



#NoMoreLimits

Educating men and boys

LABIBA FAIAZ BARI

HOW would you feel if you bled for a week straight with severe cramps and extreme irritation? Needless to say, your agony would surpass your tolerance level. Well, that's the reality a woman has to encounter during her period at least once a month. While a woman is in need of affection and support during this tough time, she ends up facing mockery and negligence from her male counterpart.

Men have stigmatised the concept of menstruation and it stems from the lack of proper knowledge and essential education on this very important issue. The stigma has reached such a level that a school-going adolescent boy mocks his female classmate if she gets period stain on her dress. Even adult men isolate menstruating women from their workplace a lot of the time for being "impure".

Educating men and boys on menstrual health and hygiene management is the only gateway to drive away these taboos and ill practices surrounding menstruation. Men's reluctance to talk about period makes the concept more complicated and therefore we need to create active platforms in every possible sphere to discuss the basics of menstruation.

Regarding this, Tamanna Sharmin, a menstrual hygiene consultant and project coordinator, opined, "Family-oriented learning can make a huge difference to end the social stigma around menstruation. Also, combined efforts from the government and NGOs are needed for conducting activity-based learning sessions among school-going adolescent boys." The large-scale participation in the educative sessions will definitely create wonders to ensure a better health and hygiene around menstruation. Only then can we expect to abolish the age-old taboos and stigmas associated with menstruation.

LABIBA FAIAZ BARI IS A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE DAILY STAR.

Why we need to talk about mental health and menstruation

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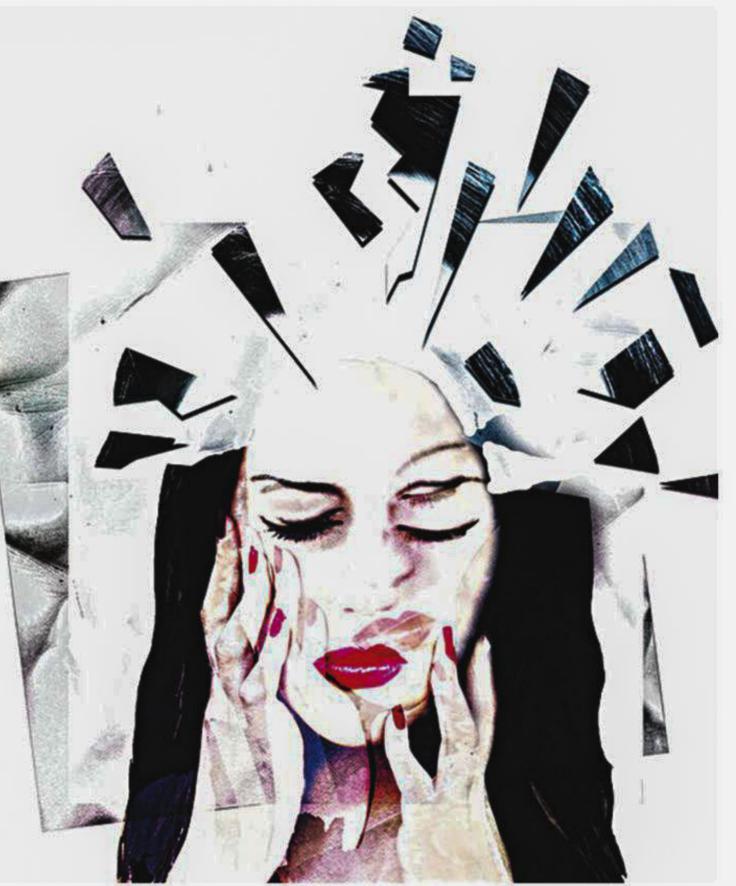
SHE feels energetic and determined to do all her work. She has got the urge to work hard and give her best. She is proactive about her submissions and feels confident about her ideas. Her performance chart has reached its peak and she has never felt so positive.

But soon after, sometime in the following days, she doesn't feel very upbeat. Fatigue creeps into her body and laziness wins over. Her temperament is often on the edge now and she suddenly seems critical of everything around her. At one point of time, she might have even felt a little too low and those skin breakouts have begun to take their toll on her. To add to her discomfort, she starts experiencing lower abdominal pain.

It became clear that it was that time of the month. She was on her period.

These mood changes are so subtle that they are not even cared for. The changing levels of hormones in the menstrual cycle are responsible for the emotional ride but sometimes the severity of mental conditions can be alarming and they may reflect a mental disorder.

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) are the main mental disorders linked to menstruation. While PMS involves mild symptoms and is more prevalent, PMDD is more severe and is noted in 3-7 percent of women. Dr Fahmida Ahmed, a psychiatric consultant of Modern Psychiatric Hospital in Dhaka, said, "Symptoms of PMDD branch out to mood, behavioural, and physical symptoms. The diagnostic criteria for PMDD include different classes of symptoms but the most important criterion is the duration in which the symptoms are notable. PMDD symptoms are present in the final week before the onset of menstruation and they start to improve after the onset. Symptoms are minimal or absent in the week after menstruation is over." Dr Ahmed



mentioned some of the major symptoms of PMDD which include mood swings, tearfulness and increased sensitivity to rejection; marked irritability or increased interpersonal conflicts; increased anxiety or tension; lethargy; marked change in appetite; hypersomnia or insomnia, etc. Both PMS and PMDD should be dealt with medical supervision and not just with consultation of a gynecologist but a psychiatrist as well. While medications can suppress your symptoms, advice from a psychiatrist will help you to deal with

them, thus providing comprehensive treatment.

However, Dr Ahmed also had this to say: "Any kind of mental distress often goes unreported in our country. Had people been more cognisant about the mental health implications and consulted psychiatrists for treatment, their distress might have been better managed."

It is no hidden fact that seeking treatment for menstrual complications and mental issues in our society is deemed unnecessary and even mocked.

While the ever-so-natural phenomenon, menstruation, is considered a taboo topic. So this stigma emanating from the community makes it extremely difficult for young girls and women to own their physiology and share their discomfort. People are quick to misuse the term PMS without even realising its seriousness. Even some women don't support a fellow woman who is going through severe menstrual cramps and they instead call it an "overreaction". The biggest challenge lies in the lack of opportunity to talk about menstruation-related health issues—more so of the mental kind. "Young girls, especially in a conservative family, are deprived of basic information about menstruation. So at the start of puberty, they can get scared about the sudden change and not have anyone to talk to about it," said Dr Ahmed. Hence, she suggested that counselling should start from the family and while doing so, extra emphasis must be put into mental stability and menstrual hygiene.

Mood fluctuations are intertwined with the menstrual cycle and can be troublesome for women. Hence, the absence of understanding of these changes of the family, friends, peers, and society as a whole serves as a barrier and builds up and takes a toll on the mental state. Women need to have an environment where they can relieve themselves from mental burdens and receive the support they require. We, as a society, owe it to them and their good health. This does not mean that we will have to invade someone's privacy. It merely means that we need to acknowledge first and foremost that menstruation is a natural process and that its mental health implications are just as important as any other. By dissolving the stigma around menstruation and mental health, we can make way for solutions and get rid of the social obstacles that should not have been there in the first place.

NOSHIN NOORJAHAN IS A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE DAILY STAR.

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share the same washroom."

Affordability of menstrual products

Lack of access to affordable sanitary napkins has kept many women from choosing them as an alternative to dirty rags. Thankfully, several companies are attempting to produce low-cost sanitary napkins. Affordability, however, still remains an issue for a large part of society.

According to the Ritu Baseline Report (2017), 91 percent girls use reusable cloth during their monthly while only 7 percent use sanitary pads.

A project by icddr,b, titled, "Piloting menstrual hygiene management intervention in urban and rural schools in Bangladesh", sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is providing reusable menstruation cloth napkins to school girls to reduce the number of missed school days. These napkins were received positively by the students, as girls said that they found the cloth napkins to be comfortable, environment-friendly and reusable. They also said that apart from the cost-effectiveness, these napkins also prevented discernable stains.

Apart from reusable napkins, companies are producing disposable sanitary napkins at affordable prices for women in the lower income wage group. Joya Sanitary Napkins is one such initiative which has been accepted by the lower tier income group. Khandaker Shamim Rahman, Head of Marketing of SMC Enterprise Ltd said that if the government could reduce the raw material price of sanitary napkins, it would be more affordable.

Public toilets in the city
Lack of usable public toilets adversely affects menstruating women. In this age and era, women share the economic burden of providing for the family, and thus have to spend considerable time outside their home. It is a travesty that there are so few public toilets to serve the

country's huge population, and that what toilets there are remain unclean, poorly maintained and are often unsafe for use by women. Women also face problems when trying to dispose their napkins as there are no disposal bins in these toilets.

While there are around 47 operational public toilets in Dhaka city, a study by ActionAid Bangladesh, in association with UK Aid, has found 90 percent of public toilets in the country to be unusable, with most of them being unsafe and unhygienic.

Thankfully, there seems to be a change in this scenario as some positive initiatives have been taken to address the issue.

WaterAid Bangladesh, in association with Dhaka North City Corporation, Dhaka South City Corporation and Dhaka WASA, has established 28 modern public washrooms in the city. Apart from lavatory and hand washing facilities, these public washrooms are equipped with modern facilities such as locker rooms, CCTV cameras installed in the area, shower and safe drinking water facilities. The toilets are maintained by professional cleaners and female caretakers.

With consideration to menstruation management, sanitary napkins are available for purchase in these washrooms in case of emergencies. These washrooms also provide sliding access facilities for persons with disabilities.

Health burden on women

The impact of poor menstrual health management can be severe and long lasting. As mentioned before, poor menstrual hygiene can cause urinary tract infections and other gynecological ailments that can hamper women's reproductive health in the long run. Professor Laila Arjuman Banu, President of the Obstetrical and Gynecological Society of Bangladesh, says that unhygienic menstrual practices are one of the main reasons behind severe abdominal pain during monthly flows, which leads to many girls and women missing class or



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

work. Poor menstrual hygiene can also lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can sometime cause tubal blocks, resulting in infertility in many women, says Professor Banu. Moreover, the tendency to hold urine for a long time due to reluctance to use dirty, inadequate toilet facilities can also lead to urine infections and chronic pelvic pain. She suggests that in order to avoid these health issues, women should change their sanitary cloth or napkin when they are half-soaked.

Overcoming a taboo
It is still a common practice in our country to warn a girl to remain within four walls when she is menstruating. She cannot sit wherever she pleases, she will be asked to refrain from talking to men, she won't be allowed to go or play outside or even meet people, and restrictions will be placed on her diet.

Mahbuba Haque Kumkum, Programme Manager of Ritu Project, Simavi, said that lack of information and education are the reasons why menstruation is seen as such a taboo subject in both rural and urban areas. She argues that while cloth napkins used during menstruation should be washed with pure water and dried under the sun to rid them of the bacteria, most women tend not to clean them properly, and hide them under the bed or under other cloths, leading to growth of bacteria.

Dr Zobaida Nasreen, Associate Professor of the Department of Anthropology of Dhaka University, argues that it is difficult to meet the needs of menstruating women in a patriarchal society. Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is often considered a social stigma and limited education on menstruation has confined women in terms of performing outdoor activities,

absenteeism in schools and at work. However, she argues, proper care and improved sanitation and hygiene facilities must be ensured to lessen health hazards and ensure that this natural process is no longer seen as an abnormal, dirty thing in our society.

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