

IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON MENSTRUAL HYGIENE AND CYCLICITY: A SURVEY STUDY

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Abstract

Women's health is a very important factor in overall development of any country. It is said that the health of the family is tied to the health of women. Women have some unique healthcare challenges than men. And menstruation is one of them that are also considered taboo in society. The corona virus disease 19 introduced about life-threatening challenges that created a dire impact on the life of several individuals. Some study suggests women suffered more consequences of the Pandemic. They had a higher risk of being infected because of their role as caretakers. Hence it definitely would have so many consequences on women's health and overall well-being. The main objective of this study is to understand how COVID-19 affected the menstrual hygiene and cyclicity of women. The online survey method has been used to collect valuable data and it is analyzed deliberately to conclude.

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural biological change that every female and gender non-binary person faces when they get an adult. It is a natural process of the body releasing blood from the uterus through the vagina after every twenty-eight days. Globally, over 1.8 billion girls, women, and gender non-binary persons menstruate. But it is still considered taboo. It is seen as something unclean and embarrassing. If we talk in the context of India there are lots of myths and misconceptions related to menstruation and a lack of knowledge about menstrual hygiene that adversely affect their reproductive health. This pandemic started a new debate on the impact of the covid outbreak on menstrual hygiene. As millions of menstruators across the world agreed that they find it more burdensome to maintain their menstruation hygiene in this era of covid 19. India with a population of more than 1.34 billion, the second largest population in the world, found it very difficult to deal with the havoc of covid 19. It significantly affected all aspects of life and turned the lives of people upside down. However, the covid 19 outbreak has no direct and immediate consequences on menstruation. But the consequences caused by the effect of fear on people could have impact on the menstruation and one's ability to safely manage it. Because the covid 19 pandemic brought a drastic change in our lifestyle caused anxiety and stress that can alter the length and variability of the menstrual cycle. India first went into complete lockdown in March 2020. After that, the news of the "sanitary-pad crisis" started coming. As the government had not included sanitary-pad in the list of essential items. That led the markets to quickly run out of stocks. Although after public outcry government added sanitary-pad to the list of essential items. As covid 19 devastation brought economic uncertainty. Many people lost their job or started getting lower incomes. This financial crisis also became an obstacle to maintaining healthy menstrual hygiene practices.

The lockdown forced the closure of schools and health centers that are known as distribution hubs of sanitary napkins and information centers where people are taught about puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health. The spreading of misinformation about menstruation

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related to covid 19 had also compounded discriminatory practices towards menstruating person. According to the report of Primary Care, the strategies used to control the covid-19 pandemic also exacerbated many barriers related to menstrual hygiene management.

Literature Review

Menstruation is a universal biological reproductive process for women. But still, it is taboo in various societies and there are lots of myths and misconceptions about menstruation that acts as obstacles to maintaining good menstrual hygiene. In a developing country like India, 70% of reproductive diseases are because of poor menstrual hygiene (World Health Organization, 2018). The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times and it is still there. In the Hindu faith, women are not allowed to participate in daily life while menstruating. They are prohibited from entering the puja room and kitchen, offering prayers, touching holy books and pickles, or doing any kind of exercise or physical activity. They also have to follow some strict dietary restrictions. Menstruation is also associated with an evil spirit, shame, and embarrassment (Garg, S., and Anand, T., 2015). Good menstrual hygiene is fundamental to the dignity and well-being of women. Government should incorporate MHM into national policies and programs as it is linked to gender equality and basic human rights. In India, despite many initiatives, there are still lots of challenges needed to address. Like, as access to accurate information for everyone and menstrual absorbent at an affordable price, etc (Sinha, RN., and Paul, B., 2018). Health education is a very important aspect for adolescent girls. Education to the parents, motivated school teachers, and trained school health personnel play a key role to create awareness about correct menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls (Dasgupta, A., Sarkar, M., 2008).

Menstruation has already widely unmet needs and the outbreak of COVID-19 added fuel to the fire and worsened the condition. The epidemic made it more difficult for menstruators to maintain their monthly cycle hygienically and comfortably due to lower income, limited supply chain, water, and menstrual product, and lack of privacy. Gender-based violence also increased due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (Care, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 can be divided into primary impact and secondary impact. The primary impact can be considered as a direct and immediate effect of the epidemic on human health. And the secondary impact can be considered as an indirect effect of the epidemic such as the effect of fear or stress among the people or the effect of measures taken to control it (UNISEF, 2020). The secondary impact deeply affected M.H.M. It mainly affected those who are economically poor, internally displaced, disabled, and refugees. During the pandemic, the whole focus shifted towards the Pandemic as a result MHM got ignored (Sharma, B.B., Logi, Ce., Fisher Ingraham, R., et al., 2021). The gender-based violence raised drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic because of several reasons such as financial insecurity, stress, anxiety, alcohol consumption, depression, etc (Mittal, K., Singh, T., 2020). The number of men who died because of the COVID pandemic is higher than women. It means women suffered more social and economic consequences of the pandemic (Burki, T., 2020). The women have a higher risk of being infected with COVID-19 because of their role as caretakers at home as well as health centers. Pregnant women have more probability to get infected because of their weak immune systems. The crisis also raises cases of domestic and sexual violence by social isolation, fear of dying, low income, male aggression, etc. The pandemic limits access to the health care services that also become a big obstacle for women's health needs especially sexual and reproductive health (Salami, Victory U., Okoduwa, Stanley IR., Chris, Aimee O., Ayilara, Susannah I., and Okoduwa, Ugochi J., 2021).

Objectives

As the Covid 19 brought so many challenges and issues with them. No one has been spared from the outbreak of this pestilence. This study is to understand how the Covid 19 affected the menstrual health and hygiene of women. The following are the objectives of the research paper:

- To understand the direct and indirect problems faced by women to manage their menstrual cycle during the period of covid 19.
- To explore the symptoms of menstruation experienced by women due to the covid 19.
- To find out the impact of the false information circulated through social media during the panic era of covid 19.
- To identify the changes in eating habits of menstruating women during the pandemic.
- To know the opinion of females about the reusable menstrual products.

Research design and methodology

Research design and Research Method

This is a cross-sectional study based on exploratory design followed by quantitative research. The researcher has collected the data from the women of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

Research Tool

The researcher has used an online survey instruments for capturing information data. The researcher has prepared a questionnaire (closed-ended questions) on Google form and distributed it among the women of Lucknow between the ages of 15-45 years.

Sampling Strategies

For this study, probability (to reach the menstruating women) sampling Strategies have been used. For probability sampling strategies, the researcher has applied Snowball Sampling.

Sampling Method

The researcher prepared the question in Google form and distributed it to all the menstruating women through mail and wats app as much as possible and asked them to circulate the questionnaire to others.

Sample Size

A total of 176 women between the ages of 15–45 years met stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria and completed the survey.

Findings

Demographic profile of respondent

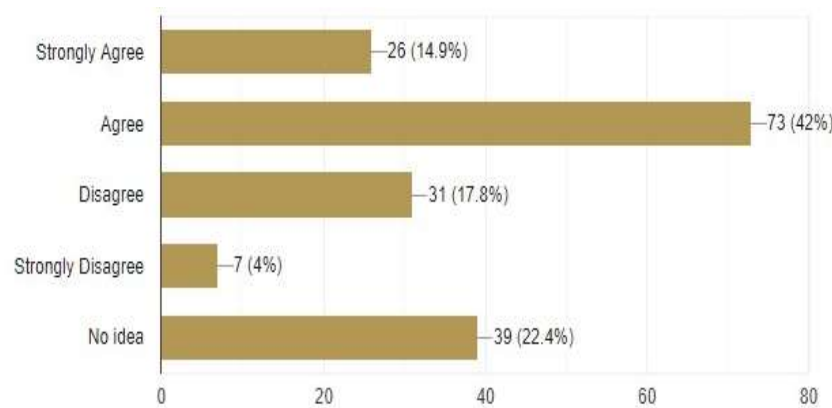
Total 176 respondents participated in this study. Out of these 58.25% of respondents were between the 15-25 age group, 37.05% of respondents were between the 26-35 age group, and 4.70% of respondents were between the 36-45 age group. All the respondents were literate. 58.6% of respondents were working, 14.56% of respondents were not working and 27.4% were completing their higher education. 81.76% of respondents belonged to the Hindu community, 15.29% of respondents were from the Muslim community, 1.17% were from the Christian community, 1.17% were from the Sanatan religion and 0.58 were from the Sikh. 66.5% of respondents were from the general category and 26.5% were from OBC category.

And rest 2.4% were ST, 3.5% were SC and 1.2% were from others. 71.4 % of total respondents were married while 28.6% were single. 60.2% of total respondents had a nuclear family and rest 39.8% were from joint families. According to the income declared by World Bank, 20% of respondents belonged to the high-income group, 30% belonged to the upper-middle, 30% belonged to lower middle and 20% belonged to the low-income group.

Impact of covid 19 on Menstruation

The study found that during the initial phase of the first lockdown, 38.8% of females accepted that pads were easily available while 61.2% of females accepted that there was a shortage of pads in the market and they managed their period by the stock of pads they had and used old cloths, cotton, and home-made napkins.

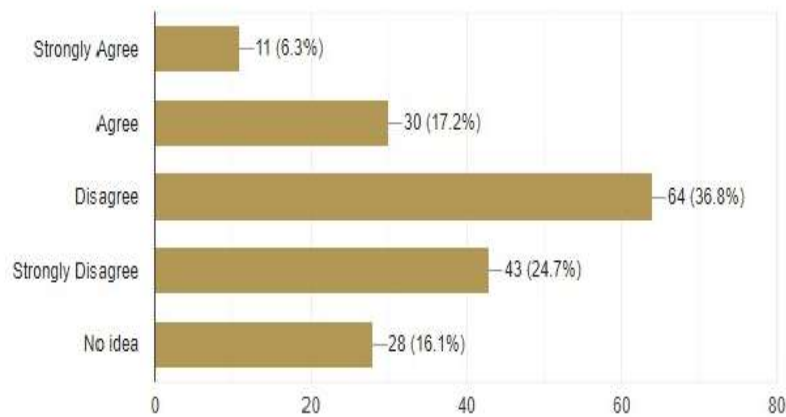
10.5% of females never had COVID 19 and 76.4% of females said that they get suspected or confirmed but didn't face any kind of problem. 5% of women accepted that there was a lack of disposal facilities for menstrual waste, 5% said there was a lack of assistance with hygiene and sanitation and 2.1% said there was a lack of water supply.



14.9% of respondents strongly agreed, and 42% agreed that the lockdown forced the closure of communal centers, such as schools and health centers which led to the lack of access to both menstrual hygiene and information". While 17.8% said they disagree and 4% said they strongly disagree with this statement. While 22.4% said they have no idea about it.

9.2% of females strongly agreed and 27.7% of females agreed with the fact that during lockdown presence of a male member at home often reduced privacy for a female to menstruate with dignity. This resulted in challenges with washing, drying, or changing pads that lead to discomfort and negative health effects. While 35.3% disagreed and 21.4% strongly disagreed with this fact. And 9.2% said they have no idea.

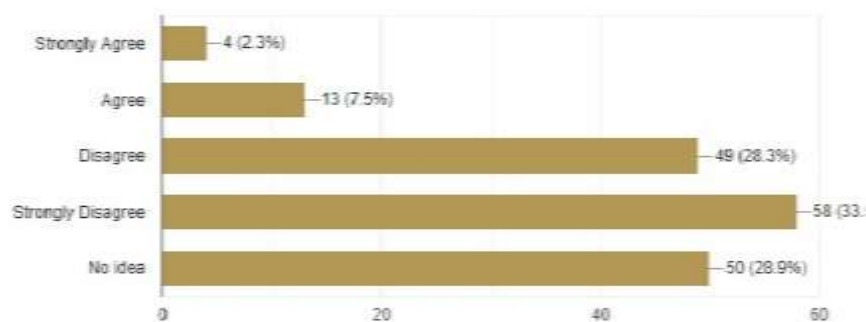
18.4% of female strongly agreed and 48.9% agreed that the pandemic has increased the economic uncertainty and financial stress that forced them to prioritize other basic needs such as food, medicine, etc over purchasing menstrual hygiene materials. And 5.2% strongly disagreed and 18.4% disagreed with it and 12.1% said they have no idea.



6.3% of females strongly agreed and 17.2% agreed that because of economical stress spending on menstrual products is also often seen as an unnecessary expense by the male members of the family. While 24.7% of females strongly disagreed and 36.8% disagreed with this fact. And 16.1% said they have no idea.

10.9% of females strongly agreed and 25.9% agreed that the false belief of menstruation is linked to an increased risk of COVID-19 created a different level of stress, anxiety, and fear in females. While 19% of females strongly disagreed and 25.9% disagreed with this fact. And 22.4% said they have no idea.

56.7% of females accepted that increased stress because of COVID-19, adversely affected the menstrual cycle. 25.7% of females accepted that their menstrual bleeding started late, 8.2% said their menstrual bleeding started early, 21.6% of females felt an increase in their pain level and experienced an increase in the frequency of headache.

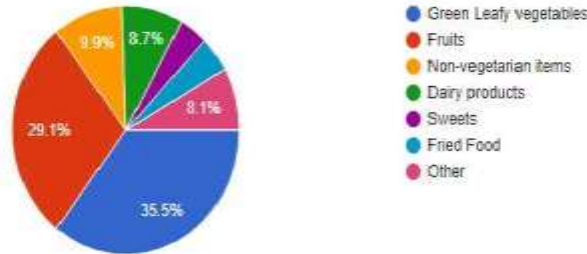


A social media post highly circulated that those women who get vaccinated during their period face a high risk of contracting the infection and falling sick. 2.3% and 7.5% of females said they strongly agree and agree with this. While 28.3% and 33.5% said they disagree and strongly disagree with this. And 28.9% said they have no idea.

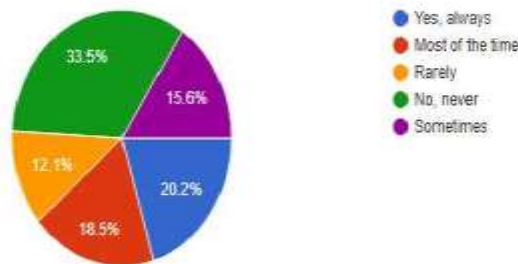
According to 37.8% of females, they have not been vaccinated yet while 51.1% of females said they didn't experience any change after the COVID-19 vaccination. While 1.4% of females experience heavy menstrual flow, 3.5% more pain during periods and 0.7% of missing menstruation flow, and 3.5% said they have recently gotten vaccinated and waiting for their periods.

41.6% of females accepted that get their preferred brands of menstrual products during lockdown while 27.7% said most of the time, 20.2% said sometimes and 10.4% said never.

62.4% of females said they never used a single menstrual product for extended hours even during the pandemic. 9.8% said sometimes, and 18.5% said rarely. while 2.9% said always, and 6.4% most of the time.



35% of females said during the pandemic they started eating more green leafy vegetables, 29.1% said they started consuming more fruits, 9.9% started taking more non-vegetarian items, 8.7% included more dairy products, 4.1% sweets, 4.7% fried food and 8.1% added other things.



20.2% of females said they always feel that reusable menstrual products such as washable pads, menstrual cups, absorbent underwear, etc are better to use during a crisis. 18.5% said most of the time and 15.6% said sometimes. While 12.1% said rarely and 33.5% said they never feel that reusable menstrual product is better to use.

79.2% of females accepted that menstruation is a normal biological process and 17.9 % said they feel proud to bleed. While 1.7% said they consider it as a disease and 1.2% marked the option of other.

Conclusion and Recommendation

A study found that respondents who participated in the study, most of them belonged to the Hindu community and then the Muslim community. The mean of respondent's age was 25.19 and all were literate. Maximum numbers of respondents were married and live in a nuclear family than in a joint family. Most of the respondents were either working or studying and only a few were homemakers. According to the study, menstruating women faced the both direct and indirect impacts of the covid 19 on their menstrual hygiene. As it is well understood that a high rise in psychological stress led to irregular periods. Intense feelings of fear, uncertainty, or anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the menstrual cycle of women. As some women started menstruating early and some got late. Some women felt an increase in their pain level during menstruation and some experienced a frequency of headaches. Apart from this, menstruating women also faced

some major direct impacts of the covid 19.

First was the crisis of pads during the initial phase of 1st lockdown. As 69.4% of females accepted that at that period of time pads were not easily available in the market . They somehow managed their period with the stock of pads they had and used old clothes, cotton, and homemade napkins. The second was the closure of communal centers such as schools and health centers were also a major issue during the first lockdown. As 56.9% of respondents accepted that the closure of schools and health center lead to the lack of access to menstrual hygiene and information. The third was the economic uncertainty and financial crisis due to the pandemic that also made it very difficult to maintain menstrual hygiene as 67.3% of females accepted that because of the financial stress they felt helpless to prioritize other basic needs such as food, medicine, etc over purchasing menstrual hygiene materials.

The study explored that the fake information circulated through social media during the covid 19 pandemic didn't get much success to mislead the women. A social media post highly circulated that those women who get vaccinated during their period face a high risk of contracting the infection and falling sick. Only 9% of women got tricked to this misinformation. The study also revealed that during the pandemic consumption of vegetables and fruits increased as most of the females added more green leafy vegetables and fruits in their diet than non vegetarian items. According to the study, only 40% of females accepted that reusable menstrual products such as washable pads, menstrual Cups, absorbent underwear, etc are better to use during a crisis but still a large number of females are unaware of reusable menstrual product.

The study of "Impact of covid 19 on menstrual hygiene and cyclicity" is very interesting and relevant to the present time. It can be done in a more broad area and in different states to understand the impact of covid 19 profoundly. It would be more interesting to know the impact of covid 19 on the menstrual hygiene of urban and rural women. Further study can also be done to find the impact of COVID-19 on widening the gender poverty gap.

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