

MEN – THE MISSING PIECES IN THE JIGSAW PUZZLE OF MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT DESIGN.

Abstract: Few men have dared to tread into the arena of menstruation and management. A biological phenomenon – a body expulsion unique to women, menstruation is connected to every man – through his mother, grandmother, sister, girl friend, wife, daughter, niece or aunt and yet it receives little focus. This paper tracks instances and efforts where men have been involved in menstruation management design and how this has had a positive impact in improving women's health. We also focus on one movement in Southern Rajasthan, India, the *Surakshit Mahwari Abhiyan* or Safe Menstruation campaign, that has the participation, sensitivity and support from men - critical components that are often go missing in the area of designing for women's needs. Aside from creativity, empathy and involvement of men are components that need to be consciously included and mainstreamed into design processes.

Keywords: *men, menstruation, design*

1. Introduction

Bathroom design, washroom design, bidets, commodes and exclusive sanitary fittings are much sought after systems and products for cleansing, urination and defecation. There are very few creative healthy solutions for menstruation, a body expulsion specific to women. The word “men” may well be present in the spelling of menstruation; but it ends there. Many men are nervous about menstruation, whether it is speaking about it or even when buying menstrual products for their partners or other women in their lives. (Smith, 2013). The subject has been seen as women's business and has never really been a part of larger discussions. It may also be true that women have not always included men. All the same, can one deny that men too have excluded themselves? The result of all this has been poor communication, insensitivity and isolation. Over time, women have been made to feel inferior just because they menstruate. There are many forms and degrees of silence around this subject that is rooted in superstition, shame, patriarchy and religious beliefs. This has caused a direct negative impact on women's health and well being. The design of menstrual management systems and products has thus been a largely neglected area. It has very strong social and cultural components. Feminist Gloria Steinem in her article “If men could menstruate” looks at what would have happened if men magically started their periods. She correctly points out that there would have been many more products and options by now, across class and caste groups. (Steinem 1978)

2. Menstrual management

Menstrual management can be defined as a method, a technique or a way to catch, contain or absorb discharged blood exiting from a women's body during a menstrual cycle or periods. The management of menstruation has been usually done combining two broad areas, one, managing with in a space and two managing through the use of products. Here we define space as a place which provides privacy to

manage period, and define products to manage the flow as plain cloth, sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups. The products to manage can be either disposable or reusable. Typically menstruation needs of women are:

- access to menstrual management products
- a private space to change the menstrual management product
- a shelf space or a hook (behind the door/ wall) - to keep / hang spare menstrual products when as and when change is required
- access to water and soap and a space to wash their product if it is a reusable one
- a place to hang and dry the reusable product
- a newspaper to wrap product if it is to be disposed
- a bin to dispose the used disposable product if it is a use and throw product

The non involvement of men in women issues will negatively impact health and well being.

3. When men are not involved in menstruation

There are many negative social and health implication when men chose to stay out of women's businesses. In Figure 1, we see a group of rural adolescent girls from South Rajasthan, India, heading out in groups toward spaces away from the main settlement. These spaces, behind bushes, behind rocks, make for latrines, for urinals and spots to change menstrual cloth. Girls and women always have to go out in groups, there is fear of snakes and animal attacks and also human beings as there are many instances of molestation by men in isolated locations. Being from lower economic groups, disposable menstrual options are an option, instead girls and women use cloth as shown in Figure 2. It is recommended that pads or cloth should be changed at least three to four times a day, however in the circumstances that are currently available, women tend to change only twice, once at dusk and then at dawn. Direct negative impact on women can be thus be seen.



Figure 1. Rural adolescent girls



Figure 2. Cloth for menstruation

Private spaces are not easily built. It is estimated that 638 million people in India do not have access to toilets, (Chaudhary, 2013) additionally the BBC reported that there are more mobile telephones in Indian homes than toilets (Phones, no toilets, 2012), all pointing to two major factors, economics and attitudes. These govern the different decisions of communities. Male members in a family typically decide how money will be spent. Priorities are different, for example a motor cycle will be purchased over construction of a bathroom. (Murthy, 2014) Going deeper into reasons why, some obvious answers appear. Indian society sanctions open urination for men. Men bathe in the open wearing a towel around their waists. Defecation is seen as a five minute job behind the bush, so money is not directed toward construction of a latrine. Hence few bother to build spaces for these activities. It is women then who bear the brunt, taking in all the inconveniences and danger in silence.

Patriarchal attitudes and insensitivity of men, translates even outside the home, for example the school. Girl's needs are not taken into account during infrastructure design, impacting their future health and well being. The UNICEF website reports that "Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to dropping out, as many are reluctant to continue their schooling because toilet facilities are not private, not safe or simply not available." (Water Sanitation, n.d) Nowhere is this more evident than the pictures below showing existing toilet facilities at a government school in rural Southern Rajasthan.



Figure 3. Open urinal for boys



Figure 4. Girl's toilet with clogged latrine

However it not always negative. There are examples where men have come forward to further the cause of supporting women which has made significant contributions in improving their reproductive health and well being.

4. When men have actively participated in menstruation work

There are well documented examples of men in menstruation. Men have come forward in the past to support menstruation; one important case is a business example. Three Johnson brothers of the now famous multinational company Johnson and Johnson sold their first batch of sanitary napkins in 1896-1897. (Company History, n.d) At that time advertising sanitary napkins was not an option as silence on the subject of menstruation ran deep. The Johnson pad packets were discretely kept in stores with a small coin box next to it, so a customer could slip money into the box without anyone noticing. What is noteworthy here is that the invention revolutionized the way women could manage their flow, it gave women liberty from bulky inefficient options, and the high technology gel based sanitary napkin available today, is a product that has evolved from these early creations.

Another man made a difference. Dr Earle Cleveland Haas was a general practitioner in America. He would observe how uncomfortable his female patients were during periods, wearing their bulky cloth pads. He would often device his own versions of cotton and bandage plugs to control bleeding problems in his patients. He saw how this method had potential to translate into a regular routine menstrual blood absorbing item. After experimenting and perfecting a product that could be inserted into vagina, the tampon was invented and patented in 1931. (History, tampon n.d) (Bellis, M, n.d). This was another of those inventions that provided complete freedom. Today, tampons are commonly available on the shelf all over the world and are a special boon for sportswomen specially swimmers.

There have been other interesting initiatives, such as the museum for menstruation. Harry Finley, a gentleman, was simply always interested in the subject of menstruation, firmly believing that menstruation was a cultural issue more than a medical one and wanted to give this subject the focus and glory it deserved. He began the Museum of Menstruation in his house by collecting products and soon many well wishers contributed artifacts to his venture. He successfully managed the museum

from his home in the years 1994 to 1998. It housed artifacts, posters, stories, poetry, paintings and many items related to menstruation dating from the 19th century. Subsequently the museum was closed and converted into virtual museum in the year 2000. This continues to be one of the most well researched and extensive virtual sites on menstruation, popularly called the mum site - Museum of Menstruation and Women's Health (Menstruation museum, 2014)

More recently social media has played a role in sensitising men and addressing anxieties of men . A man wishing to remain partially anonymous has started a blog called “Men in Menstruation” which is an open space designed for men to fearlessly and anonymously discuss issues related to periods. It covers a range of issues from emotions to facts. The blog welcomes women contributors. (Men in Menstruation, n.d)

One cannot leave out the scores of anonymous men who have supported their women folk. Today in India, women from high income communities have been able to negotiate appropriate and convenient spaces, facilities and products. As we can see from Figure 6, this young Indian girl has water, access to sanitary napkins - Figure 7, a dustbin to dispose pads, soap for cleansing and other luxuries.



Figure 5. Girl in washroom



Figure 6. Sanitary napkins

India has its own set of heroes who have made sanitary products accessible to communities from lower economic backgrounds. Arunachalam Muruganantham (Venema, 2014) – from rural Coimbatore in South India, was a man from a poor background with few resources. His tipping point came when he realized that like his wife there are thousands of women who use rags and cannot access clean products for their menstrual needs. He began his own menstrual journey and designed a low cost machine to manufacture pads. He soon started Jaishree Industries (Jaishree Industries, n.d) which now supplies machines to many micro finance women's groups who have turned entrepreneurs. Commonly known as the Menstrual Man he has a feature film made after his work. (Menstrual Man, 2014)

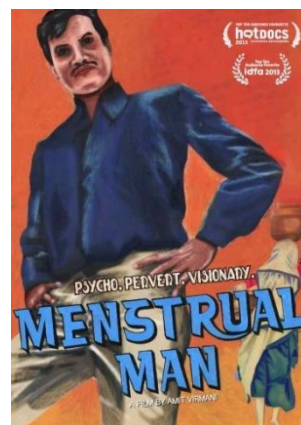


Figure 7. A. Murganatham next to his pad making machine

Figure 8. Film, Menstrual Man

Anshu Nath who began the NGO Goonj, is another well known man in the area of menstruation in the context of disaster, natural or man made. He pioneered the systematic distribution of menstrual cloth during situations such as fire, flood, earthquake, riots or Tsunami. (Cloth n.d) His approach is simple but crucial – reach quickly and reach with what people will need, his specific focus being menstrual cloth.

There are other men have taken those further extra steps to give menstruation work a thrust it needs.

5. Expanding menstruation work with men - the *Surakshit Mahwari Abhiyan* (SMA) or Safe Menstrual Campaign

The researcher along with support from a male activist Kailash Brijwasi had been routinely conducting workshops with adolescent girls on reproductive health. (Vikalpdesign, 2000) Together they found that there were very few Non Government Organisations (NGO's) addressing issues of reproductive health with adolescents boys. Another pioneering collaborative effort was thus initiated by them through *Jatan Sansthan* in South Rajasthan. Knowing that in traditional societies there is very little discussion within the family on menstruation, they designed and conducted health workshops for boys to break silence on reproductive health. This has empowered many families over the years.

However, it was only three years ago in 2011 that they encountered a new and complex situation, they noticed that scattered all around were used sanitary napkins in the area. The meteoric rise in the availability and accessibility of pads had created increased waste. (Murthy, 2014). Menstrual debris was no longer a small problem. Many components of these pads are polymer based and do not biodegrade, and hence lie on the earth's surface for many years. These pads disintegrate into microscopic units and enter water ways, polluting it.



Figure no 9. Garbage, menstrual debris, cows looking for food and often ingest sanitary pads.

Interacting with the community made us realize that girls and women tend to migrate toward branded products available in the market, assuming it to be better than their home made options. They have no other product aside from what the market and media push. An example is the “Whisper Ultra Clean, New Rule Vs Old Rule” commercial. (YouTube 2013). Girls make the shift and this migration has had its repercussions. Menstrual debris has increased in volume and homemade menstrual products have lost its value, reusable menstrual product are seen as old fashioned.

This was the trigger and the start of the *Surakshit Mahwari Abhiyan* or Safe Menstruation Campaign started in 2011 at Rajsamand and Udaipur districts. Recognising that young girls and women need healthier options to manage menstruation, Brijwasi actively supported the design and research of a

reusable product, a cloth option, the *Uger* Sanitary Pad. The research team worked for more than 8 months as they experimented with different prototypes of the design of the pads. (We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the group Eco Femme, Auroville, Tamil Nadu, leaders in cloth pads for all the help at these initial stages.) The pads are made of cotton fabric which is both non allergic and cool to the skin. Besides they button down under the underwear exactly like the branded disposable napkins with wings. Our ongoing research on *Uger* pads (Murthy, 2104) have shown that the pads can be washed and reused up to 60 times. Only 6 *Uger* pads were thrown away by a single user at the end of 12 to 13 menstrual cycles. This is in contrast to 120 to 150 disposable sanitary pads that a disposable pad user throws away in the same time period. Huge amounts of burden on the environment are thus reduced.



Figure no 10. *Uger* reusable pads made from cotton fabric

The SMA campaign now works in many ways.

- It creates awareness about how to make menstruation safe by working together with both adolescents and their families.
- Through workshops, seminars and focussed group discussions it addresses myths and taboos and provides appropriate information on menstruation and how to manage safely.
- The campaign advocates with families to change attitudes to create private spaces for women.
- It advocates and encourages the use of reusable options.
- It prepares boys and men to accept and be matter of fact when they spot a slightly stained piece of menstrual cloth or a washed *Uger* pads on the clothesline. Boys and men are told that residual stains are a part of reusable cloth menstrual products and it is a small inconvenience when compared to larger negative impact caused by disposable pads on the environment.



Figure 11. Stained *Uger* pad on clothesline

Today, *Uger* pads has its own small production centre managed by 5 women from lower economic community. The centre is headed by a man and marketing team of *Uger* also has men.

Yet another successful example of when men are involved.

5. Conclusion and way forward

Involvement of men in women issues is not as complex as it sounds. It is simple, men have to just come forward and think through along with the women they live and work with, creative simple design solutions automatically emerge. This simple example illustrates why involvement is not complex. Ten years ago a school administrator Vijay Joshi, working at a private school in Udaipur City, saw that his girl students were always asking their teachers for newspapers to wrap their used pads. As the administrator he was the one having to provide the old newspapers. He was sensitive enough to realize that adolescent young girls have irregular cycles and it is unfair to expect 12 year old girls to be always prepared. He simply got a hook fixed to the bathroom window and ensured that papers were always there for girls and that the paper stock was always replenished. With this simple action he reduced stress for teachers, his students and also importantly the cleaners who take away the debris were no longer handing open used pads.



Figure 14. Hook with newspapers, at a private school at Udaipur City

Many of the positive examples we have seen would not have been possible if men had not stood shoulder to shoulder with their women. But this is not enough, we need more men to step forward and build those toilets and make those spaces safe for women, make those spaces menstruation friendly. Corporate offices, schools, colleges and other public spaces today are not equipped to handle reusable menstruation systems. Large wash basins must be put into toilets to wash reusable cloth pads. Spaces for hanging washed pads and cloth must be provided for women.

We call upon more men to come forward and work with us. The pieces in the jigsaw are crucial to make the full picture.

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All men who support women in menstruation

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