevant and illogical. Their fundamental rights are violated because they are not living with dignity and their personal liberty is snatched from them.

Poverty also plays a major role in the personal hygiene of women during mensuration time. They don't have enough means and are not that much financially capable to afford costly sanitary napkins and tampons and they adopt very unhygienic means during mensuration. There are many women dying because of the same reason. There should definitely be efforts made to eradicate this practice so that they get their basic right at least to live properly. Women are always objectified and are made fun of this thing without understanding their mental status. The main problem is that of little girls having limited knowledge about this thing and growing up with the same mentality from their ancestors. Healthcare providers can offer counselling and treatment for menstrual disorders and refer women to specialized care when needed.

Promoting menstrual health is essential for advancing gender equity and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Since menstruation was a long taboo all across the world including India, through the continuous efforts of NGO's, activists and Government initiatives resulted in creating awareness of health hazards

of sanitary waste disposals. By addressing the factors that contribute to menstrual disorders and improving women's menstrual health, we can empower women and girls and promote their overall health and well-being.

People need to be educated about so that they don't adopt such practices or have belief on such a thing that is dangerous enough for taking away the life of innocent girls. In the era of such a modern India where people are always talking about women empowerment there are larger part of the section of society that is doing exactly the opposite of it. They are dragging women from growing and nourishing. Article 21-the Right to life- is a basic and essential right guaranteed to every citizen our country. Yet, not many people realize that denying women menstrual hygiene and proper mental health is a direct violation of this right .It snatches from women the basic right to live with dignity.

## **II. Review of Literature**

Prior studies show that mensuration is a monthly cycle of women's body. It is believed that in modern times, in the era of development, people should no longer hold misconceptions about periods and they need to be educated about it. The myths and superstition which people held in the past –and some still hold today are irrelevant to the concept of mensuration, which is very natural and related to hormones of a woman's body. (Parker, 1995). The problems which women go through when they are on their periods are terrifying. There is a strong need for activism for giving equal treatment for women. A strong stand should be taken for poor women for menstrual equity by taking various measures one of them being tax free sanitary napkins and tampons tax free. (Weiss-Wolf,2017). The taboo which exists in our society related to mensuration leads women being excluded from the society deprived of their basic necessities. Sometimes scientific calculations are used to legitimize these myths to fool the people in the society. (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth 1976).

Mensuration is seen as a mark of shame. It is considered taboo in the society. This taboo is intertwined with poverty, culture and religion and are having consequences in the lives of the women. They are prohibited from many things which they should be allowed to do , which violates of their fundamental rights. (Dahlqvist,2018). In Europe over the past decades myths and superstitions prevailed in the local communities. The presence of taboo in the Catholic and protestants societies related to mensuration. (Naphy,2002). The violence against women is present in the form of

structural violence, which is latent and indirect. It is present in the society in the form of caste, religion, culture, traditions, myths and superstitions which fundamentally violate the dignity and integrity of individual members. (Shankar et al.,2018).

The myths and superstition are present in Yoruba also and one of them being that they are considered impure when in such state, men with fortifications or spiritual messenger shouldn't be intimate with a woman menstruating as this could risk the loss of his powers. They are also prohibited from entering sacred shrines. (Owoeve,2010).

Restrictions imposed on women's freedom in the primitive society and in the present society also. The restrictions are mostly during pregnancy or mensuration involves strict isolation and seclusion, violates their fundamental rights granted by the constitution. (Sterba,1998). Jews laws are unjust related to women. According to Jews laws the women going through mensuration is impure and is prohibited from coming to the assemblies. Everyone avoids her as she is considered impure. Even by mistake she touches someone; they have to be ritually purified in order to participate in any temple worship. (Muonw, 2011). Women survive before the invention of tampons and pads, but they faced serious problems as a result. Even, today also many are left behind in availing these facilities. Puberty and the initial stages of menstruation are also psychologically difficult for young girls (Kim,2019).

Menstrual hygiene is necessary for the women out there in rural areas too. It is important because many girls die due to unhygienic menstrual habits and lack of proper technology to deal with it. (Vostral,2008). Low-cost sanitary napkins are important for health and hygiene of remote/slum feminine population of India. The stigma surrounding mensuration in Indian society ,still persists various states in India. (Pal Singh,2016).Menstruation is natural and aligns with the natural dynamics of a woman's body. There's no need of attaching a superstition to it in various forms.(Majumdar,2012).Hormonal fluctuations in hormone levels during different phases of menstrual cycle is closely linked to emotional changes such as increased tension and anxiety. However, these responses are natural and often misunderstood or exaggerated, leading to false assumptions about women's mental stability (Thompson,2007).

In reality, menstruation primarily involves physical changes in the body and it should not be equated with emotional or psychological imbalance. The popular idea that hormonal changes make women crazy is a myth. These jokes are discouraging and demotivating(DeLuca,2014). There should be no hindrance in the way of

empowering women. Women shouldn't take periods as a burden or be influenced by harmful myths of the society. (Vitti,2020). Women adopt unsafe menstrual practices, which effects their health. It is very important and necessary to create a clean and inclusive environment, not isolate women in unhygienic surrounding. (Mazza,2009).The working conditions of the woman are often miserable. Women should get leave during their periods as they need to take rest and be in a relaxed state. Physical and mental work should not be given to them at that time of the month. The biggest problem in the society i.e. acceptance and recognition. People don't talk about freely and consider it as a taboo and stigmatise it for no good reason. This is the main reason why some part of the section thinks that it is something to hide or be shame off. (Houppert,1999).

Culture and science very rarely go hand in hand. In many societies, illogical customs and traditions exist, infringing rights of women in multiple means. Therefore, there must be a balance between cultural beliefs and scientific reasoning (Geertz,1973). It may not be seeming like but superstition is very cancerous for the society. He gave example of magic that until and unless it is for fun it is fine but when it becomes superstition it's harmful for the society. People who grow up in superstitious environment may become a burden on society rather than contributors to progress. Within the society occur many deep rooted delusions around mensuration, which still remains to harm women in society both physically and emotionally. (Vyse,2000)

While there is no shortage of studies related to menstrual taboos, few have explored the intersection of law, culture and lived experiences, which remains a significant gap in the literature. In India, Article 21 promises dignity but clashes with persistent practices like temple bans and isolation. In all these studies, there is lack of sharp comparisons between countries, which can be helpful in understanding the diversity of practices related to menstruation. Though we know poor menstrual hygiene can lead to infections and school dropouts, the significance of this research is that it highlights the connections between the rights, violations cultural patterns and practical health solutions with the following .

### III. Objectives

1. To study traditional dogmas and practices allied to menstruating women, and its impact in violation of women's rights to dignity and personal liberty under Article 21 of Indian constitution

2. To analyse common socio cultural issues and differences in practices related to menstruation among women in India, Nepal, Japan and Nigeria
3. To examine serious health consequences of poor menstrual hygiene and propose sustainable management solutions

#### **IV. Cultural Disgrace and Legal rights: Effect of menstrual practices on Women's dignity and liberty**

Menstrual health is an important part of women's reproductive health, but it has gotten less attention in research and public health programmes. This is unfortunate because it should be a priority for both. Menstruation is a natural process that takes place within the bodies of women, and it is an essential component of the reproductive health of females. Menstrual health is a term that relates to the psychological and physiological well-being of women throughout their periods. Menstrual problems such as dysmenorrhea, menorrhagia, and irregular periods are quite common among women, despite the fact that research and public health programmes frequently ignore them.

Menstrual abnormalities can have a significant effect on a woman's physical health as well as their emotional and social well-being. Dysmenorrhea, sometimes known as painful periods, is the most prevalent type of menstruation illness. It can afflict as many as 90 percent of women at some point in their life. Menorrhagia, often known as heavy periods, is another prevalent illness that can affect up to 30 percent of all females. In addition to being an indicator of menstrual irregularities, irregular periods can be an early warning sign of underlying health problems such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS).

In spite of how common they are, menstruation illnesses are sometimes stigmatised, and as a result, women may be reluctant to seek care for their symptoms. Due to the societal taboos that accompany menstruation, it is possible for women to feel ashamed and embarrassed when they are menstruating. It is possible that women's access to menstrual products, education, and healthcare services will be restricted as a result of these taboos. The shame that is attached to menstruation can have a negative effect on women's mental health and contribute to conditions like anxiety and depression.

Menstrual difficulties can be caused by a number of factors, including stress, an unhealthy diet, an insufficient amount of physical exercise, and underlying health diseases including PCOS and endometriosis. The hormonal equilibrium in

women's bodies can be thrown off by stress, which can result in painful menstrual abnormalities and irregular periods. A poor diet combined with a lack of physical exercise can also play a role in the development of menstruation diseases by leading to shifts in body weight and hormonal levels. Painful and irregular periods can be caused by underlying health issues such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis, both of which require specialised medical care.

Menstruation health is an important part of women's reproductive health that warrants further attention in both research and public health programmes. menstruation health is also an important aspect of women's overall health. Menstrual problems can have a detrimental impact on a woman's physical, emotional, and social well-being, and as a result, women who struggle with these conditions require specialised care and treatment. It is possible to improve women's general health and well-being if we work to reduce the stigma that is associated with menstruation and promote healthy menstrual practises.

Every month, 1.8 billion people across the world menstruate. Millions of these girls, women, transgender men and non-binary persons are unable to manage their menstrual cycle in a dignified, healthy way. The onset of menstruation means a new phase – and new vulnerabilities in the lives of adolescents. Yet, many adolescent girls face stigma, harassment and social exclusion during menstruation. Transgender men and non-binary persons also face discrimination due to their gender identity, depriving them of access to the materials and facilities they need.

Across India today, menstruation remains suspended between tradition and modernity. From remote village to urban households irrespective of even technological advancement, most Indian women face severe social exclusion and isolation during their periods –barred only sacred spaces, but often from basic activities of even cooking or sharing a bed, often restricting their participation in day today activities. Cultural beliefs that label menstruating women as impure or untouchable contribute to their social marginalisation.

In Hinduism, menstruation holds complex meanings-some texts view it as a sign of impurity, while others reverse it as a symbol of divine femininity. While scriptures like Rigveda celebrates menstrual blood as symbol of creative power, daily practice tells a different story. The same culture the performs elaborate coming of age ceremonies for girls later shuns them monthly as impure. This gap between texts and reality reveals how custom overrides scriptures. For example, in certain rituals like *Seva*, girls are celebrated as incarnations of goddess during their first

menstruation .Despite such positive customs, prevailing taboos often negatively affect women's health , dignity and rights .These traditional beliefs results in inadequate menstrual hygiene practices, emotional stress and restricted access to education, work and public life. In societies where menstruation is stigmatized, the inability to manage it result in exclusion and hinders socio economic progress of women. Traditional myths and superstitions further reinforce these harmful norms. These are not just rituals; rather they are enforced exclusions that treat the natural process of menstruation as something shameful.

The belief that menstruating women are spiritually unclean and polluted is the product of deep rooted religious dogmas embedded in collective mind-set ,resulting in discrimination and isolation of menstruating women. In many sacred places, menstruating women are still barred from entry, as this practice is so culturally ingrained that it is widely accepted without question. It is often upheld as part of myths and beliefs.

One of the best examples is The Sabarimala temple in Kerala, which became a focal point of controversy surrounding menstruation, gender equality and religious traditions. As the deity is celibate, age old tradition barred the entry of women between age 10 to 50 years. Unlike other Ayyappa temples, this tradition based in myths and orally narrated stories, was followed for generations on the belief that entry of menstruating women may affect the sanctity of temple.

On September 28<sup>th</sup> 2018, a five judge bench of Supreme court, in its verdict in Sabarimala temple entry case, held that temple's practice of excluding women was unconstitutional. The court observed that the practice violated fundamental right to freedom of religion under Article 25(1) for female worshippers. The bench also struck down Rule 3(b) of Kerala Hindu Places of Public worship Rules, 1965, which allowed the exclusion based on custom as unconstitutional.

When the state government, as per the direction of Supreme Court, attempted to implement the judgement, many women in Kerala surprisingly led protests against the entry of menstruating women, believing it would enter the temple as it affects the sanctity of the temple. Despite the legal victory, this backlash actually highlight how deeply are the cultural beliefs continue to shape women's lived experiences, still continue to shape women's lived realities even irrespective of judicial interventions.

Menstrual taboos and stigmas that limit access to religious and social spaces, despite Article 21 of Indian constitution, which guarantees the right to dignity, privacy and bodily autonomy. If we truly seek t to uphold women's rights, such

regressive traditions must be challenged through legal reform, education and open public discussions which will definitely affirm menstrual dignity and promote gender equality in both law as well as in practice.

## V. Socio Cultural Dynamics of Menstrual Challenges: Common Issues and Policy differences in India, Nepal, Japan and Nigeria

In Hinduism, menstruation has complex religious connotations – in some texts its related to impurity, while others celebrate it as a symbol of fertility and divine power. It is observed that often menstruation is perceived as impure or polluting, resulting in restraints on cooking religious participation, sexual activity, bathing and eating certain foods (Narayan et.al, 2001<sup>1</sup>). Recently there has been a growing movement in India to challenge menstrual taboos and promote menstrual hygiene and dignity. Campaigns like *Pad Man* gathered momentum by raising awareness and improving access to menstrual products, while struggles remain to address policy gaps and expand menstrual education across the country.

Gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services like toilets and sanitary products can all cause menstrual health and hygiene needs to go unmet. India, 2018. Ashrita Kerketta and Ursela Khalkho participate in a session on peer education organised by Srijam Foundation as part of the Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management for Adolescents Girls project in Jharkhand. This has far-reaching consequences for millions of people. It restricts their mobility and personal choices. It affects attendance in school and participation in community life. And it compromises their safety, causing additional stress and anxiety. These challenges are particularly acute in humanitarian crises. Menstrual health and hygiene interventions can help overcome these obstacles.

When we compare India with other South Asian countries like Nepal and Srilanka provides a broader understanding of regional menstrual practices, highlighting shared challenges and distinct cultural characteristics.

**Nepal's** transition from monarchy to federal democracy after 2006 brought political changes, has made progress in improving social indicators but challenges persist in remote and marginalised communities, especially regarding access to education, health care and sanitation. In regions like Turmakhand in Nepal, menstruation is perceived as impure, leading to practice of isolating women during their periods. In many such communities, menstruating women are barred from religious spaces, domestic activities and social interactions like once practiced in

India. In one of prevailing practice of *Chhaupadi*,<sup>2</sup> in which menstruating women are forced to live in dangerous huts, baring them to health risks, snake bites, sexual assaults and unhygienic conditions. This practice, though legally banned continues in parts of Nepal due to deeply rooted beliefs. However change is emerging. NGOs and local organisations have initiated menstrual education, product distribution, and advocacy efforts to improve the situation, including in rural areas like Turmakhand. Efforts now focus on menstrual health as a key component of women's right, dignity and empowerment.

**Sri Lanka** has similarities like India in exhibiting a range of menstrual beliefs shaped by region, ethnicity and socio economic background. While some communities maintain traditional taboos, others reflect progressive attitudes especially in rural areas. Buddhism being dominant religion does not explicitly label menstruation as impure, but cultural norms concerning cleanliness and purity do influence menstrual practices. Menstrual health initiatives dismiss myths by promoting healthy practices which enhances the access to hygiene period products thereby increasing confidence and protecting dignity along with sexual and reproductive health. In 2018, there were 66% of girls in Srilanka unaware of menstruation until its first occurrence<sup>3</sup>. Activism in Srilanka is steadily growing, with individuals and organisations working to challenge menstrual taboos, increase awareness, and promote menstrual equity, particularly among marginalised communities. UNFPA Srilanka, in collaboration with Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), has distributed dignity kits and adolescent kits since the onset of multidimensional crisis in Srilanka, following the global Covid 19 pandemic. With the worsening poverty levels after the economic collapse, many menstruating women in Srilanka are struggling to afford basic sanitary products like sanitary pads.<sup>4</sup>

When Indian and Srilanka are compared both countries reveal shared religious influences and rural urban divides, but also highlight how different policy approaches and advocacy moments shape their respective menstrual health landscapes.

Extending the comparison beyond South Asia, sub Saharan Africa provides further insight into the global menstrual experience. In countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria, menstruating girls often face exclusion, discrimination and harmful cleansing rituals, reinforcing feelings of shame and isolation. Girls frequently miss school due to lack of menstrual hygiene products, inadequate sanitation facilities, and stigma leading to long term educational disadvantages.

Traditional practices in Sub Saharan Africa consists of ritual bathing, food taboos and sexual restrictions, often rooted in beliefs about purification and fertility .In some communities , harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) can be indirectly related with menstruation ,though FGM is rooted in broader cultural notions of purity and chastity rather than menstruation itself.

Focusing on **Nigeria**, a religiously and culturally diverse country, menstrual beliefs vary widely across different regions and communities' .While some communities' observe menstruation as taboo, others are more accepting, especially in urbanised or educated populations where awareness and access to menstrual hygiene is increasing. As per the study of UNICEF about one in ten school age African girl didn't attend school during their menstruation or dropped out at puberty due to lack of cleanliness and separate toilet facilities for girls at schools. In some schools where there was no disposal facilities for menstrual wastes, girls were obliged to carry soiled waste back home which made them prefer to stay at home during menstruation resulting in school dropouts<sup>5</sup>. Much like in India, Nigeria's rural urban gap also forms menstrual practices, with education campaigns often facing conflict in more traditional or less literate communities.

In contrast, Afghanistan another country with entrenched taboos, sees menstruating women in some communities confined to isolated spaces, limited in movement and interaction, due to the beliefs in menstrual impurity. This belief in impurity is not unique to Afghanistan, similar cultural practices prevails all across the world. In rural Yemen, the practice of Al-Badawi forces women to stay in separate huts during menstruation, reflecting a deeply ingrained association between menstrual blood and religious or social impurity.<sup>6</sup>

Moving to Pacific region, especially in Papua New Guinea, menstruation is marked by rituals signifying a girl's transition to womanhood. These may include isolation and symbolic acts that are sometimes physically or emotionally traumatic, demonstrating how menstrual beliefs are often intertwined with rites of passage and gender norms.

When **Japan** is considered, presents a contrasting yet nuanced picture .Despite its technological advancement and widespread access to menstrual products and hygiene facilities, cultural taboos continue to persist, influenced by historical notions of impurity and modesty. In Shintoism, purification rituals have historically influenced and shaped societal attitudes towards menstruation, although there are no explicitly negative religious teachings. Buddhism, while emphasizing cleanliness,

does not portray menstruation negatively, thereby allowing more thoughtful and respectful practices. However, unlike many other countries, in modern Japanese society menstrual activism is gaining momentum demanding for menstrual leave policies, school education and open discourse. With Social media platforms becoming more powerful platforms for self-expressions, where women can share personal experiences and challenge the cultural silence surrounding menstruation.<sup>7</sup> In comparison with India, in Japan also it can be observed how cultural traditions and religious teachings influence menstrual norms. Japan's workplace policies and national education campaigns are far more advanced compared to India. Though both countries are making progress through activism, education awareness efforts and policy reforms, measures aimed at promoting menstrual dignity and equality still require more reinforcement.

It is necessary to implement interventions in order to improve the menstrual health of women and address the variables that contribute to menstrual disorders. Providing women and girls with access to menstrual products and healthcare services, as well as educating them about menstruation is an important function that can be performed by public health programmes. It is also possible for communities and schools to play an essential role as partners in the fight against the stigma that is associated with menstruation and the promotion of healthy menstrual practises. Counselling and treatment options for menstruation issues can be provided by healthcare professionals, and when necessary, women can be referred to specialised care.

Menstruation has currently grown global recognition as critical human rights concern, though once it was masked in silence, shame and forbidden. This change perception points out the fact that menstrual health is not just a hygiene issue but a matter of self-esteem, impartiality and human rights. Laws and legislations recognising menstrual health is not only addressing women's issues but capable of ensuring gender equality and promoting inclusive work atmospheres. Recently, a land mark policy on menstrual management , human rights and gender equality was adopted at 56<sup>th</sup> session of United Nations Human Rights Council( held from 18<sup>th</sup> June to 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024 ) which explicitly demands for the world-wide access to affordable, safe and clean menstrual products and facilities.<sup>8</sup>

In June 2023, ACT (Australian Capital Territory) approved regulation instructing free access to period products and facilities in public places such as, schools, hospitals, community centres. This act marks one of the first in Australia

to recognise period product access to menstrual products as a legislative obligation. Turning to Indian situation, several progressive initiatives were taken at the states and institutional levels. In May 2024, the Sikkim High Court office announced a policy for its female staff: to avail menstrual leave of 2 to 3 in each month, based on medical certification which would not be deducted from their regular medical leave account. This reflects evolving norms in work place inclusivity though its not a state policy and an institutional one.

Similarly in August 2024, pursuant to an Independence Day announcement, the Odisha government introduced a policy allowing women employees (government + private sector) to take **one paid leave day** on either the first or second day of their menstrual cycle. This is an important step in wider recognition of menstrual health at work in Indian states. However, some critics argue menstrual leave policies, if not implemented wisely, is strong enough to be used to disadvantage women reinforcing discrimination during hiring process as well as can lead to even obstacle for promotion in jobs. Moreover often menstrual health focuses on women, but inclusive policies should account for trans men and non binary persons who menstruate, as emphasised in WHO's rights based framework.

Looking forward focus should be on establishing national policy on menstrual health that ensures menstrual leave product accessibility and sustainable waste management emphasizing legal protections to educational institutions and workplaces. The integration of menstrual health into broader frameworks of gender equality, public health and human rights should be ensured in both public as well as private sectors.

## **VI. Addressing Menstrual Unhygienic: Health Risks and the Path towards Sustainable Management**

Across the world, there is inadequate menstrual sanitation and amenities available leading to serious implications for women's health and well-being. Lack of availability of clean water and sanitation products exacerbates these risks. Poor menstrual hygiene is linked strongly to urinary tract infections, bacterial vaginosis, and reproductive tract infections<sup>9</sup>. Many women in resource constrained settings are forced to use unhygienic materials such as old cloth, leaves increasing the likelihood of harmful bacterial infections.<sup>10</sup> The use of unclean materials or improperly washed reusable cloth pads can introduce bacteria into vaginal area, leading to the risk of long term complications such as pelvic inflammatory diseases, infertility or higher

susceptibility of sexually transmitted infections<sup>11</sup>. These ignorant practices not only affect the physical health but also restrict their movements during periods, as they often prefer to stay at home due to these difficulties, This, in turn, perpetuates cycles of gender based inequality .

Besides these feelings of shame, fear and embarrassment due to societal taboos can lead to psychological stress and low self-esteem particularly among young adolescent girls who are unprepared for menstruation.<sup>12</sup>The societal silence that revolves around menstruation further discourages open discussion, thereby hindering awareness and proper management.

Studies have shown the misinformation and lack of awareness as a major barrier for adopting safe and hygiene menstrual practices.<sup>13</sup>Cultural taboos, family norms and economic limits further adds fuel to the situation and complicates women's ability to manage menstruation hygienically. The conditions are worse when it comes to rural regions, where either sanitary products are inaccessible due to cost or unavailable together, forcing them to completely rely on reusable alternatives without adequate facilities for cleaning or hygienically. In rural areas, sanitary products are either inaccessible due to cost or unavailable altogether, forcing many to rely on reusable alternatives without adequate facilities for cleaning or storage <sup>14</sup>

Menstrual hygiene still remains an overlooked aspect in public health intervention, irrespective of progress in sanitation and water infrastructure. Need of the hour is to raise awareness about the health and environmental risks posed by improper disposal of sanitary products. Promotion of biodegradable and reusable alternatives such as banana fiber, bamboo, and water hyacinth based products offers both ecological and economic benefits <sup>15</sup>

As education plays a vital role in breaking menstrual taboos and empowering women, school based menstrual hygiene management programmes can help adolescent girls with knowledge and confidence to manage menstruation hygienically and without shame can discuss the difficulties publically. Parents education levels and family size significantly influences menstrual practices; hence educating parents is equally important, as in most of the families even discussing menstruation is considered as a taboo .Parental misinformation can reinforce harmful norms and restrict access to correct practices.<sup>16</sup>In many cases, the lack of accurate information passed down from parents perpetuates harmful beliefs and poor hygiene management <sup>17</sup>.Awareness programmes must include not only girls but also their families and communities .Thus a multi-faceted approach is required

to address these challenges. This includes integrating menstrual hygiene into school curriculum, offering Government subsidies on sanitary products, constructing adequate water and sanitation infrastructure and conducting sustained awareness campaigns. Ensuring that school going girls have access to safe and affordable menstrual hygiene products is key to promote their education, health and dignity.<sup>18</sup>

Plastic pervades modern life and menstruation is no exception. Single use plastic has now become one of the prime pollutants of the environment, however menstrual products have escaped this radar as the disposable sanitary napkins used are not recognized as a source of single use plastic. Much of the plastic that is used in these disposable pads and tampons is polyethylene and most of the microorganisms do not recognize this material to be edible and hence do not decompose it.<sup>19</sup>

A menstruating woman in India uses up to fifteen thousand pads in her lifetime and forty-five percent of the menstrual waste generated each year in the country is disposed of as routine waste along with the garbage, twenty eight percent are thrown out in the open and the rest of it is either buried or openly burnt.<sup>20</sup> In some cases these sanitary napkins are also flushed in the toilets, clogging the drainage systems and sewage water ways. As more and more non-profit organizations are trying to help women in rural areas manage their periods better, they are not made aware as to how these pads have to be disposed off.

As per the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules 2016, every waste generating household needs to make sure that the garbage is segregated into three divisions, wet, dry and domestic hazardous waste. It also states that sanitary material must be properly wrapped, kept in the dry waste bin and be handed over separately. These guidelines also require the sanitary material manufacturers to work in coordination with the local authorities to form a proper waste disposal setup for these waste products. This however is not seen on ground reality. In most cases the disposable pads are not even wrapped properly and thrown away in the bin. The waste collectors have to separate the sanitary material from household waste with their bare hands exposing them to diseases like HIV and Hepatitis. The material does collected either ends up in the drain or at the dumpsites. Furthermore the SAPs (Super Absorbent Polymers) that are used in the sanitary pads cause water clogging and contamination.<sup>21</sup>

The harmful effects of sanitary waste disposal are only now being realized by everyone due to the increased awareness and distribution of sanitary products. This has attracted the attention of the Government as well. Under the Swacch

Bharat Campaign which was started by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation published National Guidelines on managing Menstrual Health and Hygiene known as the Menstrual Health Management Guidelines. These guidelines along with addressing various hygiene issues like separate toilet for women, availability of sanitary products and water also talks about the means of disposing the same. These guidelines mandate the availability of disposal bins in each washroom and each cubicle to avoid them being thrown in the open or flushed out of the toilet. It also suggests the use cotton pads as they are more easily decomposed.<sup>22</sup> This however is rarely seen in practical use.

The interim solution provided by the Government was to incinerate the waste collected, however according to the World Health Organization, a temperature of above eight hundred degree has to be maintained in order to incinerate sanitary waste and this could lead to realizing of harmful toxins in the air, causing pollution and spreading diseases. The solution to this was however was found in a small village in the outskirts of Lucknow, called Papna Mau which came together and decided to use locally developed sustainable methods for the disposal of sanitary waste. Each house in the village today has a low cost incinerator which is essentially a small earthen pot, lined with dried leaves. All menstruating women in the house throw their used sanitary products in this pot and once the pot is full, the waste is soaked with some oil and burnt. After burning, the remaining ashes are carefully discarded<sup>23</sup>.

Seventy percent of women in urban areas use sanitary pads as compared to the forty-three percent in the rural areas. In rural areas women usually use old cloth, newspapers which are rather unsafe ways to maintain hygiene. 432 million pads are generated in India annually with the potential to cover landfills of over 24 hectares. All these materials however when disposed of create a huge problem for the environment. Sanitary pads contain material that takes up to five hundred to 800 hundred year to dispose of. The non-biodegradability of the material used in making sanitary napkins along with improper ways of the collection and disposal of sanitary pads is a hazard for the environment and is only recently being acknowledged in India. These concerns have led to consideration on switching to sustainable means of managing periods like washable and reusable cloth pads and menstrual cups. These changes may take a long time to materialize however, educating people about these means and spreading awareness is the only way to fasten the process and

move towards sustainable management of menstrual health and disposal of sanitary products.

Similar sustainable methods are explored, for instance a single washable cloth pad lasts up to seventy five washes. Goonj, a Delhi based NGO has also started turning small pieces of clean cloth into sanitary pads which are known as 'MY Pad'.<sup>24</sup> The only drawback is that women in rural areas do not have access to clean water which can make it difficult to wash these pads and the stigma attached to menstruation can make them hesitate to keep their pads out in the open to dry. Menstrual cups are also a good alternative to disposable pads. Menstrual cups are reusable, bell-shaped cups worn internally. They last for up to teen years and on the upside one needs very little amount of water to wash these cups. They might be expensive on first time purchase however this is compensated by how long one can use them. These sustainable solutions are important for long term betterment.

If not making major changes like switching sanitary products, safe disposal can also be achieved by ensuring that the used sanitary pads are properly wrapped before disposing and disposable bins are available in all public washrooms and cubicles. Simply marking menstrual waste and making it easier for the waste collectors to segregate the menstrual waste from others can also help. Proper collection and transportation of waste from rural areas to the dumping site can help reduce the environmental harm in these areas.

## VII. Conclusion

In order to overcome the impact of tradition and culture on menstruating women , first step must be to eradicate the deeply embedded social norms and taboos through legal reforms, awareness campaigns and education. Unless these harmful beliefs are uprooted from the people's mindsets, even judiciary cannot fully eradicate these old age stigmas. This was clearly demonstrated in Sabarimala judgement, which reveals the complex dynamics that shape women's experiences of menstruation and underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to create more supportive and inclusive environment for women.

There is a population of 355 million menstruating women in India which accounts for thirty percent of the country's population. Menstruation however has a lot of taboo and stigma attached to it which makes the discussion of the same very rare in India. Improper hygiene when managing menstruation can lead to several health complications. The condition is such that women do not have proper hygiene

material for managing their periods be it in schools or work places. Lack of separate washrooms, water and sanitary material leads to poor hygiene.

Menstruation has long been a tabooed topic in the society and the stigma of impurity attached to this has made its discussion in the public domain almost impossible. However in the recent years increasing efforts have been made to erase this gap and help more and more women manage their periods with dignity. While NGOs and the Government are trying to make menstrual products available to more and more women, it is also important to spread awareness about proper disposal of these products. Menstrual waste products in the past years have increasingly been contributed to the waste collected. Though a lot of women are just getting used to using sanitary products and might not be ready to use these, however, awareness must also be spread about the alternative sustainable uses that are available. Educating not just women but also the society as a whole will only help us maintain our environment better.

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