

Menstrual Health Management among Working Women in the Formal and Informal Sectors: a Case Study in Bolgatanga, Upper East Region, Ghana

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Abstract: Menstruation is a natural process that requires crucial attention. However, it has been given little consideration especially amongst working women. Menstruation has been clouded with illogical ideologies, thus few structures have been put in place to maintain hygienic and proper menstrual health management (MHM) at workplaces. This study focused on investigating the challenges faced by working women during menstruation and how these challenges affect productivity at work. This research was carried out in Bolgatanga, the Upper East regional capital, Ghana. Data were collected by administering questionnaires to respondents in various workplaces in the area of study. Illiterate respondents completed the questionnaire with the help of interpreters. The questionnaires were validated by checking for consistency, accuracy and completeness to detect and eliminate errors and with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft® Excel 2007, the data were analyzed. This research showed that, women within the working fraternity go through some physical challenges such as abdominal pains, fatigue and weakness during menstruation. They also encounter emotional challenges like anger, irritation and anxiety. However at work, such challenges were managed using medication, listening to music and taking naps. There were no company codes for menstruation and also WASH facilities were inadequate considering the fact that 24% of the respondents in the formal sector shared one washroom with male co-workers and 12% had no washrooms. 60% of the respondents in the informal sector had no access to washrooms. Educating women on how to properly manage menstrual complication without medication, providing WASH facilities that are menstruation friendly, introducing company codes for female workers and sensitizing men to erase the erroneous of menstruation are key issues that should be considered going forward.

Keywords: Menstrual, Health, Working Women, Formal and Informal Sectors

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I. Introduction

Menstrual Health Management requires crucial attention since it is a peculiar phenomenon among women¹. Menstruation is a monthly occurrence, where women shed the linings of their uteruses². Thus, Menstrual Health Management is an area that requires urgent attention due to the level of harm it poses if neglected^{3, 4}. However, it is one of the least addressed areas especially among working women at their workplaces. For the purpose of this study, workplace refers to any formal or informal context where women are engaged in income generating activities⁵. Women are required to change used pads or tampons between 4-8 hours before they get drenched with blood to avoid Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)^{6, 7}. Cultural and illogical beliefs surrounding menstruation have also caused women to be silent on the challenges encountered during menstruation at their workplaces^{8, 9}. Some of these beliefs surrounding menstruation include restrictions from entering sacred places, touching religious books and taking part in fasting¹⁰. Also, menstruating women are seen as polluted and are not allowed to touch others, cook, nor attend religious gatherings. Another sect of people believe that, a cow will cease producing milk if it is touched by a menstruating women¹¹. Some even believe that used menstrual materials have the propensity to cause cancer or infertility¹². These specious beliefs restrict women from expressing their challenges during menstruation especially at their workplaces¹³. To ensure effective and proper management of menstruation at workplaces without embarrassment or stigma, women require access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, affordable and appropriate menstrual hygiene materials and services. Nevertheless, most workplace environments and structures lack menstrual friendly facilities⁵. This may either take women out of work or reduce work output. This research seeks to ascertain the challenges women face at their places of work during menstruation, how these challenges are managed alongside work and how work productivity is affected due to menstrual complications.

II. Material And Methods

Reconnaissance Survey and ethical clearance

Prior to data collection, a reconnaissance survey was conducted. This was to identify key areas where formal and informal women could be easily accessed. It also focused on creating familiarity, trust and confidentiality with the respondents. Formal approvals were granted in the various workplaces before the survey was conducted.

Sample Size and Data Collection

The respondents were chosen using a simple random sampling technique where every woman at the workplace had a probability of being selected. Since the population was undetermined, 50 female respondents were randomly selected for this study. The sample size was subdivided into 25 each for the formal and informal sectors. Also, fifteen (15) male respondents were assessed as a control on women's perception on men's attitude towards menstruation. Data was collected from two main sources; primary data were collected by visiting the selected workplaces and administering questionnaires. Secondary data were also accessed from available and appropriate literature.

Techniques and Questionnaire Administration

In this study, questionnaires were administered to women in formal and informal sectors. The questionnaires focused on the challenges (treatment and facilities) women faced during menstruation. Also, focused group discussions were conducted with men and women at the various workplaces to obtain detailed information on personal and group feelings, and perceptions about MHM. Observation of available WASH facilities and women's perception of how comfortable these facilities are were also assessed. The questionnaires were self-administered to the respondents at various workplaces in the study area. With the help of interpreters, illiterate women also completed these questionnaires.

Formal sector referred to women working in identified work locations and have a defined working hours (usually from eight in the morning to five in the evening), with an assured salary at the end of every month. Such women are employees. For this study, the formal sector that assessed were women working in financial institutions, female teachers, female nurses and female civil servants (ministries, departments, governments agencies). The informal sector referred to women working for themselves (self-employed), such as small business owners, market women, commercial shop attendants and female hawkers.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were validated to check the consistency of respondents', accuracy and completeness. This aimed at detecting and eliminating errors. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel software were used to summarize the data into charts and figures.

III. Results

Challenges faced by working menstruating women

Menstruating women are faced with several challenges that range from mental/emotional and health challenges, especially at work. From the survey, information gathered from the respondents on the challenges faced during menstruation is represented in figure 1.

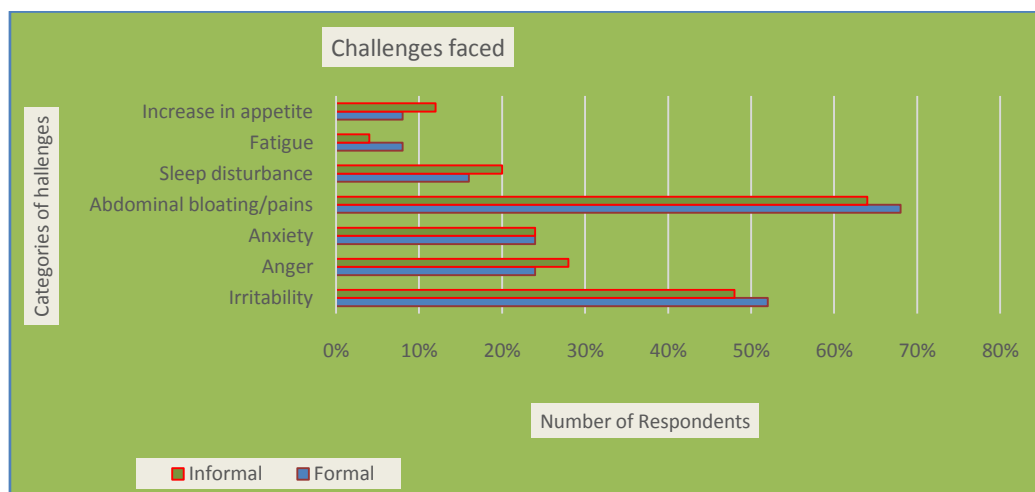


Figure 1: Challenges faced at work during menstrual periods

The study revealed that, 52% and 48% experienced irritation as an emotional challenge during menstruation in the formal and informal sectors respectively. Correspondently, 24% and 28% experienced anger in the formal and informal sectors. Also, 24% each of the respondents in both sectors experienced anxiety during menstruation. Considering the health/physical challenges faced during menstruation, 68% and 64% in the formal and informal sectors respectively, claimed to have had abdominal bloating/pains. Meanwhile, 16% of the respondents in the formal sector and 20% in the informal sector admitted to have experienced sleep disturbance during menstruation. The study further showed that, 8% and 4% in the formal and informal sectors correspondingly go through fatigue, while 8% and 12% experienced increased appetites.

Managing menstrual challenges

From the survey, 98% of respondents in the formal sector managed menstrual pain by taking unprescribed pain killers. In managing mental/emotional challenges, 40% resorted to listening to music, relaxing 32%, and 28% reduced conversations at work. Considering the informal sector, 92% relied on pain killers to soothe menstrual pain. Mental/emotional challenges were handled by listening to music (24%), relaxing (60%), and 16% engaged in less conversations.

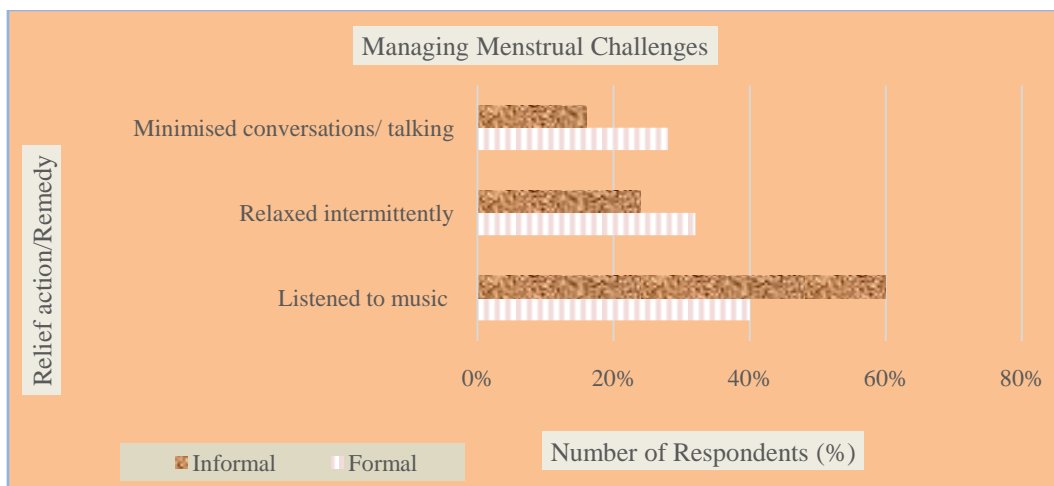


Figure 2: Methods of managing menstrual challenges at work

Support Systems at work during menstruation

From the survey, 100% of the respondents in both sectors claimed to have no company code for menstruating workers at their workplaces. Considering the level of support received from co-workers, 52% and 36% of respondents in the formal and informal sectors respectively, admitted that, they received support from colleagues at work when going through intense pain and weakness. Forty-four (44%) and 72% in the formal and informal sectors, correspondently, claimed to have received permission off work when in severe pain. Additionally, 24% and 84% of respondents shared washrooms with male colleagues in the formal and informal sectors respectively.

Male Perception of Menstruation

Control Experiment: In finding out how male co-workers perceive menstruation, the perceptions of 15 male respondents in both sectors were ascertained by interviews. This covered the perception of male co-workers on menstruation effects on the emotions and self-esteem of woman during their periods.

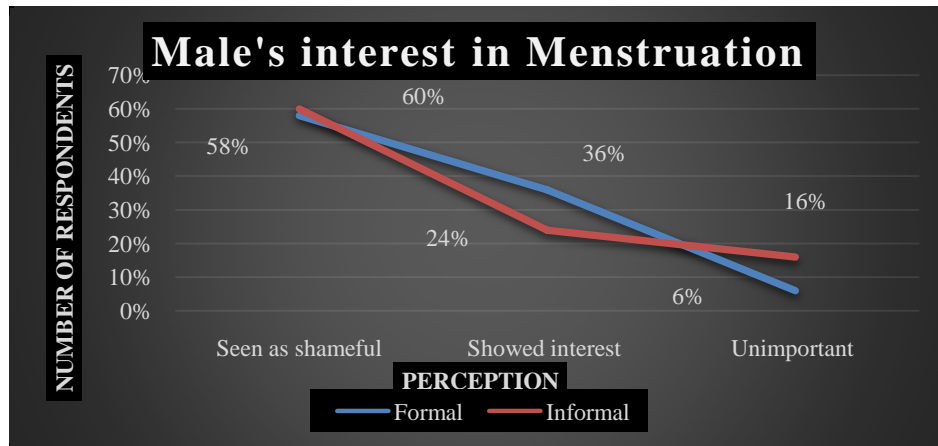


Figure 3: Males' perception of Menstruation

Eight (53.3%) respondents described menstruation as not dirty or shameful but as a natural and physiological process, while seven (46.7%) of the respondents saw menstruation as shameful, especially when proper personal hygiene was lacking.

Available WASH Facilities

The findings of this research showed that, 28% of the respondents in the informal sector, and 32% in the formal sector used shared washrooms. Twelve (12%) of the respondents in the informal sector and 56% of the respondents in the formal sector used gender segregated washrooms, while 60% and 64% of the respondents in the informal and formal sectors respectively, had no access to washrooms. The research also attended to how used menstrual materials are disposed at work. It showed that, 32% of the respondents in the formal sector, whereas 36% of those in the informal sector disposed used menstrual materials into trash can/bins at their workplaces, while 68% kept them in their bags and later safely disposed them at home.

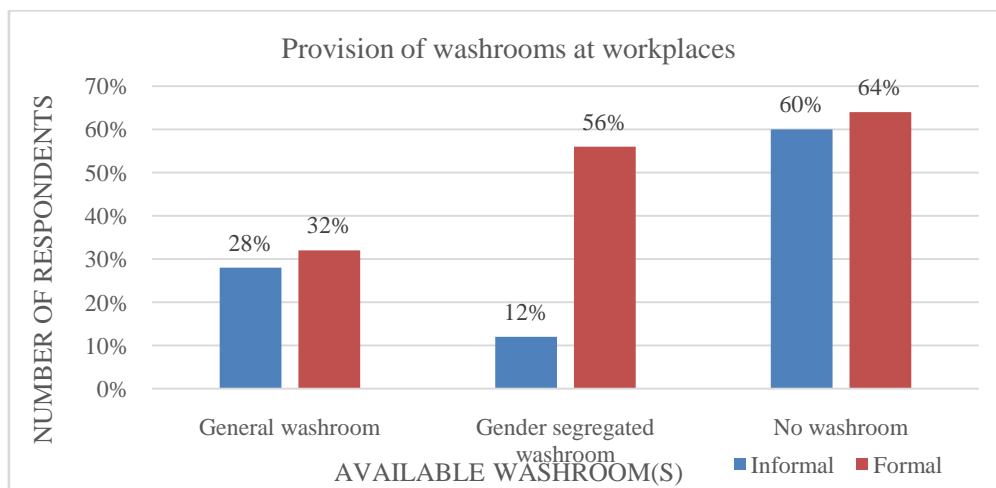


Figure 4: Availability of washrooms at workplaces

Impact on work Productivity/Performance

The challenges faced by menstruating women had some repercussions on work output or productivity. According to the survey, it was established that, 32% of the respondents in the formal sector missed work due to menstrual snags. This is subdivided into: 10% missed a day in a month, 14% missed 2 days in a month and 8% missed 3 days in a month. On the other hand, 36% of respondents in the informal sector missed work due to menstruation. This is ghettoized into: 12% missed work a day in a month, 15% missed work 2 days in a month and 9% missed 3 days in a month. Also, 28% of respondents in the formal sector and 26% in the informal sector reported physical weakness and/or sickness and 4% and 7% of respondents respectively within the formal and informal felt psychologically affected during menstruation. Even though attention/focus is needed at work, 32% and 31% of respondents in the formal and informal sectors respectively attested to the fact that, they were unable to concentrate fully and to give out their best at work during menstruation.

IV. Discussion

Challenges faced by working menstruating women

The study revealed that the leading menstrual challenge respondents faced with regards to health was abdominal pains (dysmenorrhoea)¹⁴. This is followed by sleep disturbance, increase in appetite and fatigue. The survey also showed that, majority of the women were easily irritated during menstruation. Women in both sectors experienced abdominal pains as the leading menstrual challenge in relation to health, which is accompanied by symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, sweating, headaches and diarrhoea^{15, 16}. Also, the lack or poor states of WASH facilities at workplaces is another challenge faced during menstruation⁵. This made menstrual management difficult in improperly structured working environments. For instance, diarrhoea resulting from menstrual abdominal pain requires proper WASH facilities. This is not required at home alone but at workplaces, especially for female workers to aid in proper menstruation management. Women are deterred from using WASH facilities when they are absent or in deplorable conditions. This structural and infrastructural constraint motivates some of them to use sanitary materials beyond the required duration (4-8 hours), hence, contributing to TSS¹⁷. This is reflected in the survey as 4% of respondent reported have been diagnosed of TSS. The results indicated that despite the difference in their fields of work, the time and stress experienced at work, the respondents experienced similar mental/emotional and health challenges such as fatigue, anger, stress, abdominal bloating and pain and inability to sleep.

Managing menstrual challenges

Despite the challenges faced by working menstruating women, it is obligatory that they still work during menstruation. There is, however, the need for them to manage these challenges and still fully and effectively fulfil duties at work. As a result, respondents in the formal sector were asked questions on how challenges such as abdominal pain which comes along with nausea, vomiting, sweating, headache and diarrhea^{18, 19}. Though effective physical exercise and applying hot water at the lower abdomen are positive ways of managing menstrual pain, these cannot be applied at the workplace. Thus, the respondents revealed that, menstrual challenges were mainly managed at the workplace using un-prescribed pain killers, as ninety-eight (98%) and ninety-two (92%) in the formal and informal sectors respectively relied on pain killers.

Also, at their various workplaces, minor remedies which appeared to also soothe pain were used. These remedies as indicated in figure 2 did not include heat application, which is an effective method of minimizing pain and also enhance smooth flow²⁰.

These findings reveal that, scant education had been received on proper menstrual management. This is because, the survey showed that, the respondents used pain killers without considering the long and short terms side effects. It was also observed some of the respondents in both sectors chose rest as another means of managing menstrual challenges. Even though most of the formal sector workers revealed rest as a practice that soothe menstrual pain, many of them barely had that opportunity during working hours. They had to either endure the pain, minimize conversations at work, take un-prescribed pain killers or listen to music. These methods, however successful, may possibly militate work progress and output. However, these methods worked for those in the informal sector, since many of them were self-employed and did not need any permission from work. But it also affected their incomes.

Support Systems at work during menstruation

Proper menstruation management is a cooperate issue. For women to manage and maintain proper menstrual health with sound minds and uttermost societal confidence, there is the need for support systems such as help from colleagues at work, company codes for menstruation, and permission to attend to physical challenges like abdominal cramps, intense pain and weakness. Considering the outputs of this research, the absence of company codes for menstruation, made discussions on menstruation very blunt, public and obvious though it requires some level of privacy and secrecy. Also, women were not excused off duty unlike in Indonesia where women are entitled to two days menstruation leave per month^{21, 22}. Women can be granted the privilege of staying from work during the peak day(s) of menstruation. Also there is a high level of insecurity in the informal sector in the availability of WASH at workplaces, as a greater percentage (84%) shared WASH facilities with males. This is a depravity of privacy and a sign of gender bias.

Though WASH facilities at workplaces were not adequate, women still had to work productively. Women deprived of WASH facilities however require safe and private places to change used sanitary materials and clean water for washing. There is the need to create barriers, privacy and gender independence in the accessibility and usage of WASH facilities²³. Especially at workplaces where many hours are spent. A lack in these prerequisite and safety/privacy facilities will certainly affect productivity at work²⁴. The suggests that, the 16% support difference received by women within the formal sector as compared to the colleagues in the informal sector and the 60% difference in the segregation of washroom were studied to be as a result of the levels of enlightenment gained by formal workers on the complications associated with menstruation.

Male Perception of Menstruation

The study revealed that some of the male respondents irrespective of the formal or informal educational received, still perceived menstruation as shameful and dirty. This acuity is likely to affect the emotional self-esteem of women and may hinder outward/opened expressions on menstrual needs without any sense of shame²⁵. This actually reduced women's confidence in talking about menstrual needs at work. This was observed to be as a results of the kind of working structures (too official) and the lack of emotional attention.

Available WASH Facilities

For working women to manage menstruation hygienically there is the need for adequate WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) facilities which are functioning, menstrual friendly and furnished with soap and water for washing. The responses gained on the adequacy and state of WASH facilities at the various places of work (figure 4) revealed that, comparing the responses from the two sectors, the informal sectors lacked more WASH facilities as compared to formal sector. Additionally, observation showed that, most of the available facilities in both sectors were in deplorable conditions. This reflects the high levels (60% and 64%) of usage insecurity. In such conditions, menstrual materials were used beyond required durations, though this comes with adverse health complications. Respondents in the informal sector requested for mobile latrines to minimize this challenge. Females need proper education on how to safely dispose menstrual materials.

Impact on work Productivity/Performance

The study findings reveal that, all the challenging factors affecting the menstrual health management of working women affect their work output/performance. This translates to the fact that, in every 3 days, 32% (formal) and 36% (informal) of the working force are absent from work⁵. This is certain to affect gross productivity in the country. There will be an imbalance as the individual's output falls to the income or salary earned. Also the lack, inadequacy or deplorable state of WASH facilities at work places reduces concentration and productivity since insecurity and stressed may be felt. These adversely impact productivity.

V. Conclusion

Generally, the research unveiled several menstrual complications which were studied to be tackled in diverse ways, with some having likely health implications. Many of the workplaces had either no, poor or menstrual unfriendly WASH facilities. This contributed to the occurrence of Toxic Shock Syndrome in some respondents. These snags were studied to directly or indirectly affect work output irrespective of the sector. This study recommends that; (1) workplaces should be furnished with separated WASH facilities; (2) there is also the need for companies/organizations to enact work codes for menstruating workers, as has been done in places like in the United Kingdom and South Korea; (3) sensitization on how to manage menstrual pain without pain killers. Heat application may be a better replacement; and (4) men should be educated to view menstruation as a natural process and not a dirty or shameful experience.

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