

## INTRODUCTION OF MENSTRUAL CUPS IN A LOW-RESOURCE RURAL-TRIBAL SETTING IN SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN, INDIA

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### Menstrual hygiene options for young women

In recent times, the issue of menstrual hygiene has come to dominate education and health programmes for adolescent girls in India. Various agencies and governments have been running information campaigns and promoting the distribution of sanitary pads, especially among school-going adolescent girls. However, supplies of sanitary pads through schools and village *anganwadis* have been periodic. The erratic nature of free supplies can lead to irregular use or necessitate purchase from the market — the cheapest pads cost Rs 25-30 per month's supply. While adolescent girls have been a priority, we at ARTH wondered about young rural and marginalized women at large — how did they manage, especially since no agency seemed to focus on their menstrual hygiene? We conducted a survey of 61 young (20-35 years) women in villages of tribal southern Rajasthan, and discovered that the majority were continuing with locally purchased red cloth or "laal kapda" purchased for Rs 40-50 from local shops, washed and dried in hidden places, and reused each month till they wore out, which was generally after 4-6 months. About 5-10% women did use disposable sanitary pads, especially if they had to travel during a period. Those using home-washed cloth pads complained of frequent leakage and staining probably from poor absorbency, suffered sticky discomfort (especially during summer) that made walking difficult, and were unable to travel to another town or the market. Some women said that during the monsoons when they had to work in the fields, a heavy shower could soak their clothes and if that happened during a period, the stains would embarrassingly be visible to all. Even women using pads had to carefully tiptoe out of the house unseen, to dispose them after use — it turned out that disposing pads in villages was not such an anonymous exercise after all. We therefore explored options and came to know of the menstrual cup, a menstrual hygiene device that has been around since the 1930s, but has never gained the popularity of sanitary pads. The menstrual cup appeared to be popular internationally among a fringe group of women, and in India largely among some well-educated urban young women. It was available only online, at prices upwards of Rs 500 each. We reviewed the literature about the menstrual cup, its efficacy and safety, and realized that it could potentially serve as a menstrual hygiene option, if offered at reasonable rate with education on correct use. We conducted a small pilot with 20 women over two summer months — they reported no staining or leakage and said that they could move freely outside the house -- one of them even said it felt like "there was no period at all". Soon after we launched the cup in our area, the Lancet Public Health journal published a systematic review<sup>1</sup> on use of the menstrual cup, that established its utility as a hygiene option, with the caveat that women needed education and support in the initial months, before they got used to the device.

### Launch of the RituCup

On 11 July 2019 (World Population Day) Action Research & Training for Health (ARTH) launched *RituCup* — a reusable menstrual cup made of medical grade silicone, that could be used for up to 10 years. At a large gathering of about 500 women from villages and a few urban localities of Udaipur and Rajsamand districts of Rajasthan, two women – Prof Vinaya Pendse, Retired Head, Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, RNT Medical College, Udaipur and Ms Usha Dangi, Deputy Pradhan, Block Panchayat Badgaon, District Udaipur, formally inaugurated the menstrual cup and called on assembled women to help improve menstrual hygiene practices in the districts. *RituCup*, positioned as a reliable menstrual hygiene option, was initially made available for Rs 250 a piece by about 600 Taruni Sakhis, ARTH's Community Health Entrepreneurs (CHEs) scattered across 530 odd villages and urban wards of three rural blocks and Udaipur city. All CHEs were trained to educate and support women through the initial 1-2 periods while they learned to use *RituCup*. Women were also offered the option of

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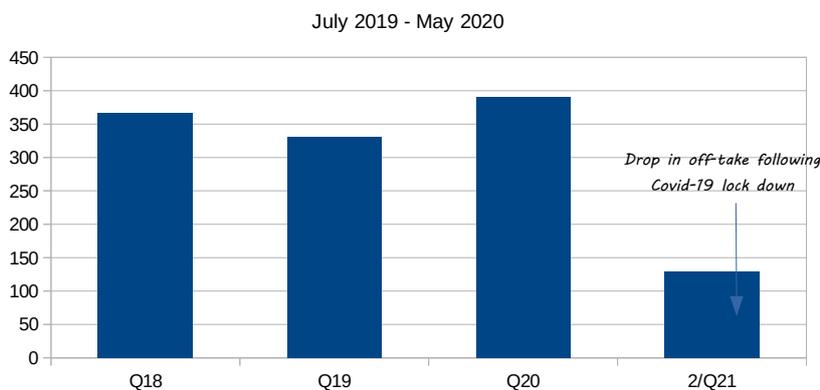
1. Anna Maria van Eijk, Garazi Zulaika, Madeline Lenchner, Linda Mason, Muthusamy Sivakami, Elizabeth Nyothach, Holger Unger, Kayla Laserson, Penelope A Phillips-Howard. **Menstrual cup use, leakage, acceptability, safety, and availability: a systematic review and meta-analysis.** *The Lancet Public Health*, 2019. Published online July 16, 2019  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(19\)30111-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30111-2)

contacting a toll free number to a day time call centre, for information and support as needed. Most Taruni Sakhis (CHEs) themselves tried out the cup and then began promoting it actively among women in their village or urban neighbourhood. We realized that while we might provide access to the cup, its ultimate popularity would essentially be user-driven. We took care to promote the menstrual cup as an option for menstrual hygiene management without running down current practices – women were free to rely on pads or home-washed cloth if they wished, and the CHEs also offered low cost sanitary pads. We developed promotional pamphlets and a video, positioning the RituCup as an “all-weather, all-activity, any-travel option” for women. To house the cup, we developed a durable storage bag with purse-string clasp, along with a simple package insert (in Hindi) to help the first time user. The cost of the cup to the owner worked out to Rs 4 to 2 per month, depending on use for 5 to 10 years. This was much cheaper than any other modern method, though this did assume prolonged use of a single cup. After a few months, we were able to source the cup at lower cost, whereupon the price could be brought down further – CHEs began to retail it at Rs 150 per piece.

### Progress (July 2019 – May 2020)

ARTH’s *RituCup* has gained rapidly in popularity, with 1215 cups having been purchased by women in the field area over 10 months since its launch. About 5 months down the line, we initiated a user satisfaction study whose results are currently being analyzed. Initial accounts reveal high levels of satisfaction with the menstrual cup on part of most women. The lock down following the Covid-19 pandemic has restricted mobility and growth in uptake of the menstrual cup by women. This might be due to cash shortage (women must spend more initially to buy the cup), and reduced mobility on part of satisfied users who have been encouraging non-users to adopt this option. In the coming months, we hope to further increase access to the cup and to perhaps scale up through savings and credit platforms that have large numbers of women members.

RituCup adoption by women in ARTH's field area



For more information on *RituCup*, contact [arth@arth.in](mailto:arth@arth.in) or call +91 9928461567

To view a video film about ARTH, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnLtvrNlmRs>