

Why Menstruation Matters for Domestic Workers

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Introduction:

On 28th May, 2018, Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) and PRIA celebrated World Menstrual Hygiene Day with 20 domestic workers in Harijan Basti in Gurgaon. Departing from traditional methods of training and learning, this session utilized the fun medium of role plays, so that participants could build their understanding regarding menstrual hygiene and the challenges towards it, from their own experiences and realities.

MFF and PRIA have been working with domestic workers and other informal sector women workers across the country for the past two years. Our work has been collectivizing them around the issue of safe and dignified workplaces. We also believe that access to safe and hygienic menstrual management is a critical aspect of a dignified workplace. Due to lack of proper menstrual management, women are often hindered from contributing to their workplaces, which also affects their health and well-being.

In informal sector workplaces, women workers are often deprived from proper menstrual management. This is further exacerbated in case of domestic workers, who work in rather privatized and invisible spaces of homes. Gendered caste and class based purity-pollution rules limit or deprive them of access to menstrual management at their workplaces.

Keeping this in mind, the participatory session was also aimed at bringing our experiences of menstruation of domestic workers at their workplaces and how their workplaces (and homes) can be made more menstruation ready.

Role Play – Bringing out Experiences and Realities of Menstruation in Homes, Schools and Workplaces

Activity Description: The participants were divided in two groups and were given the following situations to enact:

- Imagine a young girl, who has just hit puberty and suddenly starts her first period in the school and has no access to information and products for proper menstrual management. How will she deal with this situation and navigate through the different types of information received from her peers, teachers and family.
- Imagine a newly-wed woman, who is also a domestic worker. She starts menstruating at her new marital home and is hesitant in approaching her husband and in-laws for menstrual management. Amidst this, she also has to reach her workplace on time and perform household chores like cleaning, washing and cooking. How will she manage in this situation and what are the challenges that she will encounter?



Group 1 preparing for the role play

Each group was given 20 mins to prepare the role plays and 2 mins to enact it. In the first role play, the domestic workers portrayed the story of an adolescent girl, whose first period happens while she is at school. She is confused and scared and receives no support from her teachers (who are men). Her best friend helps her reach home by walking behind her to cover her stained clothes. At home, her grandmother and mother show her how to use a cloth pad and explain to

her how as a menstruating girl, she cannot undertake certain activities. She is told that she is not allowed to “enter the kitchen and temples, sleep in the day-time, bathe, and touch other people”. She cannot go out to play with other kids (especially boys) and has to limit her interaction with the opposite sex. The role play ended with the girl asking her grandmother and mother, “मेरे पर ऐसी पाबंदियाँ क्यों?” (Why are such constraints being imposed upon me?)

In the second role play, a newly-wed woman, whose face is hidden behind a घूँघट/veil, is shown as menstruating, but has no access to menstrual hygiene products. She is unaware about whom to approach in her new home. She first approaches her young sister-in-law, hoping that she will be able to give her a pad. The sister-in-law directs her to another female household member, who directs her to the matriarch of the family. The woman is unable to speak openly in front of any of the elderly female members, due to shame and इज्जत/मर्यादा associated with a married woman. In the end, she is unable to convey her needs to her family and misses an entire work day.



Group 2 in action

The performances were followed by a discussion.

Key Discussion Points:

“कुछ घरों में जहाँ मैं काम करती हूँ, वहाँ बहुत पाबंदियाँ हैं। जब मुझे महिना आता है, तो इन घरों के लोग मुझसे दूर दूर से बात करते हैं, छूते नहीं हैं और रसोई या मंदिर में घुसने से भी रोकते हैं।”

– A Domestic Worker

- While preparing for their role plays, the groups also discussed their own experiences that were similar to the situations provided to them. They realized the importance that family members, especially mothers, grandmother and sisters have in initiating a young girl into the practices, cultures and systems that stigmatize menstruation.
- In both the role plays, there was an absence of male characters. This brought out how men and boys are so disconnected from this issue and have no capacity to support a woman or girl who is menstruating. Often, they do not have access to proper information, are not guided/mentored properly about such issues and therefore, end up perpetuating the very taboos and myths that deprive a girl or woman from safe and dignified menstruation.
- The participants preferred to use sanitary pads, instead of cloth pads. They are residents of informal settlements, where water supply is irregular. Sanitary pads are easy to use since they don't require any washing or cleaning and can be disposed after usage.
- Menstruation-related myths and taboos also affect domestic workers in their workplaces. The domestic workers shared through the role play and discussion that their employers treat them as untouchables during menstruation and stop them from entering the kitchen and temple.
- They also shared that if they need to change their sanitary pad, the employers refuse to allow them to use their bathrooms. If there isn't a common bathroom in the complex or the colony that they work in, they have to go without changing their pad for up to 7 hours.
- Even if an employer allows them to change their sanitary pad at his/her home, he/she does not allow them to dispose the used pad at home. Domestic workers often have to carry their used pad in their bags, until they find a public dustbin to dispose it.
- The domestic workers do not have the option to rest or take a leave when they are menstruating. Despite heavy cramps, headache or fever, they go to work, so that their income or leaves are not deducted. Many of them informed that they consume pain killers to get through the day, which haven't been prescribed by a doctor.
- Some of them complained about irregular periods. But they never visit a gynaecologist for a check-up and are unaware about reproductive health disorders like Polycystic Ovarian Disease (PCOD) and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). They were recommended by the MFF facilitators to check with a doctor at the earliest.

Leave No One Behind:

Access to safe, healthy and dignified menstruation is a crucial aspect of both public and private lives of women. While it is important to sensitize families and communities and provide quick and easy access to MHM, it is equally important to mainstream MHM at workplaces. Employers, trade unions and governments routinely ignore or belittle this issue and period poverty is further reinforced in the lives of informal sector women workers, especially domestic workers, whose workplaces are fragmented and not easily identifiable. Due to lack of MHM at workplaces, women lose work days, income and jobs, which not just threatens their health and well-being, but also the food security and well-being of their children and families.

Enabling access to MHM at the workplaces of informal sector women workers can help in achieving the following five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- 1) **SDG 1, No Poverty** – period poverty and household poverty reinforce each other. Informal sector women workers face both. Their access to MHM at their workplaces can help them overcome both.
- 2) **SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being** – access to MHM at informal sector workplaces will also help in achieving better reproductive health and overall well-being of informal sector women workers.
- 3) **SDG 5, Gender Equality** – patriarchal taboos and myths related to menstruation have to be removed from workplaces (communities and families), so that women enjoy bodily autonomy and a safe and happy menstruation.
- 4) **SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth** – the gendered nature of informal economy is the biggest reason for lack of access to MHM in informal workplaces. By generating more awareness and action around this issue, workplace gender parity can be achieved, informal can be formalized and women can work with dignity and become more productive at their workplaces. With lack of MHM at workplaces, women workers can never have full access to decent work.
- 5) **SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities** – women’s access to MHM at workplaces ensures their further integration into work life, which will help in reducing gender inequalities in workplaces. It will also help in overcoming caste and class based purity-pollution rules that afflict workplaces, making them more equitable for all.

The call for action of 2030 agenda for sustainable development is to ‘leave no one behind’. This cannot be achieved without ensuring access to MHM in the workplaces of informal sector women workers.

