

MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT AND SANITATION SYSTEMS

STUDY OVERVIEW:

The use of improved menstrual products in India is relatively low, especially in rural areas. However, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector are increasingly interested in improving women's access to these products. Given the significant waste burden associated with disposable menstrual products, this raises the question of whether reusable products are acceptable to women.

This note describes preliminary findings from a study of menstrual product acceptability conducted among 960 married women in 60 villages in Jehanabad, Kako, and Ratni Faredpur blocks in Jehanabad District, Bihar.

Women were interviewed four times over the course of 8 months. During the first interview, women were randomly selected to receive a menstrual cup, sanitary napkins, or a non-menstrual health product to try. Two to three months later, women were revisited and asked about their satisfaction with the product they had been given. A promotional meeting for menstrual products was held, to which all women in the study, as well as others in the village, were invited. At this meeting, women were given more information about these products and an opportunity to ask questions about them.

At six months after the first interview, and again at eight months, women were asked to choose between receiving sugar or sanitary napkins, and between receiving napkins or a menstrual cup, to assess their relative preferences for these products. Women were interviewed about their health and their menstrual product disposal practices during each survey round.



Figure 1: Menstrual Cup



Figure 2: Sanitary Napkin

THE PRODUCTS:

Disposable sanitary napkins are the most commonly used purchased menstrual product in India. Menstrual cups are reusable silicon devices worn internally. These are much less commonly used, but are available for purchase in India.

On average, those women in the study who used disposable products spent 31 INR / cycle on these, whereas menstrual cups sell at a retail price of 695 INR. While this high up-front cost may be prohibitive for poor women, a single cup can be used for up to 10 years. Assuming at least two years of use, menstrual cups are more cost effective than napkins. Bulk orders through NGOs or government could significantly reduce the price of cups.



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS:

Few women currently purchase menstrual products: Prior to the intervention, 95% of women used cloths to absorb menstrual blood. Only 5% of women in the study area reported purchasing menstrual products. Of those who purchased products, the average monthly expenditure was Rs. 31.

The majority of menstrual products are disposed of in the open: Over 60% of women reported disposing of used sanitary napkins in the field or the street. Since menstrual cups are reusable for up to 10 years, there is almost no waste and disposal is not a problem.

Sanitary Napkins are generally preferred to current methods: Of those given napkins, 84% of women preferred these to the method they had been using before (usually cloth). Very few had any problem using the napkins.

Menstrual cups are acceptable to a large number of women: Of those given a menstrual cup, just over half (51%) tried it. A majority of those who tried the cup (76%) preferred it to the method they had previously been using to absorb menstrual blood.

The main barrier to menstrual cup use is fear of trying: The primary reason for not using the cup was fear of trying it (56% of non-users). Disapproval of husbands was another

common barrier, cited by 15% of non-users.

Valuation of sanitary napkins is low, but increases with exposure: When given the choice between a quantity of sugar and sanitary napkins, women in villages where napkins had not previously been introduced were willing to trade 0.815 KG of sugar (worth roughly Rs. 33) for 16 napkins, approximately a two-cycle supply. Women living in villages where napkins had been promoted and given for free were willing to trade 31% more sugar for the same quantity of napkins compared to those in other villages.

Women value the opportunity to try the menstrual cup: 26% of women who had not previously been given a menstrual cup were willing to trade at least one packet of sanitary napkins for a cup. On average, these women were willing to give up just over two cycles worth of napkins (34 napkins) for a menstrual cup.

There may be health benefits to using a menstrual cup or napkins: Previous medical studies have shown that menstrual cup use is not associated with health risks. In our study, self-reported symptoms of urinary tract infections were generally lower among those given napkins or a menstrual cup. Collection of objective health data would be required to determine whether there are significant health benefits to using these products.



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ABOUT JPAL:

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) was established in 2003 as a research center at the Economics Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT, Boston). Since then, it has grown into a global network of researchers who use randomized evaluations to answer critical policy questions in the fight against poverty.

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

The Menstrual Management and Sanitation Systems project comprises multiple research activities in India and South Africa to examine factors that influence demand for various types of menstrual management products, and in turn, how use of these products affect the functioning of sanitation systems in South Africa and India.

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