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Menstrual hygiene facilities in Indian schools

Published On: 25-04-2023

Why in News: The Supreme Court recently directed the Union Government to devise a uniform policy to ensure menstrual hygiene for school children.

A brief about Menstrual Hygiene

Menstruation is not just a biological phenomenon but a social one and continues to be a barrier to gender equality.

Menstrual health outcomes of young women and girls are deeply impacted by their education level, economic status and geographical location.

According to the recently released fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), the use of unhygienic menstrual methods of protection among women (age 15-24 years) is almost three times that of their urban counterparts.

Women in the same age group with no schooling are almost six times more likely to use an unhygienic method. And those from the poorest wealth quintile are ten times more likely to use an unhygienic method

The unsanitary use of menstrual products increases the susceptibility of young girls and women to fungal, urinary, and reproductive-tract infections, impacting their overall health and well-being.

It is therefore imperative that girls and young women have access to accurate scientific information and hygienic practices of menstruation.

This includes but is not limited to understanding how periods work, when to expect them, how to manage them, hygienic solutions, where to access them and methods of disposal.

Concerns with Period poverty

A new report published by UNICEF and WaterAid found that more than a third of girls in South Asia miss school during their periods, mainly due to lack of access to toilets and pads in schools and no proper education about menstruation.

‘Period poverty’ is the term used when there is a lack of sanitary products, and other essentials like toilets with clean water due to financial constraints in the region. According to the report, most of the schools in South Asia fell short of the WHO standards of one toilet for every 25 girls.

Though the UN has recognised menstrual hygiene as a global public health and human rights issue, globally 1.2 billion women lack access to basic sanitation and hygiene.

Petition before Supreme Court

The Bench, comprising Chief Justice D. Y. Chandrachud and Justices P.S. Narasimha and J.B. Pardiwala, responded to a PIL which sought directions on two accounts: that governments ensure schools provide girl students from class 6 to 12 with sanitary pads, and that there be a separate toilet for girl students

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These should also be padded with State-wide measures to ensure washrooms have clean running water and waste disposal facilities.

Out of 10.8 lakh government schools, 15,000 have no toilets and 42,000 lack drinking water, Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal shared in 2021.

Investment in social awareness programs is also needed, the petition argued, adding that inadequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is a barrier to education.

SC recent verdict

The Supreme Court on April 10 said a “uniform national policy” may be framed by the Centre in consultation with States and Union Territories to ensure menstrual hygiene by providing sanitary pads, vending and disposal mechanisms and exclusive washrooms for girl students in schools.

The court said the issue was in public interest and highlighted the need for sanitation and menstrual hygiene for girl children in government-aided and residential schools.

The policy should ensure all government, government-aided and residential schools provide adolescent students with free sanitary napkins and access to a vending and disposal mechanism

Schools should also be equipped with separate washrooms for girl students.

The SC nominated the Ministry of Family Health and Welfare to coordinate with the Jal Shakti Ministry and Ministry of Education to implement policies over four weeks

Government measures so far

Since 2011, the Union Government has launched three initiatives.

The “Menstrual Hygiene Scheme” provides sanitary pads to girls aged 10 to 19, at a rate of ₹6 for a pack of six napkins. In 2019, the government began distributing eco-friendly and biodegradable pads at a subsidised rate under the Suvidhascheme; data shows as of 2021-22. over 1,128 lakh pads were distributed.

Another initiative, the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK), focuses on promoting sexual and reproductive wellness for all adolescents.

At the State level, the governments of Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Sikkim, among other regions, have launched varied schemes to distribute subsidised sanitary napkins, thus making them accessible and affordable to girls who may otherwise be hindered by knowledge gaps or patriarchal norms.

The Union Government in 2013 issued guidelines for setting up mini incinerators in schools to burn sanitary waste. However, there are concerns about emissions from burning disposable pads made of plastic polymer products .

In 2012, Kerala had banned such mini incinerators as “they were of single chamber working in low temperature” and not complying with government norms.

Challenges in implementation

Experts however note that the implementation of schemes remains a challenge due to poor product quality, irregular supply, lack of funds and prevailing stigma.

Affordability is a barrier. The latest National Family Health Survey data showed at least 30% of girls were using “unhygienic” methods of protection – including cloth, make-shift sanitary pads, dried leaves, newspapers or

nothing at all.

An analysis of the data found that “rural Indian adolescent women with higher education, from general category, with medium mass media exposure and from the richest wealth quintile were more likely to use hygienic methods exclusively”.

Usage also differs along caste lines: the use of hygienic methods is lower among girls from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes than those belonging to other castes.

A 2016 analysis of the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme in north India found only 30% of girls used sanitary napkins due to irregular supply. Further, a report by The Hindu found that despite Karnataka Government’s Shuchi Scheme, most schools neither had functional toilets with water nor dustbins.

Awareness programs face administrative challenges too. In Jharkhand, Mr. Srivastava explains that male teachers are usually nominated for health education, but their capacity to deal with the concern is limited

The COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent school closure, further restricted access to affordable sanitary napkins. Most States ceased menstrual schemes due to a lack of funds. Outside of schools, people were unable to afford sanitary napkins sold by private pharmacies

Moreover, current programmes focus on able-bodied girl students, overlooking non-binary, gender non-conforming folks, and trans-men who also menstruate

Role of menstrual facility in education access

In April 2021, the Karnataka High Court said, “If you want to empower young women and young girls, provide [menstrual] facilities... This will not only “[lead to] empowerment of the girl child, but also implementation of the fundamental right under Article 21A [Right to Education].”

Girls’ enrolment in schools reduces at the secondary education level due to varied factors, with MHM being one. 23% of girls in India drop out of school due to a lack of menstruation products, inadequate washrooms and absent disposal facilities, according to an estimate by the United Nations Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

Knowledge gaps are also an issue- almost 71% of adolescent girls are unaware of menstruation until they get their first period, a study by UNICEF found.

Even when adolescent girls attend school, absent menstrual infrastructure results in irregular attendance. The latest

Annual Status of Education Report found that in Bihar, girl school students had low attendance because 36.7% of primary and upper primary schools did not have separate toilets.

A 2022 paper estimated one in five girls dropped out of school after their periods started, and 70.5% of people missed school and workdays due to periods.

In 2018, The Hindu reported that 60% of adolescent girls skipped school while on their period; a key concern was anxiety around staining their uniform (since most used homemade pads). The lack of clean toilets, running water, or a disposal system further deterred attendance. Sanitary napkins were incinerated, buried in the ground or flushed in toilets due to improper waste management and lack of awareness, other reports suggest.

Alternatively, when schools provided menstruation products, improved sanitation facilities and launched awareness programmes, the proportion of girls reporting anxiety about their period decreased from 58.6% to 34%, with an upswing in attendance rate, according to a Uganda-based study published in BMJ.

Under Chattisgarh Panna, a community-led programme focusing on awareness, sanitary napkin usage increased from 40% to 75% within a year in 2022, according to government data. Activists also note that governments should move towards eco-friendly products and allow students to choose between sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups.

The Way Ahead

From a policy standpoint. There is a need for more female teachers at school, regular assessment of pad quality, proper implementation of schemes and capacity building on health education.

“Functional toilets at school are very important” and a starting point for menstrual hygiene management

An estimate shows that India can advance its GDP by 2.7% (\$86.7 billion) by positively addressing period poverty, as it can improve girls’ and women’s health, education, well-being and economic independence.