Exploring Solidarity in Working Towards Menstrual Health Education in India

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Abstract

In India, where menstruation is treated as a conversational taboo, discussions and interactions around menstrual health have traditionally been challenging. The most prevalent approach to deliver information on this topic is via school curricula, which do a poor job of covering complete ground. Given the lack of open discussion, the current approach furthers the transfer of stigma, taboo, and myths to the next generation. We aim to develop an understanding of practices associated with menstrual health, including information seeking, information dissemination, menstrual cycle tracking, hygiene, and management in India. This contextual understanding of menstrual health practices would then form the foundation for exploring the space of technology design for ICT-based interventions across the sub-cultures that exist across India. In addition, we would like to cultivate solidarity in addressing these issues that individuals face, in varying capacities, across the globe.

Author Keywords

Menstrual Health; Menstrual Health Education (MHE); Menstrual Tracking; HCI4D; ICTD; India

Introduction

In India, menstruation and related practices are treated as a conversational taboo, impacting open discussion on the subject. This impact is also evident from the number (24%)

of young girls who skip/drop out of school because of their period [2]. There is limited or no discussion on the subject in both personal and non-personal settings. Being embedded in a society of individuals who have incomplete and/or incorrect information on menstruation and menstrual health poses various challenges for the menstruating sex. For example, a study from central India revealed that only 3% of girls received premenarchial information from their teachers and 24% were uninformed about menstruation when they experienced their menarche [5].

Current approaches to menstrual health education, where open discussion is avoided, have resulted in various fragmented sources of information on the subject. Curious adolescent minds put together scattered information that they get from TV, newspapers, peers, school, and the Internet to develop their attitudes and understanding on the subject. These sources, mostly targeting women audience, provide incomplete or incorrect information, thus propagating associated myths and taboo.

The existing information gap has also been identified and acknowledged by the government and various practitioners in the field. In 2015, the Indian government adopted National Menstrual Hygiene Management Guidelines [11]. Menstrupedia [10] offers a friendly guide on managing menstruation and its related aspects via an online platform and an educational comic tailored for young girls (9-14 years). Similarly, various NGOs (*e.g.,* Sachi Saheli [13]), and more, have been contributing to the domain. Also, a Bollywood film depicting the journey of Arunachalam Muruganantham—Pad Man of India—was released in February 2018. Though all these initiatives are directed towards a progressive and more accepting society; they are fragmented in nature in terms of content, access, and availability. There is a need to deliver comprehensive, clear, and

concise information about menstrual health to circumvent associated stigmas and taboo by encouraging open discussion on the subject. Given the rise in mobile phone and internet penetration in India [12], our objective is to explore mobile and web-based ICT solutions to spread awareness and encourage discussion while working towards emancipation of the subject.

Related Work
Recent HCI research has drawn attention to women's health focused on sexual wellbeing and intimate care [3]. Researchers have also explored advancement in technology to enhance interaction on otherwise conversational taboos (e.g., [1]). Menstruation is one such important aspect of women's health which receives tabooed treatment. Menstrual health has various dimensions associated with it—physiology, hygiene, and management, behavioral experiences, cultural and traditional values, to name a few. HCI researchers have explored and leveraged digital interaction technology to circumvent the associated taboo by supporting education around the subject. Jain et al. [9] designed a tablet-based digital game to educate adolescent girls about menstruation and associated myths. Epstein et al. [6] studied various menstrual tracking applications available to a US audience and found them to be gender-specific. Our own prior work [14] studied the information seeking and delivering practices on Menstrupedia, an existing digital platform designed specifically for Indian women and girls, to serve as a guide for periods. All such attempts target the menstruating sex and are designed for their informal, personal use. This typecasting/confinement of menstruation and its impact only to the menstruating sex has resulted in the isolation of non-menstruating sex from the discourses on the subject. There have been recent works like Ambient Cycle [8] and Crimson Wave [7], which explore novel methods to embed menstrual tracking information into daily life,

using ambient light and color emitting smart mirror respectively. Our goal is to extend this body of work further with our ongoing and future research.

Self-Disclosure

The authors were born, raised, and completed high school from India. We have been had our own set of experiences (positive and negative) with menstrual health education and its practices. The limited exposure received during adolescence,lack of access to authentic information on the subject, and treatment of the subject in professional and non-professional spaces motivated us to take on this topic of research. Throughout our lives, we have seen women being marginalized on various occasions due to others' incomplete information or misinformation.

Our Progress to Date

We have been working on the challenge of addressing Menstrual Health Education in India for the last 1.5 years, and have built several partnerships along the way. We first conducted a study to develop a deeper understanding of prevalent Menstrual Health Education (MHE) practices[1]. For this, we analyzed current curricular materials used for MHE, conducted an extensive survey, and interviewed adults (male/female), parents, teachers, social workers, and health workers in the space of sexual and reproductive health. Our findings indicated that approaches to MHE are frequently fragmented, often late (post-menarche), isolating and exclusionary (for the non-menstruating gender), lack parental involvement, and are impacted by the presence of several incomplete and incorrect sources.

We found that Menstrupedia is a platform that seeks to address some of the challenges that we unearthed in our

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[1]This paper is currently under review with TOCHI.

research, and we also conducted a mixed-methods investigation of this platform and the information it provides, as well as how this information is received by male and female youth. This research will be presented at CSCW 2018 [14]. Our analysis used Bardzell's feminist HCI framework [4] to analyze missed opportunities for learning via the platform, in addition to highlighting design implications for other MHE-focused approaches.

In future, our goal is to take this work forward and partner with diverse groups of stakeholders so that we might, in solidarity, take steps to address the marginalization of women across Indian settings on account of the lack of MHE. We understand that education may not be sufficient, but we do believe that it is an important, initial step.

Why Solidarity Matters

There are a number of reasons why we believe that attending this workshop will be of value to us, and to CSCW researchers as a whole. First, the area of women's health is still in nascent stages across the HCI community, and needs more attention—in India as well as in other countries. Second, although cultural taboos might be stronger in India and thus more visible, they are present in different measures and different manifestations across the world, and we would love to learn more from researchers on this topic. Even as we contribute an understanding of menstrual health and tracking practices from a country where menstruation has a deep cultural context and considered to be a conversational taboo, our work is in solidarity with the growing body of work on menstrual health, most of which constitutes studies from the Global North. We are united in our agenda of empowering women by informing and creating safe spaces for them. Even more broadly, we would like to work with others who are keen on developing feminist scholarship withing HCI, adopting an emancipatory action

research approach. Attending this workshop will give us an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of solidarity and identify how solidarity might shape our work, as we draw on the work of scholars such as Epstein et al. [6], who recently published their extensive study of menstrual tracking in the United States.

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