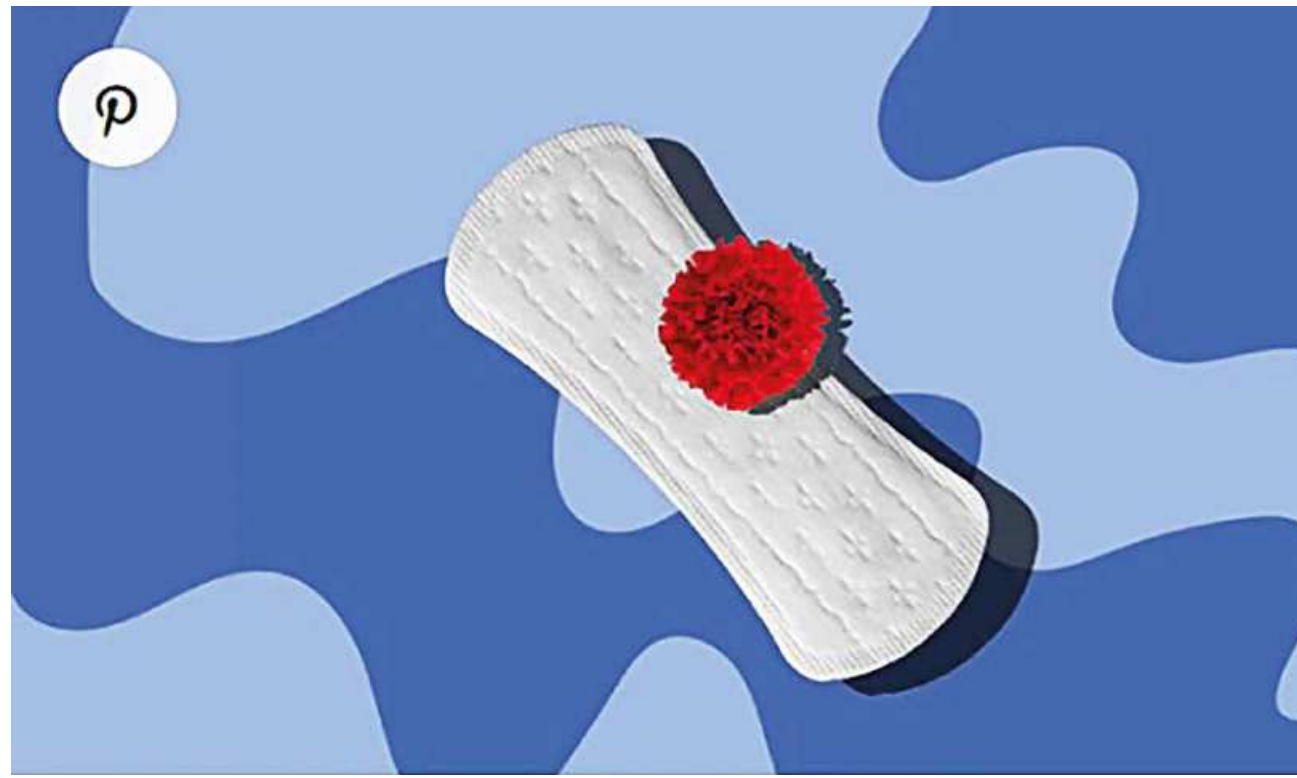


Menstruation and social stigma in Bangladesh

AYSHA ZAHEEN

"When I was 15, I had sent my younger brother to the nearby pharmacy to get me a packet of sanitary napkins. He came back without having it wrapped in its usual brown packaging, and I lashed out at him out of sheer embarrassment. Now that I am approaching my twenties and have a better understanding of all this, I feel guilty," says Rehnuma Choudhury*, a freshman in a well-reputed public university. Like every other girl in Bangladesh, Rehnuma was also taught to be ashamed of her periods from a very young age. She was only nine when she got her first period, and ever since then, she was taught the shrewd art of discreet hygiene maintenance whilst menstruating. "My mother insisted that I pretend to fast in front of my father, grandfather, and brother. She



much talked about and, thus, women impacted by such abject period poverty have no feasible solution to their menstrual management problems. Public toilets in Bangladesh fail to provide aid in such times as well, which makes it difficult for female labourers to work during menstruation. Travelling during periods sounds nightmarish to women. "I usually take pills to delay my period before going on a trip, especially if the dates align," notes Farhana Haque, a homemaker and mother of two.

Unfortunately, such challenges extend to the workplace as well. Oftentimes, offices do not have proper washroom facilities, including accessible toilets, handwashing stations, and trash receptacles. This leads to female employees eating and drinking less to avoid having to use the washroom. Sanitary pads are meant to be changed every three to four hours, thus, a woman working full-time during her period might be causing serious problems to her menstrual health.

Nuzhat Hayat Khan, an A-level student, speaks about the stigma attached to menstruation. "I, fortunately, did not face anything in particular, but the whole concept has always been stigmatised. I learnt about menstruation only from my mother and a few friends. It was never taught in school or any other educational institution. Not to mention, nobody even told me why I would go through this cycle and what causes it. I had to learn all about it by myself."

It is essential that we, as a society, talk openly about what menstruation is: the monthly discharge of blood and uterine lining that girls and women experience. Open discussions, education on menstrual health and hygiene management, accessibility to proper washroom facilities, and removal of taxation on and increasing the availability of proper sanitary products everywhere are prerequisites in our journey toward a society that does not unnecessarily stigmatise menstruation. Proper policy implementation is also necessary to address and solve the infrastructural gaps that are profoundly hampering women's reproductive health in Bangladesh.

*Not their real names

Due to the high price of sanitary napkins, 77 percent of Bangladeshi women have no proper access to appropriate menstrual materials, according to a 2018 study by the World Bank. Most women keep using unhygienic rags and old clothes that are merely washed before reuse. This largely increases the risk of urinary tract infection (UTI) and bacterial vaginosis. However, none of this is much talked about and, thus, women impacted by such abject period poverty have no feasible solution to their menstrual management problems. Public toilets in Bangladesh fail to provide aid in such times as well, which makes it difficult for female labourers to work during menstruation.

would sneak in food for me, and would turn red if I even uttered the word."

Rehnuma has gradually learned to tackle the microaggressions associated with menstruation at her home. She has since talked to her mother at length about this natural process, one that is very intrinsically linked with a woman's physical anatomy, livelihood, and reproductive health. Her mother's hesitant acceptance has helped her whole family to begin to understand why menstruation is not a matter of shame. However, Rehnuma believes that there is a long way to go.

The stigma that biologically assigned females face due to menstruation is ubiquitous, especially in Bangladeshi society. "Growing up, I never found proper sanitary napkins in my school. Our campus was large, thus, if someone suddenly got their period in school, they would either have to walk to and from the medical room that was not nearby, or wait until their friend could bring them one from there," says Nadia Karim*, a student of one of the most reputable institutes in Bangladesh.

As children, not only are women taught to be secretive about their periods by their mothers, but teachers play a major role, too. From a religion teacher chastising his

female student in front of everyone for having quietly told her friend that "Women can't always pray," to a female biology teacher making sure that no chapter with the slightest hint of menstruation is taught by male teachers in a classroom of female students, teachers play an instrumental role regarding how menstrual health is taught and perceived in a certain school in Dhanmondi. Such problems, unfortunately, are exacerbated with parents' problematic attitudes, too.

Sharika Kabir, majoring in computer science and engineering in BRAC University, recalls a particular incident at school that had an adverse effect on her mental health. "I got my first period in class six and did not make much of it. However, a certain classmate and her mother shamed me relentlessly for having gotten my period at the age of 11. They would tell other parents that I had gotten my period so early because my physique was similar to my mother's, alluding to our tall stature and wider waists as the reason."

This particular incident is not isolated. It is not rare for periods to be used as a weapon against young girls to cause them shame or make accusations against them, despite the average age for girls in Bangladesh to start menstruating being 12. This

happens due to the profuse spread of misinformation among people because of the taboo surrounding menstruation. According to a 2019 WASH Poverty Diagnostic study, only 36 percent of girls had prior knowledge regarding menstruation when they got their first period. It is no surprise, given only 6 percent of the schools in the country provide education on menstruation and menstrual hygiene. 30 percent of the students miss classes three to four days a month, many even dropping out when things get worse due to unattended vaginal infections. Over one-third of these girls believe that challenges associated with their periods hamper their educational progress. Multiple studies have shown that poor school attendance and multifarious issues related to menstrual health can significantly lower these girls' self-esteem.

Due to the high price of sanitary napkins, 77 percent of Bangladeshi women have no proper access to appropriate menstrual materials, according to a 2018 study by the World Bank. Most women keep using unhygienic rags and old clothes that are merely washed before reuse. This largely increases the risk of urinary tract infection (UTI) and bacterial vaginosis. However, none of this is

Biodegradable Shaathi Pads: Helping Women and the Environment

NILIMA JAHAN

Have you ever imagined how many disposable pads a menstruating woman or girl uses in a year or how much they actually cost?

According to an estimation of Shaathi, a social enterprise that works on empowering women and girls through locally produced eco-friendly reusable pads, a woman uses around 200 disposable pads a year, which contain plastic and harsh chemicals that are non-biodegradable and serious environmental pollutants.

Besides, a woman experiences almost 400 periods in her lifetime, which means she needs to spend over Tk 80,000 on menstrual supplies, which is simply unaffordable for millions of women in Bangladesh.

This is why, sanitary napkins are still a luxury in Bangladesh, and according to

surveys and data from sanitary napkins producers, even today, more than 75 percent women in Bangladesh use unsanitary rags, cottons, tissue papers, newspaper sheets and pieces of jute sacks on their heavy-flow days, compromising their reproductive health and well-being.

According to Barrister Mifrah Zahir, who is also the founder of Shaathi, the negative externalities that come with disposable pads can be reduced if we start using reusable pads, as they contain no such harmful materials and have no negative environmental impacts.

"That is why we chose to produce reusable pads, as these can be washed, dried, and used again for a minimum of 12 months, making them a highly cost-effective solution," she said.

Shaathi, since its inception in August 2020, has been producing the plastic-

free biodegradable pads with soft cotton flannel and absorbent cotton, covered with unbleached printed organic cotton, and distributing those to underprivileged women and girls, who can't afford sanitary pads at the commercial price.

Most importantly, these pads are made by underprivileged women, most of whom would perhaps otherwise be working at readymade garment factories.

Today, these women are not only making a living by making these pads, but also using the pads to manage their menstruation and distributing them to other women in their community.

In order to continue an uninterrupted supply of free pads to the women and girls from low-income backgrounds, Shaathi has also been selling pads under its programme titled "Pad for Pad".

Under this programme, anyone can buy a

packet of Shaathi pads (six pads along with a storage pouch) at Tk 500, from their official Facebook and Instagram pages, which ensures that another underprivileged girl or woman gets a pad for free.

One such woman is 27-year-old Lima Begum of Rayerbazar area of the capital, whose only recourse on the heavy-flow days was old rags, until she developed itching, irritation and a Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) at the beginning of this year.

Lima, the wife of a bus driver, was unable to buy sanitary napkins to manage her periods, as she always had to prioritise food and other essentials over menstrual hygiene supplies – a situation that worsened during the COVID-19 lockdown.

During a menstrual health management campaign conducted by the Shaathi team at Rayerbazar and Korail slums, Lima along with 200 other underprivileged women and girls of her locality got free health advice and medicine from the Shaathi team.

They were also provided with Shaathi pads that made the lives easier for many women and girls from low-income settlements.

For example, Lima said she replaced her scrap clothes with Shaathi pads, and she no longer has any reproductive health complications.

"These pads are way better than clothes, and I can dry and keep these for the next period, which is why, I don't have to spend a single taka on period products," said Lima.

"If these could be made available for all women like us would be greatly benefited from these pads," she added.

Shaathi has been planning to make the pads accessible for all, allowing women to prepare the pads on their own from the raw materials provided by Shaathi, and selling those within their communities at a subsidised price.

"If this can be done, women could buy these pads from the women of their community, and they no longer need to feel shy about buying it from the local medicine stores. And this will eventually help to change their behaviour patterns as well," said Barrister Zahir.

To observe Menstrual Hygiene Day this year, today (May 28) Shaathi will also

According to an estimation of Shaathi, a social enterprise that works on empowering women and girls through locally produced eco-friendly reusable pads, a woman uses around 200 disposable pads a year, which contain plastic and harsh chemicals that are non-biodegradable and serious environmental pollutants.

distribute free reusable pads to 30 sex workers in the city.

Along with preparing and distributing reusable pads, the organisation has been working on conducting sessions at schools and safe homes on menstrual health and hygiene education, since it's still considered a taboo in our society, and adolescents lack proper information, as this topic is not included in the curriculum.

The organisation has already conducted a session on MHM with 50 girls in an all girls' orphanage at Mohammadpur, run by Rights and Sights for Children.

Shaathi has also developed a curriculum both in English and Bangla, that contains lessons on topics such as vaginal anatomy, the process of menstruation, management of menstruation in a hygienic way, foods girls should consume and how to combat the myths and superstitions related to periods.

"Currently, we are just waiting for schools to reopen," said Barrister Zahir.



Menstrual Health Camp (Safe2bleed) was organised on the occasion of women's day 2021 at Korail and Rayerbazaar slums. Shaathi distributed 200 reusable pads among underprivileged girls and women.