

Analyzing the Menstrual Protection Method Followed by Young Women in South India

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Abstract

Menstruation being an important biological milestone in every girl's life is still considered as taboo in India and women menstruating process is unclean and dirty. The cultural norms and religious practices are the major reasons for women to not follow good menstrual hygiene practices. In India some places restrict women bathing during periods and against the usage of sanitary napkins. The study analyses the presence of usage of hygienic method of menstrual protection among young women of the age 15 to 24 in South India and how some factors like women participation in household decisions, women having assets, bank accounts, employment in cash influence them following menstrual hygiene. As per Census 2011, 19 percent of total female population in India are of the age group 15-24 years. Young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies. Though menstrual hygiene has improved positively, there are other issues like the degradable level of the sanitary napkins and tampons and the materials used to make these products. These issues require more attention together along with the present program to raise awareness among young women regarding the importance of menstrual hygiene.

Keywords: Menstrual hygiene, sanitary napkins, menstrual cups.

1. Introduction: Menstrual hygiene

The beginning of reproductive life for a girl is from the time she starts menstruating. Menstruation being an important biological milestone in every girl's life is still considered as taboo in India and women menstruating process is unclean and dirty. Women during her monthly periods are not allowed to participate in household, religious activities, festivities, temple entry and these rules are changing in urban areas in present days, however, still prevails in large proportion in rural areas and some pockets of urban areas.

Menstrual hygiene habits are influenced by cultural practices, family norms, personal inclination, financial access, and socioeconomic pressures. Menstrual hygiene depends on the menstrual beliefs, practices, and knowledge. The cultural norms and religious practices are the major reasons for women to not follow good menstrual hygiene practices. In India some places restrict women bathing during periods and against the usage of sanitary napkins. Hygienic practices during menstruation are the use of sanitary napkins, proper washing, and cleaning of genital area. Some places we see women washing the used menstrual blood cloths as they are witchcraft stories associated with it. Thus, education becomes more important for men and women to ensure safe menstrual practices. Menstrual hygiene practices are very important as it impacts the women's health in long term and improper practices leads to higher chances of urinary and reproductive tract infections.

The present scenario in our country is much better than earlier decades in terms of women following menstrual hygiene practices. In this present study usage of hygiene methods among young women of south India during menstruation is analyzed from the data provided in National Family Health Survey 4&5. In this article menstrual hygiene practices among young women of south India are analyzed. The first chapter explains how some factors influence menstrual hygiene among girls and young women. The second chapter deals with the usage of different menstrual products among girls and young women.

2. Literature review:

Each girl or woman uses one of the sanitary protection materials based on their individual preferences, cultural background, financial status, and accessibility in the local market. Menstrual practices and monthly periods are leaped by cultural beliefs and taboos which makes adolescent girls neglect menstrual hygiene and scientific facts. The preferences of menstrual absorbents differ among rural and urban girls and women. The adolescents of school age must be provided with the knowledge and understanding of the use of sanitary napkins during menstruation as it is an important facet of health education. The study suggests usage of sanitary napkins among adolescent schoolgirls to be inspected and informed at schools to ensure better menstrual hygiene and avoid infectious diseases. The study emphasizes on the need for organizing education programs on menstrual hygiene in schools as the adolescent girls are future mothers and hence their good health is necessary to be maintained in the long run. Mothers are the ones who were seen to be passing on information about sanitary pads to their daughters, however this had cultural influence.

There some problems girls and women face to follow menstrual hygienic practices. To ensure they follow menstrual hygiene practices they need access to water and sanitation. At the household level, women are not involved in decision making and men are hesitant to talk about menstrual hygiene. Hence women may not have proper toilets or funds to buy sanitary napkins. Another reason women do not follow hygienic practices are due to the lack of information and awareness. Mothers and other women shy away from informing the girls and boys and men do not have much knowledge and hence fail to support girls and women of their family.

Lack of proper support in schools for maintaining menstrual hygiene like water and sanitation facilities makes it difficult for adolescent girls to not attend school during their periods or drop out completely. Many studies have reported that child survival depends more on mother's education than poverty level and thus factors that affect a girl's education have more wider issues. Cases of girls and women having sex trade to ensure funds for availing sanitary napkins have been reported. Thus, making boys and men aware of menstrual hygiene reduces such risk.

There exists asymmetric information and general belief of people on the use of sanitary napkins as a menstrual hygiene product. The current economy witnesses high market competition for sanitary napkins and materials used in these products have changed over the time. The regulatory bodies and policy makers should be having the knowledge of products plunging into the country's market and how those products will impact women's health and environment in the long run. In the recent past menstrual hygiene market has introduced menstrual cups, reusable cloth pads and degradable sanitary napkins which are less known but have sustainable impact on the environment and industry. We can see concerns increasing for two reasons, one is the increasing menstrual wastes and the negative environmental impact caused due to disposal of sanitary napkins.

The study analyses the presence of usage of hygienic method of menstrual protection among young women of the age 15 to 24 in South India and how some factors like women participation in household decisions, women having assets, bank accounts, employment in cash influence them following menstrual hygiene. As per Census 2011, 19 percent of total female population in India are of the age group 15-24 years.

3. Research Objectives:

To compare and analyze the method of menstrual hygiene among girls and women in southern region. To analyze the factors that influence women following menstrual hygiene.

4. Data and methods:

In this research study the data used is taken from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) portal. Data from fourth and fifth round of National Family Health Survey is used extensively in this article. Only south Indian states are included in this study. Excel was used for data analysis; simple bar charts were used for the representation of the data. The age of girls and women considered in the study is between 15 and 24 years. Locally made napkins, sanitary napkins, menstrual cup, and tampons are viewed as hygienic methods of menstrual protection in the study.

5. Results & Analysis:

I. Chapter-1:

The menstrual hygiene of young women of the age 15 to 24 years has improved in most cases from 2015-16 to 2019-20. In this study the data of five south Indian states Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana were taken to analyze the menstrual hygiene with respect to some factors. The factors influence the menstrual hygiene among young women and the ones taken for study are women who are presently married and take part in three household decisions, women employed in last 12 months and paid in cash, women who have bank account, women who possessed ownership of house or land either with sole or joint ownership. Let's look at the detailed analysis of each state with respect to the above-mentioned factors.

In Karnataka the percentage of young women following menstrual hygiene increased from 70.3 percent 2015-16 to 84.2 percent 2019-20. This increase can be associated with the increase in women employment for past 12 months and those paid in cash from 29.1 percent in 2015-16 to 37 percent in 2019-20. Married women who participated in three household decisions also increased from 80.4 percent in 2015-16 to 82.7 percent in 2019-20. Thus, we can see that as more women got cash in hand and participated in household decisions the percentage of women following menstrual hygiene also improved. Women who had own home or land also increased from 51.8 percent in 2015-16 to 67.6 percent in 2019-20, similarly young women holding bank account also became more from 59.4 percent in 2015-16 to 88.7 percent in 2019-20. Thus, young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies.

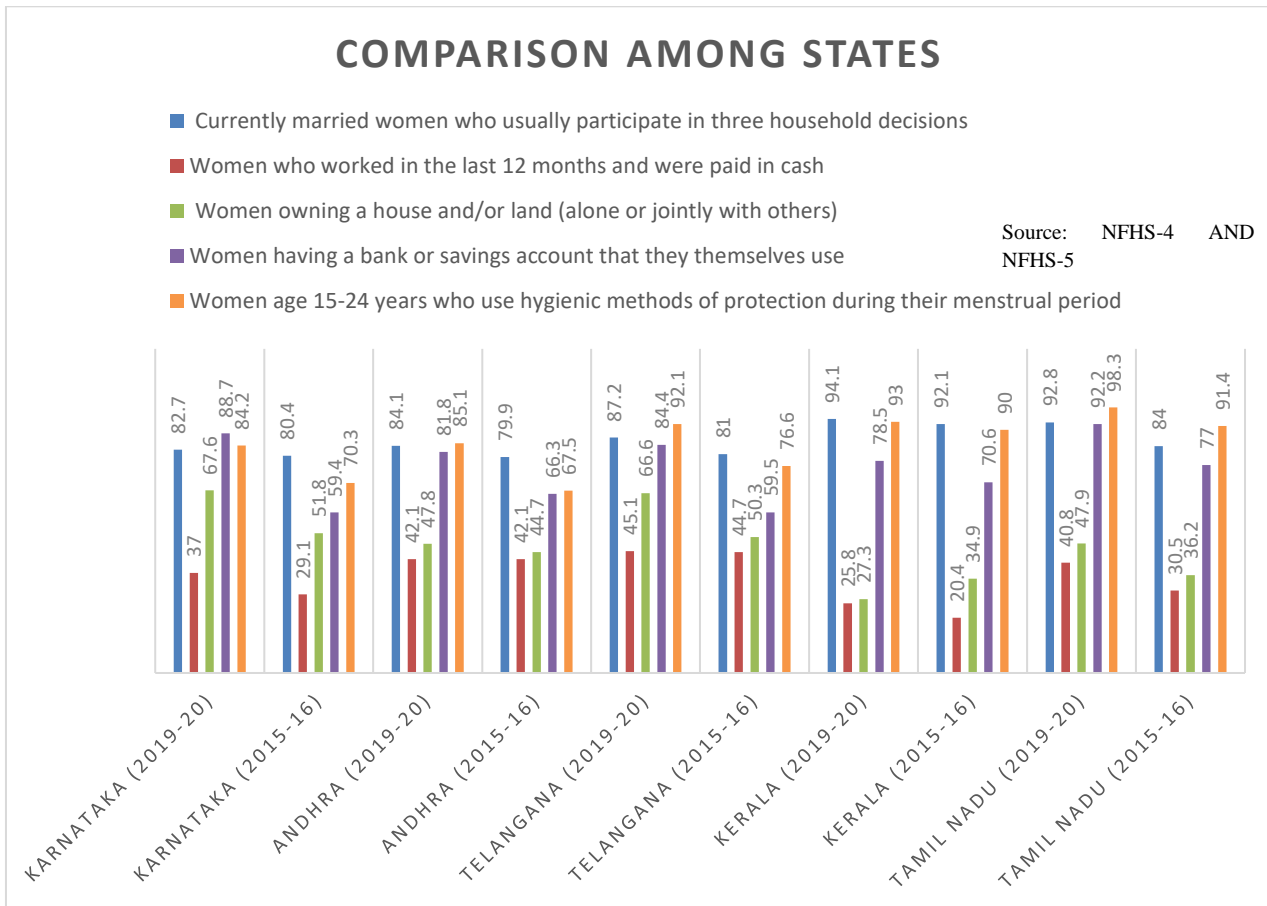
In Andhra Pradesh the percentage of young women following menstrual hygiene increased from 67.5 percent 2015-16 to 85.1 percent 2019-20. This increase can be associated with the increase in Married women who participated in three household decisions also increased from 79.9 percent in 2015-16 to 84.1 percent in 2019-20. There was no change in women employment for past 12 months and those paid in cash as the data showed 42.1 percent in 2015-16 and 42.1 percent in 2019-20. Thus, we can see that as women got cash in hand and participated in household decisions the percentage of women following menstrual

hygiene also improved. Women who had own home or land also increased from 44.7 percent in 2015-16 to 47.8 percent in 2019-20, similarly young women holding bank account also became more from 66.3 percent in 2015-16 to 81.8 percent in 2019-20. Thus, young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies.

In Telangana the percentage of young women following menstrual hygiene increased from 76.6 percent in 2015-16 to 92.1 percent in 2019-20. This increase can be associated with the increase Married women who participated in three household decisions also increased from 81 percent in 2015-16 to 87.2 percent in 2019-20. There was slight change in women employment for past 12 months and those paid in cash as the data showed 44.7 percent in 2015-16 to 45.1 percent in 2019-20. Thus, we can that as women got cash in hand and participated more in household decisions the percentage of women following menstrual hygiene also improved. Women who had own home or land also increased from 50.3 percent in 2015-16 to 66.6 percent in 2019-20, similarly young women holding bank account also became more from 59.5 percent in 2015-16 to 84.4 percent in 2019-20. Thus, young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies.

In Tamil Nadu the percentage of young women following menstrual hygiene increased from 91.4 percent in 2015-16 to 98.3 percent in 2019-20. This increase can be associated with the increase Married women who participated in three household decisions also increased from 84 percent in 2015-16 to 92.8 percent in 2019-20. There was slight change in women employment for past 12 months and those paid in cash as the data showed 30.5 percent in 2015-16 to 40.8 percent in 2019-20. Thus, we can that as women got cash in hand and participated more in household decisions the percentage of women following menstrual hygiene also improved. Women who had own home or land also increased from 36.2 percent in 2015-16 to 47.9 percent in 2019-20, similarly young women holding bank account also became more from 77 percent in 2015-16 to 92.2 percent in 2019-20. Thus, young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies.

In Kerala the percentage of young women following menstrual hygiene increased from 90 percent in 2015-16 to 93 percent in 2019-20. This increase can be associated with the increase Married women who participated in three household decisions also increased from 92.1 percent in 2015-16 to 94.1 percent in 2019-20. There was slight change in women employment for past 12 months and those paid in cash as the data showed 20.4 percent in 2015-16 to 25.8 percent in 2019-20. Thus, we can that as women got cash in hand and participated more in household decisions the percentage of women following menstrual hygiene also improved. Women who had own home or land also increased from 27.3 percent in 2015-16 to 34.9 percent in 2019-20, similarly young women holding bank account also became more from 70.6 percent in 2015-16 to 78.5 percent in 2019-20. Thus, young women who were financially independent and strong could meet their menstrual needs better than those who lacked those independencies.



II. Chapter-2:

The usage of menstrual products varies with each woman. (Kaur, Kaur, & Kaur, 2018) Each girl or woman uses one of the sanitary protection materials based on their individual preferences, cultural background, financial status, and accessibility in the local market. The preferences of menstrual absorbents differ among rural and urban girls and women. In Karnataka as of 2019-20 NFHS-5 data 91 percent urban young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection whereas among rural Karnataka only 89.8 percent young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection. In Kerala as of 2019-20 NFHS-5 data 94.8 percent urban young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection whereas among rural Kerala only 91.5 percent young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection. In Andhra Pradesh as of 2019-20 NFHS-5 data 90.6 percent urban young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection whereas among rural Andhra Pradesh only 82.5 percent young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection. In Telangana as of 2019-20 NFHS-5 data 97 percent urban young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection whereas among rural Telangana only 90.8 percent young women follow one of the hygienic methods of menstrual protection.

The different kinds of menstrual products used by girls or women are reusable cloth pads (washable), commercial sanitary napkins, tampons, reusable tampons, menstrual cups, bamboo fibre pads, water hyacinth pads and banana fibre pads. Further we see the analysis of different kinds of menstrual products used by young women in different states.

The reusable cloth pads are a sustainable sanitary option but not considered a hygienic method. The reason for this is for cloth to be a hygienic sanitary option, it needs to be properly washed and dried in sunlight

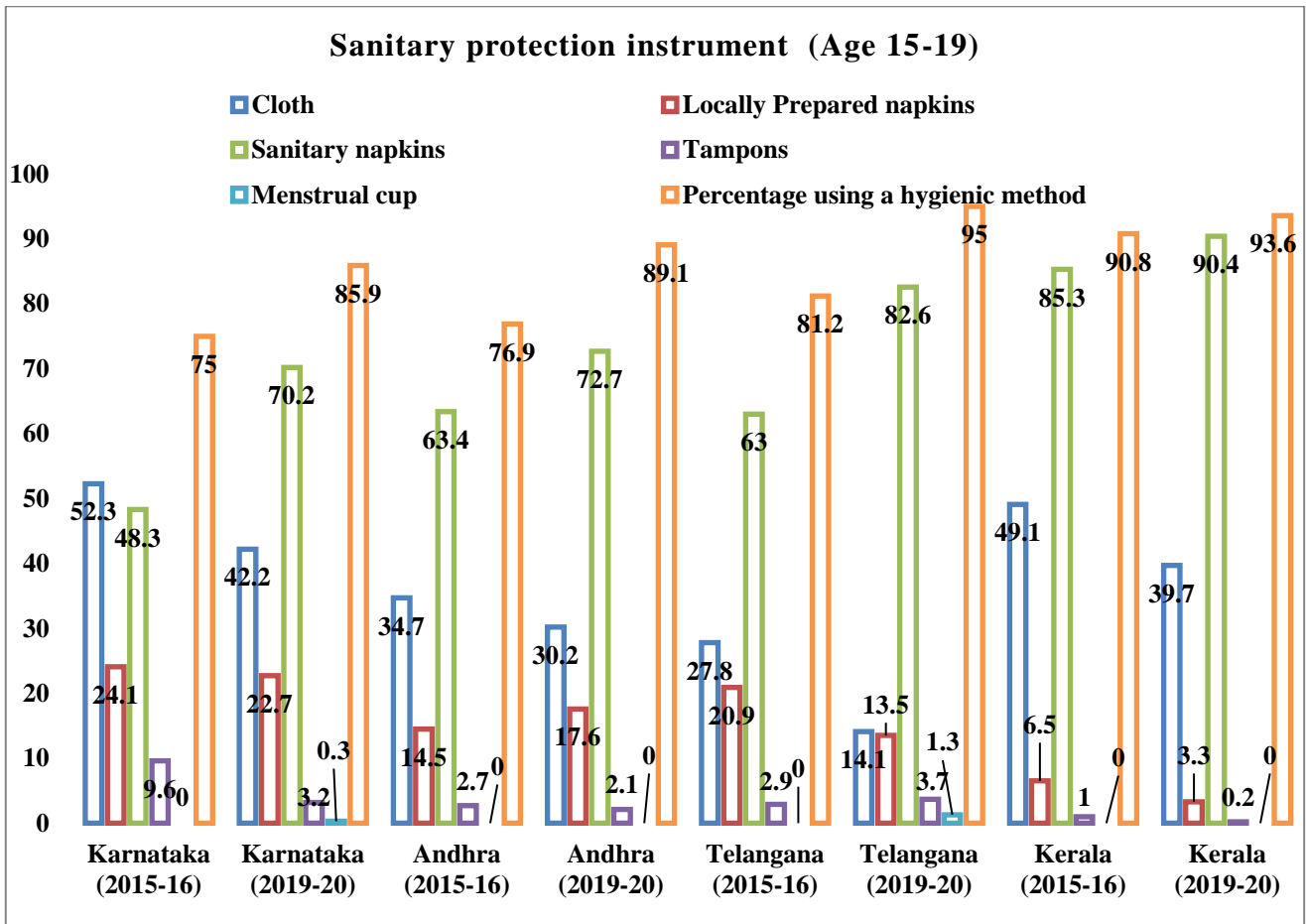
as sun's heat is considered as natural sterilizer and makes it usable in future again. These are economical, easy to afford and environmentally friendly. The storage of cloth pads should be made in clean dry areas so that it is not contaminated for future uses. Usage of cloth pads are seen highest among Karnataka women in terms of percentage and lowest among Telangana women in percentage terms. However, usage of cloth pads has reduced in all four states Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala from 2015-16 to 2019-20. This indicates a positive behaviour change among young women in following menstrual protection. Thus, cloth pads are substituted with other alternatives like locally prepared napkins and sanitary napkins in more proportion and even tampons and menstrual cups in fewer proportion.

Commercial sanitary pads are accessible at local stores, medical shops or even online. These are costlier than reusable cloth pads and not reusable nor that eco-friendly. The cotton used in making the commercial sanitary pads are not completely natural and may contain some toxins. The usage of locally prepared napkins has increased in Andhra Pradesh (14.5 to 17.6 percent among 15-19 age group and 9.9 to 16.2 percent among 20-24 age group) and decreased in other three states. The reason could be Andhra women finding locally prepared sanitary napkins more affordable than commercial sanitary napkins. However, Karnataka still has the higher percentage of women using locally prepared napkins than others state as of 2019-20. The usage of commercial sanitary napkins has increased by women in all states. Though these sanitary napkins are considered more hygienic than cloth pads, there are concerns on the materials used in these napkins and the degradable capacity of these items.

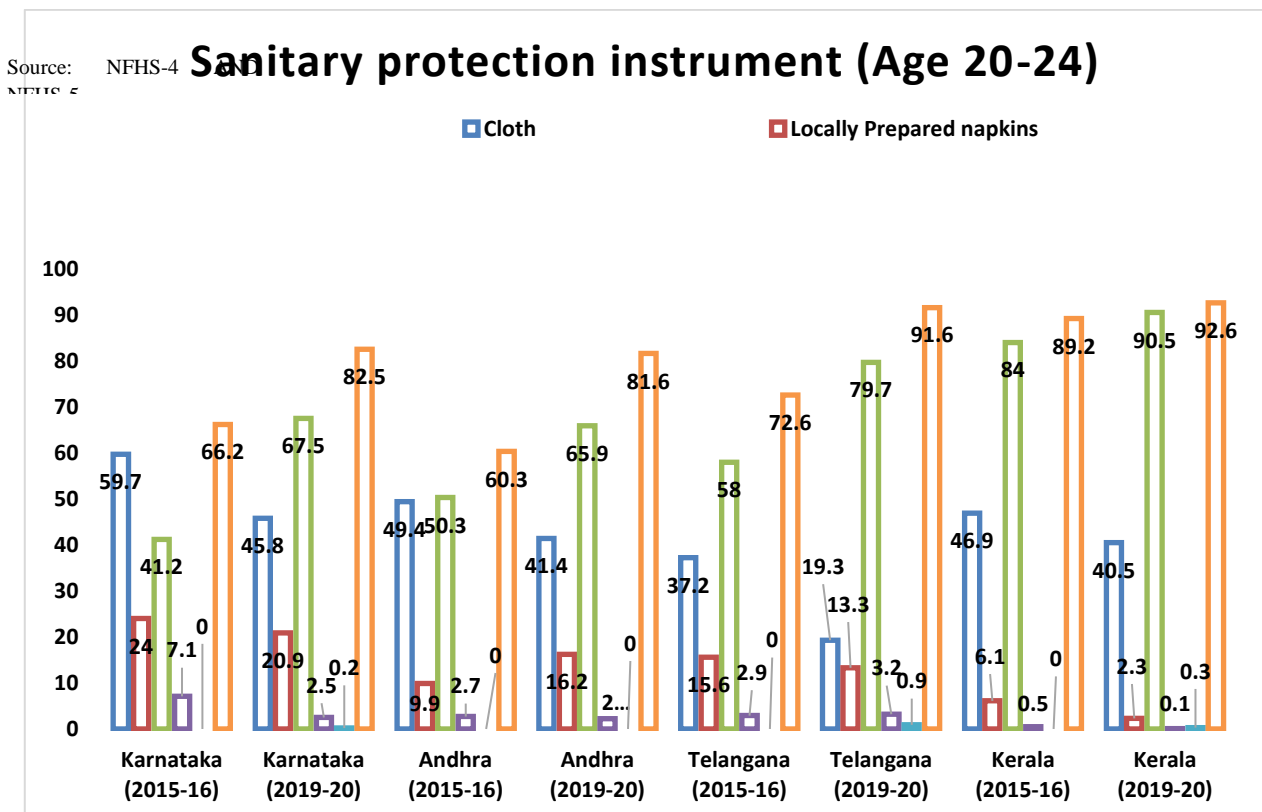
Tampons are another kind of menstrual sanitary protection which are a kind of plug made of cotton inserted into the vagina. These are more expensive than the cloth or commercial sanitary napkins and are not that eco-friendly. Reusable tampons are made from natural substances like bamboo, wool, cotton etc. They are washable and used in the same way as non-reusable tampons. The usage of tampons has increased from 2015-16 to 2019-20 in Karnataka and Telangana and decreased in Andhra and Kerala.

Menstrual cups are cup-like menstrual protection devices, generally made from medical grade silicone rubber. These cups are worn for a duration of six to 12 hours according to the quantity of menstrual flow. They are easily degradable, reusable and are a better alternative when the surrounding environment is not good. This method is not yet popular as menstrual protection among any states and usage is limited to less than two percent women among all four states. (Kakani & Bhatt, 2017) Menstrual cups could be promoted in developing countries like India which will ensure better menstrual hygiene. Studies have concluded menstrual cups as an eco-friendlier product than other vaginal devices which has more disposal problems. (Banerjee, 2019) Menstrual cups wastes do not block the landfills, cost is lower and requires lesser trees. The menstrual cups which are prepared from medical grade silicone is the greenest option and thus moving to menstrual cups despite some limitations to its usage will improve the environment

Bamboo fibre pads are made with bamboo pulp as the absorbing material in their pads. Its absorbing capacity is high and safe for usage of women/girls as it is rash and irritation free with antibacterial properties, apart from that they are cost effective, eco-friendly sanitary pads. Banana fibre pads are cost effective pads made from waste banana tree fibre for rural girls and women. They are degradable within six months after usage and hence are eco-friendly products. Similarly, water hyacinth pads are made using water hyacinth and are sold under the trade name Jani are also less expensive and environmentally friendly.



Source: NFHS-4 AND NFHS-5



6. Limitations:

The data for the state of Tamil Nadu is yet to be updated on NFHS-5 portal, hence the analysis of south Indian women method of menstrual protection had to be done excluding that state.

7. Conclusion:

(Mishra & Joe, 2021) Gender inequality is still plaguing the Indian society. In Global Gender Index, India ranks 140 among 156 countries. Despite rapid growth of the country in past decades, the gender issue still troubles the nation. Gender inequality can be bridged to major extent with women's empowerment. As per studies women's empowerment depends on many factors and one of the factors is proportion of women in the age group 15 to 24 following menstrual hygiene with good menstrual products. Studies have shown that young women are not using sanitary napkins due to financial limitation and hence sanitary napkins need to be available at affordable prices. Researchers have suggested Anganwadi workers must be educated about menstrual hygiene, and it must be taught at schools as a part of basic education. Television programs promoting menstrual health, schoolteachers, nurses and counsellors, informed mothers are some of the main methods to impart menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls.

Indian government has designed some policies in the past like Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya to improve WASH facilities which is one of the major requirements for women during her periods. Menstrual Hygiene Management scheme implemented under the National Health Mission to improve menstrual hygiene by informing and making menstrual pads more accessible. Considering the importance of menstrual hygiene of many young women, in June 2011, Government of India introduced a new policy to ensure availability of sanitary napkins in rural areas at affordable prices. Negligence of menstrual hygiene had led to reproductive health issues. Presently Indian women seemed to have been shifting from cloth pads to sanitary napkins in more proportion than before. Though menstrual hygiene has improved positively, there are other issues like the degradable level of the sanitary napkins and tampons and the materials used to make these products. These issues require more attention together along with the present program to raise awareness among young women regarding the importance of menstrual hygiene.

There are some menstrual products like biodegradable cotton, bamboo and other safer eco friendly alternatives which are less known to the women. More such eco-friendly and healthier alternatives should be produced and made affordable and accessible to women. The current economy witnesses high market competition for sanitary napkins and materials used in these products have changed over the time. The regulatory bodies and policy makers should be having the knowledge of products plunging into the country's market and how those products will impact women's health and environment in the long run. Similarly, women should be made aware of the materials used in making the sanitary products.

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