

INTRODUCTION OF MENSTRUAL CUPS IN A 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 in the tribal districts where we work — how did they manage, especially since no agency seemed to focus on their menstrual hygiene?

We conducted a formative study 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 (*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 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 neither easy nor anonymous.

We therefore explored options and came to know of the menstrual cup, a menstrual hygiene device that has been around since the 1930s, but never gained popularity like 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 — most 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 review¹ on use of the menstrual cup, that established its utility as a hygiene option, with the caveat that women would need education and support in the initial months, before they got used to the device.

Launch of ARTH's 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 contacting a toll free number to a day time call centre, for information and support as needed. Most

1. AM van Eijk, G Zulaika, M Lenchner, et al. 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)

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 cloth 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 was reduced further – CHEs began to retail it at Rs 150 per piece.

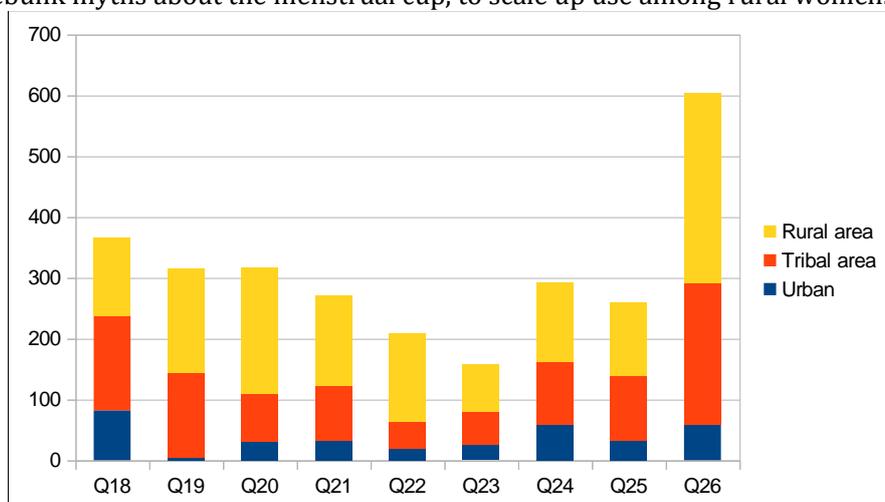
Progress

ARTH’s *RituCup* has gained rapidly in popularity, with around 2800 cups having been purchased by women in the field area as of September 2021. Women reported improved functional efficiency and mobility offered by cup. *I can jump, dance with the cup on and can go anywhere without fear of staining...* {26 year old, tribal woman, completed primary school, married, 2 children}

Being able to manage period in a private and dignified manner was basic requirement women talked about and menstrual cup fulfilled their requirement by maintaining privacy during periods.

I do not even feel I am on my periods. So I really like cup and use it every month. It feels like everyday is same (sabhi din sarikhe lage) [31 year old tribal women, completed secondary school, married, 2 children]

The Covid-19 pandemic lock down restricted mobility and uptake of menstrual cups by women, possibly from cash shortage or reduced mobility on part of satisfied users who would be expected to promote the cup. A few adolescents girls bought the cup but most did not use it because of fear of inserting it and worry about side effects. In coming months, we hope to further increase individual counselling, take user feedback and debunk myths about the menstrual cup, to scale up use among rural women.



Q21: Lockdown I
Q25: Lockdown II

To view communication materials on RituCup, click [here](#)

To view a short video film (Hindi, 3 minutes) on RituCup, click [here](#)

For more information on *RituCup*, contact arth@arth.in

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

