

Sanitary pad remains a rarity in the haors old cloths cause severe infections

Tanvirul Islam, Dhaka Post, February 26, 2023

22-year-old Rima Khatun is a resident of Laimpasha area of Itna upazila of Kishoreganj District. As she lives in a remote haor area, she has no access to education and health awareness. Old cloths are her only recourse during menstruation. She neither has seen a sanitary pad nor knows the name of one.

Sadia Akhter is 17. The teenager is from the Charigram area of Mithamain upazila of the same district. Being a girl from a low-income family, using pads is a luxury for her. Even though she has heard about it, she has never seen one let alone used it.

The story of 18-year-old Taslima Sultana, a resident of the Choddoshoto area of Sadar upazila, is different. Having grown up in the area near the district town, she has a good idea about taking care of the body during periods. However, due to the 'taboo' of using pads in the family and society, she cannot use them regularly. Whenever she saves some pocket money, she buys and uses them herself.

During our visit to various areas of Itna, Mithamain and Nikli Haor, we found out that the use of sanitary napkins or pads among girls in these areas is very low. Health experts consider the high price of the product, social taboo, lack of availability in local markets, lack of family awareness, lack of publicity about pads and lack of awareness about the health risks of using old cloths as reasons.

The more remote the area, the less usage of pads

Dhaka Post surveyed at least 50 girls including school and college students in three upazilas of Kishoreganj district to get the real picture of the usage of pads by girls in the haor area. The survey showed two patterns. The usage scenario in remote areas is dire. However, the comparative usage is somewhat higher in some neighbouring areas including the upazila township.

We spoke to 15 girls in the Laimpasha, Mriga, and Amirganj areas of Itna upazila, 11 of whom had never used pads. And the remaining four used it occasionally but not regularly. When asked about the reasons for not using pads, six of the girls told us that they did not know anything about sanitary pads and never even heard the name. The rest of the girls had high prices as their first reason for not using the hygiene product. To them, the pad was expensive to use because of its high price. The second reason was the unavailability of sanitary pads in the neighbouring markets.

We visited various areas of Chhatirchar, Dampara, and Jaroitola of Nikli upazila. The habit of using pads was very low among the girls. Among the 15 girls we talked with 12 had never used a pad. The remaining 3 bought and used them multiple times out of curiosity but not regularly. Those who were not using them said that the price of the pads was high. Also, they felt

embarrassed to ask their parents for pads. Meanwhile, pads were not available in distant village markets even though they were available in markets around the upazila.

We talked to 20 girls from Charigram and adjacent areas of Mithamin Sadar upazila. Everyone knew about pads. But only eight of the 20 girls used them regularly, six used them occasionally, and the remaining six did not use them at all. We also talked to 10 girls studying in schools and colleges in the Choddoshoto area of Sadar upazila. Four of them used pads regularly, two used them occasionally, and four did not use pads. Those who did not use pads used cloths instead.

Three-fourths of teenage girls do not use pads regularly

Till now there is no research in the country on the use of pads by adolescent girls in the haor region. However, few studies are comparing the pattern of the usage of pads among girls in urban and rural areas. A study by the Department of Population Sciences of the University of Dhaka suggests that the use of pads among school-college-going teenagers (14-19 years) in rural areas was 34.7 per cent and 41.7 per cent in district towns. Overall, 37.7 per cent of adolescent girls used sanitary pads regularly in rural and urban areas. Among the users, 35.2 per cent of girls used pads occasionally and used cloths. Also, 18.7 per cent used old cloths regularly, and 8.4 per cent used new cloths regularly.

The survey also said that more than three-fourths (76.1 per cent) of adolescent girls could not use sanitary pads regularly due to a lack of pads at home during menstruation. As a result, 66.2 per cent used old or new cloths, 28.4 per cent borrowed sanitary pads from others or took other measures.

The study also found that about three-fourths (71.1 per cent) of girls who used cloths during menstruation reused the same cloths. About 57 per cent of girls used water and soap to clean their cloths when reusing. Only 7.4 per cent of girls used water after washing.

Almost all (98.8 per cent) girls washed their genitals during menstruation. 44.2 per cent of them washed their genitals three times a day, 33.7 per cent washed four or more times, and 8.4 per cent washed once a day. About 41 per cent of them used only water to wash their genitals. Urban girls were more likely to wash their genitals four or more times a day than rural girls.

Pharmacy out of pads; vendor says ‘no one ever asked’

Dhaki Union Health Service Center of Itna upazila has four medicine shops in the market, but sanitary pads were not available in any of them. When asked for pads from a seller, he said, ‘This is the first time I have heard of sanitary pads.’ When we asked another store the reason for not having pads, the vendor replied that sanitary pads were not prevalent in this area. No demand for pads ever came from anyone. A shopkeeper named Jasim said, ‘Most of the people in the haor area are illiterate. They have no idea about health awareness.’

Even though pads were not found in the pharmacy in the Charigram market of Dhaki Union, a cosmetics shop named ‘Saj Saaj Ghar’ had them.

In this context, trader Jahangir Alam said, ‘Eight to ten girls come to my shop every day to buy pads. I sell one to two carton pads. It was not so popular a few years ago. Sometimes one or two girls would come, Freedom and Senora Pads were available then. Then came SMC’s Joya Pad. In Joya pads, there are variants with belts and those without belts.’

About the price of sanitary pads, he said, 'We sell Freedom at Tk 100 per packet. One large pack of Joya pads containing 8 pieces costs Tk 60. There is a smaller pack of five pieces, which costs Tk 35. The large pack of Joya pads with belts costs Tk 70. The small pack costs Tk 40. I also sell Senora 10-piece pads for Tk 100. But overall, Joya's single pack is more popular.'

A lack of awareness exists among the parents

We met Aminul Islam in Dhaki Bazaar. Aminul, a father, had never heard the word pad. He said, 'This is the first time I came to know about it from you. Before this, I have not heard any discussion anywhere.'

When asked what the female members of the family use during their periods, Aminul said, 'I know they use old cloths. I have a daughter, she never said she needed something like that either. I never heard from my wife. I don't know what happens if you use it or not.'

When asked another trader, Gafur Mia about pads, he told us, 'Three of my daughters are married and one more is at home. Never heard of pads from their mouths. I only know that they use old cloths during menstruation.'

When asked whether he knew about the risks of using cloths, he replied, 'I don't know if it causes any problem. However, I heard from the girl's mother that she sometimes has problems and buys medicine and takes it. She never asked for money from me for medicine for these problems. When I talk to the girl's mother, only then she tells me.'

We spoke to the driver of a rented motorcycle who lives in the Mithamain Sadar area. He was earlier working in a pharmaceuticals company in the district town. He told us that his family is aware of the usage of pads. He never allowed his only daughter to use old cloths. This guardian named Khokon Sarkar said, 'When my girl needs something, she tells her mother. I also told my wife to keep extra pads at home. I and my family are aware of this.'

Health centres are out of pads for three months, 416 pads were allocated in four years

Currently, there are more than 3,000 Union Health and Family Welfare Centers under the Department of Family Planning across the country and thousands of Union Sub-Centers under the Directorate of Health. These health centres are supposed to provide regular health services as well as sanitary pads and other materials to the girls completely free of cost. However, apart from some regular health care products, no other equipment was regularly available in the Union Health Service Centers in the haor area.

Faisal Ahmed, Deputy Assistant Community Medical Officer of Dhaki Union Health and Family Welfare Center of Mithamain Upazila, said, 'We were allocated only 416 sanitary pads in the last four years. We received them in 2022. Our health centre ran out of pads on October 4 last year, but the newer ones haven't arrived yet. When we contacted the upazila office, it said that there was no allocation.'

Referring to the horrifying picture of using old cloths in the haor area, he said, 'A lot of girls from areas far away from health centers are lagging in the use and awareness of pads. Although girls from neighbouring areas can come to the health centre regularly, it is very difficult for girls to come from distant villages. Most of them use old cloths instead of pads. We have many limitations. We don't always have a supply of pads. Many came to collect pads and had to return

empty-handed multiple times. But if we get a regular supply of pads, we can distribute it to more teenagers.'

Faisal Ahmed added, 'There was no awareness about the use of pads in haor area before. They didn't even know about the pad. However, since the start of free pad distribution in our health centres, people started using it. I see a lot of enthusiasm among teenagers for pads these days. They come to us as soon as they run out of pads and inquire about when they will be distributed again. This means that there is a demand for pads.'

Young girls facing various complications from the use of cloths

When asked what complications patients come with due to the usage of old cloths, Faisal Ahmed said, 'Patients come to us with various complications including urinary tract infection, urine infection. Most of them come with urinary tract infections. I have treated about 10 teenage girls with this infection in the last month. About 10 to 15 people come every month. Apart from girls aged 13 to 19, women of various ages visit us. We provide counselling and preliminary treatment to the patients. If there is a case with serious complication, we refer them to Mithamain Sadar Hospital.'

When asked about the role Union Health Center plays in creating awareness among teenagers and their parents, the officer further said, 'A special class is conducted at our teen corner every week (Tuesday) for the awareness of teenagers. 10 to 15 students attend each class. Also, Deputy Assistant Community Medical Officers visit four schools every month. We provide lessons on various topics including school health education, what to do in adolescence, hygiene, child marriage and eve-teasing. Parents in the haor area are not aware of this issue at all. But we are calling them and counselling as much as possible.'

There is a big difference in the usage of pads in cities, villages and haors

Md. Zakiul Alam, Assistant Professor of the Department of Population Sciences of the University of Dhaka University, was one of the members of a research team that worked on comparative pad usage among women in urban and rural areas.

Regarding the research, he told Dhaka Post, 'The main objective of our research was to find out the hygiene practice in urban and rural areas. We have tried to figure out whether women use water properly during periods, whether they use pads, or whether they use old cloths, whether the cloths are washed properly or not.'

The study revealed a large difference in the usage of sanitary pads in rural and urban areas. And the reason for this difference is the rate of education. For those who don't use pads, some use old cloths, some use new cloths. We even found unhygienic practices in some cases. However, the practice of using pads is fairly high in urban areas.'

Zakiul further added, 'We found 34.7 per cent usage in rural areas. However, the scenario of the haor area is bad as assumed. This area was dubbed 'hard to reach'. There are no markets nearby in these areas. The literacy rate is low. People's standard of living is very low. For those who know about pads, using cloth is more comfortable than walking two or three miles to buy one. Our survey in the rural areas was mainly among school-going teenagers, who were fairly educated. But most of the girls in the haor areas do not continue with their studies after a while. As a result, they lack the message of awareness.'

‘Some of the users use pads regularly, some use them occasionally, and others use cloths instead of pads. One of the major parts of our study was to determine whether they use the same cloth over and over again or not. We found that 71.1 per cent of the responders reused the same cloths. We asked them whether they use soap or antiseptic for washing. We got a good response. 7.4 per cent said, they wash the cloth only using water.’

He said, ‘How frequently they change their cloths or pads was also a big factor. We found out that 49 per cent changes 3 times daily or more. 40 per cent changed twice a day. And 10 per cent of users changed their cloth or pads once a day. In the haor area, the situation might be worse.’

Risk of infection from using old cloths

Dr Sabikun Nahar, a distinguished gynaecologist and associate professor at Dhaka Medical College, has been working on the health management of women during menstruation.

When asked about the probable complications caused by using old cloths instead of pads, she said, ‘Using old and unhealthy cloths can cause various types of infection. Such as urinary tract infection and vaginal yeast infection and urine infection.’

She further added, ‘If there is an infection of the genitals, then there would be chronic pelvic pain, that is, a lot of pain in the lower abdomen. Pain is felt while walking and working. It also causes infertility. She will also have painful micturition. Also, it will be painful for her to have sex with her husband. She will always complain of pain. She will feel pain in the activities that we do normally. Even in the later stages of the infection, there will be complications with childbirth.’

Regarding the cause of the infection, Dr Sabikun Nahar said, ‘If someone uses the same cloth for a long time, does not wash it well with soap and does not dry it in the sun, then there will be a chance of infection. If she discards the cloth and uses a new cloth, the risk of infection will be less. But many girls in rural areas do not know about it.’

She added, ‘As there is an awkwardness among the girls living in rural areas about menstruation, in most cases the girls do not wash the used cloth properly. Even if she washes it, she is not drying it under the sun in front of others. She keeps it in a damp place. If there is a fungal infection in that spot of dampness, its use can lead to a urinary tract infection. Sometimes this infection goes up through the menstrual tract and can lead to pelvic inflammatory diseases. It can even lead to infertility.’

Sabikun Nahar also said, ‘Yes, it is true that not everyone can use pads. Nor will it be possible to deliver pads to everyone right now. Under these circumstances, those who use cloths, they must follow hygiene. Regularly used cloths should be washed thoroughly and dried thoroughly in the sun. It is best to always use new cloths. Throwing away a cloth after use and using a new cloth later. We suggest that cloth should be changed every 3 to 6 hours. If someone is experiencing a heavy menstrual flow, then cloths may need to be changed every two hours.’

Lack of awareness, there is no effective action

Dr Sabikun Nahar also said, ‘About 40 per cent of the patients who come to our gynaecologists, report period-related problems. From mothers to daughters, everyone goes through a tough time during periods. Although there is a fair amount of awareness about the issue in urban

areas, there is no awareness about hygiene, or menstrual management, in suburban areas. Most of the girls in those areas do not know what to do at that time. There is not even any vigorous effort to create awareness among them. There aren't many books or reading materials about the issue in the country, no one even talks about it.'

This female doctor of Dhaka Medical College also said, 'There is no alternative to awareness. In this case, we have to take responsibility. Those who are educated elders of the family should speak. It's not something to hide. Many girls do not know that there is such a thing as pads, which can be used. You and I cannot do much by speaking, the society and the state will have to.'

Mentioning that building awareness should start early, Dr Sabikun Nahar added, 'We can use our education system. There is no discussion of this topic in our textbooks. As I work on the subject, I went through various class textbooks to see if there is anything on period management. But there is no category where there is at least a separate topic or paragraph on this subject. I think when a boy and girl reach puberty, there should be a discussion about these issues in every class. Otherwise, our children will not get used to these things. People will continue to succumb to various diseases and the number of deaths will continue to increase day by day.'

Use of cloth due to the high price is not justified: SMC

'Many people are not using the pad in haor area due to high prices' In this context, Laila Noor Nishi, deputy manager of SMC, the manufacturer of Joya Sanitary Pads said, 'If you compare our quality with other companies and compare the price, you will see that there is no one comes even close. Our pads are way cheaper than others. Those who say that they cannot use the pad due to the high price, are not providing a very logical reason. I think collecting 30/40 takas in a month is not difficult for any girl.'

She added, 'I think there is certainly a lack of awareness. Because a girl isn't using pads due to its high price, maybe she is buying two fair and lovely creams. But the sanitary pad is more important for her well-being than the fair and lovely cream. We need to work more on creating awareness. It turns out that a girl living in a village tells her father about her needs in terms of clothes, and cosmetics, but shies away from talking about her need for sanitary pads. As a result, she is not using it. But even if she shies away to talk to her father, she always has her mother to talk to. I think these issues should be discussed not only with the mother but also with the father. We are working on this. Everyone should come forward to raise awareness.'

When asked whether there is any plan to reduce the price of pads, she further said, 'There is no opportunity to reduce the price of pads at the moment. Because the value of the dollar has gone up, the cost of raw materials has gone up, the wages have gone up, as a whole, we are not doing very well.'

Laila Noor Nishi also said, 'We are working on the availability of the pads in various remote areas of the country including the haor areas. We know that there is far less use of pads in the haor region in comparison to other parts of the country. The main reason for this is transportation problems. In haor regions, the distance from one village to another or from one market to another market is very long. Besides, due to the lack of roads and vehicles, girls cannot go to the market to collect their pads. Another thing is that those areas are generally

very underdeveloped and have a low rate of education. Lack of awareness also plays a big role in not using pads in this case.'

Ensuring action after acknowledging limitations

The program manager of the Department of Family Planning (MCH, ARH) Dr Manzur Hossain admitted the scarcity of pads in the haor area and the subsequent health risks of using old cloth as an alternative. He told the Dhaka Post, 'Provision of sanitary napkins has been included in our program for the last three/four years. We are still not able to meet the total demand that comes to us.

'Basically, we have operational plans (OP) every five years. The demand letter for the next five years is prepared there. Recently, our previous OP activities ended. The work of creating the next OP has started again. In this OP we would like to keep more allocation in this sector. Already our strategic investment plan has been completed, now we will determine the amount of pad required for the next 5 years and seek approval from the government. The government will allocate us a fund accordingly.'

Dr Manzur further added, 'When we distribute sanitary pads to our centres, we try to distribute equally to each centre. If any centre runs out of pads, the rule is to send us a requisition. In that case, we may be able to give an allocation from our OP. It depends a lot on demand and supply. We usually try to send pads to a place as soon as we get the requisition.'

He urged for further awareness and said, 'Health risks cannot be reduced by providing free pads only. In this case, everyone needs to be aware. We not only provide pads among teenagers; we also have awareness programs on how to use them and period complications. We also make the parents aware of the matter. Maybe we can't do as much as needed, but we do our best. Our manpower is limited in various rural areas including the haor region. If we can have more manpower, every activity will be more dynamic.'