



Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative



May 28, 2020

## JAIL MAIL: MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN PRISONS

**May 28 is celebrated as Menstrual Hygiene Day** in many countries across the world. It is an annual awareness day to highlight the importance of good menstrual hygiene management (MHM). This global coordinated campaign provides a platform for various organisations including government agencies, the private sector, the non-government organisations, the media and individuals to promote MHM. While various ministries under the Indian government have initiated activities to promote menstrual hygiene management in India, menstrual hygiene of women prisoners is not an area that has garnered much attention.

Menstruating women across the world face difficulties while going through their period inside a prison. Recognising this as a universal problem, Rule 5 of the United Nations Rules on the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (commonly known as the 'Bangkok Rules') require authorities to **ensure facilities and materials to meet their gender-specific needs, including the provision of sanitary towels free of charge, and a regular supply of water**. In India, the Model Prison Manual 2016 stipulates that 'sterilised sanitary pads should be issued to women prisoners as per their requirements'.

However, in reality, **compliance with these international and national standards differs** from state to state and prison to prison. While there are prisons that provide sanitary napkins free of cost without limits on the quantity, others only offer a fixed number of pads to menstruating women. In some prisons, women have to buy pads from the canteen or rely on family members who visit them. In prisons where they were not provided sanitary pads, women resorted to using clothes and rags. The proper disposal of the used napkins is another area that needs attention. The restrictions placed on the provision of sanitary pads, coupled with dirty and unhygienic toilets have an adverse impact on the menstrual health and hygiene practices of women.

As of December 31, 2018, there are **only 24 jails that are exclusively for women prisoners**. These are limited to 15 States with the highest being in Tamil Nadu (5), followed by Kerala (3) and Rajasthan, Bihar and Delhi (2 each). Only about 3243 of the 19242 women prisoners in the country are placed in women's jail. The rest are placed in separate enclosures inside men's prisons. Most of these jails do not have a permanent female Medical Officer visiting. The temporary measure of a lady doctor visiting regularly, as recommended in the 2018 report by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, has become the norm in several women's enclosures in prisons across these states. However, in the absence of a lady doctor, women prisoners are forced to consult with the male doctor with whom they are not always comfortable sharing their concerns, especially on reproductive or menstrual health issues. Besides, medical camps for creating awareness about menstrual hygiene seldom take place in prisons. All these point to the dire need to increase efforts to spread awareness about menstrual hygiene

management inside prisons in India. To address this, CHRI has prepared a poster on menstrual hygiene in prisons targeting women prisoners. We have also worked with [Boondh](#), an organisation working in the field of menstrual health management, to conduct awareness sessions for women prisoners in Mysore (Karnataka) and Ludhiana (Punjab). These sessions have helped us develop a list of [recommendations](#) for menstrual health management in Indian prisons.

It emphasises on ensuring access to clean water and basic facilities, providing quality and sufficient quantity of sanitary pads, mechanisms for proper disposal of used pads, ascertaining reproductive health of women prisoners through regular doctor visits and raising awareness among the prison staff and prisoners on issues of menstrual hygiene.

CHRI has also prepared a [poster](#) on menstrual hygiene in prisons, which will be shared with prisons across the country for display inside their prisons. The poster is currently available in [English](#), [Hindi](#) and [Punjabi](#).

The recommendation document and poster are attached with this jail mail.

### **What you can do:**

On this Menstrual Hygiene Day, we call upon our readers to expand our discussions regarding menstrual health to not just talk about #PeriodsInPandemics but also to talk about #PeriodsInPrisons.

- As a **prison administrator**, ensure that women prisoners are provided with sanitary pads, adequate water supply and basic facilities for disposal, maintaining health and cleanliness.
- As a **prison monitor**, including Board of Visitors, ensure that quality sanitary pads are provided to women prisoners as per their need.
- As a **prison medical officer**, ensure that regular medical camps on various issues concerning the health of women prisoners including menstrual hygiene are conducted periodically to raise awareness about their bodies and the need to maintain personal hygiene.
- As a **member of legislative assembly**, commit to raising the hygiene concerns of women prisoners on the floor of the House and call upon the concerned ministers to provide their response on these issues.
- As a **journalist**, highlight the menstrual hygiene concerns of women prisoners and ensure that they are covered by the media while reporting on conditions inside prisons.
- As an **individual or civil society organisation working in prisons**, ensure that basic minimum standards for women prisoners are maintained to manage their periods hygienically, safely and with dignity.

Please feel free to write to us at [chriprisonprog@gmail.com](mailto:chriprisonprog@gmail.com) with your comments and suggestions.

With best regards,

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