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Menstruation and adolescent girls' daily lives in rural Upper Egypt

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MENSTRUATION AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS' DAILY LIVES IN RURAL UPPER EGYPT

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INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a fact of life for 1.9 billion women and girls of reproductive age globally (UNFPA, 2021). The specific hygiene and health requirements of girls and women during menstruation are typically referred to as menstrual health management (MHM). According to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, women and adolescent girls should adopt hygienic menstrual management products that can be changed privately, and they ought to have access to soap and water for bathing and provisions for disposing of used/soiled menstrual management products (Phillips-Howard et al., 2016). At the individual level, there is a need for awareness and understanding of the basic facts about the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without anxiety or fear.

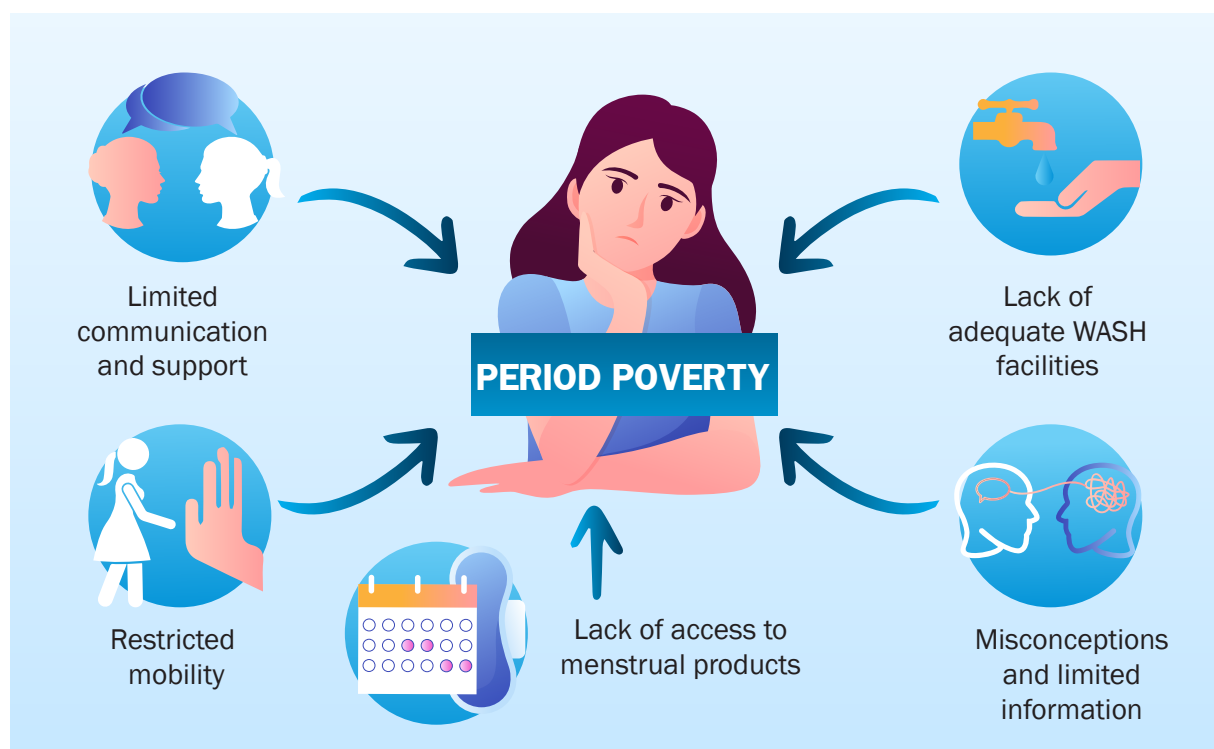
Very little is known about MHM practices among adolescent girls in Egypt. According to the 2014

Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE), one-third of respondents (33.7%) who had experienced menarche (first menstruation) indicated that prior to menarche, they did not know what menstruation was. Although the majority of adolescent girls (aged 13–19) reported that they used sanitary pads while menstruating (85.3%), the survey did not examine frequency of usage of sanitary pads, or other aspects of menstrual hygiene that may be compromised among adolescent schoolgirls residing in rural Egypt, where poverty and conservative gender norms are pervasive (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015).

To address this gap, the Population Council conducted a qualitative study to understand the menstruation-related attitudes, practices, and perceptions that shape adolescent girls' daily routines in rural communities in the governorates of Assiut and Sohag.

METHODS

Figure 1. Period Poverty Factors



The study used a period poverty lens (see Figure 1) to understand menstruation-related attitudes, practices, and perceptions. Period poverty results from poor or nonexistent MHM such as lack of sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, handwashing facilities, and/or waste management (Rodriguez, 2022). Lack of such information, products, or facilities creates a situation whereby women manage menstruation in ways that are often unhygienic or inconvenient, which can have significant negative effects on their health and wellbeing. This could translate into missed school days or reduced participation in daily activities, resulting in a further undermining of girls' and women's status and reinforcing gender inequalities (Kaur et al., 2018).

This study relied on qualitative methods, namely:

- in-depth interviews (n=15) with unmarried adolescent girls aged 13–16;
- focus group discussions with girls aged 13–16 (12 focus group discussions), mothers, fathers, and male siblings of adolescent girls (6 focus group discussions for each group); and

- key informant interviews (n=15) with schoolteachers, doctors/nurses, pharmacists, and community leaders.

KEY FINDINGS

I. COMMUNICATION ABOUT MENSTRUATION

The experience of menarche is traumatic for adolescent girls

Most adolescent girls were unaware of menstruation prior to menarche, leaving them unprepared and traumatized by the experience. The initial experience of bleeding caused considerable fear and made menarche a traumatic discovery for most of the girls. They felt shocked and afraid because of a lack of information or because of an association between bleeding and loss of virginity. Some also expressed shame, anxiety, or embarrassment, which placed a considerable burden on their mental health.

“When I first got my period, it was a surprise because I never talk about these things with my mother. I found blood, which frightened me, and I was totally unprepared. My reaction was to put toilet paper in my pants, and I kept it a secret from my mom for a whole year. I was too embarrassed to tell her.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“I was so frightened at the sight of blood. I did not know what the source was. What had made me bleed? I thought something bad had happened.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Mothers are not the primary source of information about menarche

Among adolescent girls who were exposed to information before getting their period, older sisters, school friends, cousins, and the inter-

net were their primary guides, as girls felt less embarrassed to discuss the matter with these sources.

“ I first learnt of menstruation from school. My school friends talked about the matter a lot.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ The internet did not leave anything undiscussed. It felt easier to obtain information from social media even though it is not always credible.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Girls were reluctant to ask their mothers about menstruation before menarche because of embarrassment, fear of judgment, and a perceived lack of interest or willingness on the part of their mothers. Another significant factor that

prevented many adolescent girls from initiating a discussion of the topic with their mothers was fear that their mothers would be suspicious of them and question their morals and behavior.

“ There is little talk between me and mom in the first place; there is no communication between us which makes me too embarrassed to talk to her about these issues.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

For their part, mothers said they were afraid to share information about menarche because they were embarrassed or ill-prepared. Others

wanted to guarantee a girl's chastity and innocence, so they avoided broaching the subject with their daughters.

“ We don't speak of it because we do not want to open her eyes to the matter. When she gets her period, we can then talk to her about it.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Mother–daughter communication after the first menses continues to be very limited

Mother–daughter communication occurs primarily upon first menses and is focused mostly on the practical aspects of menstruation and the responsibilities of adolescent girls. Provision of information on the biological aspects

of menstruation or emotional support during menstruation are almost nonexistent. Overall discussions between mother and daughter on menstruation are constrained by lack of information and embarrassment.

“ Once I got my period, I was too embarrassed and I panicked. My mother told me that all girls get their periods and there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. She then gave me a sanitary pad and told me to use it. She showed me the process and how to shower and wash up.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ I went and told my mom that I thought I had got my period. She asked me if there was a lot of blood but that was it. She did not ask any more questions and did not offer any advice since then.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ My daughter doesn’t tell me whether she is on her period or not. I can only sense it because she would look tired, and I don’t like asking her directly because of embarrassment. If she wants something, she will ask.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Communication with fathers and brothers about menstruation is taboo

As menstruation is considered a woman’s domain, communication on the topic between adolescent girls and their fathers or brothers is taboo. Communication about menstruation of-

ten occurs indirectly, such as when an adolescent girl asks her father for money or sends her younger brother to the pharmacy with a request for sanitary pads written on a piece of paper.

“ Talking about this topic is forbidden, even for the father himself. He relies on a mediator from among the people closest to her, but he does not talk to her directly about it.”

(Father of an adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ A girl cannot tell her father that she has her period and there’s blood. Yes, a father can buy her pads, and that’s when he knows that his daughter got her period, or sometimes my mother would tell him.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ My sister used to give me a piece of paper to buy her stuff from the pharmacy. That’s when I knew she was on her period.”

(Brother of an adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ When I see my daughter locking herself up in her room, avoiding interaction, and acting differently, the whole family becomes aware that she is menstruating.”

(Father of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Schoolteachers are a potential source of information and support for adolescent girls

Schools emerged as important sources of support for girls who did not receive sufficient support around menstruation at home. Female schoolteachers provided some guidance to girls in managing their period. Several girls pointed

to the helpfulness of informal advice and assistance from their teachers, especially regarding bathing and religious teachings in relation to menstruation. However, not all girls felt comfortable enough to confide in their teachers.

“ We try to learn from online content and sheikhs who speak about the matter in case we get asked by the students ... My relationship with the students, given that I am their Arabic and Religious Studies teacher, is closer than the rest, so there is an established bond and trust ... The girls come to me asking mainly about managing their menstruation, bathing, and how to prepare for prayers after their period ends.”

(Female teacher of religious studies, rural Sohag)

“ The schoolteachers introduced many of us to the topic. A lot of my classmates knew nothing about menstruation until our teacher talked to us about it in Preparatory 1. She gave them lots of reassurances. It was good.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

II. PERCEPTIONS OF MENARCHE AND MENSTRUATION

Parents and daughters have mixed feelings about menarche

For some girls, menarche may be a happy occasion, as it signals their transition to adulthood. However, with menarche comes some new restrictions on their behavior and mobility. For parents, menarche means that a girl has grown up, and it is testimony to her fertility. However,

menarche also signals the beginning of a burdensome phase for parents, as they need to get prepared for their daughter's marriage and enhance her marriage prospects by preserving her reputation.

“ My mom was so relieved when she knew I got my period. She was so worried that I wouldn't get it and would not be capable of getting pregnant.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ I have now grown up and there will be no more going out. Before menarche, I would go out and play. Now, it feels childish. I would feel embarrassed. I cannot wear tight pants like before. My life has changed. You have to wear the veil and you must pray because otherwise it would be haram [religiously forbidden]. You have now really grown up and there's a responsibility placed on you.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ Once I got my period, my mother sat me down and told me, that is it. I have grown and am now a lady, which means I can no longer come and go as I please. Every movement must be calculated.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ My mom told me that since I have got my period, I can no longer shake hands with males or even sit next to my male cousins.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ A mother gets sad, frankly, because she has entered the stage of distress and anxiety. She feels that her daughter has grown up and has entered the stage of expenses in preparation for her marriage.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“Parents worry because of the associated [marriage] costs and the impact this has on our livelihoods.”

(Father of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“It is inappropriate for a girl to go out once she gets her period. She has to stop dealing with males and restrain herself from going out because she is now a lady.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Menstrual bleeding is a source of pride and shame for girls

Overall, girls have no knowledge about the physiology behind menstrual bleeding or the significance of menstrual irregularities. While menstrual blood is seen as a source of pride, as it indicates that a girl is fertile and is testi-

mony to her not being pregnant out of wedlock, it is also depicted as dirty and something that should be expelled from a girl's body to maintain her purity and cleanliness.

“When I got my period, my mother was happy and finally calmed down. She was worried I wouldn't get it. It now means I can get married.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“This is bad blood, and it must leave the body.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“Menstruation cleans the body of all its impurities.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“Can the period blood get trapped inside a woman's body and cause complications? I also do not know what harm it may cause if it comes late. I once had it for a day, then it stopped. Four days later, I got a bit of spotting. But still, I did not ask or tell my mom. I was too embarrassed.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

III. THE EXPERIENCE OF MONTHLY PERIODS

Girls endure their menstrual pain silently

Hot herbal drinks are the preferred remedy for menstrual cramps, followed by painkillers in pill form. Painkillers via injection are not preferred by girls and mothers as they are believed to

cause infertility. However, such remedies are not always available outside the vicinity of girls' homes, for example at school.

“ I always feel abdominal pain, back pain, and exhaustion while menstruating. I try to relieve pain by drinking hot drinks, and sometimes by taking pills.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ If she is in pain, she should not rely on injections, but rather on pills from a doctor or a pharmacist.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ It is not allowed for menstruating girls to have injections, as pain-relieving injections can lead to retention of menstruation, which is very harmful.”

(Brother of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ I sometimes get my period while at school and it becomes an issue because there are no painkillers there. I am not usually prepared.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Girls face challenges in accessing sanitary pads

Almost all participants described sanitary pads as their preferred method for managing menstrual flow, describing them as convenient, hygienic, and reliable. However, girls face several challenges in accessing sanitary pads. A pack of 18 sanitary pads, according to interviewed girls, costs approximately 20 Egyptian pounds

(\$0.65), a cost that was considered high by some girls and mothers. Girls who lived in remote villages reported difficulties in accessing sanitary pads due to a shortage of pharmacies in those areas or due to a pharmacist being male. In the latter case, girls send their younger brothers to buy pads for them.

“ I would rather not eat to save up and buy sanitary pads for my daughter instead of having her use rags.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ My daughter would borrow money to buy sanitary pads rather than rely on rags. [Using rags] is a practice of the past.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“ If the person who works at the pharmacy is a man, I have to look for another pharmacy that has a woman instead.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ You cannot ask men to buy it [sanitary pads] for you. It's shameful because it's women's stuff. You can, however, write it down on a piece of paper for your younger brother and he can get it for you.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Girls use a number of unhygienic practices to overcome challenges in accessing sanitary pads

Girls employ a number of strategies to reduce costs in relation to sanitary pads, such as only changing a pad when it is full, or alternating between sanitary pads and cloth/rags, espe-

cially on days when their periods are lighter. Exchange of rags was reported by some girls and teachers.

“ Some girls change their pads twice or three times a day but I only change my pad when it is full.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“ I have a friend who lives in the middle of the farms, far away from any pharmacy. I gave her a rag to use. And I have done so myself when I do not have access to sanitary pads.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“When I do not have enough money, I use rags.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“Girls often do not know how to properly clean themselves and sanitize the rags. It becomes a bigger problem, especially if the same rags are used by several sisters.”

(Female teacher, rural Assiut)

Disposal of used menstrual products poses risks to adolescent girls and the environment

Girls invest considerable effort in concealing used menstrual products, either through putting them in the garbage can or throwing them in irrigation canals, flushing them down the toilet, or burning them. This practice is primarily driven by a belief that it is religiously forbidden (*haram*) for someone to see a girl's menstru-

al blood. Other reasons related to methods of menstrual product disposal were the offensive odor of the used pads and the lack of garbage collectors in rural areas. Girls who reported using rags washed them with soap and water and air-dried them.

“My aunt told me that it is haram for anyone to see it [the pad] so I need to throw it in a black plastic bag.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“I dispose of my sanitary pads either through burning them or through throwing them in a nearby irrigation canal.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“I learned from my friend that I need to remove the cotton from the used sanitary pad and throw it in the toilet, because it will emit a bad odor if I simply throw it in the trash can.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“After using the rag, I wash it myself so that no one will see the blood. I clean it well, using soap. And I usually leave them far away from anyone to air-dry so no one would see them.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

Girls bathe during menstruation despite their mothers' advice not to

Daily bathing was viewed by adolescent girls as essential for cleanliness and reducing body odor during menstruation. However, some mothers discourage their daughters from bathing or washing their hair during menstruation

for fear of hair loss. Another challenge related to cleanliness during menstruation, according to some girls, was limited water supply in their villages.

“Women not bathing during menstruation is a thing of the past. Now, she must bathe.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“My mom told me not to bathe while I am on my period. But I don't listen to her and I bathe every day.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“Mothers used to think bathing could stop a girl's period, but now we know it is not true.”

(Mother of an adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“If the water supply cuts off, it is a huge problem for the menstruating girl, especially regarding cleanliness and body odor. How can she cover that?”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“My mom told me to shower every day but not to wash my hair as it may eventually cause hair loss. Also, body hair removal is totally forbidden while you are on your period.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

IV. MENSTRUATION AND GIRLS' MOBILITY

School attendance is a challenge for girls during their period

During menstruation, girls often miss days of school due to feeling fatigued or for fear of leakage on the first days of the period. Participants used language like feeling “bad,” “stressed,” “tired,” “fearful,” and “wanting to cry” to describe the emotional distress they experience during their period.

Girls also miss some days of school because they also did not want others to suspect that they were on their periods as a result of asking for permission to go to the bathroom frequently.

“*I can't even get out of bed when I am on my period.*”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

If girls go to school during their period, they do not participate in physical education (PE) classes, and some do not attend recess out of fear of leakage. Some participants said that having

their period negatively affects their ability to socialize with their peers and undermines their concentration and academic performance in class.

“*My period affects my attention in class. I always feel tired.*”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

The difficulty of disposing of pads in school toilets was cited as another source of concern while at school. Girls were concerned that other

students using the toilet would see their soiled pads or menstrual blood in blocked toilets due to the lack of covered trash cans.

“*I go to school, but I don't go to the bathroom. I wait until I go home to change it [the sanitary pad] at my convenience. But I don't go to the school bathroom because there are a lot of people using it.*”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

Girls' activities and mobility are restricted during their period

There are many restrictions levied upon girls in rural Upper Egypt during their menstrual periods. This includes not allowing them to cook, knead dough, enter cemeteries, visit postpartum women, or enter cattle/poultry barns. The primary reason behind these restrictions are cultural and religious beliefs

that associate menstrual blood with impurity. Since it is believed in traditional Egyptian communities that menstruating women are unclean and impure (*negsa*), it is believed that the food they cook, the places they enter, and the objects they touch could become soiled and contaminated.

“A menstruating girl can't enter a poultry barn. How can I explain it? Her period blood is impure so the girl would pollute the space.”

(Father of an adolescent girl, rural Sohag)

“We do not cook because they [our families] feel disgusted.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“A menstruating girl should not visit a breastfeeding mother or her breast milk may dry up.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

“You see girls at school teasing one another, especially if they know that a girl is on her period or has stained her pants. It is very embarrassing.”

(Adolescent girl, rural Assiut)

CONCLUSION

Based on the above findings, period poverty can be detected among adolescent girls in rural Assiut and Sohag. Lack of information and emotional and practical support before menarche, as well as limited access to accurate information and material resources during menstruation, translate into material and psychosocial deprivation for girls and compromise their health and wellbeing. Moreover, misconceptions around menstrual blood position women

as “impure,” restricting their mobility and placing them in a more vulnerable position. Such restrictions may adversely affect girls' school attendance, limit their economic opportunities, and further exacerbate gender inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, a number of recommendations are suggested on the policy, programmatic, and research fronts.

1. Civil society organizations, in collaboration with designated government partners such as the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood and mass media, should rectify misconceptions around menstruation and promote intergenerational communication between mothers and daughters, while engaging fathers and male siblings to reduce stigma. Social media campaigns could be created, in partnership with the private sector, to allow space for open conversation about menstruation and to dismantle misconceptions around the topic.
2. Counseling services for women on family planning and maternal and child health should be expanded to include topics like MHM. Mothers' communication skills should be strengthened so they are able to discuss MHM and other sexual and reproductive health topics with their adolescent daughters.
3. Schoolteachers should receive training about puberty, and schools should provide accurate information about menstruation and address the complex emotional and physical changes that girls deal with during puberty by providing comprehensive reproductive health education from an early age.
4. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Population should collaborate on ensuring the provision of period pain remedies and sanitary pads in schools, and proper disposal facilities within school bathrooms.
5. Given the current surge in prices in Egypt, the private sector and civil society should introduce new menstrual products that are low cost and biodegradable and that could be produced by local communities.
6. Religious institutions should invigorate discussion among scholars, students, and the public on menstruation to dispel myths and misconceptions around menstrual blood.
7. Universities and research institutions should conduct quantitative research to provide timely data and explore the frequency of menstrual product usage and methods of disposal among various subgroups of adolescent girls.

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