

From Stigma to Statute: Inclusion of Menstruation policy in public policy for better health infrastructure in India

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Abstract

Menstruation is the vital part of health and a sign of overall well-being thus menstrual policy is a stepping stone for achieving good health, gender equality, dignity, so this paper discusses the key Menstrual policies of India. In this study it is found that most of the schemes are for hygiene, sanitation and products accessibility based. The attempts have been made to find the gaps of the existing Menstrual policies like fragmented policy objectives and lack of integrated approach. This study investigates to identify the underlying necessity for a comprehensive National Menstrual policy. It reflects how a comprehensive policy will fill the gaps of existing policy with an integrating approach and also analyses barriers regarding a comprehensive policy. The concluding remark of the study highlights the intersectoral coordination and awareness generation as tool to check the barriers. Overall, an attempt has been made to uncover the necessity of a Comprehensive menstrual policy in India in this 21st century.

Key words- *Menstrual Policy, Comprehensive Policy, Gender Equity, Menstruating Individual, Constitutional Right*

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I. Introduction

In India, women constitute approximately 50% of the population. So it is very crucial to safeguard women's health, dignity and also women hygiene for gender equality and gender justice. This article is making a modest attempt to identify the scope of the menstrual policy in health sector policy. In our country approximately around 355 million menstruating individuals are there still the policy regarding Menstruation is fragmented with a less attention to marginalized sector. This article argues that a comprehensive Menstrual Policy is needed to ensure gender equality, universal coverage of menstrual policy and to remove menstrual stigma. An intersectional right based policy framework is necessary to achieve menstrual equity in India. This article further stated that a comprehensive policy is not only need for welfare purpose but also it's a part of constitution obligation like the concept of menstrual equity is grounded in article 14, article 21 etc.

II. Background

Menstrual policy refers to the set of government laws, programs, and guidelines designed to ensure menstrual health, hygiene, dignity, and equality for menstruating individuals. In simple words, it is a public policy that focuses on: access to safe, affordable menstrual products, menstrual health education and awareness, healthcare services related to menstruation, adequate sanitation and disposal facilities, eliminating stigma and discrimination around menstruation. Menstruation or menses is the natural bodily process of releasing blood and associated matter from the uterus through the vagina as part of the menstrual cycle” (UNICEF, 2019). Menstruation is a natural physiological process involving the periodic shedding of the endometrial lining of the uterus, resulting in the discharge of blood and tissue through the vagina when pregnancy does not occur (UNICEF, 2019; NICHD. From the social lense the following definitions give another view regarding Menstruation. Menstruation is not only a biological process but also a socially constructed experience shaped by cultural norms, stigma, and gendered power relations (Bobel, 2010). Menstruation is a gendered bodily experience that is socially regulated through silence, stigma, and cultural taboos. (Fahs, 2016)

Menstrual policy is a public policy approach that addresses menstruation as a gendered social issue by ensuring rights, reducing stigma, and promoting equality in education, health, and workplace participation. (Sommer et al., 2015). Menstrual policy is a rights-based framework that seeks to ensure safe, dignified, and

equitable menstrual health conditions through access to information, facilities, and services without discrimination (UNICEF & UNFPA framing).

Women in India are half of the working forces therefore their health, hygiene, sanitation is important so it is very essential to have Menstrual Policy. Menstruation is a monthly process which needs attention and during this Sanitation is an important thing, and proper sanitation for women is necessary. A Menstrual Policy is needed to address issues related to menstrual hygiene, reproductive health. Menstruation is a natural biological Process but Social taboos associated with it make it a uncommunicative topic. Therefore a menstrual policy is needed to uphold the dignity of women by rejecting the old customs, taboos and by creating awareness in the society. In the 21st century Gender justice is a debatable topic hence more focus must be given to achieve it too. Policies regarding women's health and hygiene are much needed and it must given importance to menstrual hygiene and awareness and which will ensure more women participation in education, work and public life by reducing discrimination and support for women's equal participation.

III. REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

A considerable amount of literature are there regarding menstruation and menstrual policy in india. Earlier studies have highlighted menstruation as a multidimensional issue. Hennegan had defined menstruation and identified its dimensions and discussed menstrual hygiene management as a narrow term as its only focuses on products and sanitation not dignity. Some studies focused on school going girls like Sharma (2020) argued through a systematic review of MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management)

In Indian schools and found a notable gap on sanitation, awareness and education and role of teachers. The study stated that less than 50% of girls are unaware about the menstruation and the school lacks adequate sanitation and disposal facilities. Comparably Joshi complies that hence Polices, awareness and sanitation had increased nowadays still the rural areas aree clutched by cultural tabbos and there are limited awareness about the menstruation waste management

In other exploration the researchers have investigated the extensive policy framework which governs menstrual health in India. Like Parasuraman and Das (2022) by using a novel MHH (Menstrual Health and Hygeine Index) from NFHS-5 (2019-21) data find out perceptible inequality across the states in India. Their findings show that availability of sanitary products is not enough rather than structural changes are necessary. Like this SPLASH International (2020) pleaded for an integrated outlook by linking cross sector for menstrual policy.

The new fangled of research works has enhanced the exploration of menstrual leave in workplace debate. For instance Bhandari (2025) by collecting primary data has noted that a policy framework is needed and also highlighted the lack of a central policy for menstrual leave provision. Like this context, Mary T.(2025) talks about SDGs, human rights with a link to menstrual leave and Mengi (2025) argued menstrual leave as gender justice issue and recommends amendment to different acts.

Apart from that, other studies have underline the role of social and cultural factors in defining menstrual encounters. However, still there was restriction on girls due to social taboos and misinformation. So there is the need of level of community based awareness i.e. by ASHA, Anganwadi in more effective way to eradicate social stigma.

IV. RESEARCH GAP

The above literatures on menstrual policy and menstrual Hygiene talked about the issue in a fragmented way; hence it is a multidimensional concept so this division is seen. All these studies are confined in a limited dimension hence no attention is given to a holistically comprehensive approach towards menstrual policy. A comprehensive menstrual policy framework is much more needed in India which will integrate all sectors like health, education, sanitation, welfare etc. with rights and equality. Additionally there is also lack of précsed analysis of menstrual policy implementation in different states of India, so need of a comprehensive menstrual policy is needed to check the policy gaps and challenges.

Existing Menstrual policies in India

In India there is no specific and comprehensive policy for Menstruation hence Polices are working at different level in different dimensions which we can understand this by dividing in two categories like central schemes or policies and policies of States.

Central level policies

1. Menstrual Hygeine Scheme (2011)

This scheme can be called as the first step towards acknowledging menstrual health with a target group of 10-19 years girls. This mainly focused on awareness generation and sanitary product distribution. Accountability India's comprehensive review (2023) of menstrual health services found that while some scheme components

focused on awareness generation, public intervention primarily prioritised distribution of sanitary napkins — a concern echoed across multiple studies that called for a more holistic approach encompassing education, infrastructure, and waste management.

2. Menstrual Hygiene Policy 2024

This policy was introduced by the Ministry of Health and Family welfare and developed by the collaboration of ten ministries. The main focus of this policy is on school going girls which excludes the other women. As the name indicates more focus is upon the menstrual hygiene which doesn't covers other dimesion .

3. Suvidha Scheme (2018)

This scheme comes under Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) aims a availability of sanitary pads at cost of rupee 1 in Jan aushadhi kendra. This scheme provides biodegradable pads which meet the standards of ASTM D-6954 (Biodegradable Standard) and covers the environmental dimensions. Still it's a part of menstrual policy which addresses distribution and environment aspect but lacks other aspects.

4. Samagra Shiksha — Sanitation and Health Scheme (2024)

An IMPRI analysis (2024) of the new Sanitation and Health Scheme under Samagra Shiksha highlighted its dual infrastructural and educational focus: construction of girl-friendly toilets, provision of sanitary napkins, and integration of menstrual health into the curriculum. This initiative reflects a broader recognition that menstrual hygiene management is a prerequisite for girls' educational continuity.

State level policies

In India several states have address the menstrual health as a key parameter for development. The India Forum (2024) identified several notable state-level initiatives that supplemented central schemes.

Significantly, the distribution of subsidized sanitary napkins to adolescent girls in schools under the Udita Yojana in Madhya Pradesh. Similarly, Shuchi Scheme in Karnataka facilitates free sanitary napkin distribution to school attending girls. In Rajasthan Udaan Scheme has the initiative towards free sanitary napkins distributed through schools, colleges, and Anganwadi centres. Whereas Asmita Yojana (2018) of Maharashtra is about SHG-led distribution of pads at ₹5/pack for school girls; a 2022 extension provided pads at ₹1/10 pads to BPL women.

Likewise it is in Tamil Nadu that a federation of 60 self-help groups locally producing and distributing sanitary pads and the Kishori Suraksha scheme of Uttar Pradesh targeted menstrual health support for adolescent girls. Despite these interventions, The India Forum (2024) reported a persistent implementation gap: states such as Assam, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh only partially utilise allocated menstrual hygiene funds, while Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, and Jharkhand lacked approved State Programme Implementation Plans altogether.

KEY LACUNAE IN EXISTING MENSTRUAL POLICY

1. Fragmented Policies -

In India the policies regarding Menstruation are working in different dimensions no policies are working in comprehensive manner which will address all the issues together. Menstrual health governance in India become scattered due to different level of operation and intervention with multiple schemes aiming different targets without a sole incorporate framework.

2. Insularity of Informal sector

In the existing policy there is no specific provision for the informal sector women who constitute nearly 81% to 82% of total working women population.

The World Bank notes that Indian women's labor force participation is the highest among BRICS nations over the last decade, with LFPR at 41.7% and WPR at 40.3% in 2023–24 (Report of Ministry of Labour and Employment). Yet with over 90% in the informal sector without any protections whatsoever, a national menstrual policy remains urgently overdue (The Quint, 2025).

3. Peripheral Status of Marginalized Groups-

The Draft National Menstrual Hygiene Policy 2023 also originally excluded transgender and non-binary individuals who menstruate, though the 2024 version partially acknowledges their inclusion in its target groups (ORF, 2023; PW Only IAS, 2023).

In menstrual policies in India there is less attention is given to other groups such as specifically tribal women, homeless women, transgenders, disable women. This can be solved by only making a comprehensive policy which will include all of them.

4. Inadequate WASH infrastructure and waste disposal management

NITI Ayog 2026 report states that 98,592 schools lack functional girls' toilets, 61,540 schools have no usable toilets, 14,505 schools lack functional water sources, and nearly 59,829 schools do not have handwashing facilities. Menstrual waste in India is mostly disposed of by burning in local incinerators or by burying in the ground, both environmentally harmful practices (The India Forum, 2024). This shows the lacuna of Menstrual Policy - the gap between paper and implementation.

5. Menstrual health disorders as an Institutional Blind Spot

The existing policy mainly focuses upon the Hygiene and Sanitary product accessibility perspective. Dysmenorrhea, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), Endometriosis Menorrhagia, Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) are some issues related to menstrual health. A study published in the Indian Journal of Community Medicine found that 79.67% of adolescent girls experienced dysmenorrhea, indicating the widespread prevalence of menstrual disorders among young menstruators in India.

NEED OF A COMPREHENSIVE MENSTRUAL POLICY

In India we need a comprehensive national menstrual policy in order to fill the implementation gaps and the lacunae of the existing Policies and schemes. The following points discussed about the factors necessitating that.

1. Public health - Menstruation an integral component

Ralph Waldo Emerson had said "The first wealth is health". So when we are discussing about public health the topic of menstrual health is often left behind. Menstrual health impacts the wellbeing of women so to ensure menstrual health as a integrated part of public health is a need. A comprehensive menstrual policy is crucial to ensure the integration of Menstrual health with public health which will create space for development of women. This comprehensive policy will bring structural changes which will fill the lacunae of existing policy and will also work for menstrual health disorder which is an important aspect.

2. Educational dimensions -

"A period should end a sentence, not a girl's education" (The Pad Project- 2026). As the phrase outlines, the girls must not be deprived from education due to periods. Awareness and Education regarding Menstruation is much needed in Indian Society as Menstruation is regarded as impure and lot of taboos are associated with it. Therefore Menstrual Policy is needed to create awareness among the citizens.

Menstruation is a symbolical factor which contributes to the dropouts and absenteeism of girls. A UNICEF study found that only 53 per cent of government schools have functional girl-friendly toilets (cited in Odisha Plus, 2025). The cause of this absent and dropout can be manifold like lack of separate toilet, water facility; disposal facility which becomes a discouragement for girls and the cause also may be social stigma or improper knowledge about menstruation. Policies are there to overcome these challenges like Menstrual Hygiene Policy for School-Going Girls (2024), but it has key challenges like lack of enforcement mechanism, budget, and supply chain disruption. A comprehensive menstrual policy which will integrate the cross sector is needful, as it will work within a single national frame work and give good service delivery

3. Consolidated and organized Policy Framework

The existing Policies are working in a fragmented manner, but a comprehensive Menstrual Policy will work at national level which will create uniform policy framework for all states. It will lead to an accountable, efficient, addressable framework for menstrual policy by integrating health, education, public welfare, sanitation etc under a single window system.

4. Comprehensive Integration of all

A comprehensive Menstrual Policy will include all menstruating individuals like transgender and non binary or gender diverse people. It will also address the non inclusion of informal sector women, disable women, houseless women, tribal women. The existing policies only highlights the women but by a comprehensive policy all the section get justice and voice as for a progressive society development of all sections is a necessity.

5. Development of Infrastructure and Budget allocation

Development of Infrastructure which will support women's hygiene is need as women's hygiene is directly related to women's reproductive health. Therefore India needs a comprehensive menstrual policy to develop the infrastructure which includes clean toilets with safe disposal facilities in every work place and public institutions. NITI Ayog reports say about lack of WASH infrastructure but a comprehensive policy will bring a uniform level of WASH infrastructure across the national level. It will also ensure dedicated financial supporting.

6. Social transformation, Upholding rights and justice

A national level comprehensive menstrual policy will uphold the dignity of women and will act as a transformative pillar for Menstruation which will liberate it from taboos and stigma to Equality and gender justice based notion. It will dismantle the anachronistic Norms and societal Constraints upon the Menstruating individual by elevating the concept of menstruation from the grip of regressive dogmas to a scientific temperament.

7. Menstrual Policy as a constitutional obligation

Menstrual Policy is directly linked with the constitutional ethos like rights, equality, liberty etc. Art 14 talks about equality before law; hence menstrual policy will create substantive equality. Article 15 of the Constitution provides a strong constitutional basis for menstrual policy by prohibiting sex-based discrimination and permitting affirmative measures for women under Article 15(3). Accordingly, a comprehensive menstrual policy can be regarded as constitutionally permissible interventions designed to promote gender equality and social justice. The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 broadly to include the right to health, dignity, privacy, bodily autonomy, and a healthy living environment; hence a comprehensive menstrual policy is necessary to defend this.

Barriers towards a comprehensive menstrual policy

In India there are several challenges for a comprehensive menstrual policy. Like Menstrual stigma remains a major barrier to effective menstrual governance in India (Hennegan et al., 2021), Fragmented Governance is also a key barrier for this. Legislative apathy constitutes a big hurdle in the way of a National Menstrual policy for example the lapsation of Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017 (N. Ering, 2017), and Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Health Products Bill, 2022 (M.K Jha, 2022). The division of formal and informal sector is also a barrier, nearly 81.8% of women workers in India are employed in the informal economy, highlighting the challenges of extending workplace-based menstrual health protections to a majority of working women (ILO, 2018).

V. Conclusion

Menstrual policy is an integral part of health sector policy, hence its necessity relies for health and hygiene regarding Menstruation. A comprehensive national menstrual policy is needed for ensuring social justice and gender equality and universal coverage of menstrual policy. A comprehensive policy will include all the menstruating individuals and ensure dignity based flourishing life. As Menstruation is a multifaceted concept hence a comprehensive policy will work wholly with cross sectional approach.

In India there are several barriers for a comprehensive policy but still it can be achieved through an inter-sectoral coordination and synchronised framework for policy implementation with a consolidated right based approach. A comprehensive policy framework can be achieved through systemic data collection and research, by increasing public awareness and using social media as a tool for awareness generation. In this today's time the menstrual policy goals can be achieved easily by digital awareness through an easy reachability of information.

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