

From Stigma to Support: How Menstrual Health Programmes Are Bringing Change Across India

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Menstruation is a natural biological process, yet from generations it has been surrounded by silence, shame and social restrictions. Across India, millions of menstruating women continue to face challenges such as poor access to sanitary products, lack of clean toilets, limited awareness, and deep-rooted taboos. Most of the urban places have seen gradual openness, but menstruation still remains a phase of discomfort and fear rather than a normal life stage for many women, especially in rural and low-income communities. However, in recent years, India has witnessed a significant shift driven by awareness campaigns, policy efforts and community-based programmes that aim to make menstrual hygiene accessible, dignified and safe for all menstruating women. The present article explores the challenges faced by menstruating women, how the national and state-level initiatives are reshaping menstrual health and empowering women across the country, further addresses the gap between these and inclusiveness in menstrual health.



Challenges faced by menstruating women in India

Despite progress, menstruating women in India continue to face several interconnected challenges:

- **Affordability:** For many families, sanitary pads remain a luxury rather a basic necessity.
- **Accessibility:** Irregular supply chains, lack of nearby shops, or limited product availability restricts consistent use.
- **Poor sanitation infrastructure:** Many public and school toilets lack privacy, water supply, locks or disposal mechanisms.
- **Inadequate awareness:** Myths such as avoiding certain foods, not entering kitchens, or assumptions like menstruation is unclean/ impure remain widespread.
- **Emotional and social barriers:** Shame prevents many women from discussing menstrual problems or seeking help.
- **Special challenges for vulnerable groups:** Women with disabilities, unsheltered women, migrant women and transgender persons often face heightened difficulties with privacy and access.

These challenges create barriers not only to menstrual hygiene but to education, mobility, workplace participation and self-esteem. Recognising the widespread impact of poor menstrual health on women's overall well-being, many national and state level programmes are introduced, aiming to create awareness, improve the accessibility and dignity. These interventions represent a major shift from viewing menstruation as a private struggle to addressing it as an essential public health and gender equity concern.

A. National Programmes Transforming Menstrual Health

- **Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS):** National Health Mission, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India (2025) has introduced MHS scheme to promote menstrual hygiene among rural adolescent girls who are in the age groups of 10-19 years. The major objectives of this scheme are to increase the awareness among adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene, to increase access to and use of high quality sanitary napkins for adolescent girls in rural areas, to ensure safe disposal of sanitary napkins.
- **Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKS):** Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (n.d) launched RKS in 2014 with the aim of improving health and well-being of adolescents aged 10-19 years. This programme addresses key areas – nutrition, menstrual hygiene, sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and prevention of substance and non-communicable diseases. Through Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs), the Peer Education Programme (PE Programme), Weekly Iron and Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS), and the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS), Adolescent Health Days (AHDs), RKS provides counselling, conducts awareness sessions that help adolescent girls to understand their bodies, manage menstruation safely, and overcome stigma.
- **School Health & Wellness Programme (Ayushman Bharat):** This AB-SHWP is a joint initiative of India's Ministry of Health and family Welfare and Ministry of Education under Ayushman Bharat, was launched in February 2020. This programmes strengthens existing initiative like Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKS). One male and one female teachers trained on 11 thematic areas are designated as 'Health and Wellness Ambassadors' (National Health Mission, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, n.d.)
- **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM):** Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin (SBM-G) significantly contributes to menstrual health by integrating Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) into its core sanitation and solid waste management guidelines, aiming to break taboos, improve infrastructure, and ensure safe disposal of menstrual waste (Kumar, 2025).
- **Suvidha Sanitary Napkins under PMBJP:** Government has launched Jan Aushadhi Suvidha Sanitary Napkins under Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana. The sanitary pads are sold at highly subsidised rate of Rs. 1/- per pad for women to make menstrual health services available at affordable prices (Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers, Government of India, 2023).
- **Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan:** Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan is a nationwide health initiative, organized in conjunction with Poshan Maah - a month-long movement that promotes menstrual hygiene and nutrition and dedicated to improve health outcomes of women, adolescent girls (MyGov, n.d.).

B. State-level Initiatives

- **Shuchi Scheme in Karnataka:** A state government initiative was originally launched in 2013-14 to provide free sanitary napkins to adolescent girls in government and aided schools and colleges, but halted in 2020. However, after four years, the scheme was relaunched in 2024 by supplying 10 sanitary napkins in one kit every year and around 19 lakh adolescent girls aged between 10-18 years were expected to benefit from this scheme (Hindustan Times, 2024).
- **Menstrual leave in Karnataka:** This initiative approved one paid menstrual leave every month (12 days in a year), which is expected to benefit 5 million women employees in Karnataka. Further, two more states expressed to introduce menstrual leave following Karnataka i.e. Odisha offers 12 leaves annually, while Bihar (two days per month) in granting menstrual women (The Times of India, 2025).
- **SHE PAD Project in Kerala:** The "She Pad" project in Kerala is a state-led initiative by Kerala State Women's Development Corporation Limited (KSWDC), a public sector undertaking (PSU) was launched in 2017. Adolescent girls across Kerala are benefited

with free sanitary pads and the project also expanded its services in creating awareness on menstrual hygiene management, providing menstrual cups, installation of napkin vending machines and incinerators to dispose the used napkins (The Kerala State Women's Development Corporation Ltd, n.d.).

- **Menstrual leave to female students in Kerala:** The Kerala government has announced menstrual leave to all university female students, which comes under state higher education department (The Indian Express, 2023).
- **'Khushi' Scheme in Odisha:** The Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Odisha introduced "Khushi" scheme, a female health and hygiene program aiming to provide free sanitary napkins for adolescent girls studying in government and aided schools from class 6th to 12th, and to reduce school dropout rates (myScheme, n.d.).
- **Free Sanitary Napkin Scheme in Tamil Nadu:** Tamil Nadu state government provides free sanitary napkins to government school girls between the age group of 10-19 years in urban areas and women inpatients in the age group of 15-49 years at government medical institutions under menstrual hygiene programme (New Indian Express, 2020).
- **ASMITA Yojana in Maharashtra:** ASMITA Yojana was launched by the government of Maharashtra to distribute subsidized sanitary napkins to rural women and adolescent girls of ZP school who are in the age group of 11-19 years. Adolescent girls are provided a pack of 8 napkins at subsidised rate of Rs. 5/-. This program has achieved significant outreach across all 34 districts by empowering women through a mobile-based application and partners with banks for digital transactions, home delivery through India Post, and system-based payment process (NITI Aayog, n.d.).

May 28 is marked as Menstrual Hygiene Day, an annual awareness day to highlight the importance of good menstrual hygiene management (MHM) at global level (Kashiwase, 2024). As the world emphasizes the need for better menstrual hygiene management, India's policies and programmes collectively move in the same direction. Together, these national and state programmes reflect India's growing commitment in strengthening menstrual health through improved access, education and supportive infrastructure. They have helped in bringing conversations about menstruation into public spaces, empowered young girls with knowledge and provides essential resources to communities that once struggled in silence. However, despite their promising intentions and widespread reach, these initiatives do not benefit all menstruating women equally. Gaps in awareness, distribution, cultural acceptance and infrastructure continue to limit their full impact. This raises an important question: If so many programmes exist, why are they still not reaching everyone who needs them? The key factors contributing to these gaps are discussed in the following section.



Why menstrual health programmes are not reaching everyone?

- **Irregular supply of pads:** Some schools and health centres receive inconsistent shipments.
- **Overburdened ASHA workers:** Their heavy workload limits the time they can spend on menstrual health education.
- **Infrastructure gaps:** Distribution occurs without sufficient focus on toilets, water and disposal facilities.
- **Low awareness of schemes:** Many girls and women do not know that free or subsidised products are available.
- **Cultural resistance:** Many families in conservative communities hesitate to allow girls to attend menstrual awareness sessions.

- **Urban slum and migrant gaps:** Many programmes do not effectively reach unregistered, mobile or unsheltered group.
- **Exclusion of adult women:** Most programmes focus heavily on adolescents, overlooking the needs of working women, women with disabilities, and transgender individuals.

Changing attitudes and moving toward inclusive menstrual health

India's menstrual health narrative is evolving. Public campaigns, social media advocacy and NGO interventions have contributed to normalising period conversations. Women now feel more confident seeking information and demanding better facilities. Importantly, the menstrual health discourse is expanding to include diverse menstruating populations such as adult women, women with disabilities, homeless women, and transgender and non-binary individuals who menstruate. This shift towards inclusivity recognises that menstrual hygiene is not a one-size-fits-all issue; different groups require tailored solutions, respect and supportive environment.

Conclusion

Menstrual health in India is steadily moving from stigma to support. National and state programmes have played a crucial role in improving access to sanitary products, enhancing awareness, and creating safer sanitary environment. However, true menstrual dignity requires continued efforts in providing affordable products, inclusive policies, community education, and breaking persistent taboos. When menstruation is understood as a health matter rather than a cultural burden, women can participate fully in education, work, and society. The journey continues, but India is undeniably taking confident steps toward ensuring that every menstruating women can manage her period with privacy, safety, and pride.

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