

Quest for Dignified Menstruation in North America¹

Introduction:

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon among mature females and transgenders who experience shedding of blood for 1-7 days every month from the age of maturity until menopause. Menstruation, the periodic vaginal bleeding that occurs with the shedding of the uterine mucosa is one of the signs of puberty and occurs one- or two-years following appearance of secondary sexual characteristics around the age of 11-14 until the age of 45-50. Menstruation cycle varies from person to person but in a healthy menstruator of reproductive age, the normal cycle has been described as having 28 days, combination of different phases including the period of bleeding, the menstrual phase. The menstrual bleeding can be light, moderate or heavy.

Even though, it's a natural phenomenon occurs in every menstruator during reproductive age and essential factor for reproduction; because of gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, misconception, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services to maintain good health and hygiene during menstruation often cause unmet needs for girls' and women's menstrual hygiene and health. The gap between needs and service availability for maintaining dignity, good physical and psycho-social well being of a menstruating girl/woman through proper care during menstruation is the major challenges found everywhere in the world including North America. Especially, adolescent girls face stigma, harassment and social exclusion during menstruation because of lack of knowledge at the time their menstruation starts as it's not the topic of discussion in family and most of them don't get adequate information regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene. All of this has far-reaching negative impacts on the lives of those who menstruate restricting their mobility, freedom and choices; affecting attendance and participation in school and community life; compromising their safety; and causing stress and anxiety. The challenges are particularly acute for girls and women in humanitarian crises².

Dignified Menstruation

Menstruation is not form of dignity for many funders, experts, and so many others if not why menstruation has been side-lined and heavily overlooked in a course of development and human right globally. Principally, dignified menstruation is a human right concern as aligned with the principles of Human Right Declaration 1948. It is holistic approach to address all kinds of violence, discrimination, abuses associated with menstruation from individual to nation, private

¹ Pandey, Lilanath, RN, BSN, B. ED., MPH (2020) "*Menstruation: Phenomena, Problems and Programs in North America*" (email:lilanathpandey@gmail.com)

² Sommer M., Caruso B.A., Sahin M., Calderon T., Cavill S., Mahon T., et al. (2016) 'A Time for Global Action: Addressing Girls' Menstrual Hygiene Management Needs in Schools', in PLOS Medicine 13(2): e1001962. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001962>

to public and all. Globally, the dignity during menstruation is missing because it demands passion, knowledge and skills around menstruation, human right and policies. It also challenges bit to the actor whether he or she is practicing dignity or not in her personal and professional life. Misconception, stigma, taboos and restrictions during menstruation are practiced in all the communities in the world with variation on forms and severity. It appeals to everyone who speaks about menstruation to focus on dignity.

Thus, '**Dignified Menstruation**' is a comprehensive term used for respecting all menstruators without discrimination. It is simply 'menstrual talk, dignity first'. All menstruators deserve the dignity during menstruation no matter whether they are in private or public life, in disaster or with disability or any sexual orientation or anywhere in this world. Recently the term 'Dignified Menstruation' is being more common for advocating menstrual right as human right issue for girls, women and/or menstruators. 'As virtue of human being, each girl, women or menstruators deserved the dignity during menstruation. It is a state of free from any forms of abuse, discrimination, violence associated with menstruation no matter where the menstruator lives. In other words, there should not be difference between 25 and 5 days in a month, throughout the clock of 365 days because of menstruation'^{3 4}.

Menstrual health builds on this concept and encompasses the broader impacts of the psychological, socio-political and environmental factors that accompany menstruation on mental, physical, and emotional health. For creating a supportive environment for all women and girls to be able to manage their menses hygienically, safely, in privacy and with dignity, UNESCO have summarised the following systematic factors⁵:

1. Accurate and Timely knowledge
2. Informed and comfortable professionals
3. Sanitation and washing facilities
4. Safe and Hygienic Disposal
5. Available, safe and affordable materials
6. Referral and access to health services
7. Positive Social Norms
8. Advocacy and Policy

As a more developed part of the world and having more supply and financial resources, better menstrual health management programs and projects are launched in US and Canada to minimize the problems hovering around menstruation. Exact data on misconception, taboos, restrictions and discrimination related to menstruation was difficult to cite in this article but

³ Paudel R. (2019-12-25). *The Urgency for Dignified Menstruation*. Available at <https://www.spotlightnepal.com/2019/12/25/urgency-dignified-menstruation/>

⁴ Paudel R. *Dignified Menstruation in a Global Discourse: An Unseen Topic in Human Rights?* Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KESIMJ-ycksk>

⁵ UNESCO (2014) *Puberty education and menstrual hygiene management*. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000226792?posInSet=1&queryId=94812f22-2eab-4760-909f-28c824c15fbc>

both US and Canada have more immigrant population from all parts of the world and the practices based on religious/cultural ground might have been continued even after arriving in here for long period of times as the preservation of specific cultural values.

On the other hand, supplies for menstrual hygiene products are unaffordable for some of the poor people and not readily available around public areas, schools and workplaces, creates barrier to maintain dignity and hygiene for many menstruators when they need it urgently. When employees find themselves without access to menstrual products, they may turn to unsuitable improvised solutions such as using toilet paper and paper towels to act in place of tampons and pads. Others may extend the use of products beyond their recommended time frame, which poses a health hazard due to the increased risk of toxic shock syndrome. Some employees may also avoid the workplace due to the shame and stigma that often surrounds menstruation.

There has been increasing public awareness and acknowledgement that menstrual products constitute necessary items that are essential to the health of a large proportion of Canadians. Lack of access to menstrual products can create barriers for employees to participate fully in society, including in the labour force. A 2018 survey found that there are barriers and taboos during periods and emotional effects of periods felt by Canadian women⁶.

Period are barriers to participation for women in Canada, with 68% of women having felt that their period prevented them from full participation in an activity and for women under 25 years of age it goes up to 83%. More than half (55%) of women have missed school or work or declined social activities because of their period. Period leaks are an issue for women of all ages, with 74% of women having had a period leak at work or school. 86% of women have been unprepared when their period started.

Periods are also considered by most women to be a taboo subject. 63% have felt that they had to hide about the tampon or pad were brought to the washroom at work or school, proportion jumps to 81% among women of under 25 years of age. 56% try not to let male colleagues at school or work about their periods. 63% of women agree that periods are an easy topic of conversation with their female colleagues and 28% women agree that they try not to let their female colleagues at work or school know that they're having their period.

⁶ Plan International Canada. (2018) *A Canadian gender study*. Available at <https://plancanada.ca/file/Plan-International-Canada--period-stigma-2018-report.pdf>

Periods are also a cause of anxiety for Canadian women. 23% of women, 33% of under 25 years of age, have struggled to afford menstrual products for themselves or their dependants. 59% have felt anxiety or dread when their period was late. 57% of women report having had other people accuse them of Premenstrual syndrome (PMS), 74% among women of under 25 years of age.

Similar study conducted in the United States found that 86% of women have started their period unexpectedly in public without having the supplies they need, causing feelings of anxiety or embarrassment, often resulting in the disruption of workplace activities⁷.

Another study carried out among 18–25 years old girls/women in US high schools, revealed that 92.3% needed MHPs while at school, but only 42.13% attended schools that provided MHPs free of cost. 12.7% missed school because of lack of access to MHPs, 38.9% were late to school or left school early and ability to learn was impacted in 17.6%⁸.

2. Objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the stigma, taboos and restriction during menstruation.
- To explore the program and activities aligning dignified menstruation.
- To explore the gap on programs in relation to addressing the socio-cultural aspects of dignified menstruation.

3. Rationale of the study:

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon, occurs in every woman during reproductive age and essential factor for reproduction. Lack of proper knowledge, traditional way of thinking as a male dominant world, gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, misconception, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services often cause unmet needs for girls' and women's menstrual health and hygiene. Sometimes, menstrual hygiene needs are unseen and supply for maintaining menstrual hygiene are not available at the time of need because of financial and other accessibility issues. The gap between needs and service availability for maintaining good menstrual hygiene poses major challenges for girls/women's physical and psycho-social well being. There are few community resources and individuals working and advocating on right to

⁷ Free the Tampons. (2013) *The Murphy's Law of Menstruation* . Available at https://www.freethetampons.org/uploads/4/6/0/3/46036337/ftt_infographic.pdf

⁸ Christopher A. Cotropia (2019) *Menstruation Management in United States Schools and Implications for Attendance, Academic Performance, and Health, Women's Reproductive Health*, 6:4, 289-305, DOI: 10.1080/23293691.2019.1653575

dignified menstruation for billions of girls/women in the world. This study was conducted to find out problems the menstruators are facing to maintain their dignity and human right related to menstruation, maintain good health and hygiene during menstruation and the supports and programs available to do so around North America; US and Canada.

4. Methodology:

The study is a desk review search report. Keywords used for searching information were menstruation, menstruation taboos/restriction, menstruation practices, menstrual hygiene management and dignified menstruation. The study was conducted from June 16, 2020- July 15, 2020. Secondary source of information such as journals, articles, books, newspaper, blog and organizations report were used to collect the necessary data.

5. Key Findings and Discussion:

5.1 Stigma, taboos, fear and restriction during menstruation;

- Preventing women from full participation in an activity.
- Missing school or work or declined social activities.
- Period leaks are an issue for women of all ages, subject of shame.
- They have been unprepared when their period started.
- Women feel that they had to hide about the tampon or pad were brought to the washroom at work or school.
- Women try not to let male colleagues at school or work about their periods.
- Not all women let their female colleagues at work or school know that they're having their period.
- Creating anxiety or dread because of fear of uncertainty period, affordability of menstrual products and blame facing for premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

5.2 Program and activities aligning dignified menstruation.

Most of the resources and programs are focussed on providing resources for maintaining sanitation and hygiene during period than mitigating socio-cultural tradition and practicing taboos and discriminatory behaviours towards the menstruators for dignity.

In US, in March 2019, 'Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2019' was passed by 116th congress, Joint assembly of HOR and senate to increase the availability and affordability of menstrual hygiene products for individuals with limited access, and for other purposes. It ensures supply of menstrual hygiene products; safe water supply, pads/tampons/cups, soap and material to dry hands; free of cost for underprivileged population; homeless, prisoners, detainees, people with low economic status, schools and workplaces⁹.

⁹ Government of USA. (2019) Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2019. Available at <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr1882/BILLS-116hr1882ih.pdf>

Canada have also recognised the similar problem, revealed through 2018 survey and published Canada Gazette, Part I, Volume 153, Number 18: Government Notices in May 2019, intending to make similar legal provision ensuring supply of menstrual hygiene products; safe water supply, pads/tampons/cups, soap and material to dry hands; free of cost for underprivileged population; homeless, prisoners, detainees, people with low economic status, schools and workplaces¹⁰.

One of the leading Canadian newspaper, Global news had article on comparison of sex education in different provinces across Canada and Ontario's newly-revised sexual education curriculum introduces kids to the physical changes of puberty in Grade 4 (10 years of age), receives essential knowledge of menstruation in the class¹¹.

Some of the advocacy groups like; 'Canadian Menstruators' are also involved in removing sales tax on essential menstrual hygiene products saying that it's unfair to tax for the products required for maintaining physical integrity and dignity regarding natural phenomena of life, which is discriminatory to girls and women¹².

Despite of the recent legal provision to provide free of cost supply in public buildings, schools and workplaces, there is lack of continuous supply of menstrual hygiene product; safe water supply, pads/tampons/cups, soap and material to dry hands universally as outlined in the legal provision. Not all, but some of the cities in Canada have lunched programs to provide supplies for menstrual hygiene products in schools to break down barriers to education^{13 14}.

5.3 Gap on programs in relation to addressing the socio-cultural aspects of dignified menstruation.

¹⁰ Government of Canada. (2019) *Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations*. Available at <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/SOR-86-304.pdf>

¹¹ Global news. (2015-02-24) *Sexual education compared across Canada*. Available at <https://globalnews.ca/news/1847912/sexual-education-compared-across-canada/>

¹² <http://www.canadianmenstruators.ca/>

¹³ CBC. (2019-08-) *Toronto public schools to offer free tampons and pads to students*. Available at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-schools-free-menstrual-products-tampons-pads-1.5265461>

¹⁴ Campbell, C. (2019, April). All B.C. schools will have free menstrual products by end of 2019: Minister. Kamloops Matters. Available at <https://www.kamloopsmatters.com/local-news/all-bc-schools-will-have-free-menstrual-products-by-end-of-2019-minister-1359588>

Although there are various programs available through governmental and non-governmental agencies in US and Canada for promoting knowledge on menstruation and maintaining hygiene during menstruation; there is clear lack in availability of the gender and culturally sensitive programs focused on socio-cultural barriers related to dignified menstruation.

Similarly, the taboos, restrictions, discrimination and dignity during menstruation varies in different cultures, ethnicities and religions across the world and people from across the world have been immigrated to US and Canada, no studies report was found in relation to differences in practice associated with their origin, ethnicity, religion and culture among the residents of those countries. Most of the literatures have mentioned about discriminations, taboos and restrictions the menstruators face in relation to participation in public and socio-cultural events but nothing mentioned on how the cultural differences are affecting people's knowledge, attitude, practices and behaviour in relation to thinking and talking openly about menstruation among family members, friends, colleagues and in public, maintaining proper dignity of menstruators and in a non-discriminatory manner.

In North America, governments are more committed to implement better policies for educating about menstruation and making sure the supplies for maintaining good menstrual hygiene and health. Menstruation is still the topic that many people don't want to discuss openly and because of that it's more important to look for improvement all the time. And, the differences on thinking and practising restrictions/taboo and discriminating menstruators in different culture is missing.

It would be difficult to address the problem to eliminate those discrepancies in different cultures/communities without knowing what is happening at grassroot level. There is still lack of more practical approach based on knowledge, attitudes and practices of grassroot level community which is more important in assuring and safeguarding physical, mental and emotional health of menstruators.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations:

Menstruation is natural phenomenon, occurring since the beginning of human life, only girls/women of reproductive age pass through it every month. It's the truth of life but historically because of the myths and beliefs prevalent in different cultures and religions, it's a subject of stigmatization and discrimination of women as barriers in participation in the activities of daily life and in religious activities in some cultures. Even in open societies, menstruation has still been considered the topic of shame and embarrassment, rarely discussed in public. Even among female groups, not everyone is comfortable talking openly and often tagged as a subject of taboo. These stigmas are often internalized by individuals and

reproduced in societies across the world, generating negative effects in personal self-esteem, well-being and health outcomes. More or less; stigma, taboos and discrimination are still prevalent in North America even though the governments look more committed and knowledge of menstruation is disseminated through school education system and various other health and social programs.

Since policies and strategies play an important role in success of any programs; inclusion of dignified menstruation and its indicator on national and international policies is crucial. The governments not only should focus on the menstrual hygiene management program but also address the myths, taboos, restrictions, discrimination and violence related to menstruation and creating dignity for menstruators. Dignified menstruation is new concept but proper term and holistic approach to create conducive environment for women empowerment and improving gender based human right violation situation.

7. Limitation of the study:

This study was performed based on searching the keywords mentioned on the methodology. Hence, it might not incorporate all the taboos and initiatives and works done by government and other sectors for improving status of menstruators on the study area. Especially, the differences in taboos, restrictions and discriminations in different ethnicities, cultures and religions regarding menstruation was missing. Any feedback and additional information regarding the topical issue are highly appreciated.