

Accessibility of Low Cost Sanitary Napkin in Rural and Semi-Urban Community of Bangladesh

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Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) closely associated with gender equity and women empowerment thus matters to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3, 5 and 6). Sanitary pad is most widely used and popular method of menstrual hygiene practices. Although it is easy to use, easily accessible, and pretty straightforward in developed countries, but in developing countries like Bangladesh still it is not easily accessible to everyone especially in rural areas. In this paper, we report results from a survey amongst girls and women in rural and semi-urban areas in Bangladesh. We find an overwhelming number of girls and women (44 percent) do not practice appropriate menstrual management. Though social stigma, hesitation in open discussion, ignorance etc. are some of the causes for poor MHM practices. We found that affordability is the main constraint to using pads. The insights from our findings suggest that the future MHM interventions to be inclusive and they should pay attention to price of sanitary napkin as well as mass awareness.

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Introduction

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) directly influence women's reproductive health, education and labor participation thus closely associated with gender equity and women empowerment in any parts of the world. It matters to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs3, 5 and 6). Several evidences documented that impacts of poor MHM, emphasize the needs of increased advocacy on this issue within the policy sectors. A recent study published in BMJ open journal showed that 41% of schoolgirls in Bangladesh cannot attend classes during their menstrual cycle.¹ With respect to reproductive health of women; poor MHM has been associated with an increased risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections. Such health outcomes have repeatedly been shown to have considerable repercussions on the labor market, with a recent study¹ by the Water Supply Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) in

Bangladesh suggesting that an infection because of usage of cloth during menstruation leads to 73% of women missing work for an average of 6 days a month. Addressing the problems of menstrual hygiene management in developing countries is therefore critical to realizing the relevant SDGs.

Effective, hygienic management of menstruation is essential for women and girls to participate in the society with dignity and comfort. The sanitary Napkin is far and away the most widely used method of menstrual management. Although it is easy to use, easily accessible, and pretty straightforward in developed countries, but in developing countries like Bangladesh still it's not easily accessible to everyone specially rural areas. There are very few of the studies rigorously documented factors that determine usage of sanitary pads, as well as constraints to adopting these over other methods of sanitary care such as cloth.

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Academic studies on MHM in Bangladesh have focused primarily on sanitary practices amongst young adolescent girls in rural and/or urban secondary schools. While this is clearly an important group to target, it is also important to consider the cases of yet other vulnerable groups. In some respects, middle-aged women in the rural and semi-urban areas are the most vulnerable from the viewpoint of adopting good menstrual practices. This is because they are suffering from poverty, lack of awareness, spatial and infrastructural constraints may all combine to pose an insurmountable challenge.

However, in this paper, we present the results from a survey that was conducted amongst girls and women in rural and semi-urban areas in Bangladesh in order to better understand the current sanitary practices, and acceptance of sanitary napkins for menstrual management including constraints faced on adoption of sanitary pads.

Methods

This survey was carried out in rural and semi-urban areas across six districts of Bangladesh in 2017. The six districts are Rangpur, Shatkhira, Feni, Khulna, Gazipur, Tangail. A total of 300 women and young adolescent girls, proportionately sampled across the six districts were interviewed during this survey. The adolescent girls were interviewed at school and the women were interviewed at their home. In order to have a representative sample of the population, we adopted a simple random sampling method. Our only criterion for selection of respondent was that the woman/young girl had to be of menstrual age, identified as 12 to 50 years. Refusal to respond in the survey was relatively high, with approximately 40 percent rejections. Given this refusal rate, we continued to sample using the original strategy until we achieved a final sample of

300 women and girls who consented to participate.

Results

Table I shows the frequency distribution of different age groups of the respondents. Most of the respondents were from poor family with 41.67% of average monthly household income below 10000(ten thousand)BDT.

Table I: Age distribution of survey respondents

Age Group (years)	Number of respondents
12-18	123
19-35	121
36-50	56

About 56 percent of respondents reported using sanitary pads; while around 41 percent reported using cloths and 3 percent reported using cotton as menstrual protection (see Figure – 1). Though our results suggest that considerable high rate of usage of sanitary pads amongst our sample still significant number of respondents in our sample (41 percent) continue to report using cloths as menstrual protection. In order to be able to effectively promote improved MHM practices among these respondents, it is critical to understand their profile and identify potential characteristics which determine the usage of cloths over pads.

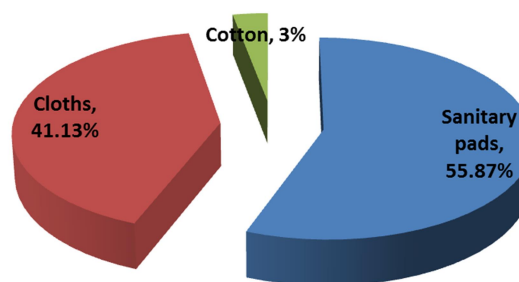


Figure 1. Distribution of sanitary care practices

Use of old cloths instead of Sanitary Napkin/pad

Our results suggest that total 44 percent of women in our sample continue to report not using sanitary napkin as menstrual protection. Among the respondents who do not use sanitary pad more than half (51 percent) reported because of high price and 19 percent reported because of that sanitary napkin is not accessible, while 30 percent reported that they use other method because they are just used to it.

If we dig into details we can find some reasons play vital role behind unhygienic menstrual management issue;

Social Stigma: Under privileged society sentiments still make girls and women feel that menstrual management is something disgusting. It is a dirty aspect of women's life and they should hide irrespectively of how much pain and discomfort they feel. Thus we have seen that approximately 40 percent of women and girls were approached for survey refused to respond. This refusal mainly came from women who felt the topic was 'too embarrassing' to talk about. It's a shy topic for them. However, we need to work for this important issue.

Hesitation in open discussion: Usually cloths are washed and reused for menstrual management. However, most of the respondents who use cloth often do not wash these cloths with soap and clean water and drying them in the sun because other people will see and they think that it is a secret matter. Some of the respondents are not aware of it because there is no practice of discussion. Girls and women usually hesitate in open discussion due to lack of education on normal physiology of menstruation. They consider the topic as secret and shameful chapter of women's life.

Ignorance: Women and girls have been found across a range of countries to lack knowledge of the physiology and management of menstrual bleeding. On average, women are facing routinely painful experiences every single month for up to a week or longer, between the ages 11 to 50.² Cultural beliefs and taboos may also contribute to poor MHM through the perpetuation of misinformation or unhygienic customs. Studies across contexts have reported taboos around the disposal of sanitary pads/ cotton/cloths, and practices including restrictions to bathing and participation in social activities. In the survey, it was found that only 22.33% of the respondent change their cloth/cotton/pad 1 time a day, 48% change 2 times a day and only 29.67% change 3 times and more which is not hygienic for good health. Hygiene guidelines recommended changing absorbents (cloth/cotton/pad) every two to six hours dependent on blood flow.³ But, there are hardly people found who know about that.

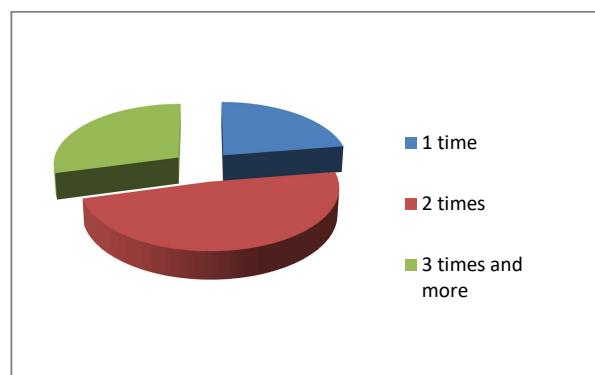


Figure 2. Frequency of daily use of pad/cloth among the respondents

Affordability: Sanitary Napkin cost is not cheap like other commodity. Still it is considering as a luxury cosmetic item. In the survey it was found that the market price of sanitary napkin is quite high. If we take a

look at the available sanitary napkin of the local market, we can found that majority of sanitary napkin price is above 70 BDT per pack which contains 8/10 pieces whereas each menstrual cycle requires 12 to 15 sometimes more depending on blood flow. So, one has to pay more than 100 taka each month for sanitary napkin/pads. Around 87% of the respondents believe that 30tk per pack of a sanitary napkin will be an affordable price for them. It is very difficult for a village girl and woman to spend this amount of money for sanitary napkin each month especially when the average income of a family is hardly 10,000 BDT.

Table II: Available sanitary napkin brands in the local market with their prices

Name of the band	Price in BDT
Freedom Regular flow(10s)	105
Joya Regular Belt (8s)	70
Joya Regular Wings (8s)	80
Senora Sanitary Napkin Regular Flow (Belt) (10s)	90
Monalisa Regular Flow (10s)	90
Senora Confidence (10)	120
Sunny Day Active	130
Whisper Maxi Fit (8s)	145

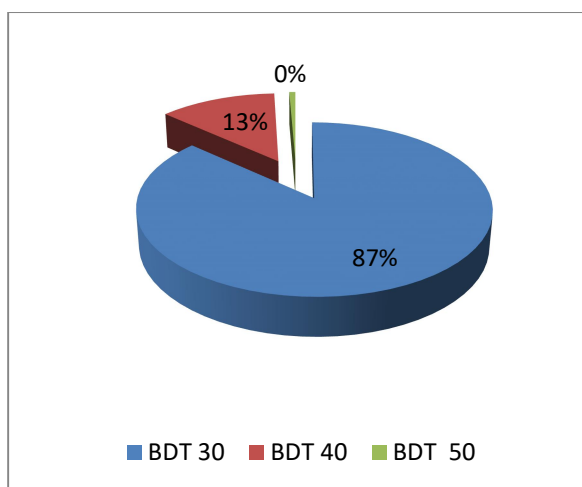


Figure 3. Affordable price of a regular pack of pads for respondents

Distribution Channel: Distribution channel are not user friendly. Majority of the distributors, shop keepers are male. It is difficult and shameful for a village girl to bargain with a male for better quality sanitary napkin. Not only that conservative attitude made shopkeepers sell the sanitary napkins wrapped in a paper bag so that no one can guess what she is buying.



Figure 4. Presence of males in shop restricts girls/women to buy sanitary napkins (photo source: internet)

Towards Improving Sanitary Care

Price: In the survey it was found that commercially produced disposable sanitary pads are too expensive for most of the participants. In a round table meeting held in the conference room of East West Media group on 17th May 20017, Sales executive of SMC group put a note regarding sanitary napkin price where he mentioned that good quality sanitary napkin requires 12 to 15 types of raw materials from outside of the country and companies usually have to pay a high duty which is around 70%, not only that there are also some additional cost like manufacturing and marketing cost. On the other hand, the custom duty for sanitary pads is 127.84%. But, is it the only cause of high price of sanitary napkin or is there any monopoly business going on in the market? So the Govt. and Non Govt. should consider these issues

with priority. Research issaying, “The production and distribution of low-cost sanitary pads, either re-usable or disposable, is a timely, simple and innovative means of improving MHM, and is one that needs to be implemented as part of a holistic approach to improve the experience of millions of girls in low-income countries.”³

Awareness: Menstrual cycle is not a disease. We should consider menstrual cycle under public health issue. Women fertility face problem due to unhygienic menstrual management. Women often suffer from various infections.

Policy and implications: Our study suggests that policy has ignored some critical aspects of sanitary care that need to be brought into focus for the provision of sustainable sanitary services, because unhygienic and ineffective menstrual hygiene management has been documented across rural and semi-urban areas of Bangladesh. Positive and constructive dialogues are needed to break the silence on high price of sanitary product issue. Not only that policy maker need to take action on educating women about safer low-cost MHM materials, subsidizing the costs of sanitary napkins/pads for economically deprived groups and removing or reducing taxes on menstrual absorbents. There is a strong need for menstrual hygiene promotion and awareness-raising initiatives as it is closely

associated with gender equality and female empowerment, it also has a direct influence on women’s reproductive health, education and labor participation.

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