

LET'S TALK PERIOD

Committee for Managing Gender Issues



*This is the second edition in a two-part series to understand community views regarding menstruation. A survey¹ was rolled out by CMGI's Research Assistant **Therese Abraham**, inviting participation from IIMA students, research staff and academic associates, to understand how the younger population of the IIMA community perceives menstruation. We saw participation from 90 community members (equal representation from menstruators and non-menstruators), and presented to you some findings from the survey in the last issue.*

In this issue, we look at key themes which emerged from the survey and expand on its implications on us and society in general.

WHY USE 'MENSTRUATORS' AND NOT WOMEN?

“Do you know that all menstruators do not identify as a woman?”—this was one of the questions posed to our respondents. Fifty four per cent of our respondents said they were not aware of the same. Recently, this lack of awareness in the broader section of society was evident in reactions to the news of a [transman](#) in Kerala giving birth. Social media went abuzz at the news, with many questioning the biological possibility of the event.

Most of us have been brought up with the knowledge that only (cis) women menstruate, thus neglecting the trans and nonbinary people who do so. Also, not all women menstruate – this can be because of multiple reasons (Bobel et al., 2020). The term ‘menstruators’ therefore is more appropriate, enveloping within it all individuals who experience menstruation regardless of their orientation. Of course, there are arguments that such ‘nominal’ changes do nothing deep enough to change systemic structures that perpetuate discrimination, but one needs to factor in that these are small stepping stones to where we want to reach.



PERIOD POVERTY

Period Poverty refers to when menstruators do not have access to menstrual products, hygienic facilities and proper disposal mechanisms which can lead to detrimental effects on multiple aspects of their life (Farid, 2021; Gupta, 2021; Klos, 2022; Michel et al., 2022; Sweekruthi, 2023). This leads to further marginalisation of women and further hinder their opportunities (Neel, 2023). An IIMA research assistant recalls how her mother would talk about women who had to use ash and old clothes because they did not have access to sanitary napkins, often leading to infections and severe complications.

The question of whether menstrual products should be made available for free has been in the public domain for some time. Countries such as [Scotland](#) have provision for this and one could consider emulating this model in India. **Nirmohi Shukla**, Academic Associate at IIMA, opines that these products should be made available for free as it is not only a question of health, but also impacts educational ill would be to empower the women in the community to produce sanitary pads and tampons. It wit not only help the menstruators, but also can help community women earn and bring about a social change in the long run.”

However, as pointed out by Piya,* an IIMA community member, mere access does not solve the problem. Piya was a part of a research team in rural Andhra where girl children at a hostel were given sanitary napkins under the program. However, a few days later they realised that the students were not taught how to properly use and dispose them. The used pads were dumped into a stall in the washroom leading to clogging. She stresses on awareness building within the target population and adds that period literacy needs to be a part of the curriculum. In our survey, 22.2 percent of the respondents reported that they were not taught about the biological aspect of menstruation at their school or home. Normalising menstruation and dispelling myths / taboos associated with can begin at a young age, and school curriculums with well-equipped teachers can pave the way (Olson et al., 2022).

¹All participants were informed of the survey purpose and where the final outcome would be featured. All responses were anonymous.

SUSTAINABILITY IN MENSTRUATION

Recent shifts in lifestyle trends see a higher preference for sustainable options in daily use items. Menstrual product usage has also seen this change with more menstruators opting for cost effective and reusable products. We talk to **Anjali Choudhary**, Research Assistant at IIMA, who has been contributing to the area of sustainability through her research and workshops.

“There are many practices followed for the disposal of menstrual waste—burning in incinerators and throwing it away as municipal waste are considered to be two of the better options. Menstrual Health Alliance India states that 28% of sanitary waste is disposed along with municipal waste. There are high chances that these go to landfills due to lack of proper incineration facilities in India. Another data suggests that around 121 million women (i.e., 36% women of reproductive age) use sanitary napkins in India. If we are to assume a regular cycle of twelve months in a year with an average use of eight pads per cycle for 121 million women, 12 billion pads are generated per year as waste. Sanitary napkins are 90% plastic and their disposal in landfills is problematic as it has a long life cycle before degrading.



Such questions have led to products such as cloth pads and menstrual cups being brought into the limelight. While reusable cloth pads are easier to use and switch to for many pad users, questions of hygiene and practical difficulties in maintaining them has led to a certain favouring of menstrual cups. According to the findings from the fifth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 64.4 per cent of women aged 15-24 use sanitary napkins and only 0.3 percent use menstrual cups. However, menstrual cups are gaining popularity as the most convenient sustainable menstrual product. Adoption of menstrual cups avoids generation of large amount of waste. Being cost-effective, they are also free of chemical bleach and dioxins which are usually found in sanitary napkins and tampons.”

While menstrual cups may seem like the ideal choice to tackle the problem of disposing menstrual products and health-related concerns, one also needs to take into account social realities. Many women are averse to letting ‘younger’ women in their households use cups as they fear it will affect their ‘virginity.’ There is also considerable fear and hesitation in using and cleaning the menstrual cup. We need more awareness programs and active involvement of health professionals to reduce these fears. Last year, Kerala’s [Kumbalangi](#) rolled out a scheme where all women were given menstrual cups, making it the first sanitary napkin-free village in India. This was followed up with training and awareness campaigns relating to its use. Such schemes can be rolled out in other states as well.

At the same time, we also need to factor in that usage of a menstrual cup may not be suitable for all menstruators. What we need, therefore, is an enabling environment, where menstruators are aware of all options available to them and are able to make informed decisions.

PERIOD POLITICS IN MOVIES: THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

An Academic Associate at IIMA (anonymous) comments on an acclaimed movie which deals with issues that menstruating women face even now.

Directed by Jeo Baby, *The Great Indian Kitchen* is set in the backdrop of political turmoil of the Sabarimala temple entry agitation in Kerala. While the movie addresses many concerns that women face in their daily life, it also addresses the woes of a menstruating women. Things are fine for the newly married couple in the initial phase, but we soon witness the wife being burdened by patriarchal expectations of her husband’s family. She is shocked to see the regressive attitude they maintain towards menstruation when she is made to sleep on the floor in a different room, use separate utensils and wash everything she touches. There is a particular scene where the husband falls off his two-wheeler and the wife rushes to help him up, only to be rudely pushed away, since she is on her periods. The movie also portrays the role women play as agents of patriarchy, particularly when the husband’s aunt visits the couple while the wife has her periods.

The movie is an eye opener to the daily drudgery that many women face in their homes. While I focus on the menstruation part of the movie here, I would recommend that everyone watch it for the message it conveys. It is bound to leave a lot of us disturbed. The final scene where the wife throws kitchen waste water on the husband and walks out was a cathartic experience for me and many others as well.

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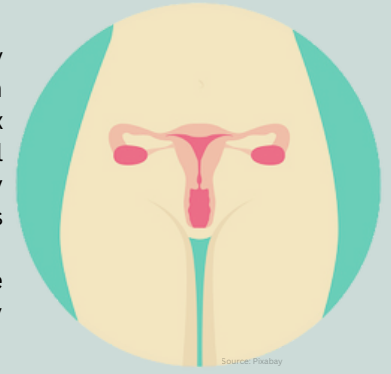
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THE NEED FOR EMPATHY: EXPERIENCING PCOS

One in five women in India suffer from PCOS/PCOD. Categorized as a lifestyle disease, it has multiple implications on one's body and interaction with the broader society. In the following piece, a Research Associate (who wishes to remain anonymous) comments on her experience.

I was diagnosed with PCOS (Poly Cystic Ovarian Syndrome) at the age of 21. My very concerned mother— partly due to irregular periods and mainly due to a sudden increase in weight— had recognised the signs. Starting then, I have been to six doctors across the medical spectrum including Homeopathy and Ayurveda. Across all branches a few factors stood out in common— body shaming and a fixation on my future reproductive capability rather than my health as a person. One went so far as to comment on my body and said I would turn into a buffalo very soon and would have no one to marry me. It is only after seven years of being in and out of the system that I have finally found a doctor who is concerned about PCOS affecting my quality of life and not any other factor.



When one sees this kind of behaviour from trained professionals in the medical field, it is only natural to expect worse from people around you. I picked up an interest in asking friends who have been diagnosed with PCOS on what led to them being taken to doctors in the first place. Two of them said it was a result of sudden onset of weight and hair growth while another said it was due to her not being able to conceive after a year of marriage. In all three cases, they were fat shamed by the doctor and asked to cut down on food without any further explanation or detailing of the problem. The family members

also followed this pattern and made them cut down drastically on food. After the birth of her child, the married friend found her well-being ignored by her family, since the PCOS ‘problem’ no longer required treatment. Unfortunately, it was her reproductive capability that was being prioritized, and not her wellbeing.

PERIODS AND SEX: ADDRESSING CONCERNS

There is a definite lack of empathy and understanding when it comes to PCOS, which is unlikely to change overnight. The younger generation, however, can work towards changing this attitude, particularly to ensure that such biases do not creep in at a systemic level within the medical field.

We had two very interesting responses related to sex during menstruation. One of the respondents brought up a myth about women being more aroused during their periods. Another commonly held belief seems to be that sexual activity during this time is unhygienic.

Meena,* an IIMA community member, refers to Doctor Tanaya Narendra, who goes by [Dr. Cuterus](#) on Instagram, and shares how the doctor has helped her in dispelling queries regarding this. “The page addresses concerns that all of us may hesitate to voice out loud in fear of embarrassment. She is a qualified doctor and uses simple language to explain things, as opposed to doctors who refuse to talk about it. I would definitely suggest her page to anyone who has queries.” Studies do show that women can feel higher degree of sexual desire starting from the second day of their periods. However, this does not mean that every individual is comfortable or desires sex during this time.

Therese Abraham, Research Assistant for CMGI, had a chat with a gynecologist on whether period sex is ‘safe’. The doctor says “sex while you are menstruating is neither unhealthy nor unhygienic and it depends on each individual. Menstruation does come with the added benefit of extra lubrication and lesser probability of pregnancy for those seeking to avoid conception. However, this does not discount the role condoms have to play and it is recommended that they be used. The most important factor should be that all parties involved are comfortable with it and there is ongoing consent during intercourse. It also needs to be understood that it’s not everyone’s cup of tea and one should respect their partners decisions, be it the menstruator or the other party.”

The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at theresea@iima.ac.in for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:
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Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.