

A Study on Menstrual Product Choice and Acceptability of Menstrual Cup among Young Women in Kerala

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Abstract

One of the main physiological changes occurring in an adolescent girl's life is marked as menstruation. As it is considered as a symbol of maturity among young girls, it also holds a social significance. It is very important for women to be aware of healthy menstrual hygiene practices and its effects on health and environment. And most importantly, it is essential to understand the advantages of using a menstrual cup along with its cost-effectiveness. The following study analyses the factors influencing young women to choose the menstrual hygiene product during menstruation and also to understand the barriers that women face to use menstrual cups. In addition, this study also examines the environmental hazards caused by the disposal of menstrual hygiene products. The sample of the study was based on different parts of Kerala from 191 respondents. Further, to understand the efficiency of the menstrual cup, data was collected from 43 respondents who were using a menstrual cup which constituted young women who were employed and married. Snowball sampling method has been used to collect data through questionnaires. From the study it was found that awareness and acceptability of the menstrual cup can increase the number of menstrual cup users. Due to the lack of awareness, and increased fear and taboos most of the women tend to avoid hygienic menstrual practices. Besides, the usage of menstrual cups is cost-effective and is a zero waste product to the environment which is better than other non-biodegradable menstrual hygiene products.

Key words: Menstruation, Menstrual Hygiene, Menstrual cup, Cost-effective, Environmental hazard

1. INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, sanitary napkins and tampons are expensive which make young women use cloth, newspaper, toilet paper etc. In India, there are over 355 million menstruating girls and women, out of all the menstruating girls and women in India, less than 20% use sanitary pads where in urban areas it rises only till 50 percent. The barriers to adopting menstrual hygiene practices are three-fold: lack of awareness, a lack of acceptance and a lack of access. The only way through which young women have access to free menstrual products is through campaigning programmes and NGOs.

For women, menarche is the most important among all the developmental milestones associated with adolescent years, especially when a girl child is discriminated against in the society. Due to lack of awareness and knowledge about menstruation people in India still consider it unclean and dirty where women get fear and embarrassment. The widely prevalent taboos make girls skip school, they have to restrain from religious activities and are not allowed to enter kitchen and certain cultural practices doesn't allow them to have some foods during menstruation.

The improvement in Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) over time and shedding of stigmas have made cloth pads and menstrual cups widely acceptable in the Indian market. A menstrual cup is a type of reusable feminine hygiene product. It's a small, flexible funnel-shaped cup made of rubber or silicone that you insert into your vagina to catch and collect period fluid.

The objective of the study is to analyze the factors influencing young women to choose the menstrual hygiene product during menstruation.

To understand the barriers that women face to use menstrual cups. In addition, this study also examines the environmental hazards caused by the disposal of menstrual hygiene products.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Maryam et al, (2021) studied on the acceptability and safety of the menstrual cup among Iranian women. This cross sectional study was conducted during 2020. The high level of acceptability and safety of menstrual cups showed that this product is a suitable alternative during menstruation among Iranian women.

Fernanda et al (2020) studied to understand how the menstrual intimate hygiene item is related to the construction of the identity of consumers. This study pointed out that the use of the menstrual cup helped to break the limiting patterns that surround the social and behavioral relationship of the woman participating in the study.

Isaac Jacob et al, (2014) made an exploratory study regarding the diffusion and adoption of sanitary napkins along with its brand awareness among low income group women in Mumbai. They found that working status, education type of home and monthly household income were important influences in usage and non usage of sanitary napkins. Furthermore in order to increase diffusion and adoption of sanitary napkins among the target group, the products must be given at much affordable rates.

(Mason et al., 2019) studied on comparing use and accessibility of menstrual cups and sanitary pads by school girls in rural western Kenya. 450 school girls were studied on the use and views of menstrual cups compared to girls using disposable sanitary pads. They examined the ease of insertion and removal also comfort, soreness and pain with the product use. Girls using sanitary pads faced lesser availability issues compared with girls using menstrual cups. Uses of menstrual cups faced initial problems on insertion, removal and comfort and further reduced on time.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic profile

Table 1

Demographic profile, (N=191)	Number	Percentage
Age group (in years)		
15-20	125	65.4%
20-25	56	29.3%
25-30	10	5.2%
Area of residence		
Rural	125	65.5%
Urban	66	34.5%
Religion		
Hindu	129	67.5%
Christian	51	26.7%
Muslim	9	4.7%
No religion	2	1.04%

Education		
Post-Secondary	151	79.1%

Secondary level	39	20.4%
Primary or less	1	0.5%

Civil Status		
Single	180	94.2%
Married	11	5.8%

Employment status		
Employed	26	13.6%
Unemployed	6	3.1%
Student	159	83.2%

Monthly Income		
Less than ₹10,000	87	45.5%
₹10,000-₹20,000	27	14.1%
₹20,000-₹30,000	16	8.4%
₹30,000-₹40,000	25	13.1%
₹40,000-₹50,000	16	8.4%
More than ₹50,000	20	10.5%

Source: Compiled from Primary data

The sample of the study was based on different parts of Kerala. Among the 191 respondents ,the majority of them were students from a particular college in Changanacherry. In addition to that, to understand the efficiency of the menstrual cup data was collected from 43 respondents who were using a menstrual cup which constituted young women who were employed and married and this data was collected through a snowball sampling method.

A large proportion of 65.4 percent of the study population were in the age group of 15-20 years, followed by 29.3 percent in the age group of 20-25 years. The mean age of respondents is 19.48 years with a standard deviation of 2.94. A vast

majority of the study population were from rural areas (65.5 percent) followed by urban areas (34.5 per cent). Out of the total 191 respondents, 45.5 percent of the respondents earn less than ₹ 10,000 per month whereas only 10.5 percent of the respondents earn more than ₹ 50,000.

Cost

In India, lack of access to quality menstrual hygiene products continues to be a barrier in achieving 100 percent coverage for menstrual hygiene. In the competitive Indian market, the available sanitary napkins are above the purchasing power of women from lower income groups (SWaCH Coop, 2016). The small pack of stayfree comes cheaper than whisper in the market. In the study, majority of the respondents (45.5 percent) have a monthly income less than ₹ 10,000 and 42.9 percent of them use stay free whereas 37.7 percent use whisper. Another 19.4 percent of the respondents use other brands like sofya, bella etc. However, Procter and Gamble's Whisper (50.4 percent) held the largest market share in India followed by Johnson and Johnson's stayfree (24 percent) (Euromonitor International, 2018).

On an average, a pack of 7 sanitary napkins costs about ₹ 30-40. In the study, 46 percent of the respondents spend around ₹ 50-100 per month on sanitary napkins, whereas annually it will be around ₹ 600-1200 per woman. This situation will be even more dreadful if the family consists of more than one woman, which turns out to be a huge expense for the breadwinner of the family. Women tend to sacrifice their basic hygiene needs for the family's well-being and they try to save the money for other essentials by often wearing sanitary napkins for more than the recommended 4-6 hours.

A menstrual cup costs about ₹ 250 -1000, which can be used for up to 6 months to 10 years, and only costs ₹ 2.08 per month for 10 years. Women using sanitary napkins need to spend about 6000-12000 for 10 years. Therefore, using a menstrual cup can reduce the expense 12 times rather than using a sanitary napkin.

Impact of menstrual hygiene products on Health

The socio-economic conditions of the lower income group force the women and adolescent girls to use the disposable sanitary napkins for more than suggested hours of wearing; it puts them at risk of their health to reproductive tract infections, cervical cancer, female genital tumors and other related diseases.

In India, the second most common cancer among women aged between 15 and 44 years of age is cervical cancer (National Health Portal, 2016). Cervical cancer contributes to approximately 6.29 percent of all cancers in women (NCBI, 2016).

Sanitary napkins have absorptive agents like dioxin and super absorbent polymers. The dioxin can get accumulated in the body that can negatively affect the reproductive organs which can cause ovarian and cervical cancers. Dioxin also suppresses the body's immunity which makes women more vulnerable to infections. Furthermore, it also impacts the production of reproductive hormones like estrogen, which results in major health consequences in the future.

In the study, on using synthetic sanitary napkins, 62 percent of the respondents reported itching problems while 51.8 percent had leakage issues and 18.1 percent had allergy.

Impact of menstrual hygiene products on Environment

Sanitary napkin is the commonly used menstrual hygiene product used in the country which is disposable and has an adverse effect on the environment due to the raw materials it contains. As sanitary napkins and tampons contain a major proportion of plastics and from the study it is evident that a menstruator uses a minimum of 18 sanitary napkins per month which results in the

production of huge amounts of plastic waste globally. These plastic wastes take up to 500 years to break down. The convenience of using sanitary napkins has silently given birth to the increasing rate of pollution in landfills as well as in the atmosphere.

The disposal of sanitary napkins is usually by burning, dumping, digging or giving away as municipal waste. 84.7 percent of the respondents from the study burn the sanitary napkin waste which can emit toxic chemicals as it is made of super absorbent polymers and they gradually break down to micro plastics. 7.6 percent give it away as municipal wastes while 5.3 percent dig it inside the soil and 2.4 percent dump it, which eventually results in the contamination of soil nutrients and ground water quality and burdens it.

This scenario will become more scary when we realise that an average woman could use up to 10,000 sanitary napkins from menarche to menopause. It is estimated that municipal bodies collect approximately 62 million tonnes of waste

daily which is generated in the country (Bose & Bhattacharya, 2018).

Menstrual cups, hence again act as a best alternative as they can be reused for a decade, which make them sustainable and eco-friendly period partners.

Consumer behaviour and Awareness towards menstrual hygiene products

In developing countries like India, despite the availability of sustainable and largely affordable menstrual hygiene products alternatives women always choose unsustainable products due to the convenience and traditional practices they follow and misconceptions associated with the menstrual hygiene practices.

In the study it was found that, 82.7 percent of the respondents were aware of the alternative menstrual cup and its benefits, even though they were aware of the positives of the alternative, only 22.5 percent of them are using it. This may be due to the myths and taboos that are surrounded with the idea of using it. 39 percent of them fear that the cup will get stuck in their vagina. Also, many cultural aspects act as a barrier from using a menstrual cup. 30.4 percent of the respondents from the study agree that culture and religious practices also influence in choosing the menstrual hygiene product. Many believe that using a menstrual cup can cause hymen breakage which is assumed to be a symbol of virginity of a woman. 23 percent of the respondents were unaware of the fact that the menstrual cup is reusable and it is environment friendly.

Another interesting response observed from the study is the purchaser of the menstrual hygiene product. 18.3 percent of the respondents' male family members (father/husband/brother) purchases the product when it is required. It is a positive affirmation to the society that discriminates against women. It is an indication that the society has slowly started accepting the change and men are ready to understand the hardship that women go through during menstruation.

4.CONCLUSION

The findings on the use of menstrual hygiene products among young women will help in promoting the realization of women's health, effects on environment and behavioral aspects. As awareness and acceptability of the menstrual cup become more common nationally, the information on menstrual flow management, acceptance and availability of cheaper menstrual hygiene products and guidance for young women will be more widely available. India scrapped the 12 percent tax on sanitary products in 2018, because it cannot be considered as a luxury, and cutting tax is just a small step towards a much longer journey of making menstrual health and hygiene an accessible reality for every woman in the country. A project to manage menstrual waste by encouraging women to switch to reusable pads made of cloths and menstrual cups was launched in Kerala in 2019 and Muhamma grama panchayat in Alappuzha have become the first synthetic pad-free panchayat in India.

In the context of the study, further research is required for the evidence about menstrual cup use and more awareness and positive attitude towards healthy menstrual practices need to be assured in the state as well as all over the country.

Suggestions

- Menstrual cups are a safe and sustainable option for women's health and environment and cost-effective also.
- Even when the water and sanitation facilities are poor, menstrual cups can act as an alternative over disposable menstrual hygiene products.
- Proper information, training and guidance should be given while introducing the menstrual cups.
- Better understanding of the reproductive process and better understanding of their partners by men make the situation tabooless

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