

## TEACHING GIRLS ABOUT PUBERTY, MENSTRUATION AND HOW TO MAKE WASHABLE MENSTRUAL PADS, IN RURAL INDIA

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My work on the issues of sexual and reproductive health in rural India centered on interacting, both formally and informally, with young adolescents in rural southern Rajasthan. I looked at how young people view their own health in order to help me to understand how communication material should be designed specifically for this group. The reasons for poor menstrual hygiene among women in rural India can broadly fit into two categories, cultural factors and economic constraints. This is further compounded by limited exposure to health issues and limited availability of resources.

The sanitary napkin exercise is conducted within a broad reproductive health workshop, lasting one to three days. Adolescent girls are selected from villages to attend these workshops. These sessions revealed that adolescent girls and women held similar beliefs and negative attitudes about menstruation and about themselves, reinforced by their communities.



Menstrual blood is perceived to be unclean, impure, dirty. Adolescent girls and women from the workshops shared the following:



- *“I am not allowed to cook or fetch water at this time.”*
- *“Do not touch the pickle jar at this time, pickles will develop fungus.”*
- *“We cannot enter any sacred area like a temple or a room with religious pictures.”*
- *“When I got my period for the first time, I did not tell anyone for over two days. I thought I got my period because I was talking to a boy in the neighboring village. I thought I was pregnant.”*

Nevertheless, the arrival of a girl’s first period is hailed by the family; she becomes the symbol of fertility. The family and the community begin to discuss marriage, and often within six months the pubescent girl will move into her in-law’s home. Yet, discussions of marriage will never include mention of sexuality or health.

Because menstrual blood is “dirty,” any old rag is deemed sufficient to wipe off or to absorb the flow. The menstrual rags usually selected are dark in color to ensure that the *dirty* discharge will not be visible on a dark background. As a result, green, yellow and other irregular discharge remains undetected. Women change twice a day, once in the morning and once at night; the cloth is washed out with soap and water and hung out to dry in a dark corner away from the sight of men. Women advise

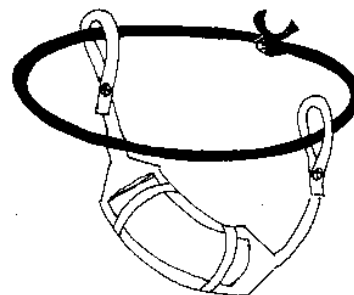
one another: “*Hide the cloth. If men see it, they will lose their sight.*” Once the period is complete, the cloth is put away, often between *kelus* (roof tiles), to be taken out the following month. Improper care of the cloth and poor menstrual hygiene leads to fungal infections in young girls and women. Repeated infections lead to more serious reproductive tract infections, making them more vulnerable to other health issues.

Economic constraints also impact the access of rural women to adequate menstrual health and hygiene. Although sanitary napkins are available for purchase in most small towns and cities in India, on average only 35 percent of women can afford them. Furthermore for rural families, a pack of 20 sanitary napkins, costing 42 rupees (less than USD 1), amounts to half of the father’s daily income. Consequently, women in rural India have few options. Many women use old cloth, usually polyester and often dirty, as discussed previously. Other women reveal that fine sand or ash is poured in a rectangular cloth bag to absorb the blood; when a change is required, the sand or ash is tipped out and the bag refilled again. Occasionally, a woman will disclose that she uses nothing; she is separated from the rest of the family during her period and bleeds onto her skirt.

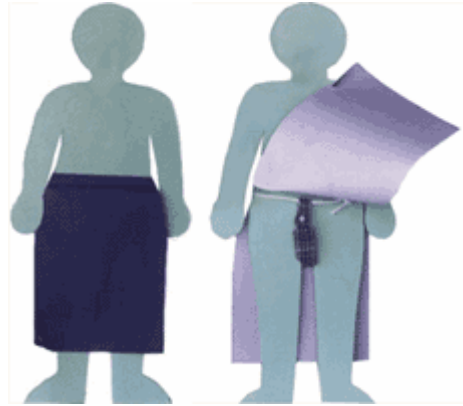


In talking with these women, I was perplexed by the complete absence of anything sanitary to absorb the flow. This realization led to the design of a sanitary pad. I used the internet to find out whether anyone had designed anything in the past; there were many examples, yet none seemed suitable for girls living in rural India. Therefore I designed a sample keeping in mind the following:

- easy to wear (*buttons to underwear, attaches to drawstring tied around the waist*)
- easy to make (*designed for hand stitching, most girls do not own sewing machines*)
- adjustable and adaptable (*for girls of different ages and sizes*)
- hygienic (*white or light colored cotton cloth*)
- economical (*locally available material, found in most households*)
- reusable (*washable*)



After testing the stitching exercise with several groups, I soon discovered women were unclear of how to wear their sanitary napkins. To resolve this problem, a cardboard doll wearing the napkin was developed as a demonstration model. The doll also had to be sensitized to the audience, specifically to their discomfort with the naked body. So, the doll wears the napkin under her *ghagra* (skirt), permitting the women to lift and to drop the skirt at will.



The original goal was to develop a personal sanitary product that is affordable, reusable, and washable – a product that any women can make on her own using local materials, something for herself. Ultimately, the workshops also provide a forum for women to



openly discuss cultural beliefs and traditional practices surrounding reproductive health in order to critically examine their validity. Interactive exercises, including stitching a sanitary pad, further raise awareness among the girls and women of the importance of menstrual hygiene. The participants then share their knowledge with others in their community, rendering them agents for social and behavioral change.

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