**Menstruation in Rural Areas**

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Periods have long been a significant taboo in rural areas, where menstruation has been intentionally withheld from women under the guise of “protecting their chastity.” Unfortunately, this mindset has adverse effects on both their physical and emotional well-being. Traditionally, women in these regions have used rags and cloth to manage their menstrual flow, but due to the stigma surrounding periods and a lack of reproductive education, hygiene standards are low, leading to numerous cases of infections being contracted.  
Additionally, female family members often share the same menstrual rags, heightening the risk of urinary and reproductive tract infections. Unfortunately, schools lack education and awareness on this topic, and even within homes, discussions are rare among women. Many women still feel uncomfortable due to the gaze of leering shopkeepers and prefer to have their husbands purchase menstrual products for them.  
For the past three years, I have been organizing medical camps in my village, Alipur Kanju, located in the southern province of Pakistan. A considerable number of women suffered from reproductive and urinary tract infections due to the adoption of unhygienic methods during menstruation, which consequently resulted in infertility and complications during childbirth. Furthermore, the absence of soap, clean water, and proper bathrooms made maintaining hygiene nearly impossible. Many young girls remained uninformed about this natural process because mothers hesitated to discuss it, and schools failed to address these crucial issues, leading to a high dropout rate.  
The menstrual taboo perpetuates a sexist stereotype that impacts girls and women worldwide. This mindset needed to change. Regarding menstruating women as unclean and limiting their capabilities was ethically unacceptable. I devoted all my efforts to improve the welfare of women in my village, and the first step was education and awareness. Dispelling the notion that menstrual blood is different from any other bodily fluid was essential. Emphasizing the significance of regular bathing to prevent bacterial infections became crucial. I began organizing group discussions for women and, with the assistance of female doctors, informed them about various diseases caused by unhygienic menstrual practices. I also provided instructions on the proper usage of sanitary pads and other hygiene products. Though initially daunting, this approach eventually yielded results.  
Obtaining sanitary pads in my village was a challenge due to their limited availability and high cost. Fortunately, my collaboration with Khair provided a solution to this problem. Khair, an organization based in Karachi, offers a comprehensive solution to women’s healthcare. Its goals include raising awareness about menstrual and reproductive health, providing easy access to medical professionals and tests, and recently introducing Pakistan’s first period and pregnancy tracker along with subscription-based menstrual hygiene product delivery. The women in Alipur, including myself, are grateful to Khair for granting them consistent access to free sanitary pads, which are now available at every “Hati” (kiosk). Almost all the women and girls in my village and the surrounding areas use these products, resulting in improved health conditions and reduced infection rates.  
Women and young girls have gained newfound confidence, happiness, and better health. Previously, many girls dreaded their first period, often mistaking it for a grave situation. However, with the introduction of period education and informative lectures in schools, girls are now more informed and assured. Menstrual health should be a fundamental aspect of comprehensive sexuality education. Affordable and accessible hygiene products are essential to ensure that girls can manage their periods with dignity. In Alipur, women are now exploring methods to create sanitary napkins from sustainable and renewable materials, with the aim of making them available to women in nearby villages. My hope is that what has been achieved in my village can serve as an example for other rural areas in Pakistan, eventually eradicating the period taboo throughout the country once and for all.