

# Menstrual Hygiene Management in Informal Urban Settlements in Dhaka: Conversations around Taboo, Stigma and Challenges

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## INTRODUCTION

- There are more than 32 million adolescents in Bangladesh (Unicef, 2016).
- Adolescent girls are one of the most vulnerable groups.
- Their vulnerability is further exacerbated when they live in informal urban settlements, where there is limited space, shared bathrooms and little or no privacy.
- 85% of garment workers are female; 50% of whom are adolescent girls living in informal settlements (World Bank, 2014).
- Menstruation is seen as an illness that makes girls 'dirty'.
- Even in the 21st century, there is shame and embarrassment associated with menstruation due to cultural norms and religious beliefs.

## OBJECTIVE

To dispel the superstitions and myths that exist around menstruation and to understand the challenges that adolescent girls living in informal urban settlements in Dhaka face regarding menstrual hygiene.

## METHODOLOGY

- ARISE, a large multi-country participatory action research project, organised a webinar on International Menstrual Hygiene Day on 28 May 2022.
- Adolescent girls and boys from three informal urban settlements in Dhaka city participated in the webinar and shared their experiences, taboo and stigma around menstruation.
- One female community co-researcher, selected from one of the settlements, moderated the webinar.
- These data are taken from the webinar.

## RESULTS

### Common Myths and Practices

**Mobility Restrictions during menstruation** - older women in the household instruct and ensure that menstruating girls do not stay out in the evening to prevent them from getting an "evil eye" or "Batash".

**Food restrictions during menstruation** - menstruating girls are not allowed to have meat or fish during menstruation as it is believed that it would lead to odourous menstruation.

**Urged to make menstrual management as "invisible" as possible** - advised to wash menstrual cloth at night and dry them in dark, hidden spaces where men and boys can not see them.

### Ramifications on adolescent girls

- Reduced self-esteem
- Negative impact on school attendance
- Psychosocial outcomes - stress, anxiety, tension
- Dietary restrictions lead to malnutrition and affect physical growth

*"Various NGOs provide sanitary napkins to adolescent girls, but after their projects are over, there is a sudden halt in their supply. NGOs often advise adolescent girls to save TK 2 per day in order to buy sanitary napkins. But even an amount as small as TK 2 is not always possible to save as we do not get any pocket money. Our families prioritize getting food on the table first."*

- Adolescent girl participant, 19 years, Kallyanpur



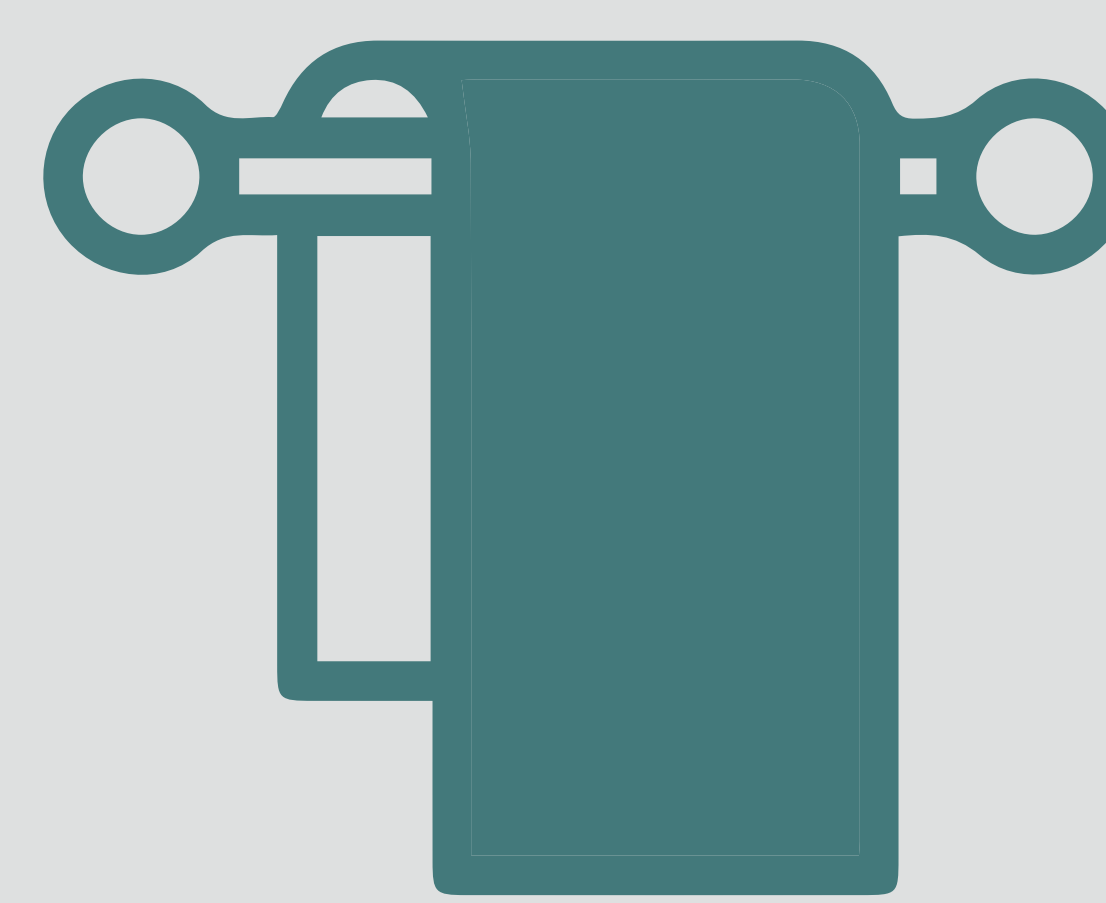
### Challenges of MHM



Lack of free sanitary napkin supply



Unaffordability of sanitary napkins



Drying cloth napkins in congested living conditions



Shared toilets make sanitary pad disposal challenging

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Arrange awareness sessions on menstrual hygiene and emphasize on the need for nutritious food during this time to dispel the myths.
- Men and boys need to be included in these discussions to help them better understand the importance and practicalities of safe sex and contraception.
- Separate bathrooms/toilet with water facilities for women to ensure privacy and dignity.
- Lastly, integration of menstrual health into essential healthcare services.

## CONCLUSION

- In order to have positive health outcomes for these adolescent girls, who are the nation builders of tomorrow, we need integrated and intersectional approaches to address SRHR.
- Addressing taboo and stigma on menstruation is crucial to "make menstruation a normal fact of life by 2030".

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