



A study on Menstruation- a social taboo: discussion on its impact on women's health & hygiene

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Received : November 2017

Accepted : March 2018

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Abstract: Menstruation and impurity are considered synonymous across the world. Most of the girls endure mental and emotional trauma during periods. However, there is a positive change in people's mindset of young women. They now talk about it openly.

Even in the 21st century, women are considered as impure during her 'those days'. It is believed that her touch can contaminate the food. Girls in both rural and urban areas follow different rules and regulation when they menstruate.

Menstrual hygiene is still ignored in both rural and urban areas where as special need girls they follow proper hygiene required during this period.

For India to become a developed country not only social, economic or industrial changes are required, there is a need to change mindset and individual perceptions in a positive way.

Keywords: menstruation myths, hygiene, special need girls.

Introduction:

Menstruation is a phenomenon unique to girls. It has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude women from many aspects of socio-cultural life. Such taboos often have negative effects on women's emotional mental state, lifestyle and most importantly, health.

Don't go into the kitchen, don't touch the 'Prasad', don't touch the pickles, don't enter the temple, are what the menstruating women have to often hear from their elders. That's not all; some girls aren't even allowed to enter other people's homes during their periods. The origin of this myth is dated back to the Vedic times. In the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from participating in normal life while they menstruate. She must be "purified" before she is allowed to return to the normal day-to-day chores of her life.

Menstruation is a periodic flow of blood and cells in women. It is repeated at an average interval of about 28-30 days, and the cycle of events starting from one menstruation till the next one is called menstruation cycle. One ovum is released during the middle of the menstruation cycle. The cycle starts with the menstrual phase, when menstrual flow occurs and it lasts for 2-7 days.

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Ignoring the fact that menstruation is the reason for existence of human kind, even in the 21st century women are considered as impure during her 'those days'.

A girl can ask her father to bring her books, sweets and even a bindi but she hesitates to tell her father that she needs sanitary napkins, which is an essential need. The shopkeepers who sell sanitary napkins wrap them in paper and give it to their customers in black polybags as if they are buying something illegal.

The problem is not only limited to the mindset of people, there is much more to it.

The question to be asked is, for how long do you wear same bandage on your injured hand or, how many times can you use the same bandage again? Sounds so unhygienic, right? But the harsh truth is that in India some women still use ashes wrapped in clothes during their periods. Some clean and reuse the same cloth due to lack of awareness, proper knowledge and financial constraints. This ultimately may lead to infections and diseases like reproductive tract infections (RTI) and its complications and often the infection is transmitted to the offspring of the pregnant mother.

Objectives :

The research study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To study the hygiene maintained in rural areas.
- To understand the mindset of people in urban and rural areas.
- To find out problems faced by physically challenged women in the same situation.
- To study the effects of purchasing power of women on use of sanitary napkins.
- To study the role of the government and the media in creating awareness.

Hypothesis:

The hypothesis of the study concerns the basic assumptions or beliefs upon which the entire study is based which would be verified by the study. The hypothesis of our research is as follows:

- Menstruation is a social taboo
- Active role of the media in breaking the stereotype.
- Poverty is the main cause of unaffordability of sanitary napkins.
- People's attitude is changing towards menstruation
- Physically challenged girls face bigger problems.

Methodology:

The findings of the survey include data collected from 200 women including girls from rural and urban areas, schools, colleges and special child centres,. Data were collected using the 'personal contact' approach. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 200 women in Patna out of which 175 valid and complete responses were returned. Also, face-to-face interviews was conducted with a few of them.

There was one set of questionnaire which consisted of 15 close-ended questions. The questionnaire included questions related to mindset of people; hygiene maintained during those days of month; unaffordability; role of media in creating awareness and problems faced by physically challenged girls. The survey questionnaire also included a section for the general information of the respondents. The information asked included questions regarding their age, qualification, and designation.

Data Collection:

- (a) Primary sources: The methodology followed by a questionnaire – based on survey among women from both rural and urban areas; including schools, colleges, special child centres.
- (b) Secondary sources: Reviews and data were collected from various sources like the internet, blogs and books. The model used for study was conceptual method.

Methods of data collection:

The methodology is based upon hypothetical assumptions. To check the authenticity of the assumptions questionnaires, face to face interviews, were conducted and data collected from varying sections of women.

Personal Interview: Some of the gynecologists and school teachers were also interviewed.

Data Analysis Interpretation:

The questionnaire consisted of 15 close- ended questions.

- 1) Do you get periods?
 - Yes • No
- 2) Did you have any idea about periods before you had it?
 - Yes • No
- 3) What did you use on the first day of your period?
 - Napkin • Clothes

- 4) What do you use during your periods now?
 - Napkins • Clothes • Both • Others
- 5) Why you use clothes and rags instead of sanitary napkins?
 - Unaffordability • Unavailability
 - Uncomfortable
- 6) How many times do you use the same cloth?
 - Once • Twice • More
- 7) After how many years of menstruation, did you get married?
 - Same year • Within 3 years
 - Within 5 years
- 8) Do you discuss the problems related to periods with your father or brother?
 - Yes • No
- 9) Do you talk about periods with other male members (out of the family)?
 - Yes • No
- 10) Do you buy sanitary napkins on your own?
 - Yes • No
- 11) Do you feel free to talk about your periods with people around you?
 - Yes • No
- 12) Do you feel any change in people's approach towards periods?
 - Yes • No
- 13) Are you supposed to follow some rules at your home during those days?
 - Yes • No

If yes then, what kind of rules
- 14) Do you feel that the media has brought any change in the mentality of people on menstruation?
 - Yes • No
- 15) Were you given proper education on menstruation in school?
 - Yes • No
- 16) Does your school get regular supply of sanitary napkins by the government? (For government)
 - Regular supply • Irregular supply
 - No supply

The questionnaire consisted of 15 close-ended questions to meet the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was based on the changing role of gender.

The graphical representation of each of the items is given below :

1. Opinion regarding prior knowledge about menstruation.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	28	28	6	12	22	88
No	72	72	44	88	3	12

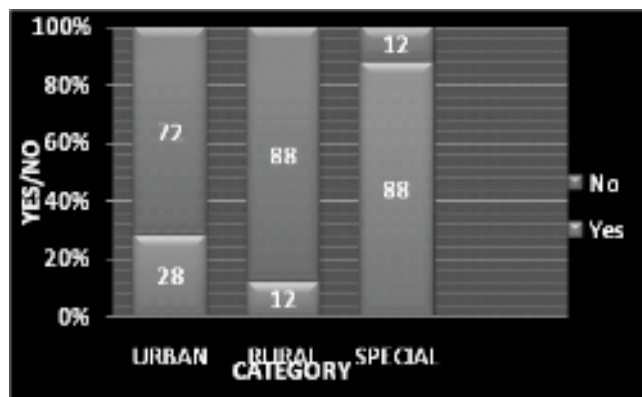


Diagram 1. Distribution regarding unawareness among the girl

Rural and urban girls were uninformed whereas special girls were having prior knowledge.

2. Opinion regarding the use of napkin or cloth on the very first day of period.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Napkins	69	69	2	4	20	80
Clothes	31	31	48	96	5	20

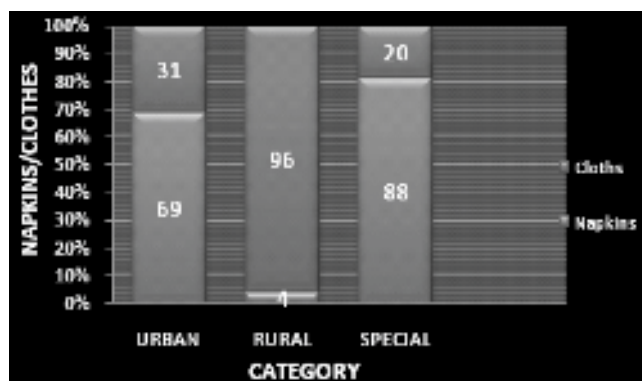


Diagram 2. Distribution regarding practice of menstrual hygiene on the very first day of periods

Girls of urban areas are using napkins while most of the girls in rural areas are using clothes.

3. Opinion regarding protection used on regular basis.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Napkins	55	55	7	14	22	88
Clothes	10	10	40	80	2	8
Both	35	35	3	6	1	4

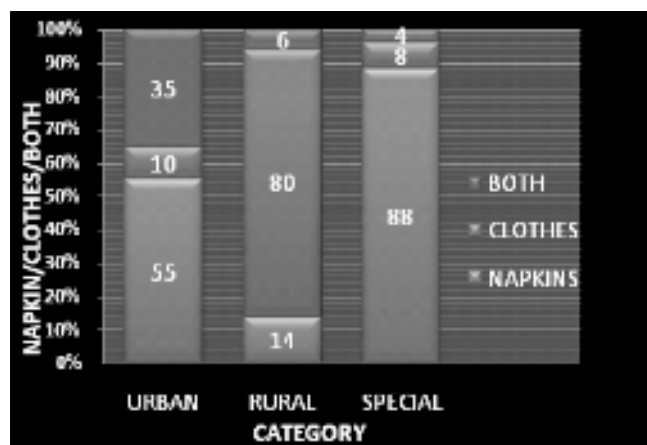


Diagram 3. Distribution regarding practice of menstrual hygiene

Most of the girls in rural areas are using clothes whereas special need girls are using napkins.

4. Opinion on reasons behind using clothes and rags instead of sanitary napkins.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%
Unaffordability	30	67%	36	84%
Uncomfortable	7	15%	4	9%
Unavailability	8	18%	3	7%

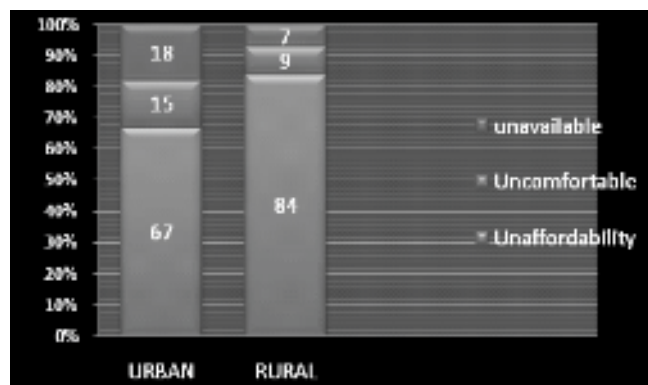


Diagram 4. Distribution regarding reasons behind unhygienic practices

5. Opinion on number of times the same cloth is used.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%
Once	40	89%	15	34%
Twice	5	11%	24	56%
More	00	00	04	10%

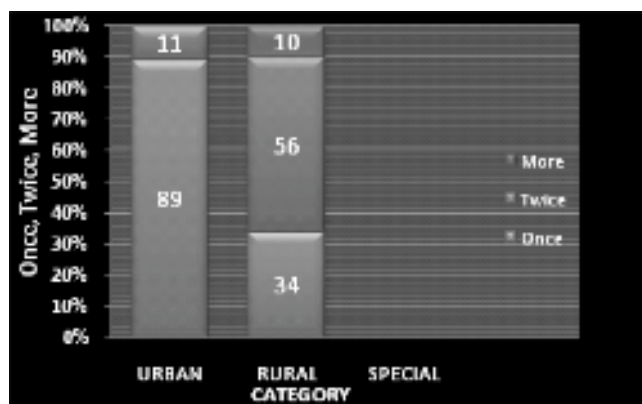


Diagram 5. Distribution regarding reusing the cloth used as napkins

Most of the girls in both rural and urban areas use the cloth only once.

6. Opinion on marrying soon after they get their periods (for rural only)

Category	Rural	Percentage
Same year	15	37.5
Within 3 years	20	50
After 3 years	05	12.5

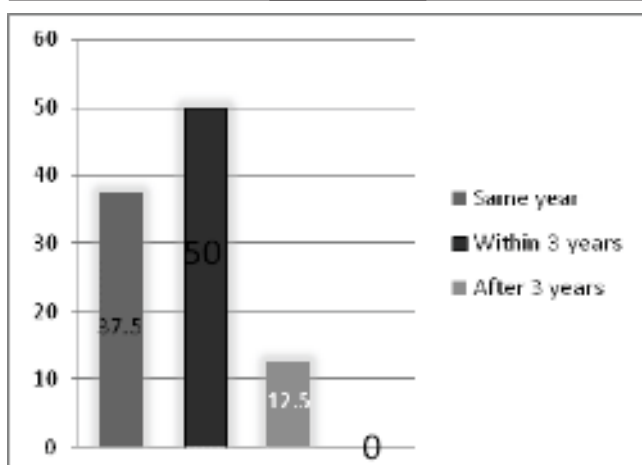


Diagram 6. Distribution regarding marrying girls after they attend their puberty.

Women are married soon after they start menstruating.

7. Opinion on girls comfortable in talking about periods with their father and brother.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	25	25	2	4	3	12
No	75	75	48	96	22	88

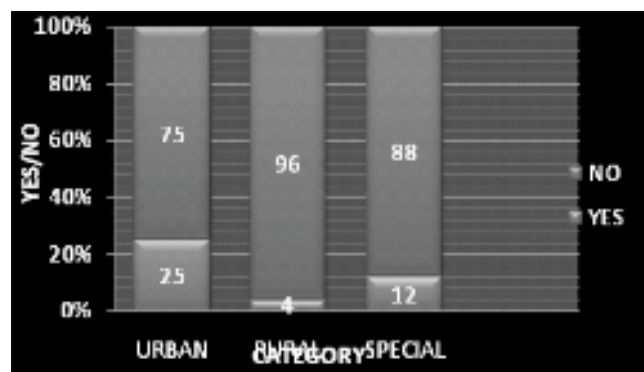


Diagram 7. Distribution regarding communication about periods with male members of the family

Girls still don't talk about menstruation with the male members of the family.

8. Opinion on being comfortable in talking about periods with other male members (out of the family)?

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	50	50	0		0	0
No	50	50	50	100	25	100

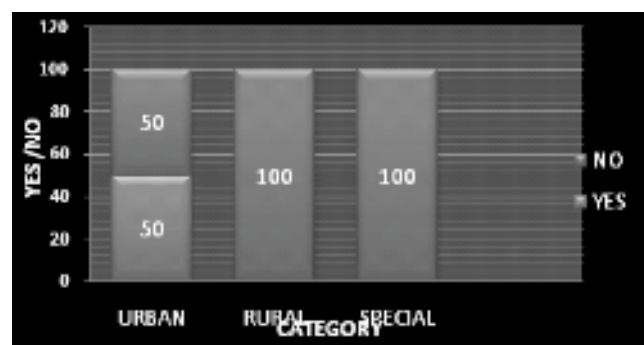


Diagram 8. Distribution regarding communication about periods with male members (out of the family)

Women in rural areas do not discuss menstruation in and outside their house whereas in urban areas they are more open to such discussions.

9. Opinion on girls buying sanitary napkins themselves.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	65	65	12	24	2	8
No	35	35	38	76	23	92

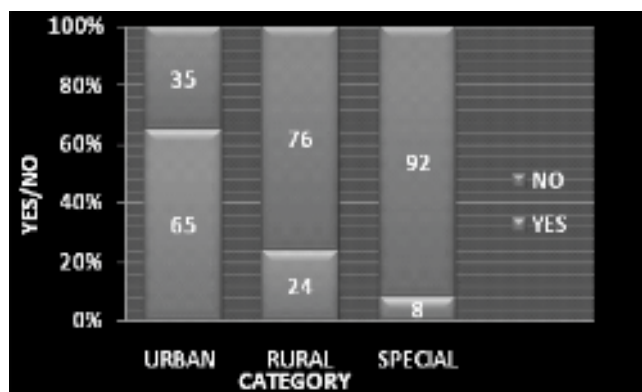


Diagram 9. Distribution regarding purchasing sanitary napkins

Girls in urban areas are now buying sanitary napkins themselves, whereas rural and special need girls are still not comfortable in doing so.

10. Opinion on how people around are comfortable discussing periods.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	50	50	14	28	8	32
No	50	50	36	72	17	68

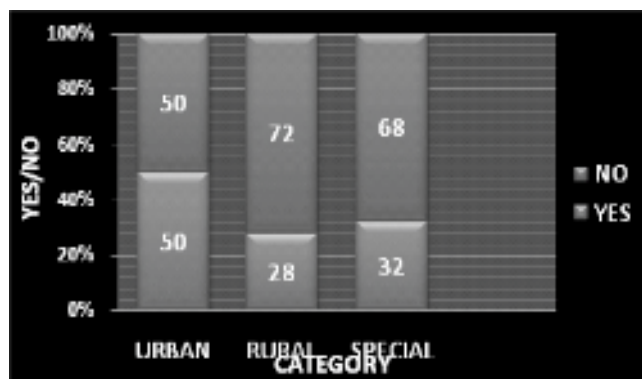


Diagram 10. Distribution regarding girls comfortable in talking about periods

Girls are still not comfortable discussing periods with people around.

11. Opinion regarding people changing their negative approach towards periods.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	88	88	40	80	20	80
No	12	12	10	20	5	20

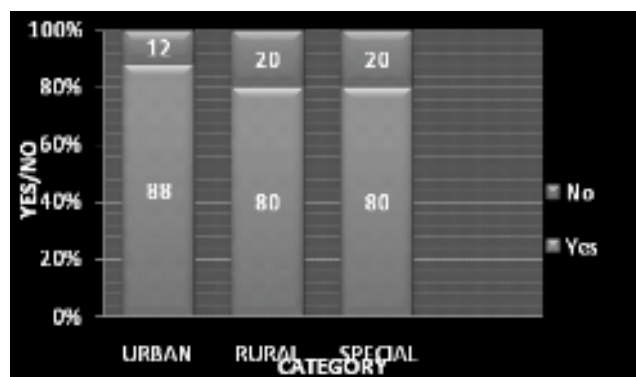


Diagram 11. Distribution regarding changing mind-set of people

With time people's negative attitude towards periods is changing.

12. Opinion regarding girls supposed to follow some rules at your home during those days.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	90	90	49	98	12	48
No	10	10	01	02	13	52

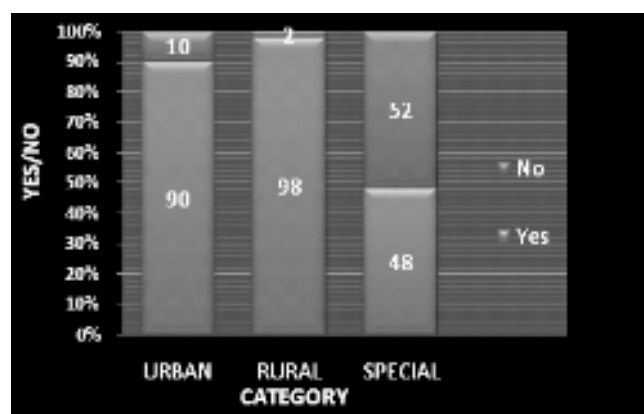


Diagram 12. Distribution regarding restrictions practiced during menstruation

Till date most of the girls have to follow some set of age old rules during menstruation.

13. Opinion regarding positive role of media in eliminating the orthodox mindset of people.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	85	85	40	80	21	84
No	15	15	10	20	4	16

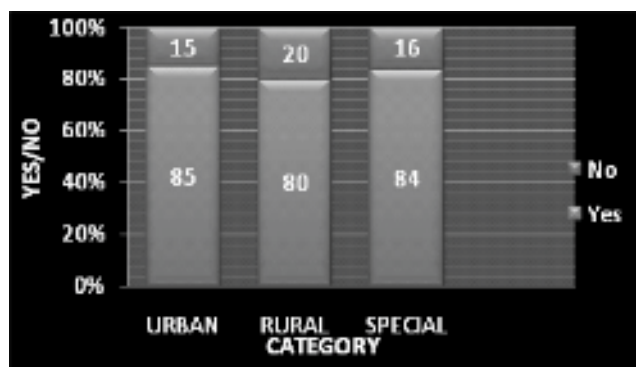


Diagram 13. Distribution regarding media's role

The media played an active role in eliminating the orthodox mindset.

14. Opinion on role education in creating awareness about menstruation.

Category	Urban	%	Rural	%	Special	%
Yes	55	55	12	24	23	92
No	45	45	38	76	2	8

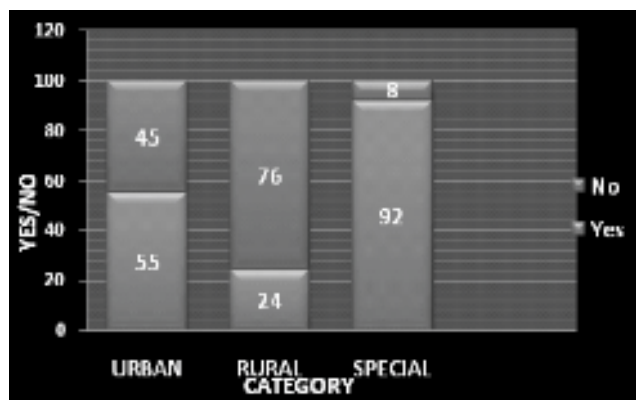


Diagram 14. Distribution regarding quality of education imparted on menstruation

There is a lack of education about menstruation in schools in both rural and urban areas.

5. Opinion on government schools not getting regular supply of sanitary napkins.

Category	Government school	%
Regular supply	7	47
Irregular supply	5	33
No supply	3	20

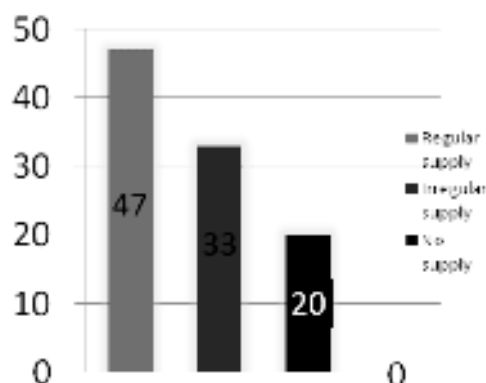


Diagram 15. Distribution regarding supply of napkins in government schools

Most of the schools are getting a regular supply of sanitary napkins.

Findings :

According to the survey, times are changing. The last few years have been revolutionary. There is now a Menstrual Hygiene Day, observed on 28th of May but there is still a long way to go. Adolescent girls still hesitate to talk about it with their father and brother. There is a lack of proper education both in schools and colleges. More than 70% of both rural and urban girls were clueless about menstruation before it started.

Hygiene practices are still not prevalent. In the rural area, more than 80% of girls use clothes and 56% of them reuse the same cloth as sanitary napkins. Unaffordability of sanitary napkins is the major reason behind this practice.

Special need girls are in a better position as they are trained for those days before it starts. Special team of doctors are called to train and inform them about menstruation.

Old myths not to enter the temple or to touch holy things are still followed in 90% of the families as it is coming from generation to generation. Many families don't allow girls to enter the kitchen. They do not sleep on bed, take bath and are not allowed to touch certain food items.

The media has played a strong role in changing the perception of people regarding menstruation.

Irregular supply of sanitary napkins in government schools is also a matter of concern.

Recommendation:

There is a need to educate girls about menstruation at the right time by both family and schools. The myth needs to be eliminated from the roots. The first step could be taken into your house.

It's high time the government acted and strictly maintained supply of sanitary napkins in government schools and it should launch some schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to make napkins available to rural women at low price. Clean India is meaningless if women are not clean and healthy.

Schemes related to providing free sanitary napkins to poor should be launched by the government and napkins should be made available at a subsidized rate.

Limitations:

The study was conducted only among selected indicators which were significant to the topic. It was limited only to the women and men residing in the urban and slum areas of the capital.

Respondents were assured of confidentiality.

Conclusion:

Even after 70 years of independence, majority of women in India still do not talk freely about menstruation. Most of them are uninformed about it until they start menstruating.

While 90% of the girls are not allowed to enter temples as they are considered impure, only a small part of the country allows menstruating girls to worship inside a temple. It is indeed an irony!

It is very sad that most of the girls of rural areas are not using sanitary napkins because it is unaffordable. The supply in government schools is irregular. Incidentally the government has imposed 5% tax on it considering it a luxurious item.

Girls now-a-days start menstruating from the age of 10 or 11 but information regarding menstruation is not given until they reach the age of 14 to 15 yrs 8th-9th. Parents also do not talk about it with their daughters. They are just given a list of rules to follow from the very day she starts menstruating.

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