

**Menstrual Health and  
Hygiene Framework: A  
Human Right Approach**

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**Abstract**

*Menstruation is a natural reproductive process. In our society, menstruation is considered as something that is unclean, shameful, and impure. The conversation regarding menstruation among women and adolescent girls from an initial age is observed as taboo. If menstruating women and adolescent girls cannot access safe and private places for managing menstrual hygiene, it is against their dignity. There is a need for a holistic approach that addresses menstrual health and hygiene issues within the context of human rights. When women and girls cannot manage their bleeding cycle hygienically, it can negatively impact their rights. With this background, the main objective of this paper is to examine basic rights in the context of menstrual health and hygiene. The present paper will be descriptive and secondary sources of data will be used. This study is significant because it helps to understand the existing human rights in the context of menstrual health and hygiene.*

**Keywords**

Women, adolescent girls, human rights, menstrual health and hygiene, menstruation.

**Introduction and Methodology**

Menstruation is a natural process that is associated with a woman's ability to procreate (Thakur, et al., 2014). The onset of menstruation is called Menarche, one of the milestones in an adolescent girl's life (Manhas, Asmat, and Dolker, 2017). Menstruation is periodic vaginal bleeding that occurs with the shedding of the uterine mucosa, one of the symbols of Puberty. There are over 355 million women and girls, who are menstruating each day (Greetz, et al., 2016). The starting stage of menstruation is called menarche, and this stage usually occurs between

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the age groups of 12-13 years of girls (Spot On! Improving menstrual health and hygiene in India, 2015). A Female experiences about 455 bleeding cycles across her reproductive years (Panday, 2014). In many societies, people don't have enough knowledge regarding periods and consider it a pity. Inadequate awareness and information lead to various meaningless restrictions in the daily routine of menstruating women and girl's life. Restrictions like: they are not allowed to enter religious places for prayers during their periods because people considered them impure (ibid, 2017). Women are restricted to touch the holy books as they are unclean (Garg, Goyal, and Gupta, 2011). A strict diet has been followed by girls like not eating Ghee, butter, or milk. The parents believe that if adolescent girls consume a healthy diet they would grow faster and the flow of blood also increase (Gill, 2019). In addition to this, there are restrictions on the bathing of menstruating women in some societies. Due to these restrictions and poor understanding women are not aware of how to manage periods hygienically. Therefore it is a need to understand the term menstrual hygiene management. Menstrual hygiene management refers to *"Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management material. They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort and fear"* (UNICEF, 2019). Menstrual health and hygiene mainly depend upon the socio-cultural, economic, and education status of families (Maniar and Mehta, 2017). Menstrual health and hygiene stand for *"Encompass both Menstrual Health management and the broader systematic factor that link menstruation with health, wellbeing, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment, and rights. These systematic factors have been summarized by UNESCO as accurate and timely knowledge; available, safe, and affordable materials; informed and comfortable professionals; referral and access to health services; sanitation and washing facilities; positive and social norms, safe and hygienic disposal and advocacy and policy"* (UNICEF, 2019). Menstrual health and hygiene are integral to achieving sustainable development goals. In 2015, UNICEF adopted 17 sustainable development goals and these goals are arranged in such a way that they address the problems of sustainability and health (United Nations, 2015). Although menstrual hygiene is not mentioned in any of the SDGs, it is still linked directly to some of the proposed SDGs. Like SDG 3: *Ensure healthy lives and promotes well-being for all, at all ages*. It is the fundamental right of every human being to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health. Buta study conducted by Sultan

and Sahu (2017) revealed that menstruating women often managed periods in unhygienic ways. Menstruating women develop their hygienic practices and strategies to deal with periods according to their cultural beliefs, and economic and educational status (Sumpter and Belen, 2013). The unhygienic practices include the usage of rags, cotton, or old cloth, and the reuse of the old cloth without properly washing it. The usage of unsuitable material for absorption increases the risk of health problems (Das et al., 2015). Another study by Dingra, et. al. (2019) revealed that respondents lacked prior knowledge about menstruation before experiencing it due to which they faced various health-related problems. So, poor menstrual health becomes the obstacle to accomplishing the Sustainable development goal (SDG3). **SDG 4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all.*** Good education is a prerequisite for women's rights and gender equality. Education is one of the main keys that empowering women and girls. It must be available to them across their lifetime. But the actual condition is quite different, due to the non-availability of menstrual material, and the lack of sanitation facilities in school forces many adolescent girls to dropout of school (Naughton, Weiss, and Vargas, 2017). A study conducted by Ndlovu and Ednah, (2016) shows that 20% of primary school girls miss their school during periods because of fear and shame. Ultimately if girls leave their education because of menstruation, their carrier stops, and parents force them into early marriage and they become the victim of violence and forced sexual relations (ibid, 2016). Consequently fails to achieve Sustainable Development (SDG 4). **SDG 5: *Ensuring Gender equality and empowering women and girls.*** This Goal addresses the key challenges like poverty, violence, and inequality against women. The taboos around menstruation and insufficient menstrual hygiene practices often portray women are inferior to men and are not involved in social and cultural events of life during periods (Tiwary, 2018). A qualitative study conducted by Narayan et al., (2001) revealed that half of the South Indian girls admitted that their periods are terrible and shocking. Menstruating girls often miss school because of experiences of harassment by male students in schools during periods (ibid, 2016). Menstruating women still face all these issues that become hurdles for them. Somewhere fails to attain this SDG4. **SDG 6: *Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.*** This goal ensures the availability of water and sanitation for all. Knowingly women manage menses in unhygienic ways because they deal with it in secrecy. So, clean water and sanitation are the utmost need of women for cleaning themselves. Accessibility to these facilities will help the girls during their periods and it also reduced the

dropout of girls from school (Tiwary, 2018). Scanty disposal management in schools continuously becomes a barrier to menstrual hygiene management and causes environmental issues (UN Women and WSSCC, 2015). Ultimately this act will become the barrier to SDG6. Menstruation is a topic that society often deals with concealment. Menstruation is a symbol of healthy women and it should be no longer covered under the blanket of fear, embarrassment, and shame. Disbelieving myths, taboos, and stigma around menses have been proven to empower women and girls, change menstrual hygiene practices and remove restrictions. This supports the self-esteem of women and is also essential for them to reach their full capability. For this alteration to happen, it is necessary to inculcate menstrual hygiene in policies. These policies must be supported by resources and dedicated budgets for smooth implementation (Tiwary, 2018). The challenges in achieving menstrual health are fundamental to the equality, rights, and dignity of all individuals who menstruate. But still, menstrual health is not a priority for anyone (Babar, et al.2022). Till now women and girls continuously suffer and it infringes their human rights. The main problem is that women are still bound by such myths and taboos that restrict them from getting accurate knowledge about menstrual hygiene. It is the right of every woman to access awareness about it. Women and girls are not aware of their rights, although these rights are universal. With this background, the present research paper shall examine basic human rights in the context of menstrual hygiene. This research paper will be divided into three sections. The first section illustrates the Introduction, Objective, (To examine the basic Human rights in the context of menstrual health and hygiene), and Methodology (The research paper used a descriptive research design and it is based on secondary sources like Research papers, Reports, books, Internet sources, Articles, etc. The second section deals with findings and discussions. The third section unfolds the inferences and Conclusion.

### **Findings and Discussion**

According to the United Nations (UN), “human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other status”. To sum up, every individual all over the globe is entitled to human rights. Moreover, human rights are interlinked and interdependent: the refutation of one right will directly disturb the ability to enjoy other rights (Roche, and Veerdonk, 2019). Understanding menstrual health and hygiene in terms of human rights entails a holistic approach to women’s and girls’ rights. Working on menstrual health and hygiene from a human rights perspective, will require observing systematic problems and acting effectively and

thoroughly in improving the conditions of women and girls as these problems frequently constitute barriers to the realization of human rights (Wardana, 2020). Human rights are mentioned in every constitution, law, and policy. But the real struggle is whether these human rights are enjoyed by the citizen or not. Knowingly, these rights exist all over the globe, and the state here must address the barriers that women face in managing their periods. Menstruating women and girls face problems in managing hygiene during periods (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2017). The term menstrual health and hygiene is used to state the requirement of menstruators encompasses menstrual products supplies, infrastructure, and easy access to the information needed to deal with periods comfortably and also with dignity (Guide to Menstrual hygiene material, 2019). But women and girls encounter difficulties when they don't avail sufficient facilities like sanitation, water, and health. Due to this, they fail to manage their menstruation easily which automatically leads to a negative impact on certain rights of women like the Right to work, the right to education as well as health (Human rights WATCH, 2017). MHH was discussed for the first time by the UN human rights council. Here the council said the inadequate menstrual hygiene management and stigma related to menses leads not so a positive impact on gender equality. In addition to this, WHO demands three actions: The first one is to recognize and frame menstrual health as a health and human right issue, not a hygiene issue. The second one is to recognize menstrual health: which means that people who menstruate have access to education, information, sanitation facilities, disposal facilities, and the place where they live or study in which menstruation is seen in a positive way or not something that makes menstruators embarrassed. The last one is to guarantee all these activities encompassed in budgets and sectoral work plans and their actions are to be analyzed (WHO, 2022). The advantage of framing MHH as a human rights issue, it attracts attention to the plea of women and girls who face hurdles in managing menstruation carefully and adequately by recognizing the failure of states and other actors in accomplishing the duties concerning MHH (Wardana, 2020). The problems faced by menstruating women and girls in the management of menstruation could be framed as human rights violations (United nation human rights, 2014). MHH is related to human rights: observing human rights treaties such as CEDAW (Convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) and CRC (Convention of the rights of the Child) and ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) these treaties need to take action on menstrual health and hygiene (Wardana, 2020). Menstrual health and hygiene are the results of the fulfillment of numerous human rights like rights related

to sanitation, housing, health, education sanitation facilities, and clean water. More importantly, these rights are extended to all menstruators irrespective of age, religion, gender, and socio-economic status (Guide to menstrual hygiene materials, 2019).

### **The Right to work**

The two fundamental aspects include the Right to work;

- The first one is the right to freely choose or admit work
- The other one is the right to a safe and favorable working environment or conditions. Both these rights are guaranteed by ICESCR (International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) in articles 6 and 7. The Committee of Economic Social and Cultural rights particularly emphasized the importance of facilities that require in work to “meet the women’s specific hygiene needs” (CESCR, 2016), which means that adequate sanitation facilities must be provided to the employer in the workplace (ILO Convention No 161, 1985). Importance of the right to work upsurges, when considering MHH from a human rights point of view (Wardana, 2020 and Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Concerning the Right to work and a safe healthy working environment, it is specifically to be clear that the state’s duties apply to all workers in both formal and informal workplaces. States' duties are entrenched in the articles in ICESCR and CEDAW. The state’s role is to monitor, generate and enforce suitable standards in the workplace that encompasses all these components that require an employee of the workplace for safe and healthy working conditions and most importantly which meet women’s requirement during menstruation. In reality, women workers face many health-related problems, as for as menstrual hygiene is concerned many women face the issue of unhygienic conditions for menstrual management. As they face cultural norms and taboos that make it difficult to manage good menstrual hygiene (Human RIGHT WATCH, 2017) Here must quote the example of the daily wagger’s wives, who work along with their husbands on roadsides or constructions side, where they don’t have an appropriate place for cleaning themselves or changing menstrual products. If they don’t have a safe place for dealing with menses, it will increase the chances of reproductive tract infections. Menses are the natural reproductive process experienced by every woman, since it is a natural process society should not consider it taboo. With such poor conditions in workplaces, menstruating women may drop out of their job or may miss their work during menstrual days, which results in a decrease in their ability to earn wages. Such hurdles lead to discrimination in workplaces and are also one of the broader

features of gender inequality (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Through the lens of the human right to work, workplace space should be organized in a way, where the women can easily choose their work and with this, where they can effortlessly look after their health.

### **The Right to Education**

The human right to education is included in numerous human rights contexts. Article 13 and 10 of ICESCR and CEDAW, states the right to free and compulsory education and accessible secondary education to all. Moreover, CEDAW has elaborated that “States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women to ensure their equal rights with men in the field of education”. In addition to this, CRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child) indicated that “initiating and supporting measures, attitudes, and activities that promote healthy behaviour by including relevant topics in school curricula” is mainly crucial in the framework of adolescent health and development. Education is not only a human right but one of the central tools that empower girls (Human Rights WATCH, 2017; Wardana, 2020). UNICEF Report of 2018 on Menstrual Hygiene Management in South Asian Schools reveals that India has the highest number of adolescent girls in the world. With the increasing rate of the adolescent girl population, there is a requirement to spread awareness about menstrual health and hygiene. Insufficient proper knowledge, illiteracy, and financial issues lead to unhygienic practices, which results in various health problems. Later on, these practices lead to adolescent girls dropping out of school (UNICEF, 2018-2020). Menstruation is surrounded by myths and taboos in India. It blocked the right access to knowledge and information and is also one of the neglected topics. Most of the girls who belong to the early adolescent age group drop out of school because of inadequate resources that contribute to menstrual hygiene practices (Bansal, 2021). Due to the negligence of menstrual issues, many adolescent girls are deprived of accessing their fundamental **Right to Education** (Article 21 A: states that: the State shall provide free and Compulsory education to all the children of the age of six to fourteen years.), and even **the Right to life** (Article 21: Protection of life and personal liberty: No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law) (Lakshmikant, 2019). The UNICEF, 2018 report also indicates that 52% of adolescent girls are those who don’t have any prior knowledge about menstruation before menarche. Most of their mothers believe in taboos related to menstruation and considered menstruation impure. Not focusing much on this, the natural cycle becomes a barrier to empowering women and girls, and also because of this, they don’t get the

benefit under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 which gives free education to children till 14 years of age (Bansal, 2021). A study conducted by Van Eijk et al., (2016) reveals that in India about a quarter of adolescent girls miss school during periods. Inadequate sanitation facilities become the reason for this. A survey conducted in Bangladesh shows that only 36 percent of adolescent girls had prior knowledge about periods (The World Bank, 2022). In addition to this, through the perspective of human rights there is a need to emphasize the quality of infrastructure of the school: neat and clean washroom with proper sanitation facilities (soap and Water), proper disposal mechanism of used Sanitary Napkins, Spread awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices. The chapter on menstruation should be included in School books, and workshops related to menstruation should be conducted on School premises. If all of this will be encompassing in school curricula the dropout rate of girls will decrease and they easily enjoy the human right to education.

### **The Right to Health**

The Human right to health also plays an important role in practicing good menstrual hygiene. It contains the right to medicine and health care. According to World Health Organization "achieving the right to health is both central to, and dependent upon, the realization of other human rights, to food, housing, work, education, information, and participation." No one can fully enjoy their rights if they do not have health. The human right to health creates a legal obligation for countries, "to ensure access to timely, acceptable, and affordable health care of appropriate quality as well as to provide for the underlying determinants of health, such as safe and potable water, sanitation, food, and housing, health-related information and education, and gender equality" (Roche, and Veerdonk, 2019). Moreover, Article 12 of the ICESCR states that every person has the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health. Later it has been focused on Article 12 of CEDAW; it states that "States parties shall take all the appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care to ensure on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those relative to family planning" (Elimination of Discrimination against women, 1999). Under the Indian Constitution Article 47 of the Directive Principles of State Policy ensures that the state must maximize the nutrition level, to improve the public health and living standard of people (Lakshmikanth, 2019). The right to health means the accessibility of all the health services to the people they require without any financial hardship. No person



should die or get sick because of financial problems. Good health is also determined by other basic human rights like proper sanitation facilities, safe and hygienic workplaces, healthy food, and clean drinking water. Many girls experience fear during the first bleeding cycle because they don't have enough knowledge regarding it. The stigma that surrounds menstruation blocks the right to access information, and knowledge about the management of menstrual hygiene (WHO, 2020). Subsequently, it affects the health of women and girls. Understanding menstruation and menstrual hygienic practices is completely a normal process. When women don't have sufficient awareness about the management of periods, for instance, women use unhealthy sanitary materials for absorption of menstrual blood they may experience different health issues. Therefore, enabling them to manage periods easily there is an utmost need for the right knowledge and information. It is their right to feel healthy. Here is the duty of the state to ensure that women can enjoy their right to health to the fullest without any hindrance.

### **The right to non-discrimination and gender equality**

The definition of non-discrimination is contained in Article 1 (1) ILO 111, which provides that discrimination includes 'Any distinction, exclusion or preference made based on race, Colour, sex, religion, political opinion, natural extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in the employment of occupation'. Thus, the right to equality requires that all persons be treated equally without any discrimination. The principle of equality and discrimination assures that those in equal situations dealt with equality in law and practice (ILO Convention, 1958). Moreover, article 3 of CEDAW state that "all appropriate measures including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, to guarantee them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men". The main point here to notice is that equality doesn't mean being identical. For achieving equality, the state would take all the necessary measures that would help a person in achieving equality (Wardana, 2020). To focus on the point of gender equality the CEDAW Committee has further elaborated its point: "It is not enough to guarantee women treatment that is identical to that of men. Rather, biological as well as socially and culturally constructed differences between men and women must be taken into account. Under certain circumstances, non-identical treatment of women and men will be required to address such differences" (UN.CEDAW, 2004). A study conducted in Nepal shows that during periods women are forced to stay in a hut even though the government of Nepal announced this practice illegal (The World Bank,

2022). Equality and non-discrimination form the basis of human rights. All individuals should enjoy human rights and therefore it is required that existing inequalities be identified and removed. Any form of discrimination that becomes a hurdle in the way of enjoyment of human rights amounts to a violation of human rights and should be addressed immediately. States must remove discrimination in the realization of human rights. For practitioners, it is important that if they find any form of discrimination or any unsuitable effect on the women and girls they are working with, then they may have further advocacy leverage with the state by highlighting the discrimination and making recommendations on how the state may deal with it (HUMAN RIGHT WATCH, 2017). Menstrual health and hygiene practical barriers in managing menstruation may become the reason for not enjoying human rights properly. Cultural norms that surround periods may further root discriminatory practices. Myths and taboos related to menstruation are entrenched in the perception that menstruation is impure or something that to be ashamed of or to keep secret. This can lead to discriminatory practices against women and girls, hindering gender equality and impacting the dignity of women and girls.

### **Inferences and Conclusion**

Viewing menstrual health and hygiene through the human rights framework, studies show that women and girls don't enjoy their human rights to the fullest. The poor practice of MHH (menstrual health and hygiene) threatens their human rights. A study which was conducted in Goa by Patel, Vernekar, and Desai (2019) shows that 71.4% of respondents admitted that various restrictions are imposed on them during periods. These restrictions are mostly related to religion. About 63.2% are those who followed these restrictions like not entering the prayer room when menstruating. 91.8% of Hindu girls, 90.4% of Muslim girls, and 8.1 % are Catholic girls who followed these restrictions. Another study which was conducted by Sultan and Sahu (2017) revealed that 76% of girls are not allowed to attend any religious prayer or function and they are forced to sleep separately. Menstruation and menstrual practices allow many barriers even in modern times like social, cultural, and religious restrictions are still imposed on menstruations that lead to creating an immense problem in the path of menstrual hygiene management (Kaur, Kaur, and Kaur, 2018). Results of these studies show that these restrictions lead to discrimination and inequality. Menstruating women and girls are not enjoying the human rights to non-discrimination and gender Equality. Furthermore, a study conducted by Dingra, Kumar,

and Kaur (2009) in Jammu and Kashmir revealed that girls don't have sufficient knowledge about periods before menarche, due to which they face several health issues. This study also highlights hygiene level among girls is quite unsatisfactory. 98% of respondents believed that there should be no regular bath during menstruation. These girls don't have proper knowledge about periods. Another study which was conducted by Maniar and Mehta (2017) illustrated major findings that school-going girls usually miss school because of the fear of strains of menstrual blood. Girls use clothes also there are no proper mechanisms for disposal of this used menstrual material. One more study conducted in Navi Mumbai by Thakur, et. al. (2017) revealed that 25% of girls use reusable cloth, because of the poor economic condition of their families. Women don't have much knowledge about menstrual hygiene and usage of reused clothes will lead to health issues like reproductive tract infection, and vaginal infections. The inadequate knowledge mostly hampers the right to health and education. Based on the above illustration, menstruation is a normal reproductive cycle experienced by almost all menstruators. But still, people who menstruate all over the world face hurdles in the context of its management. Menstruation often inhibits them from recognizing their basic human rights. Instead of considering menstrual health as a separate issue, it is important to recognize menstruation is a prerequisite for the accomplishment of human rights. It is crucial to keep in mind menstrual health is a matter of human rights.

### **Recommendations**

Based on above-discussed literature following are the recommendations:

- The state has to find out the ground-level problems that become the stone in the way of menstrual hygiene management and also endeavor to address these problems immediately.
- In the school curriculum, the chapter on menstruation must be included. A workshop related to menstruation would be organized at school as well as community level. The students will get awareness about MHH will help the students. Most importantly there is a need to keep in check the sanitation facilities of schools. There should be a neat and clean washroom with a proper mechanism for the disposal of sanitary napkins, where they can change their sanitary product with dignity and comfort.
- At workplaces, there is a need for a safe and healthy working environment. There is a requirement for complete sanitation facilities (soap, water) in the restroom of workplaces, where menstruating women easily met their hygienic needs.

- The state must chalk out health policies that easily fulfill the need of menstruating women. There is a necessity to include in the health policies distribution of free napkins to poor women. For practitioners, it is important to view how these policies work at the ground level.
- Practitioners engaged in programming advocacy related to menstrual hygiene management should know myths, taboos, and cultural norms where they are working, to enable girls and women to overcome these menstrual-related obstacles.

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