

WASH Talk Episode 14 - Pad Man and Menstrual Hygiene Management

Show notes by WASH Talk host Andy Narracott

What effect has the Pad Man film had on the topic of menstruation in India?

- It has brought the topic into the public arena and triggered conversations around cultural issues of menstruation and sustainable menstruation, etc. As a result of popular culture, people have become more curious and interested, and this has certainly opened up a taboo subject, but economic deprivation still persists, which, Padma maintains, is the main cause of poor menstrual hygiene practices in India. Many low-income groups can still not afford disposable pads.
- Kathy maintains that disposable pads are a problem where solid waste management services are weak, which is the case in many low-resource settings. High-tech branded pads contain a high concentration of chemicals and plastics which takes hundreds of years to break down or require very high temperatures to incinerate which are rare in developing countries.
- Low cost pads pioneered by the likes of Pad Man would create mountains of waste if millions of women and girls were to start using them. Disposing of disposable pads in sanitation systems also presents many issues with functionality and emptying.
- Health risks associated with using disposable pads are related to social and psychological aspects, particular amongst adolescent girls.
- It is well established that infections of the female lower reproductive health tract result in adverse pregnancy outcomes. Padma's research shows infections occur when either disposable or reusable menstruation products are used. For reusable pads, it's because of improper cleaning, drying and storing practices, which can be linked to poor access to clean water and sanitation facility. With the disposable pad, it's because the frequency of changes is reduced because of inability to pay for an adequate number pads. So a product is only as good as how it's used. When the topic is taboo and there is poor education around menstruation, it's a breeding ground for poor menstrual hygiene practices. So what's needed is access to low cost, affordable reusable products, or disposable pads if that's what a woman or girl chooses to use, along with proper education and discussion in the classroom and the home to break down taboos.
- Use of disposable pads has increased in India as a result of government distribution of free or heavily discounted pads in schools, along with awareness raising programmes.
- But what remains a major problem is sufficient clean water for washing, cleaning of private body parts, and private space for changing and cleaning of reusable pads.
- Another problem is that awareness campaigns are also only targeting adolescent girls, so it will take another 30-35 years for all women of menstruating age to be covered.