

MEN – MISSING IN MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT DESIGN

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Abstract: Few men have dared to tread into the arena of menstrual management design. A biological phenomenon – a body expulsion unique to women, menstruation is connected to every man – through his mother, sister, wife, daughter, niece or aunt and yet it receives little focus. This paper tracks two sides to the story. The first side illustrates instances where men have not applied any creativity to menstruation management design and the consequence of this. The second side shows cases where creativity has been applied and how this has had a positive impact in improving women’s health. We focus on one movement in Southern Rajasthan, India, the *Surakshit Mahwari Abhiyan* or Safe Menstruation Campaign, that has the participation, sensitivity, creative contribution and support from men - critical components that are urgently needed but are still missing in the area of designing for women’s needs.

Keywords: *men, menstruation, creativity*

1. Introduction

Bathroom design, washroom design, bidets, commodes and exclusive sanitary fittings are much sought after creative systems and products for cleansing, urination and defecation, expulsions from the human body. There are very few creative healthy solutions for menstruation, specific to women. The word “men” may well be present in the spelling of menstruation; but largely this is where it ends. Many men are nervous about menstruation, whether it is speaking about it or even when buying menstrual products for their partners or other women in their lives (Smith, 2013) (Allen, Kaestle & Goldberg, 2010). The subject has been seen as women’s business and has never really been a part of larger design interventions. It has been well established by researchers that both men and women are equally creative (Baer & Kaufman 2006). When Adobe, the digital media solutions company commissioned a research on creativity, they reported the following “Whether you’re able to be creative or not has little to do with how old you are or whether you’re female or male, but it might depend heavily on where you live, how your boss treats you, and how you were educated.” (O’Dell, 2012). Gender never comes in the way of creative design processes, however in the area of menstruation management design a majority of men appear to have excluded themselves and have not put on creative caps. To be fair, women too have not always included men as this is seen as a topic not to be discussed openly with male members (House, 2012). Poor communication between men and women has resulted in many forms and degrees of silence around this subject rooted in superstition, shame, patriarchy and religious beliefs (Chawla, 1994)(Krishnan, 2006). This has caused a direct negative impact on women’s health and well being. Feminist Gloria Steinem in her article “If men could menstruate” looks at what would have happened if men magically started their periods. She correctly points out that there would have been many more products and options by now, across class and caste groups (Steinem, 1978). This

paper largely examines two scenarios, one where men have not been involved and the consequences of this non involvement and one where men have been creative and how it has contributed to women's special needs and well being.

2. Method and findings

- We first defined menstrual management design. This is detailed in Section 2.1.
- We visited three locations to substantiate the earlier claim that there are consequences when men are not involved and have not been creative. This is detailed in Section 2.2
- We looked at existing instances where men have made creative contributions and the impact that it has had. This is detailed in Section 2.3

2.1 Menstrual management design

The nature of the menstruation is such that to manage it requires both spaces and products. Products to manage this flow can either be disposable or reusable products such as plain cloth, sanitary napkins, tampons or menstrual cups. Spaces are places providing girls or women privacy to manage periods – manage means changing menstrual product and washing the product if it is a reusable one, this space will typically be a bathroom or washroom. Further the space to manage is a permanent or fixed at one spot. Menstrual management design includes creativity and considers:

- access to menstrual management products
- a private space to change the menstrual management product
- a shelf space or a hook (behind the door/ wall) - to keep / hang spare menstrual products as and when change is required
- access to water and soap and a space to wash product if it is a reusable one
- a place to hang and dry the reusable product
- a newspaper to wrap product if it is to be disposed
- a bin to dispose the used disposable product if it is a use and throw product

We defined Menstrual Management Design as - *a set of well designed creative products, spaces and systems, to efficiently maintain, catch, contain and absorb the discharged blood exiting from a women's body during a menstrual cycle or periods.* Further, creative in this context means use of imagination and intelligence to design the spaces and products. This was the frame work we used to assess men's creative role in the design of menstruation management.

2.2 When men have not made creative contributions – visit to rural locations

We visited three rural locations, a home based location, a school location and a work site location, so we could examine what was available for menstruation for women.

2.2.1 Location 1

We visited a village of around 250 houses, our first rural location in Southern Rajasthan in India. It is estimated that only 20 to 25 homes here have latrines. We saw a group of rural adolescent girls, heading out in groups toward spaces away from the main settlement. See figure no 1. These spaces, behind bushes and rocks, in isolated locations, make for latrines, spots for defecation and urination. For the sake of safety, girls and women go out in groups, there is fear of snakes, animal attacks and being molested by drunken men. Once they have attended to nature's call, since there is no space to change their menstrual product, women change when they return home. It is recommended that to maintain hygiene, a menstrual product be changed at least three to four times a day (House, 2012). However in the circumstances that are currently available, change can be done twice, at dusk and dawn under the cover of darkness so that no one can see. This compromises their health. If men in the community had applied some creative thinking and had developed safe and private spaces, these young women would have had safe options. Aside from the space, the second unsafe element in this scenario is the product itself, toward which no one has devoted any creative thinking to. Research has shown that the use of improperly maintained menstrual products can be reasons for infections in women. (House, 2012) Figure no 2 illustrates this very well, shown in the picture is a dirty piece of fabric used during menstruation potentially exposing users to fungal infections.

A larger picture is that an estimated 638 million people in India do not have access to toilets, (Chaudhary, 2013). A toilet is that first basic facility to manage menstruation, that first step to menstruation management design. The BBC website reported that there are more mobile telephones in Indian homes than toilets (Phones, no toilets, 2012), all pointing to economics, attitudes and aspirations, all of which govern and motivate the different actions of communities. Other researchers too have pointed out that motivation is a factor governing creativity (Chakrabarti, 2010). To understand this further we can examine Indian society. It has up to now sanctioned open urination for men, defecation is seen as a five minute job behind the bush, so there is no motivation to direct energy, creativity, money or time toward menstruation management design for women. Priorities are different, peer pressure is also a factor that decides what is spent in a family, for example a motor cycle will be purchased over construction of a bathroom (Murthy, 2014). At the end it is women then who bear the brunt, taking in all the inconveniences and danger in silence.



Figure 1. Rural adolescent girls going in a group



Figure 2. Cloth used for menstruation

Photo source: Author generated

2.2.3 Visit to Location 2

From many studies and reports we were aware that girl's needs are not taken into account during infrastructure design, impacting their future health and well being. The UNICEF website says "Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to dropping out, as many are reluctant to continue their schooling because toilet facilities are not private, not safe or simply not available." (Water Sanitation, n.d) This point was easily illustrated by the two pictures Figure no 3 and Figure no 4 showing existing toilet facilities at a government school at the rural location. The first uncreative decision, made by the male construction engineers at the time when the building must have been made, is the location of the girls toilet - girls have to pass the boys urinals first to access the bathroom located after it. The boys urinals are open, so girls are embarrassed to pass by the urinating boys at break time. Once they reach the toilet, the space is unusable. It is not surprising at all when it is reported that many girls stay away from school during menstruation days. Patriarchal attitudes results in insensitivity of men which restricts creative thinking. In many cultures men stick to accepted social norms and do not change mindsets. This has also been very well pointed out by Karlyn Adams – she has said that an aspect to creative thinking is – "comfort in disagreeing with others and trying solutions that depart from status quo" (Adams, K. 2005)



Figure 3. Open urinal for boys with girls toilet next to it. **Figure 4.** The clogged girl's toilet
Photo source: R. Singh

2.2.4 Visit to Location 3

We visited a government construction work site location, where we spoke to 8 women working on an embankment project. These women leave home early in the morning in order to reach the work site on time. They spend the whole day working here even when they have their periods. We saw that at the work site there was no space or shelter to change their menstrual cloth, with the closest tree cover 800 meters away. See figure no 5. Additionally there is no running or stored water or soap for washing hands or washing their menstrual cloth. A small bamboo shelter may have sufficed as a temporary measure but even that was missing.



Figure 5 Women at work site. Photo source: Author generated

Applying the definitions that we formulated earlier on menstrual management design, from the above three examples it was evident that no creativity has been applied at all to either spaces or products. Theoretically women can take charge of their own menstruation management design, but they are not the decision makers specially when expenditure is involved. Patriarchy does not encourage women to think independently and take action on their own.

2.3. When men have been creative

There are examples where men have been creative and have stepped ahead to further the cause of supporting women making significant contributions in improving their reproductive health and well being. The menstrual management design examples mentioned here are broadly divided into two groups, products and spaces.

2.3.1 Products

Dr Earle Cleveland Haas was a general practitioner in America in the early thirties. He would often device his own versions of cotton and bandage plugs to control bleeding problems in his patients. Additionally he would observe how uncomfortable his female patients were during periods, wearing their bulky cloth products. He saw how this bandage plug method had potential to be translated into a regular routine menstrual blood absorbing product. After many experiments, he perfected an item that could be inserted into vagina, the tampon, which he patented in 1931. (History, tampon n.d) (Bellis, M, n.d). This was an invention that was liberating. Today, tampons are commonly available on the store shelf and are a special boon for sportswomen especially swimmers who are able to participate in competitions even during their periods.

There are other men who have made a difference to the menstruation management design scenario. A business example, is that of the three Johnson brothers, of the now famous multinational company Johnson and Johnson. The brothers created and sold their first batch of sanitary napkins in

the year 1896-1897. (Company History, n.d) At that time advertising sanitary napkins was not an option as silence on the subject of menstruation ran deep. Creative male store owners kept the Johnson pad packets discretely at the back of their stores, placing a small coin box next to it, so a customer could slip money into the box and take away a pad packet without anyone noticing. This earlier sanitary napkin was the start of an invention that revolutionized the way women could manage their flow, it gave women liberty from bulky inefficient options. The high technology gel based branded sanitary napkins such as Whisper, Stayfree, Sofy available in India today, is a product that has evolved from these early creations.

Another menstrual management design contributor is Arunachalam Muruganantham (Venema, 2014) (WS 1) – from South India, from a poor background with few resources, he reached his tipping point when he realized that like his wife there are thousands of women who use rags and cannot access clean products for their menstrual needs. He began his own menstrual management design journey and created a low cost machine to manufacture pads at a much cheaper price than the multinational company variety. Commonly known as the Menstrual Man he has a feature film made after his work. (Menstrual Man, 2014).



Figure 6. A. Murganatham next to his pad making machine
Photo Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26260978>

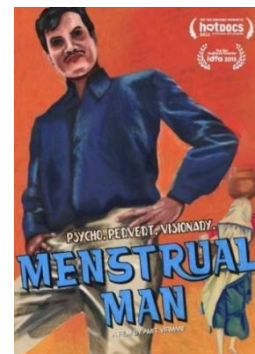


Figure 7. Film Poster of Menstrual Man
Photo source: www.menstrualman.com

2.3.2 Spaces

There have been other interesting initiatives, such as the creative one of its kind museum – a museum for menstruation that simply celebrates two things, the biological process of menstruation and menstruation management design. Harry Finley, managed the museum from his home in the years 1994 to 1998 which housed artifacts, posters, stories, poetry, paintings and many items related to dating from the 19th century. Subsequently the museum was converted into a virtual museum in 2000 and this continues to be the most well researched and extensive virtual site, popularly called the mum site - Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health (WS 2)

Another virtual creative space was started by a man wishing to remain partially anonymous, a blog called “Men in Menstruation” an open platform designed for men to fearlessly and anonymously discuss anxieties issues related to periods, covering issues from emotions to facts. (Men in Menstruation, n.d).

Anshu Gupa yet another man has made a significant contribution. He founded the NGO Goonj in India, (WS 3) working in disaster areas such as floods and earthquakes. During these emergency situations when people are completely displaced, this NGO plays a huge role in menstrual management design by making shelters exclusively for womens needs and providing clean menstrual cloth.

Revisiting the definition of menstrual management design, it is evident from all the above examples that products and spaces and systems that have been described have come about as a result of thinking, sensitivity and creativity

4. Collaborative steps toward menstrual management design

Taking all these efforts further and translating this into the next step was a huge challenge. A women’s rights activist Kailash Brijwasi – a man – who founded the NGO, Jatan Sansthan (WS 4) in Rural

South Rajasthan worked closely with the researcher - a woman, a designer and reproductive health activist of Vikalpdesign (WS 5), to support menstrual management design. Collectively their belief was that the root of menstrual management design lay in two sectors:

- 1) education and awareness work with rural adolescent boys and girls
- 2) developing a safe and healthy menstrual product

Together they designed a campaign the *Surakshit Mahwari Abhiyan* or Safe Menstrual Campaign in 2011, that works in many ways.

- It creates awareness about how to make menstruation safe by working together with both adolescents and their families.
- The campaign specially address adolescent boys to sensitize them early
- Through workshops, seminars and focussed group discussions it addresses myths and taboos.
- The campaign advocates with families to change attitudes to create private spaces for women.
- It advocates and encourages the use of reusable menstruation management options.
- It includes supporting media material on menstruation

Further Brijwasi's NGO actively supported the design and research of a reusable product, a cloth option, the *Uger* Sanitary Pad. We worked for more than 14 months experimenting with different prototypes for a design of an environmentally sustainable pad. The final design of the pads are shown in Figures no 10 and 11, they made of cotton fabric which is both non allergic and cool to the skin. The pads button down under the underwear similar to branded disposable napkins with wings. The ongoing research on *Uger* pads (Murthy, 2104) have shown that these pads can be washed and reused up to 60 times in contrast to 120 to 150 disposable sanitary pads that a disposable pad user will throw away in the same time period. Huge amounts of burden on the environment are thus reduced by the use of reusable. *Uger* pads are now produced at a small production centre. This is run by 5 women from a lower economic community who stitch these pads, which give them a supplementary income. This is another successful example of when men have come out of their comfort zones.



Figure no 10 and 11. *Uger* reusable pads made from cotton fabric Photo source:Author generated

5. Conclusion and way forward

For men to think creatively about women's issues - is not as complex as it sounds, it is fairly simple, men have to just come forward and put themselves in the place of women they live and work with, creative simple design solutions will then emerge. We use our last simple example to illustrate creative menstrual management design. A school administrator Vijay Joshi (a man), working at a private school in Udaipur, India, was inspired when his daughter started her periods and would keep looking for newspaper to wrap used pads. He simply got bunches of newspapers hooked to the bathroom window for wrapping and disposing used pads. He ensured that papers were always there for girls and that the paper stock was always replenished. This simple action reduced stress for teachers and students. For the cleaners who took away the menstrual debris, this was a big advantage as they were no longer directly handling the bloodied used pads.

While this paper highlights the work of few men, there are many other efforts that have not found a place in these writings, we acknowledge this humbly. However even if we were to include ten more examples of men's creativity in this area, these numbers are too few and what is available for women today in the menstrual management design space is not enough. Men are uncomfortable and do not enter into this space easily. The tampon inventor Dr Haas and the Johnson brothers were already in a medical space, so they came into this field with greater amount of ease. Additionally the Johnson brothers had a business motive when they marketed their sanitary napkin, motivation pushes creativity as discussed earlier. Irrespective of this minor criticism, the positive impact on women by these efforts is tremendous and needs to be applauded.

In the framework of creativity much has been written about the Indian design innovations *Jugaad*. From the book *Jugaad Innovation*, the word is defined as – “*Jugaad* is a colloquial Hindi word that roughly translates as an innovative fix, an improvised solution born from ingenuity and cleverness. It is a unique way of thinking and acting in response to challenges.” (Radjou, N., Prabhu, J. & Ahuja, S., 2013) *Jugaad* typically provides ‘make shift’ very intelligent solutions. In the menstruation management design space, even *Jugaad* has no place. We have so far not come across any simple creative design solution or menstruation. When we did a google search on “*menstruation and jugaad*”, it sadly lead us to A Muruganatham's work mentioned earlier, (WS 6 & WS 7)which to our mind is not *Juggad* at all. It is a robust piece of work. He has made a very significant and heroic effort to give women pads at a cheaper cost and applying the word *Jugaad* to his work undermines his innovation.

Menstruation management design is a complex challenge and largely, it has been left to women to manage on their own or left to the medical community to come up with solutions. It must move away from this framework and the focus must shift. Menstrual management design needs a mindset change and a huge thrust.

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WS 7 - <http://www.jugaadu.com/jugaad/mini-sanitary-napkin-making-machine>