

## Menstrual Health Management in Higher Education Institutions of Haryana

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### Abstract

Poor menstrual health management infrastructure is a challenge for menstruating female students in higher education institutions in Haryana. A qualitative study was designed to know the menstrual health facilities available in colleges and universities and how these facilities are insufficient to maintain the menstrual cycle. The study was conducted in April and May 2023 among female graduate and postgraduate students. Out of a total of more than 400 higher education institutions 10 higher educational institutions were randomly selected for 10 focus group discussions. Interview guides for focus group discussion (FGD) were prepared to understand menstrual health management. After conducting a focus group discussion with 80 female students the researcher found that menstrual health management facilities are inferior in higher education institutions of Haryana. The toilets are dirty and smelly, no sanitary pad facilities, the staff are insensitive, no dustbin facilities and the girls dispose of pads in the open. Absence from colleges and universities is a regular feature of girl's student's life. Menstrual health management audits of higher education institutions and menstrual health education can improve the menstrual health of female students. Free supply of sanitary pads, sanitation facilities and awareness and sensitivity about menstrual health can improve the situation. The infrastructure of the higher education institutions must be according to the needs of the female students.

**Keywords :** *toilets, sanitary pads, menstruation, hygiene, higher education*

### Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a key determinant of health, with individuals having lower educational attainment often experiencing poorer health outcomes (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). In this context, higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping the well-being and prospects of individuals. The environment and resources provided by these institutions encourage young people to adopt healthy practices and promote their overall hygiene and well-being. Furthermore, the infrastructure and facilities available in higher education institutions reflect the government's commitment to the youth and the development of the country (Kadyaan, 2022).

India, being one of the youngest nations in the world, holds a significant portion of its population in the age group of 18 to 35 years. Among them, Haryana accounts for 75 lakh young people out of the total 40 crore young population in the country. Notably, there is a positive trend in Haryana, where the enrolment of female students in higher education institutions surpasses that of male students. The state government has made efforts to promote women's education by establishing numerous women's colleges, with a policy to ensure access to higher education within a 10-kilometer radius (Census 2011; Haryana CM Office). There are 38 Universities, 182 Government Colleges, 97 Government Aided Colleges and 94 Self-financing colleges in Haryana (Directorate of Higher Education, Haryana, n.d.). However, despite this expansion, the infrastructure of higher educational institutions in Haryana is yet to adequately cater to the needs of female students, especially regarding menstrual health management.

Menstrual health communication and hygiene practices are essential for the well-being of menstruating women (Parija et al. 2022). Unfortunately, a study conducted in Haryana revealed that only 36.8% of women use sanitary napkins during menstruation, while 57.8% lack access to hygienic menstrual materials. Moreover, only 47.5% of women possess knowledge about menstrual hygiene practices (Singh et al. 2022; Deshpande et al. 2018). Recognizing the significance of addressing this issue, several universities and colleges in Haryana have initiated programs to promote menstrual health communication and hygiene practices among their students. These initiatives include providing free sanitary napkins, organizing workshops, awareness campaigns and distributing menstrual hygiene kits (National Institute of Technology, Kurukshetra; Maharishi Dayanand University Rohtak). While Haryana has shown improvement in various health indicators, including gender equality, sanitation and female enrolment in higher education, challenges persist. The state still faces issues such as high neonatal and maternal mortality rates, low immunization coverage and the need to enhance its health system infrastructure and services (NITI Aayog Health Index

report). It is crucial to address the specific needs of women, including menstrual health management to continue progressing towards a healthier and more equitable future.

This research study aims to shed light on the current state of menstrual health management in higher educational institutions in Haryana. The study provides an overview of the menstrual health infrastructure available in these institutions and highlights the challenges faced by menstruating women. By exploring these aspects, the study seeks to contribute to the prioritization of women's health and well-being within the government and higher education institutions.

### **Research Objectives:**

1. To assess the resources and facilities provided by the higher education institution for menstrual health management.
2. To gather the opinions of female students regarding menstrual health management at the higher education institution.

### **Method and Procedure**

This research aimed to understand the opinions and perceptions of female students regarding menstrual health management in higher education institutions in Haryana. Focus group methods were employed to gather qualitative data. A total of ten focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in eight universities and colleges, involving 80 graduate and postgraduate female students. Each FGD comprised eight participants within the age range of 18 to 25 years. The FGDs were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription.

The selection of respondents for the FGDs was carried out in collaboration with the women's cell of the respective colleges and universities. Volunteer sampling was employed to recruit participants who were willing to engage in the discussions. To ensure a conducive environment, the FGDs were conducted at convenient venues, minimizing external disturbances and barriers. A structured questionnaire was prepared to guide the discussions and delve into deeper insights.

The choice of a skilled moderator was crucial for the success of the focus group discussions. A female moderator was selected to conduct the sessions, considering the comfort level and rapport-building potential with the participants. The participants represented the target population of college/university graduates. Before commencing the discussions, the moderator provided an overview of the research topic and the purpose of the discussion. Guidelines were shared with the female students who volunteered to participate. In order to maintain privacy and comfort, the FGDs were held in comfortable and private locations. The moderator initiated the discussion by introducing the topics listed for exploration. Due to participants' hesitation to be recorded on camera, audio recording was utilized with the

respondents' permission. The FGDs allowed the participants to express their detailed views on the topic under discussion. With the audio recordings serving as valuable resources, the discussions provided rich insights into the opinions and perceptions of female students regarding menstrual health management in higher education institutions in Haryana.

### **Results**

The focus group discussion revealed that the institution does not have adequate menstrual hygiene management facilities. The major 8 themes drawn are lack of basic amenities, unclean and smelly washrooms, non-functional or inadequate disposal facilities, lack of awareness and education, insufficient access to sanitary pads, careless disposal of pads, reluctance to use washrooms and lack of cooperation or support.

#### ***Lack of basic amenities***

During the focus group discussion, the participants highlighted the insufficient menstrual hygiene management facilities at the college or university. They specifically pointed out the absence of essential amenities such as water, soap and bins. Additionally, the lack of soap in the washrooms compels students to carry paper soaps and sanitizer with them for personal hygiene. The participants expressed their concerns regarding the absence of these basic amenities on campus, which significantly impacted their ability to maintain proper menstrual hygiene. This unanimous dissatisfaction among the participants highlighted the difficulties girls faced in effectively managing their menstruation due to the insufficient availability of essential amenities in the washrooms.

*Sanitation is extremely poor at our college. There is no soap, no water, no tissue, no bins and no one to clean. It is really difficult to cope in a harsh situation as many girls today have irregular periods; and heavy blood flow. (Participant-2-FDG1)*

#### ***Unclean and Smelly Washrooms***

The washrooms were consistently described as unclean and emitting a foul smell, which created an unpleasant experience for the students. The lack of regular maintenance and cleanliness of the facilities was a major concern. Students reported that the washrooms were consistently described as dirty and lacked regular cleaning. The dustbins were not regularly emptied, resulting in them being filled with used pads and contributing to unhygienic conditions. As a result, many girls felt compelled to take leave during their periods to avoid using the inadequate washroom facilities. Consequently, many participants expressed a strong reluctance to use the washrooms during menstruation and opted to take half-days off to change pads at home, seeking more hygienic conditions. The cleanliness of the college or university was inconsistently maintained, which presented challenges.

*The toilets are unclean. The dustbin is kept outside the toilet and throwing pads, we have to come outside and then throw it. No bin is available inside. The washrooms are dirty. I prefer not to use it. (Participant-8-FDG3)*

*Honestly speaking, the overall cleanliness and maintenance of the college washrooms is appalling. It's not just about aesthetics, but it's about our health and well-being too. We deserve better. The college administration needs to step up and address these issues immediately. (Participant-5-FDG9)*

### **Non-functional or inadequate disposal facilities**

There was a noticeable absence of machines for both pad disposal and pad purchase. The sanitary pad destroyer machine, which was intended for disposing of used sanitary pads, was frequently reported as non-functional. In addition, the washrooms were lacking pad disposal bins, which was a significant concern raised by the respondents. The broken door locks and malfunctioning jet sprays in the washrooms were additional issues highlighted by the participants. While some institutions had pad machines installed, they were also reported as non-functional. As a result, respondents resorted to carrying newspapers for disposing of their used pads and keeping extra pads for emergency situations. As a result of these inadequate hygiene management facilities, some students opted to avoid using the toilets altogether.

*I don't understand why they even have that destroyer machine in the washroom if it never works! It's so frustrating. We're expected to use it, but no one bothered to teach us how. It's like they just put it there for show. (Participant-1-FDG3)*

*There is a pad disposal machine installed in our hostel, but when I tried to use it for the first time, I had no idea what to do. There were no instructions or any guidance provided. I just stood there, feeling completely clueless. And to make matters worse, the machine didn't even work. It was such a disappointment. I mean, what's the point of having a machine if it's not functional? (Participant-7-FDG8)*

### **Lack of awareness and education**

Several participants raised concerns regarding a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding the existence and proper usage of hygiene management facilities. Specifically, they mentioned a lack of understanding about pad disposal, including the operation of pad disposal machines and pad vending machines. Respondents emphasized that some girls openly disposed of used pads without utilizing the available bins, resulting in unhygienic conditions. This indicates a need for increased awareness and education regarding menstrual hygiene among students. In certain institutions, there were no pad disposal machines available and

even in cases where they were installed, students often remained unaware of their presence. Additionally, some participants expressed a lack of awareness about the 'women cell department' in the college, only learning about it during the discussion. These findings emphasize the importance of active participation from both students and faculty in the effective management of menstruation.

*I think it's important for the college to educate us on how to use these facilities properly. If they want us to dispose of our used pads in a certain way, then they should at least show us how. It's not fair to expect us to figure it out on our own. (Participant-3- FGD7)*

*I had no idea about the existence of the "women's cell department" in our college until it was brought up during this discussion. It was surprising to learn about the existence of such a department, which could prove helpful during any menstrual emergency. The fact that some of us were completely unaware of the women's cell department reflects a gap in communication and outreach. I believe it is crucial to have knowledge about the resources and support systems available to us, especially when it comes to matters related to women's health and well-being. (Participant-4- FGD4)*

### **Insufficient access to sanitary pads**

Respondents pointed out the absence of free or purchasable sanitary pads within the department, leading to limited or non-existent availability on campus. Although pads could be purchased from external markets, they were not readily available within the institution. In cases where pads were available, they were often regular ones, unsuitable for individuals with heavy menstrual flow. Respondents mentioned relying on other girls or female teachers during emergency situations. The overall insufficient access to sanitary pads on campus was deemed negligent and raised concerns. Moreover, the respondents noted the absence of on-campus shops specifically dedicated to purchasing sanitary pads. This lack of suitable options forced students to rely on alternative sources such as friends, online purchases, or seeking pads from sources outside the university. These findings underscore the need for improved accessibility to menstrual hygiene products and better support for individuals with specific menstrual needs within the university environment.

### **Careless disposal of pads**

The participants drew attention to instances where girls openly discarded used pads in toilets or left them on shelves instead of utilizing the available dustbins. They observed that some female students were negligent in maintaining hygiene during their periods, openly discarding pads without bothering to cover or wrap them in a newspaper or plastic before

disposal. Furthermore, respondents noted the negligence of some girls in the disposal of pads, frequently resorting to throwing or flushing them directly into the toilets. Such actions created an unpleasant experience for the students, further emphasizing the need for education and awareness regarding appropriate sanitary pad disposal. Addressing these issues would contribute to a cleaner and more hygienic environment for everyone.

#### ***Reluctance to use washrooms***

The unsanitary conditions and lack of proper amenities in the washrooms led to widespread reluctance among students to use them during menstruation. Consequently, some students opted to take leave or employ alternative measures to manage their periods. The washrooms were consistently described as unclean, emitting unpleasant odors and lacking essential amenities. Some washrooms even had non-functional flushes and regular cleaning was insufficient. These poor hygiene conditions created discomfort for the participants and in some cases, they avoided drinking water to minimize their washroom usage. Additionally, the malfunctioning toilet locks posed challenges for students attempting to access the facilities. The overall lack of menstrual hygiene management facilities was identified as a significant issue by the respondents.

*Once, I unexpectedly got my period two days earlier than expected. I rushed to the washroom, but I couldn't bear the unhygienic conditions there for even three minutes. So, I decided to leave and hurriedly ran back to my home, which is about 2 kilometers away from the college. It's challenging for me to use the toilets at college. The washrooms are not cleaned regularly and the lack of cleanliness makes it uncomfortable. (Participant-1-FDG6)*

#### ***Lack of cooperation or support***

The participants highlighted instances where they encountered uncooperative or unhelpful attitudes from female teachers when seeking assistance with menstrual hygiene. This lack of support further exacerbated the challenges faced by the students. The participants mentioned instances where some female teachers advised them to carry pads themselves and keep a record of their menstrual cycle dates, rather than offering assistance or resources. This approach from the teachers added to the students' challenges and highlighted a lack of support regarding menstrual hygiene management. Additionally, the participants expressed the difficulty of discussing menstrual hygiene issues with male teachers, which led them to prefer seeking assistance from female teachers in case of any uncomfortable or challenging situations. This preference for female teachers stems from the participants' desire to communicate openly and comfortably about their menstrual needs, knowing that female teachers may have a better understanding and empathy towards such matters. It emphasizes

the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment where students can freely address their menstrual health concerns without any hesitation or judgment.

*The female students should always carry an extra pad with them. . This incident highlighted the need for better menstrual preparedness and support systems in educational institutions. It was a reminder that unexpected periods can occur and it is crucial to have access to menstrual products and a supportive environment. (Participant-6-FDG10)*

The themes that emerged from the discussion underscore the urgent need for comprehensive improvements in menstrual hygiene management facilities, awareness, education and support systems within colleges and universities. It is clear that the existing conditions and practices are inadequate and fail to provide a healthy and comfortable environment for female students.

#### **Discussion**

The findings from the focus group discussions shed light on the specific challenges faced by female students in managing their menstrual health within higher education institutions. The lack of basic amenities, including soap, water, tissue paper and dustbins, in the washrooms hindered effective menstrual management. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the importance of accessible and well-equipped facilities for menstrual hygiene (Sommer et al. 2015; Miiro et al. 2018). Research has consistently shown that inadequate facilities, such as the absence of basic services and functional disposal systems, can hinder effective menstrual management and contribute to unhygienic conditions (Sommer et al. 2015; Kaur et al. 2018; Hennegan et al. 2019).

The non-functionality or inadequacy of disposal facilities, such as malfunctioning pad destroyer machines and the absence of separate dustbins, contributed to unhygienic conditions in the washrooms. These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasized the significance of functional and accessible disposal systems to ensure proper menstrual waste management (Hennegan et al. 2019; Hennegan & Sol, 2020; Uwadia et al. 2022). The lack of awareness and education regarding existing hygiene management facilities among the participants signifies the need for increased awareness programs within educational institutions. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive menstrual health education to address knowledge gaps and promote positive menstrual hygiene practices (Benshaul-Tolonen et al. 2020; Hennegan et al. 2019). Insufficient access to sanitary pads on campus emerged as a significant challenge, forcing students to rely on external sources or travel to nearby cities to purchase them. This lack of availability is supported by the previous research highlighting the importance of providing free or affordable

sanitary products within educational settings (Miirio et al. 2018;Gold-Watts et al. 2020; Uwadia et al. 2022). The careless disposal practices observed, such as openly throwing used pads in toilets or leaving them on shelves, underscore the need for proper disposal education and the provision of accessible and hygienic disposal systems (Hennegan et al. 2019).

The discomfort and challenges experienced by the students due to the unsanitary conditions and inadequate facilities led to reluctance in using the washrooms during menstruation, with some students resorting to taking leave or adopting alternative measures. This resonates with previous research indicating that inadequate facilities can adversely impact students' well-being, academic performance and overall educational experience (Benshaul-Tolonen et al. 2020; Sommer et al. 2015). Furthermore, instances were reported where female teachers appeared uncooperative or unhelpful when approached for assistance regarding menstrual hygiene. Similar findings have been reported in earlier studies emphasizing the crucial role of teachers in promoting positive menstrual health practices and providing support to menstruating students (Uwadia et al. 2022; Wickramasinghe & Lanka 2012). In order to address these issues, it is crucial to prioritize the establishment of well-equipped washrooms with basic amenities and functional facilities for pad disposal. Additionally, the availability of free or affordable sanitary pads on campus should be ensured, along with comprehensive menstrual hygiene education programs. These programs should cover not only the biological aspects but also emphasize proper hygiene practices, disposal methods and the importance of seeking support and assistance. The establishment of support systems within educational institutions, including sensitization of teachers and staff, can create a safe and supportive environment for female students.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for improved menstrual hygiene management facilities within colleges and universities. The development of awareness programs and incorporating menstruation education in comprehensive education is essential. For the educators, sensitization and training programs would be significant to create a supportive environment where students could feel comfortable seeking assistance on menstrual health. Female students' activities may be limited in educational institutions if they experience difficulties managing their menstruation. Therefore, educational institutions have to utilise their potential to establish a nurturing and pleasant atmosphere. The environment should foster the well-being, dignity and academic achievements of female students by taking appropriate measures to tackle these challenges. The study calls for immediate action to address the challenges faced by female students in managing their menstrual health in higher education institutions. It

emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment where menstrual hygiene needs are met and students can thrive without barriers.

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