

Menstrual Disposal and Washing Facilities:

Considering user preferences in design

A recent study reviewed and summarised all of the existing research (80 studies) on why users choose different menstrual material disposal and washing practices.

Recommendation:

Designers and builders of facilities for menstrual disposal and washing must consider the preferences of users within the local context. This includes the social appropriateness of facilities, local stigmas around menstruation, particularly who can and cannot know a person's menstrual status, and the knowledge level of users regarding menstrual disposal and washing practices.

Why was the study needed - what's the issue?

- The use of disposable menstrual materials continues to increase, contributing vast amounts to both formal and informal waste management systems, as well as polluting the environment;
- Menstrual materials are often flushed down or deposited into toilets, causing issues with wastewater and faecal sludge management;
- Campaigns often assume that undesired (by planners) menstrual material disposal behaviours are due to a lack of knowledge of their consequences;
- Even where technically and environmentally appropriate menstrual disposal and washing methods are available, they are often not used.

What influences the choice of menstrual material disposal and washing practices?

- The state of available facilities drove behaviour in 56 studies and included consideration of two components:
 - Physical infrastructure - the quantity of available and physically functional toilets, the design of toilets, the quality and availability of running water in and around toilets, the availability of soap for washing and the availability of a physically functional disposal mechanism and/or service for used materials;

- Social perceptions - the presence or absence of a private and safe space for managing menstruation, the cleanliness and maintenance of the facility, the time the user had available to change, wash or dispose of materials and the availability of gender-segregated toilets;
- Menstrual taboos and social stigma drove behaviour in 55 studies and included consideration of three components:
 - Cultural beliefs - general beliefs discouraging/encouraging certain methods of disposal, washing and/or drying;
 - Embarrassment and worry - unpleasant emotions related to doing/being something considered by others to be wrong or shameful, in this case, reaching menarche or menstruating in general;
 - Fear - unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or other harmful consequences, particularly when others became aware of a person's menstrual status;
- A lack of knowledge on how to appropriately dispose of or wash menstrual materials drove behaviour in only 11 studies.

Why these drivers can't be considered in isolation

The reasons for menstrual material disposal and washing behaviours were not given in isolation. Often some mix of the state of facilities, knowledge and menstrual taboos and social stigma informed users' actions. Examples from the reviewed studies include:

- Where menstruators had not been taught how to dispose of materials and concurrently felt shy and uncomfortable openly discussing disposal options due to menstrual stigma, they threw their used materials into open spaces (including bushes, around school premises, under rocks at the beach, etc.);
- Where a fully functional incinerator was built on school grounds but not integrated into the toilet facilities. Girls were embarrassed to be seen accessing the incinerator, especially by men. There was no mechanism for girls to discreetly transport used materials from the toilets to the incinerator. So the facility was unused.

Read the study:

Robinson, H., Barrington, D.J. (2021) Drivers of menstrual material disposal and washing practices: A systematic review. *PLOS One* 16 (12), e0260472
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