



Gender Watch

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COVER STORY

Stay away from the kitchen
Don't touch the pickle jar
Don't enter the temple
Please don't touch me
You're so impure !

**Relax ! I'm just
menstruating !**

[Source](#)

Menstrual Hygiene in India

Last month in May 2017, during the formulation of tax brackets for the Goods and Service Tax (GST), sanitary napkins were included as a luxury item and 12% tax rate was levied on sanitary napkins. Several activists, women groups and Members of Parliament have protested against this move (Dixit, 2017). Menstruation is considered to be a taboo in India and a lot of stigma is associated with it. Significant number of adolescent girls drops out of schools due to the taboos associated with menstruation. Additionally, lack of good quality sanitary napkins among girls and women residing in rural and urban areas has also resulted in development of certain health risks. While, the use of good quality sanitary napkins is required, it is also important to note that sanitary napkins results in considerable amount of solid waste. Hence, mechanisms should be developed to manage the waste generated by sanitary napkins. Focusing on menstruation this essay sheds light on all the issues associated with menstrual hygiene.

Menstruation and Stigma and awareness about Sanitary Napkins

In most parts of India, menstruation is considered to be dirty and impure. For instance, girls and women who are menstruating are restricted from entering the kitchen and the temple as well because they are considered to be impure (Yerasthala, 2017). Additionally, menstruating girls and women are also restricted from offering prayers or touching holy books (Garg, 2012). In a study conducted by Kumar and Srivastava (2011), it was revealed that menstruating girls

and women are also not allowed to cook because the food they handle can get contaminated. Among the tribal groups in Siotala village in Maharashtra, menstruating girls are banished from their villages and have to spend their menstruating days in a *gaokar* (a hut outside the village). These *gaokars* do not have a kitchen and these girls have to rely on their family members for food. Given the location of the huts, there are chances of encounters with wild animals. Some women have died during their stay in a *gaokar* due to snakebites. Most of these *gaokars* lack basic facilities such as a bed, bathroom and electricity (Kaur, 2015). This practice of banishment when girls are menstruating has also been observed among Gond, Bohra and Madiya ethnic groups who belong to Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa. Similarly in villages in Gujarat, menstruating girls are prevented from

“People share a common nature but are trained in gender roles”

Lilie Devereux Blake

going out or touching other members of the house (Shah et al, 2013). In South India, even though puberty of girls is celebrated, during menstruation girls are forbidden from entering temples, eating with others, swimming and washing their hair (Rajat, 2016). The major reason why girls face restrictions during menstruation is because in most religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). Menstruation is one of the major reasons for girl children dropping out from school in India. Studies have indicated that a large number of adolescent girls dropout from schools when they reach puberty and start menstruating (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008; Thakre et al, 2011; Garg et al, 2012). Data suggests that 23% of adolescent girls dropout of schools when they start menstruating (UN, 2017). Poor toilet and sanitation facilities and the stigma associated with menstruation are the major reason why girls dropout from school when they begin menstruating (Garg et al, 2012; Yerasthala, 2017). Most girls feel embarrassed and humiliated to talk about their menstruation experience and due to the lack of facilities in school, most of the girls' dropout from schools and as a result they are subjugated to the domestic sphere.

Initiatives to remove Menstruation Stigma in India

Given the taboos associated with menstruation, both the Government and NGOs have taken initiatives to remove the stigma attached with menstruation. The National Guidelines on menstrual hygiene released in 2015 highlights that the Government intends to train *anganwadi* workers, nodal teachers and supervisors to talk openly about menstruation in schools and also provide support to girls who are menstruating. Additionally, the Government also through Integrated Child Development services and Self Help Groups under Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal intend to provide support to girls during menstruation. The National Human Rights Commission has also asked the Maharashtra Government to intervene and put a stop to the practice of *gaokars*. In particular NGOs such as SPARSH, Breakthrough and AZADI

are also spreading awareness and encouraging people to openly talk about menstruation in different villages of India (Garg, 2012).

Menstrual Hygiene and Access to Sanitary Napkins

Apart from the attached taboos with menstruation, women in rural and urban slums do not have access to sanitary napkins. For instance, women in rural and parts of urban India, rely on sand, ash, cloth and straw due to lack of access to sanitary napkins. As a result several women suffer from urinary tract infection (Sripada, 2014). To promote the use of sanitary napkins the Government had launched the Scheme for Promotion of Menstrual Hygiene in 2010. The scheme aimed to provide sanitary napkins to adolescent girls at nominal cost. However, the scheme has not been able to generate the desired results. The scheme was started as a pilot project in 152 districts in 20 States under the National Health Mission. Later

“Gender equality is a precondition to overcoming starvation, poverty and epidemics”

Khalid Malik

distributed in Chhattisgarh under the scheme and West Bengal did not have any promotional campaign for menstrual hygiene (Comptroller and Auditor General Report, 2015). Additionally the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report (2015) also indicated that due to poor quality of sanitary napkins resulted in low usage in states such as Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Odisha. Additionally the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers did not hold the monthly meetings regarding menstrual hygiene awareness in States such as Haryana, Karnataka and Uttarakhand (CAG, 2015). Based on the CAG report it could be suggested that making sanitary napkins tax free is the first step. However, it is more important to make provisions for good quality sanitary napkins and also generate adequate awareness regarding the use of these napkins. In particular, it is important to increase the use of sanitary napkins in rural and urban areas where women are facing health risks because they rely on other material such as sand and ash during menstruation. Currently the use of sanitary napkins is an urban and middle class phenomenon. Making sanitary napkins tax free will benefit these classes who can already afford good quality sanitary napkins. It is important for the Government to spread awareness regarding the use of sanitary napkins and also distribute good quality sanitary napkins for free among rural and urban slum women. However, it is also important to note that many rural and urban slum girls and women do not know how to use sanitary napkins. Hence, the Government should also distribute reusable cloth among rural and urban slum women.

the scheme was combined with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to enable access to menstrual hygiene (Woldetsadik, 2014; Dixit, 2017). Within the eight districts selected in Gujarat the scheme has been implemented in only two of the districts. No sanitary napkins were

Sanitary Napkins as Solid Waste

The other major viewpoint that has emerged is that since disposal of sanitary napkins result in considerable amount of solid waste, there should be mechanisms to handle the waste generated by sanitary napkins. As per the findings of the Kachra Project (2017) a social movement that focuses on waste management, an average woman disposes 150kg of non-biodegradable absorbents every year. Once the sanitary napkin is disposed off, garbage collectors segregate the napkins manually. In this process of separating the sanitary napkin the waste picker is exposed to micro-organisms such as E.Coli, salmonella, staphylococcus, HIV and pathogens that cause hepatitis and tetanus (Sahoo, 2015). Additionally, menstruation blood takes longer time to stagnate and the bacteria pathogen continues to accumulate. As a result the hygiene of the surrounding areas where the napkins are dumped by waste pickers is constantly exposed to the pathogen bacteria (Lekhi, 2016). Additionally, sanitary napkins are burnt and the plastic on the napkins releases harmful toxics in the atmosphere (Lekhi, 2016). Based on these instances it could be suggested that sanitary napkins are a major cause for waste and harmful for the environment as well.

Conclusion: Possible Solutions

An analysis of the viewpoints suggest that lack of awareness among women regarding use of sanitary napkins and the various risks that sanitary napkins pose to the environment are the two major concerns. Both the points are significant and require attention. To remove stigma regarding menstruation and prevent girl children from dropping out from schools, the Government needs to take initiatives to introduce awareness campaigns that will enable discussions around menstruation. Health counselors need to discuss menstruation openly in village areas to answer all doubts regarding menstruation hygiene. Thus, making sanitary steps tax free would be useful only after more women start using sanitary napkins. Additionally, programs should be started that distribute good quality sanitary napkins and demonstrate how to use these napkins. For instance in Kerala, sanitary napkin vending machines were installed in every school (Kumar, 2017). This helped to provide more access an also accept menstruation with respect and dignity. Through these campaigns and programs girls and women will be able to avail sanitary napkins and reduce their health risks.

With the use of more sanitary napkins there will be disposition of more solid waste and risk to the environment. However, currently several Indian entrepreneurs have started manufacturing eco-friendly sanitary napkins. These napkins are biodegradable and can be recycled. These napkins are made of khadi, cotton and flannel. Organizations such as SAATHI, Azadi, Anandi, Goonj and Ecofemme are all producing cheap eco-friendly sanitary napkins. These organizations have employed rural women in the manufacturing process and the prices of these napkins are 40% lower than the sanitary napkins brand available in the market (Pareek, 2014).

In this context, it could be suggested that the Government should promote the use of eco-friendly sanitary napkins to create awareness regarding menstruation as well as address environment concerns.¹

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EQUALITY

Daycares over Pool Tables: Offices must be designed For Women Too!

The Quint

The second edition of Men's Conference: The Shift held in June 2017 involved men into deliberating that gender roles are not absolute. The main debate centered on the design of workplaces. Women CEOs of different organizations attending the event argued that gyms and pool tables should be replaced with daycare centers and breastfeeding rooms and make workplaces more gender neutral.

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WR, Amnesty India join hands to sensitise staff to women's issues

Vedika Chaubey, The Hindu

According to Western Railway Officials many complaints go unreported because majority of the female passengers hesitate to come forward despite being harassed at stations and in trains. Therefore, the Western Railways has tied up with Amnesty International India, which will be conducting 25 workshops for the railway employees. The main aim of the workshops will be to train the railway frontline staff regarding the safety of female passengers. Such awareness programmes are essential to train the frontline railway staff with regard to their responsibilities towards female passengers.

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Discrimination, courage, resilience – What being a young Dalit women in India means today

Cynthia Stephen, The Indian Express

In the Constituent Assembly while finalising the draft of the Indian Constitution, amongst the 15 women members, Ms. Dakshayani Velayudhan was the only Dalit member. She had identified two important issues for the Dalits, 'the denial of civil rights through slavery practices, and the economic condition which kept them down as a people'. Seventy years later, the above issues continue to haunt the Dalit community which includes about 100 million women.

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Women as jawans: It has to be a gradual process, say former Army officers

The Indian Express

Earlier this month, the Indian Army Chief had told the media agencies that the army is considering induction of women as jawans and that initially they will be recruited for positions in the military police. On this initiative, Lt. Gen. (ret'd) B K Chopra, former Director-General of Armed Forces Medical Services had said that this is a 'humble beginning' and he also said that the Army would require a "change of psyche" before this step is taken, as it is not used to seeing women as jawans.

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India's deepening gender imbalance

Pramit Bhattacharya, Live Mint

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, which conducted survey over 6 lakh households across India in 2015-16, shows that some of the districts and areas with the lowest sex ratios at birth span across states such as, Assam, Nagaland, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The above outcome is surprising because these are the states where the overall sex ratio is higher than the rest of the country. Additionally, these states also have higher literacy and work participation which is favourable to women.

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These three women are India's first female combat pilots

The Economic Times

Bhawana Kanth, Mohana Singh and Avani Chaturvedi were commissioned as flying officers in the Indian Air Force in June last year. This was followed by the Government's decision to end the previous gender-based combat exclusion policy in October 2015. The three female combat pilots are the first female officers who are now ready to fly Sukhoi 30 jets in September.

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DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

50% quota for women now in Punjab's civic bodies

The Tribune

On 13th June 2017 the Punjab Cabinet decided to increase women reservation in urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj institutions from the existing 33 per cent to 50 per cent. The aim is to enhance reservation for women in direct elections for members of municipal corporations, municipal councils, nagar panchayats, gram panchayats, panchayat samitis and zila parishads.

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[Source](#)

“Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression”

Nelson Mandela

VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

Cruelty in Marriage, Molestation Most Common Crimes against Women in Bengaluru

IndiaSpend

More than 70% of crimes against women reported in Bengaluru in 2015 were of two types: cruelty by the husband or the in-laws, and molestation. In particular, data highlighted that the affluent societies had the maximum number of molestation cases. Additionally, the victims mentioned that they had lost faith in the judicial system because they know that most of the time the accused will go unpunished.

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Why are Indian women wearing cow masks?

BBC News

India is frequently in the news for crimes against women and a woman is raped every 15 minutes. However, under the current Government's regime cows are getting more protection than women. Hence, to protest against this, a photography project which is being undertaken by a Delhi-based photographer Sujatro Ghosh, shows women wearing cow masks provokes the question: "whether women are less important than cattle in India."

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How Do Bengaluru's Working Women Make it Home at Night?

The Wire

The article comments on the access of working women to public spaces at night. It states that while working late at night is considered a safety issue for women in the night shift of the IT sector, it is a problem for many others as well. The article covers various examples of women working in garment factories, hospitals, police stations, hotels etc. to accentuate the same. Further, it sheds light on the notion that women who work at night has always been equated to sex.

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ACCESS TO HEALTH AND SANITATION

Home Births: Why Are More Women Choosing It Over C-Section?

The Quint

The indifference of doctors and gynecologists is motivating women to choose home births over C-sections. The WHO standard for C-Sections for a country is 10 to 15 percent. In India, in private hospitals alone, the rate of C-Section is nearly 31 percent. Even though home births are rare, the natural birth movement is gaining ground, supported by mothers, doctors and activists.

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[Source](#)

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Why higher education doesn't ensure better jobs for women in India

The Indian Express

The Indian Express has analysed the various aspects on whether higher education for women leads to jobs and financial empowerment for women. Here, they suggest that it necessarily does not lead to more jobs for women. Women with lower levels of education enter the labor market. However, women with intermediate education due to lack of job satisfaction and poor salary levels do not join the workforce. Additionally, many women leave the jobs after they get married due to inconvenient location and timings.

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Why We Aren't Yet Celebrating the Punjab Government's Fee Waiver for Women

The Wire

The article is written against the backdrop of the Punjab Government's decision to provide free education to girls and women from nursery to PhD. While it seems to be a cause for celebration, the author offers an alternative perspective. The author states that since the move only includes Government institutes it will lead to exclusion of a major section of students in Punjab.

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Richer India empowers women but ranks of baby girls barely budge

Jacqueline Thorpe, Live Mint

With the growth of the Indian Economy, the education levels for women have increased in the past decade. According to the data, women literacy rates have increased to 68 percent from 55 percent in the last 10 years. It is also reported that greater number of women are becoming independent. However, on the other hand, there is a marginal growth in the sex ratio, which increased to 919 from 914 (a decade ago) females born per 1000 males.

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Why Do Girls Drop Out of School in Delhi's Resettlement Colonies?

The Wire

The article talks about how girls in a resettlement colony in Delhi drop out of school by citing the reason of safety. It further states that the narrative of safety is usually a cover for patriarchal prejudice as there are higher expectations of domesticity from girls. The flagship programmes for women empowerment in India are also failing because of lack of implementation.

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ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Men are favored over women by India Inc., according to more than half of the Indian workforce

Business Insider

“61% of the male respondents and 47% of the female respondents feel men are favored over women even when both are equally qualified for the same job at their workplace”. According to the Survey, about 57 percent of the overall respondents in India had a preference for a male manager. Even though gender diversity is high on the agenda, nonetheless most companies do not follow it.

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‘Globalisation helped LGBT people assert their identity’

Zeeshan Shaikh, The Indian Express

A study was conducted by the Department of Social Work of the University of Gothenburg in order ‘to examine how LGBTQ activists in Mumbai perceive the changes in section 377 and what they describe as main factors affecting the living conditions of LGBTQ individuals in the Indian society’. The study has found that the people who had come out of the closet after Section 377 (criminalises homosexual acts) was read down in 2009, did not choose to return to the closet when it was reinstated in 2013.

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More Women in India's Workforce would Make in India Much Richer, Says ILO

Rukmini S, HuffPost

The recent report by International Labour Organisation has suggested that if India narrows down the gender gap between male and female participation in the labour force by 25 percent, then India's GDP could increase by USD 1 trillion. It has also been reported that India has one of the world's highest gender gaps with regard to workforce participation, where about 79 percent of adult men are said to be in the workforce in comparison to merely 27 percent of women.

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The invisible women farmers

Mrinal Pande, The Indian Express

According to a government report on Indian women workers in the year 1989, the farm sector had employed the largest number of women workers as cultivators as well as daily wage labourers. Despite such large numbers, women remained outside the formal definition of ‘worker’ in the census report. The latest census figures list only 32.8 per cent women formally as primary workers in the agricultural sector, in contrast to 81.1 per cent men. Despite the stark contrast, women labour force is the backbone of the agriculture sector, without them it will not survive.

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Taxing Women

Tara Narula, The Indian Express

In India, there are about 355 million women who are post-pubescent and pre-menopausal stage. However, only about 12-20 per cent amongst them have to access to sanitary pads. In this regard, with the introduction of the GST the Government will impose 12 percent tax on sanitary pads. This new imposition has been highly criticised and it has been hailed as a tax on women who are menstruating. Sanitary napkins have also been categorised under ‘luxury goods’. Such economic decisions need to be viewed from a woman's perspective before being imposed.

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Soft loans for women to run public transport

Subodh Ghildiyal, The Economic Times

With the objective to provide last mile connectivity in the remote villages across the country, Central Government is working on a scheme to provide interest-free loans to women. They are expected to form Self-Help Groups to provide transport services. With the loan money, the women are expected to buy vehicles and hire drivers. These vehicles will serve as public transport for the remotest villages which are otherwise not connected to other towns.

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Why higher education doesn't ensure better jobs for women in India

The Indian Express

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Rising Gender Inequality Leaves a Dark Mark on India's Growth Story

The Wire

The article highlights the need for policy interventions owing to the decreasing female-male labour participation rates in India. It further establishes how rising gender inequality negatively affects labour productivity. The need for social policy intervention by the state and raising public awareness is expressed by the author.

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Manual scavenging in Meerut: Why are women made to carry excreta on their head for two stale rotis a day?

Kainat Sarfaraz, The Indian Express

Among those engaged in manual cleaning of dry latrines and removal of human excreta from public streets, 95 per cent are women. According to a Human Rights report, on an average, the women get paid as little as between ten and fifty rupees every month per household, and sometimes as a bonus they are given stale leftover food and worn-out clothes. This is far less than men who earn up to Rs 300 to clean septic tanks and sewer lines on any given day. The high rates of poverty push them into taking up manual scavenging.

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In Assam, Bodo Women Are Cycling Their Way to Freedom

The Wire

The article talks about how Bodo women in Assam have learnt how to cycle and have used this skill set to pull themselves out of poverty. Learning how to cycle has helped women become financially independent by running small businesses of their own. The Amteka Mouti Foundation's cycle bank was an initiative started in 2013 which provided cycles on loan to women. Cycling has become a mode of autonomy for the women and the cycle is seen as a vehicle of freedom.

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LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS

Draft on policy for women suggests quick matrimonial decisions, free education

Hindustan Times

Recently the Women and Child Development Ministry submitted the draft for national policy on women to the Cabinet for approval. The draft focuses on time-bound disposal of matrimonial disputes, make education free for girls of poor families and provide better facilities for working women. Additionally, the draft policy recommended the increase of girl's hostels and to provide health care facilities to women belonging to Below Poverty Line families.

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Hyderabad: Police bust surrogacy racket, find that 45 women had been confined for nine months

Scroll

The Hyderabad Task Force recently raided an illegal surrogacy clinic. Officials said "at least 45 women, who were surrogate mothers, were confined for nine months to a space above Sai Kiran Infertility Centre, which did not have the required authority to conduct the procedures." The accused allegedly rented out wombs for around Rs 15 lakh to Rs 30 lakh and were paying the women only Rs 3 lakh. This highlights that despite the ban on commercial surrogacy, the black market continues to rent out wombs of poverty stricken women.

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Haryana: Bibipur model of women empowerment to be introduced in 100 villages adopted by President

Sukhbir Siwach, The Indian Express

The former village sarpanch of Bibipur in Hisar district had earlier introduced the 'the Selfie with Daughter concept' in his village. This concept had also received praise from the Indian Prime Minister in 2015. Under the 'Bibipur model of women empowerment and village development', the houses and streets were named after daughters to fight gender bias. He has now been asked by the Rashtrapati Bhavan to implement the above model in as many as 100 villages of Haryana adopted by the President of India.

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