

Lack of Access to Sanitary Pads for Highlanders a Grave Concern

Mr. Chayku (Bhutan)

Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan kingdom with a population of a little over 800,000 people is located in the mountains in South Asia, under the umbrella of the Tibetan Plateaus. It is most often called the last Shangri-La and the happiest country in the world. It is perceived as a land of perfection. However, if one dives deeper down into the valleys and mountains, lifestyles show a mixed picture.



Gasa Village. Source: Tourism Council of Bhutan website

The serenity of the mountains, home to highlanders and nomads, holds multiple promises, some of which are wonders in the world. However, the inhabitants cope peacefully with the harsh realities of being so detached from the world. Among the many hardships nature has brought upon them, the lack of access to sanitary pads for girls and women is a sad tale.

Organizations and institutions in the country advocate for the use of sanitary pads to ensure hygienic lifestyles and more focus is being given to this issue during Menstrual Hygiene Day. However, this message does not seem to have crossed the valleys and mountains. The women in these communities have not heard of either menstrual hygiene or sanitary pads. Only a few have thought that menstrual hygiene and sanitary pads are good for their personal and family health until recently.



Advocacy on the use of sanitary pads. Source: BBS archive

Shouldn't the biological process in women's body which allows for the conception of offspring and ensures the sustainability of generations, be celebrated? Of course, but for a disturbingly large amount of world's female population, the few days of menstruation every month is a source of significant shame. They are subjected to being stereotyped, ignored, ostracized, or humiliated by individuals, neighbors, communities, and even their own families. Particularly in Bhutan, the social stigma attached to menstruation is still intact in its cultural norms and principles. The wide acceptance of this social stigma on the nation's cultural and religious perspectives has created even more discomfort.



BBS staff during Menstrual Hygiene Day 2018

Bhutan will emerge from its position as a least developed country in a couple of years and its economy is expected to develop dramatically. However, access to sanitary pads is and will remain a major issue for quite some time. Those who live in the mountains of Gasa, Laya and Lunana have been coping with this issue under very unfriendly conditions for quite some time.

Although the community of Lunana has long faced harsh realities, including snow, glaciers, teeth-gritting cold and other hardships, many of the members of the community there did not even know about the existence of sanitary pads, with the exception of the younger generations. For women in those communities, access to sanitary pads and other health facilities is an everyday challenge. While most women use pieces of cloth during their periods, others use nothing at all.



Women of Lunana. Source: Google

Tshering Dema from Toenchoey in Lunana shared how frightened and scared she was the first time she experienced menstruation. Because she thought she was the only one experiencing that, she kept quiet, fearing stigma and discrimination. Without any knowledge about sanitary pads, she has spent her entire life using pieces of cloth. “It’s very uncommon for women of my age in the community to use sanitary pads,” said Tshering. She is aware that the use of these cloths is not hygienic and that she might come down with an infection, but she says there are no alternatives. Another woman, Dorji Pem, shared the same view on how elderly women in the community do not use sanitary pads.

In contrast, Tshering’s daughter, Tenzin Dema, who is 16 years old and a student at one of the schools in the capital is very familiar with menstrual health and hygiene. The efforts and support provided by the younger generations have helped a few women become familiar with menstrual health and hygiene and use sanitary pads. However, they now face a different issue: lack of access to sanitary pads.

With the nearest shop a distance about 10 days away, women in these communities compromise their health and hygiene on a daily basis. Even the easiest way to access sanitary pads requires them to transport them in bulk all the way from Punakha or Gasa which requires the women to pay three to four times the actual cost of the pad. With the people’s livelihood solely dependent on yak herding, this is a luxury that most are unable to afford.



**Men celebrate and support menstruation hygiene
Menstruation Hygiene Day 2018**

Access to sanitary pads is very important for women's empowerment and is something that will enhance their productivity as well. But the lack of access to proper menstrual hygiene has impacted girls and women in a serious way. School-age girls miss school and some even quit after they get their period. The survey findings of Knowledge, Attitude and Practices on Menstrual Hygiene Management conducted in 2017 by the Department of Education and UNICEF showed that 48% of girls missed school because of issues with menstruation.

While different levels of advocacy are being carried out in the country, there have been intense efforts to make sanitary pads accessible in many places. But for girls and women in the mountains, it remains a concern. After all, it is the right of girls and women to have proper and easy access to healthy menstrual hygiene.