

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW**  
**MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

**[ISSN 2581-5369]**

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**Volume 4 | Issue 3**

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**2021**

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# Analysis on Menstrual Health: A Human Right Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*Menstruation or commonly known as periods are natural and vital part of the reproductive cycle of approximately half of the human population. On any given day, hundreds of millions of girls and women around the world are menstruating yet a substantial proportion of them lack knowledge and means to manage their menstrual health with dignity due to factors like gender inequality, poverty and lack of facilities coupled with religious and cultural taboos. On an average, a woman menstruates for 3000 days during her lifetime and these days often prove difficult for them due to lack of menstrual hygiene management. In the last decade significant steps have been taken in global level on this issue pushing states to include menstrual hygiene as a part of their policy making and to recognise menstrual health as human right. With the celebration of May 28 as World Menstrual Hygiene Day, slogans such as 'break the silence' or 'no shame periods' sounded as shouts of empowerment. Keeping with the same, India has also made notable progress in menstrual hygiene. However, the question of the hour is whether the steps taken have proved fruitful in achieving the desired results. Several news reports still throw light on stigmas and discriminatory practices against menstruating women such as social exclusion in places all over India. The paper analysis the strides taken in India on menstrual health and hygiene and explores into possible measures to realise the same as a human right.*

**Keywords:** *Human right, Menstruation, Menstrual Health, Menstrual Hygiene, Sustainable Development*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Every month a woman's body biologically prepares for pregnancy. When no pregnancy occurs, a cyclical vaginal discharge of blood, secretions and tissue debris occurs at monthly intervals forming a biological cycle. This process is known as menstruation or periods. Girls start menstruating between 11 and 14 which is called as menarche and will continue to menstruate till menopause. This time is also characterised by other discomforts such as pain in back, breasts and pelvic region or headache and fatigue. Menstruation is a natural fact of life and a

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monthly occurrence for billions of girls and women of reproductive age. The bodily changes associated with puberty will have an impact on the girls' physical, psychological and social development.<sup>2</sup> Menstrual health refers to healthy menstrual hygiene practices with relation to broader aspects such as health, well-being, gender, education, empowerment and rights.<sup>3</sup> Menstrual hygiene management as defined by UNICEF and World Health Organisation is the use of clean material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, privacy to change and access to soap and water to wash and suitable facilities for disposal of menstrual materials.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) goes further and summarizes systemic factors that facilitate healthy menstrual management are accurate and timely knowledge, available, safe, and affordable menstrual materials, informed and comfortable professionals, referral and access to health services, sanitation and washing facilities, positive social norms, safe and hygienic disposal and advocacy and policy.<sup>5</sup> Thus we can infer that menstrual health management also includes the ability to understand what is normal during menstruation and feasible methods to seek help in case of any abnormalities.

## II. MENSTRUAL HYGIENE - A HUMAN RIGHT

When we place menstrual hygiene in the framework of human rights, we recognize menstruating women and girls as rights-holders with legal entitlements and identify governments and their partners as duty-bearers with obligations to meet entitlements regarding menstrual health. This includes particular attention to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups, the impact of programs on their rights, and the establishment of procedures to ensure non-discrimination and equality, accountability and participation in an organization's operations removing barriers to the full realisation of human rights. Rights around menstrual health are human right to health, right to water and sanitation, right to education, right to work and right to non-discrimination and gender equality.<sup>6</sup> Menstrual hygiene will fall under the umbrella of right to life of every person enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights among other slew of rights

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<sup>2</sup> Leisa Gibson & Brooke Yamakoshi, *Guidance on Menstrual Health and Guidance*, UNICEF (Nov 03, 2020, 11:04 AM), <https://www.unicef.org/wash/files/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Hilda Alberda, *Menstrual Health Training Manual*, Simavi (Nov 01, 2020, 2.17 PM), <https://simavi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/MH-Manual-Digitaal-DEF.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: 2017 Update and SDG Baselines*, WHO (Oct 28, 2020, 10.20 PM), <https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/launch-version-report-jmp-water-sanitation-hygiene.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Keith, *Outlook on Reproductive Health*, PATH MISSION (Nov 02, 2020, 3.43 PM), [https://path.azureedge.net/media/documents/RH\\_Outlook\\_Nov\\_2017.pdf](https://path.azureedge.net/media/documents/RH_Outlook_Nov_2017.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *Understanding Menstrual Hygiene Management and Human Rights*, WASH United 2017, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, (Oct 29, 2020, 5.30 PM), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news\\_attachments/mhm\\_practitioner\\_guide\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news_attachments/mhm_practitioner_guide_web.pdf).

such as right to non-discrimination and equality, right to education and information. However, none of the core international human rights treaties make any allusions or clear references to menstruation. Though convention on specific issues can be justified for not bringing menstrual health under its purview, the silence of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are more notable because menstrual health arguably sits within the scope of these treaties. The treaties' references to women and girls' rights to health (including sexual and reproductive rights), water and sanitation, education, work (including adequate working conditions) and economic development, fail to explicitly mention, or even allude to, menstruation. The vast majority of CEDAW and CRC reports do not make any clear references or allusions to menstruation. This silence is surprising in itself as menstruation affects most women's lives, irrespective of their country's income, but is made more alarming by the fact that 39% of these reports are on middle to low income countries in which menstrual-related human rights violations are most prevalent. Most striking is the complete silence of the reports on reproductive education, sexual and reproductive health, and the right to health and development. The report simply states the obvious women menstruate. No details are given about how menstruation affects them, what their needs are, or how women might be affected differently by menstruation. In addition, it is remarkable that the Right to Education report on girls' education and the Right to Water and Sanitation report on the Millennium Development Goals only allude to menstruation. Thus, most allusions and references to menstruation are made in the context of sanitation and sanitary materials.<sup>7</sup> This general neglect within the international human rights system can be a result of combination of numerous factors such as taboo surrounding the topic of menstruation, patriarchy or disempowerment of women which has to be addressed. However, this is not the end. With the progress of time, menstrual hygiene management was slowly brought under limelight in the international arena with special reference to sustainable development goals.

Sustainable development goals are structured and defined in such a way that they address important problem from health and sustainability perspective. Menstrual health and hygiene though not mentioned as an explicit goal, is directly linked to a number of goals. Sustainable Development Goals acknowledges that, "By 2030 the aim is to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and to end open defecation, paying special attention to

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<sup>7</sup> Robyn Boosey & Emily Wilson, *The Menstrual Hygiene Management and The International Human Rights System: A Vicious Cycle of Silence*, WORLD BANK (Oct 29, 2020, 5:45 PM), [https://consultations.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/consultation-template/update-world-bank-group-gender-strategy-consultations/submissions/a\\_vicious\\_cycle\\_of\\_silence\\_final\\_version\\_of\\_paper\\_0.pdf](https://consultations.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/consultation-template/update-world-bank-group-gender-strategy-consultations/submissions/a_vicious_cycle_of_silence_final_version_of_paper_0.pdf).

the needs of women and girls in those vulnerable situations.” Without considering the needs for safe and dignified menstruation, the world cannot achieve the vision for sanitation and hygiene under goal six. Women and girls’ access to menstrual health and hygiene is also central to achieving other sustainable development goals. The lack of basic knowledge about puberty and menstruation may contribute to early and unwanted pregnancy, the stress and shame associated with menstruation can negatively affect mental health and unhygienic sanitation products may make girls susceptible to reproductive tract infections – all affecting sustainable development goal health outcomes (Goal 3). Girls may be absent or less attentive in school during menstruation due to a lack of WASH facilities or support from the school community, affecting education (Goal 4), or at work, affecting economic opportunities (Goal 8). Gender equality (Goal 5) cannot be achieved when taboos and myths prevent menstruating women and girls from full participation in society. Failure to develop markets for quality menstrual materials can impact on sustainable consumption and production patterns (Goal 12). UNICEF’s role in addressing the issues is applaudable. It has come up with Strategy for Wash 2016-2021, Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and Gender Action Plan 2018-2021. It is very well addressed in the World Conference on Human Rights and in the United Nation’s Platform for Action<sup>8</sup> “that the human rights of women throughout the life cycle are an inalienable integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.”

### **III. A CHECK ON MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN INDIA**

As of 2015, 71% of girls are unaware about the concept of menstruation until menarche in India. 70% of mothers consider menstruation as ‘dirty’ and 88% of menstruating women use alternatives such as old fabrics, rags, sand, ash, wood shavings, newspapers and hay. 66% of women manage their periods in the open due to absence of household toilets which lead to an increase of 70% of reproductive infections among women who use unhygienic materials and 23% of girls drop out of school every year due to lack of proper functioning toilets.<sup>9</sup> This report was confirmed and additional statistical data which stated that 100% of girls had no knowledge about the process of menstruation leading to a total of 86% of girls being completely unprepared for such situation leading to low self confidence in 79% of girls and leaving 64% scared. 44% felt embarrassed and humiliated over restrictions.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon of

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Anuradha R Tiwary, *Role of Menstrual Hygiene in Sustainable Development Goals*, 8(5) IJHSR 377, 378-79 (2018)

<sup>9</sup> *Spot on Improving Menstrual Health and Hygiene in India March 2015*, (Oct 28, 2020, 6.00 PM), DASRA, <https://www.dasra.org/resource/improving-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>.

<sup>10</sup> *National Guidelines on Menstrual Hygiene Management December 2015*, MINISTRY OF DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION (Nov 04, 2020, 1.35 PM), <https://www.mdws.gov.in/menstrual-hygiene-management-national-guidelines-december-2015>.

menstruation is not only physiological but comes with certain social and religious strings attached to it which are often myths and misconceptions. Women are prohibited from religious activities, attending functions such as marriages, cooking and sexual intercourse or touching male members of the family during their menstrual periods. This can go to the extent of not allowing girls to play or attend school leading to the development of a negative attitude about menstruation on these girls. In both rural and urban areas adolescents remain uninformed or very little informed about these issues. The educational system also tends to be ambivalent about sex education.<sup>11</sup> On the whole one can understand that the obstacles to menstrual hygiene are cultural taboos and restrictions which is largely due to lack of awareness and education in the particular area, limited access to information and supplies to sanitary materials and lack of infrastructure or wash facilities.

#### IV. INDIA'S JOURNEY ON MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

India has definitely made progress in the area of menstrual hygiene. Initially menstrual hygiene was not recognised as an issue. Only after the issue was recognised in the international level, the matter was addressed in India. The year 2010 was when the Government of India launched the 'Pad Scheme' which provided for subsidised napkins for rural girls. Subsequently the luxury tax levied on sanitary napkins was reduced from ten percent to one percent and the prices of sanitary napkins was reduced by multinational companies due to cut in excise duties. In 2011 Ministry of Women and Child Development introduced the SABLA Scheme. This scheme was to encourage self-development and empowerment in adolescent girls and to improve their nutrition and health status with menstrual hygiene and sexual health as key components.<sup>12</sup> In the same year, a poverty alleviation program implemented by Ministry of Rural Development called the National Rural Livelihood Mission supported self-help groups and small manufacturers to produce sanitary pads.<sup>13</sup> The Nirmal Bharat Yatra also called the Great WASH Yatra – a giant carnival developed by the Government of India, WASH United and Quicksand an interdisciplinary consultancy in collaboration with partnership from UNICEF, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and other international organisations, was conducted to promote awareness and enact behavioural change around sanitation and hygiene in India.<sup>14</sup> In 2013 the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation

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<sup>11</sup> Rajesh Garg, Shobha Goyal & Sanjeev Gupta, *India Moves Towards Menstrual Hygiene: Subsidized Sanitary Napkins for Rural Adolescent Girls—Issues and Challenges*, 16 MCHJ 767, 768-70 (2011)

<sup>12</sup> *Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls SABLA, Ministry of Women and Child Development* (Oct 30, 2020, 5.11 PM), [https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/1-SABLAScheme\\_0.pdf](https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/1-SABLAScheme_0.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *National Rural Livelihood Mission, NRLM* (Oct 30, 2020, 5.20 PM), <https://aajeevika.gov.in/>.

<sup>14</sup> *The Nirmal Bharat Yatra (The Great WASH Yatra) - A travelling carnival over 6 weeks spreading awareness on sanitation & hygiene in India, India Water Portal* (Nov 5, 2020, 11.00 AM),

included menstrual hygiene components to Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan Campaign which envisages that by 2022 all gram panchayats in the country must attain Nirmal Status with ecologically safe and sustainable sanitation and solid and liquid waste management systems.<sup>15</sup> Similarly in 2014, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram, a health program for adolescents between the age of 10 and 19 in which menstrual hygiene is placed in a key focus area.<sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has introduced the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme for promotion of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls in the age group of 10-19 year in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> The scheme aims to increase awareness among adolescent girls on Menstrual Hygiene, to increase access to and use of high-quality sanitary napkins to adolescent girls in rural areas and to ensure safe disposal of Sanitary Napkins in an environmentally friendly manner. The scheme was initially implemented in 2011 in 107 selected districts in 17 States wherein a pack of six sanitary napkins called “Freedays” was provided to rural adolescent girls for Rs. 6. From 2014 onwards, funds are now being provided to States and Union Territories under National Health Mission for decentralized procurement of sanitary napkins packs for provision to rural adolescent girls at a subsidized rate of Rs 6 for a pack of 6 napkins. The ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) will continue to be responsible for distribution, receiving an incentive at Rs 1 per pack sold and a free pack of napkins every month for her own personal use. She will convene monthly meetings at the anganwadi Centres or other such platforms for adolescent girls to focus on issue of menstrual hygiene and also serve as a platform to discuss other relevant related issues. A range of material has been developed around menstrual hygiene to create awareness among adolescent girls about safe and hygienic menstrual health practices which including audios, videos and reading materials for adolescent girls and job-aids for ASHA and other field level functionaries for communicating with adolescent girls. A qualitative study was conducted in 2015 in few villages in North India<sup>18</sup> to explore the success of the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme and it was found that 80% women were aware about sanitary napkins. 79% was motivated and found the scheme beneficial but only 30% use sanitary pads. The ASHA workers were disappointed due to fewer margins of profit and irregular supply and the other stakeholders in

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<https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/nirmal-bharat-yatra-great-wash-yatra-travelling-carnival-over-6-weeks-spreading-awareness>.

<sup>15</sup> *Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan*, JALSHAKTI (Nov 5, 2020, 11.10 AM), [https://jalshakti-ddws.gov.in/sites/default/files/swajal\\_nirmal\\_bharat\\_enewsletter\\_0.pdf](https://jalshakti-ddws.gov.in/sites/default/files/swajal_nirmal_bharat_enewsletter_0.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> *Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram*, NATIONAL HEALTH PORTAL (Nov 5, 2020, 5.45 PM), [https://www.nhp.gov.in/rashtriya-kishor-swasthya-karyakram-rksk\\_pg](https://www.nhp.gov.in/rashtriya-kishor-swasthya-karyakram-rksk_pg).

<sup>17</sup> *Menstrual Hygiene Scheme*, NATIONAL HEALTH MISSION (Nov 2, 2020, 7.50 PM), <https://nhm.gov.in/index1.php?lang=1&level=3&sublinkid=1021&lid=391>

<sup>18</sup> Sudip Bhattacharya & Amarjeet Singh, *How effective is the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme? An evaluation study from North India* 3(9) IJCMPH 2584 2585 (2016)

the community were not actively involved in the implementation of this scheme. The study concluded that there is a huge marketing potential of low-cost napkins in rural India and the programme needs active involvement of various stakeholders and to ensure regular supply of napkins.

Menstrual hygiene management is also an integral part of the Swachh Bharat Mission and the 'Menstrual Hygiene Management Guideline' issued by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation<sup>19</sup> involves the support from state governments, district administrations, engineers, technical experts, inline departments and school headteachers and teachers for its implementation. The guidelines also include 'Action Guides' that describe what each key stakeholder must do, why and how and 'Technical Guides'. The guidelines emphasize that everybody in the society needs to have a basic understanding of menstrual hygiene. It lays down that state and district level officials, school staffs and students both boys and girls and communities should be oriented and trained in menstrual health management. This has to be achieved by training anganwadi workers and reaching out to schools, communities and shelter homes through various schemes and programs. The guidelines also set out key performance indicators and the objectives to be achieved by various authorities. It briefs on barriers in menstrual health such as advantages and disadvantages connected with menstrual absorbents, need for private space to wash, store and dry menstrual cloths, availability, collection and disposal of sanitary napkins. The Guidelines for Gender Issues in Sanitation (2017)<sup>20</sup> by Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation was aimed to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women and girls with respect to sanitation. This requires that all state, district and local authorities, including schools, communities and families create an environment where menstrual hygiene management is seen as acceptable and normal. May 28 is celebrated as Menstrual Hygiene Day to highlight the importance of good menstrual hygiene management. In addition to the work of the government various non-profit organizations and social businesses also involve in various activities within communities and schools to improve the status of menstrual hygiene among girls and women from raising awareness to providing sanitary pads and other necessary measures at low cost to manage menstruation coupled with educating communities on hygienic practices. They are also involved in training stakeholders, mobilising communities and leveraging government schemes by developing innovative solutions.

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Guidelines for Gender Issues in Sanitation 2017*, WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL (Nov 2, 2020, 7.15 PM), <https://www.wsscc.org/media/resources/guidelines-gender-issues-sanitation-government-india>.

A private bill, was introduced by Ninong Ering Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh seeks to provide for two days of paid menstrual leave every month to women in both private and public sector undertakings. The Menstruation Benefit Bill 2017<sup>21</sup> aims to establish that menstruation is not a sickness and also seeks to address health issues and taboos relating to menstruation. The bill also provides for periods of rest, creche facilities and other common facilities emphasises that every woman should be intimated of this benefit at the time of her appointment. Though no significant progress has been made with the bill, many progressive companies announced to give a day off for their women workers, a move which was welcomed and celebrated. The bill also faced criticisms. Some held that the bill paved way for gender bias where if enacted and mandated would made companies ideal to hire men instead of women leading to serious discrimination. Some also state that it would be far more beneficial and effective to remove taxation on feminine hygiene products making it more accessible and affordable at low cost.<sup>22</sup> Reference can also be made to a private bill titled The Women's Sexual, Reproductive and Menstrual Rights Bill 2018 introduced by Sakshi Tharoor Member of Parliament.<sup>23</sup> The bill primarily discusses marital rape and termination of pregnancy. With regards to menstrual rights, the bill talks about menstrual equity for all women to be guaranteed by the state and provides that sanitary pads shall be made available for free by public authorities in places preferably in toilets for women in the premise of such authority. The bill is criticised for not addressing the issue of lack of clean, hygienic and safe toilets that are functional with access to water and safe disposal of waste. Without all these infrastructure free sanitary pads are not going to make any difference. Then comes the issue of toxic free bio degradable pads which can be safely disposed without any difficulty of disposal.<sup>24</sup> Thus, these bills alone cannot guarantee a shift in the existing condition.<sup>25</sup> The need of the hour is proper network of laws and channels of implementation and policies to make it a success but recognising the issues around menstruation and bringing forward the topic for legislative discussion is certainly a step

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<sup>21</sup> The Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017, No 249 of 2017 (Nov 5, 2020, 3.45 PM), <http://164.100.47.4/billtexts/lbills/asintroduced/2651LS%20As%20In.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Chandrika Manjunath, *The Menstruation Benefit Bill Proposes Two Days Menstrual Leave. Does This Help Women?* FEMINISM INDIA (Nov 5, 2020, 6.30 PM), <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/02/01/menstruation-benefit-bill-2017/#:~:text=In%20the%20first%20week%20of,paid%20menstrual%20leave%20each%20month>.

<sup>23</sup> The Women's Sexual, Reproductive and Menstrual Rights Bill 2018, No. 255 of 2018, (Nov 5, 2020, 3.50 PM), <http://164.100.47.4/billtexts/lbills/asintroduced/2271as.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Rupali Pruthi, *Bill to make Marital Rape A Crime Introduced in Lok Sabha*, JAGRANJOSH (Nov 5, 2020, 6.40 PM), <https://www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/womens-sexual-reproductive-and-menstrual-rights-bill-2018-introduced-in-ls-1546517400-1#:~:text=17%3A36%20IST-,A%20private%20bill%20titled%20the%20Women's%20Sexual%2C%20Reproductive%20and%20Menstrual,women%20in%20termination%20of%20pregnancy>.

<sup>25</sup> Usha Rani Das, *Women Reject The Menstruation Benefit Bill*, APNLIVE (Nov 5, 2020, 4.00 PM), <https://www.apnlive.com/women-reject-the-menstruation-benefit-bill/>.

in the right direction.

## **V. SUGGESTION AND CONCLUSION**

Ability of women and girls to practice good menstrual hygiene is the heart of human dignity and gender equality. State is under the obligation of guaranteeing this human right by respecting right holders and by refraining from activities that violates such rights. The state is also under the obligation to ensure full enjoyment of human rights both in public and private sphere. The cause of menstrual health has to addressed from grassroot level. Myths and taboos relating to menstruation has to be addressed to remove negative attitudes towards women which eventually leads to discriminatory practices. Similarly, poor sexual and reproductive health choices is a result of lack of knowledge and facilities which further affects the health, education and employment of women. India has done a commendable role in promoting and ensuring menstrual health from the various schemes framed on menstrual health to tax free feminine hygiene products. Yet there is still a significant need to improve the effectiveness of existing efforts on menstrual hygiene. This is a proven fact which has to be accepted. Indian laws should address discrimination related to menstruation through creative efforts bringing them within the existing framework of laws. Extensive research will help in strengthening the schemes in progress. Similarly, scientific and technical research must be encouraged in developing innovative, low cost yet high quality and eco-friendly menstrual materials. When it comes to matters relating to menstruation, mothers are the most common source of information. Hence, mothers and persons in positions of influence such as teachers and care takers must be educated and counselled on menstrual hygiene and must be encouraged irrespective of their educational status to acquire knowledge on actual process of menstruation without any tint of discriminatory factors to pass on to the young girls and women. A health education component with menstrual hygiene promotion must be included in school curriculum and teachers should be trained to impart knowledge on reproductive health and sex education and media can be used as an effective tool to disseminate information on health schemes relating to menstrual health. Law relating to health and hygiene is always an integral and essential component of human right and is also guaranteed by the constitution as guiding principles of state policy making and interpreted by courts to be a fundamental right. Menstrual health and menstrual hygiene management must be

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