

In an era when Padman is on celluloid and Sanitary pads are given out for free to make the young girls facing menstruation feel at home, the flipside is that in rural and certain urban pockets in Lucknow, the lack of awareness and medieval mindset towards a biological process rings alarm bells



In collaboration with



MENSTRUAL HYGIENE AWARENESS IN LUCKNOW - A STUDY

Under Guidance of:

Prof. (Dr.) Sanjay Mohan Johri

Dr. Areena Zainub Mirza

**Amity School of Communication
Lucknow Campus**

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WaterAid has been working in India since 1986 and has played a significant role in the WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sector nationally and in the states with commitment towards transforming the lives of the poorest and most marginalized people by improving access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

The study aimed at understanding the knowledge, attitude and practices regarding menstrual hygiene amongst adolescent girls from the marginalized communities both in urban and rural Lucknow.

This study was carried out and the report produced by the students of Amity School of Communication, Lucknow (ASCO-L) under the guidance of Dr. Sanjay Mohan Johri & Dr. Areena Mirza. The findings are based on the qualitative study carried out by Amity School of Communication in four different Sites/locations of Lucknow.

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OVERVIEW

Menstrual hygiene is the personal hygiene during menstruation. It includes bathing daily for comfort, using clean, dry absorbent material and disposal of used pads/material in clean environmentally acceptable, safe methods, keep perineal area clean from anterior to posterior.

Puberty is not a problem to be solved; it is simply a time of accelerated physical growth and sexual development experienced by every human. But by facing this crucial phase of life unprepared, learners are left confused and unsupported, which in turn affects the quality of their life.

Lack of information, misconceptions and adverse attitudes to menstruation may lead to a negative self-image among girls who are experiencing menses for the first time, and can result in a lack of self-esteem as they develop their personality as women. The culture of 'silence' around menstruation increases the perception of menstruation as something shameful that needs to be hidden, and may reinforce misunderstandings and negative attitudes toward it.

Akshay Kumar starrer Padman has been the talk of the town. At such times there are efforts by government and non - government organizations to make menstrual hygiene a priority. Ahead of May 28 which is observed as menstrual hygiene day, Amity School of Communication along with WaterAid conducted a study to assess the awareness levels on menstrual hygiene among rural and urban adolescent girls in Lucknow. The selected students under the guidance of the Head of the Institution, Dr. Sanjay Mohan Johri and a faculty guide, Dr. Areena Zainub Mirza, carried out this study.

India has just observed the International Women's day and while there is much talk about the glory of women, the state of affairs with regards to awareness on menstrual hygiene in young girls remains rather abysmal. Students carried out focused group discussions in Amberganj, Thakurganj Indiranagar and Jankipuram extension in the state capital of Uttar Pradesh. They tried to assess the awareness levels on menstruation and sanitary hygiene. FGDs were conducted in October last, January and July this year.

A natural, psychological and biological phenomenon menstruation is subjected to various stigmas and is considered as a taboo in the Indian society. Girls and women at large often have to suffer the supposed shame of this biological process. It has broadly been observed by the not so educated as an “*unhealthy and filthy*” process subjecting females to discrimination and has devoid them of hygienic means to menstruation. Adolescence is a transition period between childhood and adulthood and marks the beginning of puberty. Menstrual hygiene becomes important as unhygienic practices may lead to vulnerability to several reproductive tract infections.

Among the varied factors that affect awareness are lack of proper education on reproductive health, sex education and conservative society, lack of clean water, sanitation, resource management, etc. Practices like not allowing menstruating girls to be part of household activities and rituals, and keeping them within the four walls often demeans a woman leading to mental trauma at a young age.

Misconceptions such as menstruating women are unclean or impure and therefore they cannot enter the kitchen, must live in a separate room outside the house during those days, and not even dream of stepping inside a temple or a shrine lest its sanctity is compromised, severely curtail their movement. It affects their daily routine, and most importantly, instill in them feelings of being lesser humans. At least 50 per cent of girls in the state are not allowed inside the kitchen during their periods besides several other social taboos imposed on.

SETTING THE MENSTRUAL HYGIENE AGENDA

Menstrual hygiene plays an important in a healthy life of a woman. It is an important issue that affects healthy adolescent girls and pre-menopausal adult women monthly. Around the world women have developed their own personal strategies to cope with menstruation, which vary from country to country and depend on economic status, the individual's personal preferences, local traditions and cultural beliefs and education status.¹

Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) practices vary worldwide and depend on the individual's socioeconomic status, personal preferences, local traditions and beliefs, and access to water and sanitation resources.²

As a girl progresses from puberty into womanhood, RTIs (Reproductive Tract Infections) potentially triggered by poor MHM could affect her reproductive health. RTIs are major public health concern basically in low income settings. Study reports suggests over the years RTIs and STIs (sexually transmitted infection) has increased among the young girls and women. Even Urinary Tract Infection has become common disease among women after respiratory tract infection.³

Various factors prevail for the increment in such diseases. Often methods of management can be unhygienic and inconvenient, particularly in poorer settings. However reusable material may not be well sanitized because cleaning is often done without soap and with unclean water, and social taboos and restrictions force drying indoors, away from sunlight and open air. Most of the studies compared mainly the types of absorbent used, e.g. rags vs. disposable pads, but a minority compared the methods of washing of cloths used for absorption or other menstrual hygiene practices.

¹ Student paper Submitted to Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District on 2017-04-12

² Student paper submitted to The University of Manchester on 2017-11-30

³CVC Nigeria Consortium on 2018-02-27

CONTEXT: THE UTTAR PRADESH STORY SO FAR

The Uttar Pradesh government Panchayati Raj department has recently launched a scheme to focus on menstrual hygiene among the rural populace.

As per the scheme, a gram panchayat will employ a 'Padman' for procuring sanitary napkins from manufacturing units and supplying them to Anganwadi centres. These will be then sent to schools and local women for distribution⁴.

Interestingly the need for menstrual hygiene finds a distinct mention in the Swachh Bharat guideline of the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation. Menstrual hygiene notably makes up an important plan of the government to make a village open defecation free (ODF) plus.

At present UP presently has rural sanitation coverage of 58.22 per cent, the fourth lowest in the country. Reports go on to suggest that impact of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan on UP has been minimal in the first two years of the campaign. The state aims to go ODF by October 2018. The areas going ODF will also be the ones where the message of menstrual hygiene will be promoted.

Many women remain unaware about the importance of menstrual hygiene.

In Uttar Pradesh 81% per cent of menstruating women use unhygienic methods for menstrual protection⁵.

Only 12 to 14 per cent of menstruating women in rural UP have access to sanitary napkins and the rest are dependent on cloth or other means during menstruation.

**200 million women
In India lack
awareness of
menstrual hygiene
and associated
healthcare practices**

Source: A.C. Nielsen and Plan India (2010). Sanitation protection: Every Women's Health Right (In the study, the researchers questioned 1,033 women of menstrual age and 151 gynecologists).

⁴<https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/rural-uttar-pradesh-goes-the-padman-way-to-locally-manufacture-and-sell-subsidised-sanitary-napkins-17584/>

⁵National Family Health Survey 2015-16

In 70 centers in the state, sanitary napkin manufacturing units will be set up so that napkins can be easily transported to Anganwadi centres in villages.

Low awareness and high cost deter women from using sanitary napkin. Locally manufactured sanitary napkins will cost at least 70% less.

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers in the state are to lead from front in the implementation of the scheme.

With high number of girls using disposable pads, there is dire need to highlight environmental impact and offer other solutions like reusable menstrual cups and compostable pads.

Much like the academia at Amity University, many teachers across Uttar Pradesh are being trained to break the silence and stigma surrounding menstruation under what is now popular as the '**Chuppi Todo Campaign**' led by WaterAid & its partner Vatsalya.

About 2 million girls, between the age group of 10 and 19 years, are likely beneficiaries of distribution of low cost sanitary napkins that are made available to all girls studying in Class VI to Class XII in government-run schools in UP.

At present, in UP, low-cost sanitary napkins are being produced and sold by women's groups in Barabanki, Mathura and Mahoba districts, as pilot projects.

Various studies suggest that there are over 2.8 million adolescent girls in UP, who end up missing out on life and studies during that time of menstruation.

STUDY DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research: After a detailed discussion with Water Aid professionals, it was decided to keep this study purely qualitative so that in-depth information on the research problem could be obtained from the adolescent girls from three different locations of Lucknow.

The choice of the research designs and data collection methods was primarily based on the research objectives and the population under study.

Qualitative research had much to offer to this study. It provided unique insights into complex social behavioural aspects that can help to develop and refine interventions. The qualitative methods used deepened the understanding of cultural and contextual issues.

In this case, qualitative data was collected from the target population to better understand their Knowledge/Awareness levels, their perceptions, behaviours and hygiene practices, needs and problems faced.

Focused Group Discussions (FGDs): Seven Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out at three different locations in Lucknow city. Through focused group discussion with some urban (3) and semi urban (4) groups of adolescent girls, we explored and got some insights into the issue.

Approximately 75 adolescent girls in the age group of 11-19 years were part of these group discussions. Apart from the adolescent girls, the mothers of some of the adolescent girls (Around 25) were also informally interviewed in order to take their views and to understand their perceptions.

Study Objective: The study carried out by ASCO was aimed at understanding the knowledge, amenities available and awareness of proper hygiene and sanitation amongst adolescent girls both in urban and semi urban areas of Lucknow. It also tried to decode the stigma and myths associated with it.

FINDINGS/OBSERVATIONS

LOCATION : AMBERGANJ

GROUP : 1

Menarche-ascension into womanhood

Girls usually experience menarche at different ages, as young as 12 and as old as 15.

While talking to the female respondents about when they had their first period, the response was an average age of 13-15 years. Some clearly could not recall their first menstrual bleeding. 68% of the girls started their periods at the age of 13 years, 16% at the age of 12 and 16% at the age of 15.



Starting the conversation about their first period

When asked whom you informed about your first periods, it was their mothers or sisters whom they turned to when they first experienced this phenomenon. 33% of the female respondents told their mothers, whereas 66% talked to their sisters. 16% of the girls had their first periods in their relative's home whereas 84% at home.

A guide to their menstrual cycle

It was a general plea of the participants that every girl should be told about the changes that are likely to take place in their bodies. A couple of participants said that "It's important to talk to girls from an early age to make sure they're prepared before the big day; their first period. The start of menstruation is a major event in a girl's life, that's why every girl should know what changes are happening with her own body."

Neither were they aware about this phenomenon nor what exactly is happening to their body when they first menstruated, they at first were really stressed out about not having or experiencing the same earlier. Also, on asking if they will educate their sisters about menstruation one of the participants said, “They are quite young.”

Cloth vs. disposable sanitary menstrual pads

The respondents when asked about what type of sanitary protection do they use, they said that they used cloth during the initial years when they started menstruating but now they generally use sanitary pads and especially mentioned - Stayfree sanitary pads, yet when they do not have access to it or could not buy it due to its high price they prefer using cloth instead of sanitary pads. According to Naghma, when she had her first menses, she was informed about using cloth as a sanitary protection by her mother. Zareen prefers using sanitary pads because according to her it is more hygienic. (33% used cloth, 66% used sanitary pads when they first had their periods).

Myths related to Menstruation

Woman’s natural biological processes lead to withering of plants: According to Zehra, “*Ped nahi chhoone chahiye, woh murjha jaate hain* (we should not touch plants as they wither away).” Not only Zehra but other participants also agreed and nodded on this. There is an existing myth about menstruation among the females that while they are menstruating they cannot touch plants and leaves. If they do so, it leads to withering of the plants. Thus during their menstrual cycle, they stay away from the plants.

Adeeba said that “*khatta khaane se mahvaari jaldi aati hai* (sour food leads to early menstrual bleeding).” The respondents said that they have been asked not to eat or touch pickles or any sour food items during menstruation by their family members.

Don'ts...

Also must neither visit any religious place (masjid) nor observe roza (fast), can continue only after seventh day. Must take bath only on the second day of the periods and must stay away from perfumes. There is a long list of menstrual taboos across families and these continue to manifest in complex ways with instructions.

Too many instructions for those menstruating

Menstruation comes with a set of polite guide and instructions every month. Guide to sit proper, not go out, wear dark clothes, do not indulge in physical activities, no sour food items, keeping it a secret, and the list of instructions goes on. The participants accepted that these kinds of instructions exist around them, and they do not resist them.

Pain, emotional strain and safe hygiene

On an average, one must change a used sanitary pad every 4-8 hours to prevent any disease, yet 50% respondents told that they usually change sanitary pads or cloth twice in 24 hours, 25% changed thrice a day and 25% four times a day. Also, they dispose of these sanitary pads or cloth in the public sewer or garbage, wrapped up in polythene. One of the respondents, Adeeba told how she takes care of her hygiene and why it is an important aspect. She told that "one must take care of cleanliness to stay away from diseases and infections."

The respondents also informed about the roller coaster of emotions that they go through during their periods; like anger issues, irritability, mood swings, cramps, abdominal pain, and leg pain and sometime feel bloated.

Why do girls bleed every month?

Among all the respondents, none of them knew why they lose blood every month, why periods are important, why and how does it happen? Adeeba was the only one aware why females experience it every month and why males do not have periods. She told that

menstruation is important for preparing a female body for good reproductive health and males do not give birth to a child. 83% of the girls were unaware of the reason behind a menstrual cycle.

Menstruations affecting physical and daily activities:

On asking, whether they face any problem doing their daily work? Adeeba, Naghma and Zareen answered that, they have to do their household work, cook food, without fail even when they are undergoing periods. Yet there are times they feel low due to the pain and emotional changes.

LOCATION : AMBERGANJ

GROUP : 2

Lack of Knowledge

In the second focus group discussion we realized that most girls/women were unaware about menstruation. The best source for immediate knowledge gaining on the subject seems to be mothers and sisters, but they themselves are uncomfortable to talk about it. When girls start their menstruation cycle, they are provided with only limited knowledge like what to use, how to dispose of the cloth or sanitary pad and basic do's and don'ts but no emotional support or explanation about the phenomenon.

When they get their first period, they are clueless and scared, sometimes even traumatized. One of the respondents at Amberganj, Rukhsaar says, "*hume kisi ne bataya nahi tha aur hum bhi kisi ko nahi batayenge. Isey log battameezi maante hain* (nobody told me about it, neither will I tell my younger siblings/daughter as it is considered bad morally)."

High Rate of Illiteracy

Literacy rate among girls was found to be very low. Most have just done primary schooling; some had religious schooling (Madarsa), that too for a short period of time. Lack of proper knowledge of bodily changes and menstruation, often leads to a very narrow-minded approach.

Zoobia says, "*Hafiz ji ghar aake jo padhate the utna hi kaafi tha. School nahi jaane dete the gharwale* (religious teacher came home and imparted only religious teachings. I was not allowed to go school)."

Age-old myths/stigmas still exist

Women are not allowed to touch pickles, no prayers can be offered, can't have citrus/sour food. Most of the women don't take bath while they experiencing their menstrual cycle;

only few prefer taking bath at this time. Danya told us that she sleeps on different mattress during her menstrual cycle.

Bamboo- curtain approach towards menstruation

Women don't talk about their menstruation with anyone, even if they are experiencing mood swings, body ache, etc. They believe talking about it is not good. Most of the women feel ashamed and shy. Married women move to another room or simply sleep separately when menstruating. Only husbands know about it.

Zoobia said something shocking, "*waise to meri betiyan nai hai, par agar hoti, to bhi main unhein mahwari ke baare me nahi batati. Jab hote toh khud pata chal jata. Maa-beti me ek parda hona chahiye* (I will not educate my daughter about this phenomenon. She will get to know herself. There should be some distance between mother & daughter)."

Hygiene and Sanitation

Women here preferred sanitary napkins and some used cloth. Sanitary napkins were changed frequently. Once the cloth was used, it was thrown away. They changed their cloth three to four times a day according to their need. Use of soap for cleaning their hands was found common among all women. Proper disposal of napkins and cloth were done. Everyone had toilets in their homes.

LOCATION : THAKURGANJ

GROUP : 1

Girls felt shy and uncomfortable to talk about their menstrual cycles throughout the discussion. The younger ones spoke more actively than the ones who were elder than the other girls. One of the participants Shifa goes to school; her father has his own small business of shoemaking. Her responses came out to be different as compared to other



group members. She shared that her mother did not try to bind or restrict her and never stops her from taking bath on first two days or entering the kitchen. Since her initial menstrual cycle, she has been only taught to use sanitary napkins and has never tried using cloth material unlike other girls.

Heeba and Sareen are of 13 but not experienced this phenomenon yet. They are already in their teen age and totally unaware of the phenomenon, they sat all blank throughout the discussion.

Farhana, who lives as a tenant with her family in Shifa's home, is quite influenced by Shifa in terms of using sanitary napkin along with cloth.

Pre-menstruation Phase

The teenage girls were not aware about menstruation before it happened to them. As told by them neither the school nor their parents enlightened them about this phenomenon except Shifa and Niba who were informed and taught about this process in school but very casually. Some of them who go to Madarsa were never taught about it, remaining few do not even go to school. Each and every girl agreed when asked about whether or not parents/schools/other family members should tell the girls about menstruation and

related aspects. They think girls need to be educated more and more about it, and also that it would have been better, if they knew about it before actually entering this phase of their lives.

Menarche-ascension into Womanhood

Most of the girls had their first menstruation at the age of 10-12 years except Heeba and Sareen; both are of 13 years of age and did not yet experienced their first periods. No one was aware about this phenomenon or what exactly is happening to their body when they first menstruated. Eventually, they informed about this happening to their mothers or elder sisters in some case.

33% of the girls were informed by their elder sisters, 22% by their friends and 42% from their mothers. The girls said that their mothers did not explain the phenomenon in a detailed manner as much as their friends did, who have already grown up biologically. *“Mujhe to Nigar sab batai thi, ache se, in sab ke bare me,”* said Firoz in a confident tone explaining the extent her friend told her about every single detail related to periods, which her mother never did.

Cursing Oneself for Being a Girl

Since the very start of their menstrual cycles, girls start to feel ashamed of the sudden change in their body. Some of them even said that they curse themselves for being a girl. As stated by them, they feel embarrassed and ashamed of their periods as it brings bucket full of problems and restrictions with it. They go through the sufferings every month thus cursing themselves for being a girl and not a boy. *“Achcha hota ki hum ladke hote, ye sab na jhelna padta* (being a boy is better as you do not have to go through all this),” said Farhana followed up by Arzoo saying, *“ladko ka sahi hai, unke saath ye sab nahi hota* (boys are care free, they do not face all this).”

Never Talk About Menstruation with Males

As stated by these girls, they have been strictly asked to not talk about their menstruation with any male person be it father, brother, friend, or any other male relative. "*Ammi ne pehli baat yahi samjhai thi ki abbu ya bhai se ye sab baat nahi batani hai* (first thing that mummy told me is that these things should not be shared with father or brother)," said Niba. Girls said that their mothers did not give any specific reason for this but asked them not to share as it is a very personal thing and needs to be kept hidden. The girls never questioned back and thus followed what was asked of them without questioning it.

Dos and Don'ts

Their mothers have asked them not to go to the temple or any religious place or to offer Namaz or touch 'Paare' (religious book) as they are chapters from the holy book and for those periods are considered to be dirty, so Namaz is not offered while menstruating. Girls are not allowed to enter kitchen and also not allowed to touch pickle jars except Shifa whose mother doesn't keep any such thought regarding menstruation and let her work in kitchen even on those days. Girls are also advised not to eat sour/tangy food items as it affects the body and menstrual cycle. They have been instructed not to take bath for the first three days, as it weakens the joints. The girls, who take bath on third or fourth day, maintain cleanliness by washing their lower body properly on their first two days. They have got no restrictions on going out and playing during those days, but the girls themselves does not feel like doing so as they feel uncomfortable and heavy.

Questioning Restrictions

When asked about whether or not they felt restricted, the answer clearly came out to be no. Each and every girl was fine with all the things being explained to them as they trust the source of knowledge. They are totally alright when people ask them not to do certain things when they are experiencing their periods. They never questioned back to their elders about the restrictions and never asked the reason behind them being imposed on them. Alisha

feels restricted and totally uncomfortable with the Don'ts, thus tried asking it to her mother but never got a satisfactory reply.

Materials Used

Arzoo uses cloth for the absorption of blood as they are not able to afford sanitary napkins due to economic conditions. Shifa, Niba and Alisha only prefer sanitary pads and have never used cloth for it. Remaining girls (Kavita, Farhana) use both sanitary napkins and cloth as required. 28% of the girls uses cloth whereas 42% uses sanitary pads and 28% uses both pad and cloth as required. The girls, who are not able to afford sanitary napkins, prefer to use old clothes for it. Be it sanitary napkin or a cloth material, girls change it on average 2-3 times a day.

Steps Followed To Maintain Hygiene and Cleanliness

Cleanliness to all the girls is important and they are aware of the importance of maintaining cleanliness during their menstrual cycle. They are taught how to dispose of sanitary napkins properly so that they do not clog sewers or do not make the surroundings dirty. Girls dispose of the used sanitary napkins by wrapping them in a newspaper and then in a polythene as required. They keep their lower body clean if not taken bath in first few days.

Physical and Mental Changes during the Days

Physical: The girls feel heavy and bloated during their periods especially on first and second day. They experience severe pain around their waist and in some cases pain in legs too. Some girls also experience swelling in particular parts of their body like stomach, thighs, and calf.

Psychological: Angry outbursts, anxiety attacks, emotional phase, feeling way too excited and then back to normal state is what girls feel while having their periods. As stated by girls, they easily get irritated over normal things than they generally ignore during other days of the month.

Menstrual Cycle: A Hindrance?

They do perceive menstruation as a hindrance in their daily routine as they are not able to work freely and normally than they are able to during the other days of the month. Also, the restriction imposed plays another major role in considering menstruation a hindrance in daily routine. “*Yeh 6 din bitane bohot mushkil ho jate hain, aur kaam nai ho pate* (these six days becomes really frustrating and carrying out normal activities becomes very difficult),” said Alisha, explaining how difficult is to go through those days. They get tired easily, the cramps don’t let them work so actively, the mood swings are responsible for every wrong decision taken and the man-made restrictions do not let them move freely even in their homes.

LOCATION : THAKURGANJ

GROUP : 2

From A Girl into Womanhood

Findings in this group show most girls started menstruation between ages 13 to 15 years. Most young girls were not aware of the fact that they are experiencing their periods which is a normal phenomenon. It's both psychologically and mentally challenging.



Talking Menstruation

When they were asked about the age when they experienced their first period and what was their first reaction to it. The girls shared that they mostly got the information either from their elder sister or from their friends. One of the girl named, Shabana says, "*Main bohut choti thi isliye mai bohut darr gayi thi jab pehli baar mujhe periods huye* (I was small and therefore I got really scared for the first time)." Firoza says, "*main kitchen mein thi jab mujhe halka halka dard hone laga, andar gayi to dekha mere mahavari shuru ho gayee thi* (I was in the kitchen when I experienced mild pain in the lower abdomen, when I went inside and checked I saw the blood)."

Restrictions

Malala says, "*Ammi ne bataya hai unn dino na namaaz adah kar sakte hain na Quran shareef ko chuh sakte hai* (my mother told me that I can neither offer prayers nor touch the religious books during that time)." Another girl Shabnam tells us she likes to eat pickle not allowed to have at that time and that she really do not like this. She said, "*mujhe khatti cheezein khane ko mana karti hain mummy, bas yahi baat mujhe bahut kharaab lagti hai.*"

She can't even touch the pickles because of the belief that it gets rotten when touched during periods.

Cloth vs. Sanitary Napkin Debate

The girls mostly used cloth during periods. When asked for reason for this choice one of them (Saleema) answered: "*Humare ghar me sab aurate humesha se kapda hi lagati hain. Ye hi sahi hai* (women in my family are using cloth since beginning and that is better)." Nigar added, "*Ek baar maine bola mummy ko ki pad istemaal karte hain, par wo boli us se bimari lag jaati hai, toh mae chup ho gayee* (once I asked my mom that why don't we use sanitary napkins, she told me that it leads to infections and therefore I kept quiet)."

Pain, Emotional Changes and Safe Hygiene

Hygiene management in this area by the girls was found to be poor. They avoided taking bath during periods. They didn't wash their hair as well. They believed it harms the body by making bones weak. Naaz told us, "*garami lagti hai par naha nahi sakte unn dino me. Amma ne aur baaki sabne bhi bataya tha ki haddiya kamzor ho jaati hain* (I feel hot and uncomfortable but cannot take bath as my mother says that it weakens the bones)." Abdominal pain was found common and emotional changes like irritation, headache was felt by many.

LOCATION : INDIRA NAGAR
GROUP : 1

Meena was active in sharing her experiences. Her participation was active throughout the discussion. She was the first one to share her experience and answered quickly.

Ayesha was a bit shy. Ayesha and Naina were best friends. She shared about the advertisements that she saw on television of Vidya Balan. Ayesha was a bit shy in front of other girls, thus was answering in a lower voice.

Kriti was not vocal in the discussion yet answered with smile, gestures and nodding. She also left early for her coaching. She was quiet throughout the session.

Malti was initially active but later gone low on answering and participating in the group discussion. She hesitated on discussing and opening up in front of everyone. Initially, she was answering to the questions but later was participating only through nodding to everyone else's responses and experience sharing.

Neha was very possessive about hygiene. She says, "*Cotton ka naya kurta phaad diya tha jab Stayfree nahi tha ghar mein* (I tore my new cotton kurta when the sanitary napkin was not available at home)." She initially hesitated and looked



towards Ayesha before sharing about her friend's customs which were different from her's with regard to taking bath during periods. Neha was also actively sharing about Malti. She seemed to be unconventional and outspoken as she told that she asked her friends to justify not touching pickles during periods. She defied it and touched the pickle herself to prove that it is just a myth.

Jagriti had an overall active participation throughout the discussion. She was a type of girl who does not believe in complying with instructions. She had great knowledge about periods. She raised her hand every time to share her experiences. Jagriti was the loudest amongst all the respondents in the group.

Neetu was quiet, shy and seemed to be not interested in sharing anything extra other than nodding and one-word answers to the questions asked. Even on asking she was comfortable only with listening and nodding.

The following points came out from the discussion:

Menarche-ascension into Womanhood

42% of the group started their periods when they were 12 years of age, the other 42% started at 13 years of age. Rest 16% started when they were 14.

85% of the group experienced their periods when they were at home; the remaining 15% had it in school.

57% of the group received the information about their menses from their mothers; remaining 43% received it from "WORLD VISION INDIA" meetings. None of the group members received any information in school.

Starting the Conversation about Their First Period

During the discussion, it came to fore that the girls were educated about periods in the meetings organized by World Vision. Ayesha aged twelve told that her neighbor's sister

educated her as well. Malti aged twenty shared that her mother was the first one to inform her about the phenomenon before the World Vision meetings.

Ayesha shared, "*Main darr gayi thi, laga ki mummy ko na pata chale ki mujhe pehle se pata tha sab kuch isliye naadaan ban gayi* (though I had prior information but I pretended to be ignorant as I got scared that my mom should not get to know about my prior knowledge)." On the other hand, Kriti aged 16 and Malti, 20, said that they did not feel any kind of uneasiness; they said they were fine with it.

Neha aged 22 added she was unaware about the phenomenon beforehand, and reported an incident that once she was playing carom with her elder brother and her mother saw her stains & slapped her whereas she was not aware about it. Later, she was told that she got slapped as she was sitting with a red bloodstain in front of her brother. She shared that "*pehle ghar pe baat hoti thi...itni umra ho gayi hai abhi tak periods kyu nahi aaye* (when my periods had not started, it used to be a point of discussion in the family that why it has not started yet)?" Such things still haunt Neha's mind and she complained to God that he should not have made her a girl.

Jagriti did not have any idea about how to use a sanitary pad. She was given one by World Vision, which she kept dutifully. She shared, "*Pehli baar underwear mei ulta chipka diya tha, fir didi se confirm kiya aur baad mein World Vision ki training mein pata chala* (for the first time when I used the pad, I did not know how to use it correctly and stick it to the underwear from the wrong side, later used it correctly when told by the trainer during the world vision training)."

Cloth vs. Sanitary Pads

The respondents told that they started using pads since the beginning; Jagriti aged 16 told that she got sanitary pad from World Vision for her first periods. Also, when sanitary pads are not available at home she uses a cloth but it feels uneasy, "*Subah hote hi sabse pehle pad khareedne chale jaate hain* (as soon as the shop opens in the morning, I go and get the sanitary napkin)." The girls shared that they preferred sanitary pads because of hygiene

purpose; they were educated during the World Vision meetings about the unhygienic effects of using a cloth. All the girls of the group use only pads but confessed using cloth sometime or the other.

Education and Availability of Pads in Schools

Sanitary pads are always available to the girls in schools for which they do not have to pay anything; also their female teachers are very supportive and helpful. Jagriti says while studying biology as a subject in school she was informed about this phenomenon. Jyoti believes that school should play an active role in educating about menstrual cycle. “*Class Vth tak mein ye bata dena chahiye kyuki ab menstrual cycle jaldi ho jata hai* (the schools should educate the girls about periods by fifth standard as menstruation starts early nowadays), adds Meena. Parents these days are well aware of menstrual cycle and the pain and spasm that accompany it. Neha playfully told us, “*Hum to drame karte the school na jaane ke liye par mummy fir bhi bhejti thi* (I used to pretend having pain so that I do not have to go to school but my mother used to understand my ruses and always forced us to attend school).” School pays special attention to the cleanliness of ladies toilet. Their sweepers are also separate.

Instructions/Restriction Imposed By Family

Meena told that she was asked not to wash her hair and touch the pickle jar whereas Ayesha says she was prohibited from touching the holy Quran or meet the religious teacher. Neha tells us that she was worried about going out, as she likes to roam around. Also, she was asked not to go to the temple during her periods. Jagriti was advised the same yet she broke the stereotypes by touching and eating pickle during her periods and asked her friends also to try the same.

All the girls of the group felt restricted but they found a way around it. “*Sab kehte hain agar bhagwaan ko chhoo denge aise time toh chhoot lag jaegi*, (everybody says that we should not touch the idols during mensuration),” says Meena to which Neha adds, “*Banaya toh bhagwaan ne hi hai, par duniya ki reet chali aarahi hai* (the fact is that God only has made us

this way but since everyone follows it since time immemorial, can't even question it)." Mothers tend to avoid mixing up menstruation and religion. Neha says that once she asked her mother about this to which she got a reply, "*Kuch zyada hi nahi padh li ho* (seems you have read too much)."

How Regularly Do You Change Your Sanitary Napkins?

57% of the girls in the group changed their pads three times a day whereas the remaining 43% changed it for four times a day. Malti playfully teases Neha by saying that "*Ye toh bundle kharch kar deti hai* (she finishes the entire pack in no time)."

Importance of Cleanliness

Meena tells us that it is very important to stay clean during periods and her mother told this to her. Ayesha adds, "*Periods ke time khule mei toilet nahi jaana chaye, aisa World Vision ki meeting mein bataya gaya tha* (we should not go in open for defecation or urination during menstruation, as our body becomes more susceptible to infections at this time of the month)."

Neha says that in her house her mother pays attention to the cleanliness. She also says that "*Beemariyan hoti hain bahut kapde istemaal karne se. Emergency mein lenge agar toh saaf hi kapda lenge. Ekbaar maine naya cotton ka kurta phaada tha* (using cloth leads to many infections. Even if one has to use in an emergency, it should be clean. Once I tore my new cotton kurta when there was no sanitary napkin in the house)."

Jagriti told that one should bathe in spite of periods and should wash their undergarments with disinfectants. Neha says that she avoids taking protein during her periods. She was advised to do so by a male doctor whom she was very hesitant to ask questions initially.

Emotional and Mental Changes

Kriti goes through a lot of pain during her menstrual cycle and hardly eats anything whereas Malti cries a lot and experience a lot of mood swings during menstrual cycle.

Neetu and Jagriti suffer the same. The group was also aware of the use of medicines to relieve the pain but they advise against it. They say it makes one habitual and dependent on it.

Perceive As a Hindrance

71% of the group goes to school and does not find menstrual cycle interfering in their day-to-day lives. 29% of the girls does household chores and find the pain bearing enough to continue their works.

Disposal of Sanitary Napkins

Meena has a unique method of disposing used sanitary napkins, “*Matke mein pads ko daal ke sookhne tak chhod do aur fir jala do* (put the pads in a pot/pitcher and then burn it once it gets dried).” Nevertheless Jyoti disagrees with her. Meena explains further that soiled sanitary napkins should not be disposed in open. Kids playing barefoot bring back the bacteria home. Ayesha wraps the sanitary napkins in a paper, put it in two polythenes and disposes it off.

Breaking the Stereotypes

Kriti was informed that impure blood comes out of your body during menses but she educated herself to know better. Jagriti boldly asks her father to bring sanitary napkins for her if she is unable to go out. Neha

Like we get upset about a guest cancelling on us after our preparations it happens to our body. Our body is prepared for the egg to be conceived but the egg dies which results in our menstrual cycle hence, the pain and spasm.

tells us, “*Mujhe bataya gaya tha ki periods mei achaar chhoone se achaar kharab ho jaata hai, par maine chooa aur kharab bhi ho gaya. Shayad humara haath hi kharab tha. Maine apne doston ko bhi bola, unka bhi achaar kharab hua par main fir se koshish karungi* (I was

told not to touch pickles during menstruation but I touched and it got spoilt, I also asked my friends to experiment, they also tried and the result was the same. But I think our hands must not have been clean and dry, so will try again).”

Jagriti who is merely sixteen years old explicitly knows why periods happen and how periods happen. She says that

Neha has also shared with her male teacher during emergencies about her having menses. She now feels comfortable in watching sanitary napkin advertisements. Earlier she was confused about its use, “*Ye dawa hai ya kapda jisse chot lagne par laga lo toh sahi ho jaata hai* (this is some medicine or cloth which is used in case of some injury).” Ayesha shares an incident when her younger brother pointed to the advertisement and said, “*tumhare wale huggies ka ad aaya hai*”.

LOCATION : INDIRA NAGAR

GROUP : 2

Menarche-ascension into Womanhood

As per the findings we got results that in most of the girls menstruation started between the ages of 12 to 15 years. Most of the young girls were not aware of the fact that this discharge is normal. Because of this ignorance they face a lot of mental trauma and psychological issues along with the bodily changes.

Let's Talk

They were first asked about their age when first they had their periods and what was their first reaction on it. The girls mostly got the information either from their elder sister or from their friends. One of the girl named, Sudha says, "*Main bohot darr gayi thi jab pehli baar mujhe periods huye* (I got really scared to when I saw the blood)." Neeti says, "*bahar khelte waqt mujhe ajeeb sa laga, jab andar room me jaake dekha to periods start ho gaye they, per main darri nahi kyuki mujhe pehle se iske bare mein pata tha* (I felt a little uncomfortable while I was playing outdoor, when I came inside and checked I realized that my menses has started. I did not get scared as I was already aware of this phenomenon)."

Period Stigma Surrounding the Women

World Vision, an organization which works for women's health and hygiene especially on Menstrual hygiene is committed to keep girls healthy and in school worldwide. It is important to understand that menstrual hygiene enables women and girls to reach life's fullest potential. Reeta, a cook by profession says, "*Meri maalkin mujhe periods ke dino me mandir mein jaane se rokhi hain* (the lady of the house where I work stops me from entering the worship area during my periods). Another girl Divya tells us she likes to eat tamarind and further adds, "*mujhe khatti cheez khaane ko mana krti hai mummy* (My mother stops me from eating tamarind or anything tangy)." She can't even touch pickles due to their belief that it rots when touched during periods.

Say No to Shame

Girls who were school goers used washrooms without any hesitation and hindrance and were not scared of wearing white clothes during periods. They change their pads three to four times in first two days of their periods and gradually change every day during their menses. Anganbadi Kendra, which spreads awareness regarding menstrual hygiene among young girls and women, has changed lives in tandem with other well-meaning organizations. Isha, a eighth standard student, tells us that “*Hum sirf pads use karte hain per jab kahi nai milta tab sirf saaf cotton kapda use kar lete hain* (I use only sanitary napkins and in case it is not available I use clean cotton cloth).” Reeta says, “*Pad use karne mein dikkat nahi hoti hai per kapda laga ke kaam karna mushkil ho jaata hai* (it gets difficult to work if we use cloth. With sanitary pads, we face no problem at all).”

Pain, Emotional Changes and Safe Hygiene

During the study, the girls were already aware of the importance of practicing personal hygiene and most of them were comfortable in using sanitary pads, bathing, washing hands after toilet during their periods. They even went through emotional and psychological changes such as mood swings and irritation along with changes in their body like abdominal cramps and other such symptoms. Sudha whose periods started at the age of 15 years says, “*Hume sharmana nai chahiye* (we should not be ashamed of menstruation).” Neeti says, “*Mujhe periods ke dusre din bahut dard hota hai jisse kaam karna mushkil ho jaata hai* (I experience unbearable pain on the second day of the periods and, therefore, it becomes difficult to do the routine work normally).”

LOCATION : JANKIPURAM

GROUP : 1

Sunita prefers sharing everything with her sister. Her sister Kirti even answered the questions asked to Sunita and they both kept giggling. She did not interact much and chose to keep quiet until asked to respond.



Pammi responded the most among all the girls. She laughed on other's answers, raised her eyebrows on questions being asked, winked while

answering. She answered all questions with full enthusiasm, she knew that everyone has different views, thus she has to give her views as well.

Divya was quite active, and preferred to answer every question. She did not hesitate to tell us about her experiences and anecdotes.

Menarche-ascension into Womanhood

75% of the group started their periods when they were between 12-13 years of age, the other 16.6% started at 15-16 years of age. From among all the girls, 8.4% of the girls did not experience it yet.

Around 84% of the girls had their periods when they were at home; the remaining had it in school.

58% of the girls received the information about their menses from their family members (mothers and sisters); remaining 42% received it from their friends. None of the participants had received any prior information in school.

Starting the Conversation about Their First period

“Hum soche chot lag gayi, fir bua se bataya toh unhone pad diya aur kaha ki kisi ko iss bare mein batana nahi (I thought I suffered some injury but when I told my aunt she gave me a pad and instructed me not to share it with anyone else),” said Divya (18), explaining about her first period. While noticing sudden changes in her own body, *“main darr gayi thi ki ye kya ho gaya mere sath (I got scared that what has happened with me),”* shared Preeti aged sixteen. She told that she started crying and told her mother about it. Mitali (19) and Savita (15) were informed by their friends and were asked not to discuss about it with anyone else.

Savita (15) overheard Sulekha and Suneeta, while they were discussing about their periods in school. She later on confirmed with one of her classmates in detail. While everyone shared about their first experience, Renu (30) hesitated to answer in the group. Pammi Verma aged 20, shared about her first menstrual discharge with her elder sister by whom she was advised not to discuss with their father and brother.

Cloth vs. Disposable Sanitary Pads

73% of the girls' still use cloth when they are out of pads but only use cotton cloth, whereas 27% stick to sanitary pads only because of the comfort and ease factor. *“Us waqt jo mil jata hai woh use kar lete hain (we use whatever is available at that time),”* says Divya (18) happily and proudly. *“Pad achcha lagta hai par asaani se milta nahi hai aur mehnga bhi bahut hota hai (I prefer using pad but it is not easily available all the time and it is also not cost-effective),”* says Preeti (16) who mostly uses cloth during her periods. Adding to this, Mitali aged 16 says, *“Mehnga toh hai par araam bahut deta hai, un dino mein dikkat nahi hoti (no doubt it is expensive but it is worth it).”*

Education and Convenience in School

Some girls told that sanitary pads are always available to them in schools for which they do not have to pay anything and also their classmates are very supportive and helpful. Savita along with other girls like Mitali told that her school provides two packets of sanitary pads

every month to every girl student without having to pay for it. Contrary to this, Divya who is eighteen years of age says that *“school mein pad milta hai par hum lete nahi kyuki achcha nahi lagta lete huye* (yes, we get pads in school but I do not avail it as I feel ashamed).”

Talking about education/awareness about menstruation, none of the girls received it from their respective schools or college. They now realize that one should be informed or educated about it in their schools as things become much easier and convenient when they experience their first menstruation. Sanjana (11) shared *“Mujhe hota nahi hai par didi ne bataya hai* (I haven’t experienced my menses yet, but have received prior information from my elder sister about menstruation).”

Instructions/Restriction Imposed By Family

Pammi and Sulekha both aged 20 told that they were asked not to wash their hair and touch pickle whereas, Mitali (19) says, *“Ab emergency pad jaye toh chhoona hi padta hai achaar wagairah* (in case of emergency we have to touch pickle at times while menstruating).”

Savita aged 15 says she was prohibited to visit temples and other religious places and even the place for worship at home. Kirti tells us that she was worried about going out, as she was asked by her mother and sister to not roam during this time of month. Divya (18) who loves to roam around still goes out despite the fact that she is menstruating. Also, she was asked not to go to the temple during her periods. *“Mummy ne kaha ki vrat rakh sakti ho par maataji ko mat chhoona* (my mother told me that I can keep fast but cannot touch the idol of goddess),” says Suneeta (21).

Girls did not oppose to all these instructions or restrictions laid by their family members and they have no issues and problems with it except Mitali. The girls are even asked not to wear light colored clothes and not to move around so much because of bloodstain on clothes.

Medications and health checkups

During the discussion it was noticed that no health checkups/camps have been organized till date for them. Whereas two girls Divya (18) and Pammi (20) told that they experience

irregular periods with a gap of two-three months to which Pammi told, “*Har mahine nahi aate aur iss baar teesre mahine aaya. Saamne ki bhauji ne kuch garam khaane ko kaha* (I do not get my periods every month. This time I got my periods after three months. The lady in the neighbourhood has advised to have foods which are hot).”

During menstrual cramps they take medicines like ‘Combiflam’, ‘Borophil’ (this is how they pronounced it) and ‘*Harey panney ki dawa*’ (the medicine in the green strip), shared Divya, Kirti and Renu. Contradictory to this some believe that medicines are not a good option to reduce the pain during menstruation.

Emotional and physical changes

“*Thand mei bahut dard hota hai kyuki khoon jam jatahai, garam paani se sekne se sahi ho jata hai* (we experience more pain during winters as the discharge is not smooth due to clotting, we get relief when use hot water),” says Pammi. Every girl in the group told that they face anger issues and mood swings in the initial two days. Menstrual cramps and back pains are much common to everyone in the group as shared by the girls. Also, they avoid going out for marriages and family functions because they feel uncomfortable during those days. Mitali said that she avoids going to college in the initial two days because of pain and cramps. “*Lagta hai aise samay koi na bole, jab mera mann ho tabhi main bolu* (I don’t feel like talking to anyone during that time),” says Sulekha (20) while talking about her mood swings.

Importance of cleanliness

58% of the girls say that they change their pads or cloth 3 times a day, 33% change it twice a day. Pammi aged twenty says that “*Kabhi zyada aata hai or kabhi kum par teen baar toh badal hi lete hai* (at times the discharge is more and at times less but we generally change the pad/cloth at least three times a day).” Cleanliness was not a major factor of concern as they felt it is as normal as any other day of the month for most of the girls.

But Pammi (20) says that “*Kabhi kabhi toh teen baar naha lete hain aise time* (at times I take bath three times a day during periods)” and Kirti aged thirteen told “*Ganda lagta hai agar aise time na nahaye toh* (it feels dirty if we do not take bath during this time of the month).”

Disposal of sanitary pads

When asked about how they dispose of the sanitary pads after use, almost everyone had the same way of disposing by wrapping it in a newspaper and throw it in the dustbin kept outside of the house. When asked about other ways of disposing a sanitary pad to which Pammi said, “*Mummy kehti hain jalana nahi chahiye* (mummy says that it should not be burnt),” and everyone agreed to this.

Awareness and exposure through media

The girls were unaware and didn't have any knowledge regarding periods and its functioning and why do they occur to girls only? No health checkups and camps were ever organized for them because of which they have no prior information and knowledge about menstruation. When asked the girls if prior information is important, they agreed and Suneeta (21) said, “*Apni beti ko main pehle se bata dunggi* (I will definitely educate my daughter about it).”

Almost everyone has seen the movie Padman and they liked it, to which Kirti says, “*Bhaiya dekh rahe the TV pe, mujhe sharam aayi toh main wahan se uth gayee* (my elder brother was watching the movie, I felt uncomfortable so I came from there.” Some of the girls discussed about the advertisements on sanitary pads but none of them clearly remembered it except the color blue, which indicates Stayfree sanitary pads.

LOCATION : JANKIPURAM
GROUP : 2

Everyone was very nervous except Khushi in the starting; they were shy and most of the time they were looking around.

Khushi was very interactive. She had fair knowledge about the subject of discussion.

Rita was very curious to know more about menstruation. Nitya was more into discussing her friend's problem. Shobha was almost silent and sometimes she giggled and listened to the other girls until she was asked to respond.



Menarche-ascension into Womanhood

50% of the group started having their periods at the age of 14 yrs and 33% at the age of 12 and rest at the age of 13 yrs.

Rita and Khushi were in the school when their menses started. They got very nervous at that time. Whereas Shobha, Amita and Reema were at home and Nitya was in the relative's house when she got her first periods. 54% of the girls had prior information about the menstruation rest of them were not having any idea about it.

Lack of Knowledge

Most of the girls were unaware about the phenomenon. Mothers and sisters are considered to be a primary source for this knowledge but they themselves are uncomfortable talking about it. When the menstruation cycle starts, they are provided only limited knowledge like what to use, how to dispose the cloth or sanitary pad and basic do's and don'ts but no

emotional support. When they got their first menstrual discharge, they are clueless and scared, sometimes even traumatized.

Awareness

Literacy rate among women was found to be very low. This leads to very narrow-minded approach towards bodily changes and menstruation itself.

As Rita was totally unaware she said, "*Hume pata nai chala kab periods shuru huye* (I did not even realize when it started)." Similar case was with other girls as no prior knowledge was provided to them which led to shock and self-consciousness when their periods started.

In case of Nitya, while she was in school she saw her friends white skirt with sudden blood stains that made her curious about what is going on. It was her friend who educated her about the onset of periods which she experienced soon.

Physical and Psychological Changes

Psychological changes during periods include emotional outbursts, mood swings, irritations whereas physical changes include cramps, headache, and body ache and so on. All the girls experienced, "irritation and mood swings." Due to severe pain Reema said, "I take medicine during my periods". Women don't talk about their menstruation with anyone, even if they are experiencing mood swings, body ache. They believe talking about it is not good. Most of the girls feel ashamed and shy.

The area in which they live does not have any medical facilities with lady doctor so for this they have to travel six to seven kilometers away from their place. As there is stigma around this issue which make them suppress their emotions which ultimately lead to stress. There are times when they just want to take a break from their daily chores during their periods but can't because they fail to express what ordeal (emotional) they are going through.

Social Stigma

Menstruation surrounds itself with various prejudices. Social stigma is the unsaid and unquestioned rules that women follow and pass on. There is no room for questions and discussions when this stage arrives in any girl's life. It is ironic that in a country where children are said to be god's incarnation, the natural process which leads a woman to motherhood is frowned upon. 90% of girls faced social stigma. Shobha and Reema were best friends. They were not allowed to wash their hair until seventh day and the on the other side khushi said, "*Choti nahi banate period ke time aur sir nahi dhote* (we neither tie our hair nor wash it during menstrual period)," whereas Amita said "*Periods ke time pe na aachar khate hain na chhote hain* (we are instructed not to touch or eat pickle during menstruation)."

"*Hume to kahin bahar hi jaane ko nahi milta* (I do not get to go out of the house)," said Nitya. Rita aged fourteen very confidently shared that "I play at school even during that time." Most of the girls are subjected to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating. Not entering the 'puja room' is the major restriction among them whereas, not entering the kitchen is the main restriction among the girls during menstruation. They are also restricted from offering prayers and touching holy books. They believed that during menstruation they become unhygienic and unclean and hence the food they prepare or handle can get contaminated. During the discussion the girls also reported that during menstruation the body emits some specific smells, which turns preserved food bad. And, therefore, they are not allowed to touch sour foods like pickles.

Sanitary Pads and Other Disposable Material

As menstruation is an on-going process, the only thing that matters during this time is what a woman uses to make her everyday work life smooth during this time. Use of cloth or pads has their own perks. Amita said, "*Pehle kapda istemal karte the par us se bahut khujli hoti thi toh powder laga lete they, fir humne pad istemal karna shuru kar diya* (earlier I was using cloth but it caused itching and irritation, so I used to sprinkle powder but lately I have

started using pad).” Shobha said, she disposes of her pads into the pond, garbage and dumping ground.

Hygiene and Sanitation

Daily hygiene care is a part of every girl's life. No special supervision is needed for it, but when it comes to menstrual hygiene one must take care of their cleanliness even more. For girls, hygiene during menstruation becomes particularly important. While scientific evidence is currently inconclusive, the risk of vaginal and reproductive tract infections may increase during menstruation.

Some girls preferred sanitary napkins and some used cloth. Sanitary napkins were changed frequently. Once the cloth was used, it was thrown away. They changed their cloth three to four times a day according to their need. Use of soap for cleaning their hands was found common among all girls. Proper disposal of napkins and cloth were done. Everyone had toilets in their homes.

LOCATION : GOMTINAGAR

Menarche

43% of the girls started with their menstruation when they were 12 years old. 29% of the girls started with their menstruation when they were 13 years old. 14% of the girls started with their menstruation when they were 14 years old. Remaining, 13% of the girls started with their menstruation when they were 15 years old.

100% of the girls had prior knowledge about menstruation.

Starting the Conversation about Their First Period

When asked whom did they inform about their first menstrual discharge, it was their mothers or sisters whom they turned up to when they first had their period.

43% got to know about it from their older sisters whereas the remaining 57% were informed by their mothers.

They shared that prior knowledge helps a lot. Ankita adds, "I wasn't nervous at all when I had my first bleed. I knew it wasn't a disease. I was turning into a woman." Statements like these restore the faith that families in urban areas are bringing up their girls with correct mindset.

A Guide To Their Menstrual Cycle

It's important to talk to girls from an early age to make sure they're prepared before the big day; their first period. The start of menstruation is a major event in a girl's life, that's why every girl should know what changes are happening with her own body. 100% of the girls in the group had prior knowledge about menstruation, its start, how to use a pad, etc.

Cloth vs. Disposable Sanitary Menstrual Pads

The female respondents when asked about what type of sanitary protection they use, they shared that they have always used a disposable sanitary napkin.

They were not allowed to use any kind of cloth. Ayesha tells us, “My mother always keeps extra pads handy for emergency purposes so we never had to use cloth. She is against using cloth at any cost.”

Instructions

Menstruation comes with a set of polite guide and instructions every month. Instructions to sit properly, not go out, wear dark clothes, do not indulge in physical activities, no sour food items, keeping it a secret, and the list of instructions goes on.

The participants accepted that these kinds of instructions exist around them; these girls somehow have escaped them. Their mothers let them go out, play, attend classes etc. The only restriction faced by Bhumika and Arushi is not to visit the temple while menstruating. They listen to their mother and offer their prayers from outside.

Why Do Girls Bleed Every Month?

Ankita, Bhumika, Natasha, Alifsha and Arushi constitute the 71.42% of the girls who had complete knowledge of why menstruation happens.

Bhumika aims to be a doctor and wishes to raise awareness amongst people about menstruation and why it shouldn't be a hush hush topic. She adds, “The more we talk about it, the more we know. It's a natural phenomenon, why do people not understand?”

Menstruations Affecting Physical and Daily Activities

Alifsha and Ayesha suffer a lot of menstrual cramps and their mood is cranky too. Arushi says that she faces bloating and rarely wishes to eat during her menses. Ankita tell us that,

“I majorly don’t go through any kind of pain or crankiness. I feel lucky sometimes”.Bhumika and Natasha shared that they go to their school, play and homework with minimal difficulty. Natasha tells us that she has major mood swings in PMS.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

MENARCHE

Girls usually experience menarche at different ages as young as 12 and as old as 16. While talking to the respondents at different locations, about when they had their first period, they responded with an average age of 12 to 15 years. Girls had their first period at the age of 10 to 12 years in Thakurganj, while in Indira Nagar they had it at the age of 13-15 years. 84% of the girls in Thakurganj had their first period at the age of around 12-13 years while the remaining had it when they were 15-16 years of age. In Jankipuram majority of the girls got their menstrual bleeding when they were of 13 years of age whereas the remaining girls were of 15-16 years of age when they stepped into adulthood.

In Amberganj, 84% of the girls had their period when they were at home; the remaining 16% had it at their relatives' places, whereas in Indira Nagar the majority of the girls had their first period in their schools, and remaining had it at their homes. In Thakurganj and Jankipuram the majority of the respondents told that they had their first period at their homes.

MEDICINE AND CHECKUPS

During the discussion in Jankipuram extension, it came to fore that no health checkups have been organized till date for them. During menstrual cramps some of the girls told that they take medicines like 'Combiflam', 'Borophil' (This is how they pronounced the name of the medicine) and 'Harey panney ki dawa' (Medicine in green strip) as told by the girls. Contradictory to this some believe that medicines are not a good option to consume while having their periods.

In Indiranagar, with the intervention of an organization named World Vision, various health check-ups were organized on a regular basis. Girls are aware and conscious about their health and prefer to visit doctors in case of any menstrual problem.

In every focused group discussion, there were almost 2-3 cases of irregular periods and pain that was noticed out of which some preferred to take painkiller medicines and go for health checkups, whereas some of them opted for natural remedies as told by their family members or neighbors. In Jankipuram two girls among the group told that they experience irregular periods to which Pappi (20) told, "*har mahine nahi aate aur iss baar teesre mahine aaya. Saamne ki bhauji ne kuch garam khaane ko kaha* (I do not experience it every month. This time I got my periods after three months. The lady in the neighborhood asked me to consume hot food)."

MYTHS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED

Not only rural areas, urban areas too are filled with myths and misconceptions related to periods. There are varieties of myths which are followed by the people of particular area according to their cultures and traditions. While carrying out the focused group discussions, we observed that almost every group follows some kind of myths "*ped nahi chhoone chahiye, woh murjha jaate hain* (we should not touch the plants as they wither away), *khatta khaane se mahvaari jaldi aati hai* (sour food leads to early menstrual bleeding), *Mummy ne kaha ki vrat rakh sakti ho par maata ji ko mat chhoona* (My mom told me that I can keep fast but cannot touch the goddesses);" and others like not touching and eating pickles, washing hair only on third or fifth day of the menstrual cycle, not visiting any religious place or doing any religious act, and one must stay away from any kind of fragrance, wearing dark colored clothes, sitting properly, not to roam around, not to talk about this with their fathers and brothers.

Girls did not oppose to all these instructions or restrictions laid by their family members and they have no issues and problems with it except in the case of Indira Nagar, where the girls raised questions against limitations imposed on them. Jyoti from Indira Nagar says that once she asked her mother about the instruction imposed on her, to which she got a reply, "*Kuch zyada hi nahi padh li ho* (Seems you have read too much) and *sab kehte hai agar bhagwaan ko chhoo denge aise time toh chhoot lag jaegi* (everybody says that we should not touch the idols during mensuration), *banaya toh bhagwaan ne hi hai, par duniya*

ki reet chali aa rahi hai (the fact is that God only has made us this way but since everyone follows it since time immemorial, can't even question it)," said one of the girls from the same group.

DISPOSAL

Proper Disposal of Sanitary Napkins plays a vital role in maintaining hygiene and cleanliness in our surroundings. Used sanitary napkins that have not been disposed of properly sometimes block the drainage system. Burning plastic sanitary napkins causes harmful toxins to be released into the atmosphere, and is, therefore, not an environment-friendly solution to the problem whereas Naina from Indira Nagar says, "*Matke mei pads ko daal ke sookhne tak ka chhod do aur fir jala do* (put the pads in a pot/pitcher and then burn it once it gets dried)." She explains further that soiled sanitary napkins should not be disposed in open as kids playing barefoot bring back the bacteria home, also other girls from the group told that they wrap the sanitary napkins in a paper, put it in two polythenes and disposes it off.

When asked about how the girls from Jankipuram group disposes off the sanitary pads after use, almost everyone had the same way of disposing by wrapping it in a newspaper and throws in the dustbin kept outside of the house adding to this, Pappi says "*Mummy kehti hain jalana nahi chahiye* (my mother says that it should not be burnt).

In Amberganj and Thakurganj, girls told that they dispose used sanitary napkins or used clothes off in their locality where garbage is accumulated.

BREAKING THE NORMS

Among all the FGD's conducted at different locations, it came to fore that the respondents did not oppose to any of the instructions imposed on them along with the myths and misconceptions passed on by their elder generations.

Apart from this, few girls of Indira Nagar broke the stereotypes by questioning back their family members along with performing the acts which were prohibited. Like few instances

from Indira Nagar, Nisha was informed that impure blood comes out of your body during menses but she educated herself to know better. Khushboo boldly asks her father to bring sanitary napkins for her if she is unable to go out. Jyoti tells us, *“Mujhe bataya gaya tha ki periods mei achaar choone se achaar kharab ho jaata hai, par maine chooa aur kharab ho gaya. Shayad humara haath hi kharab tha. Maine apne doston ko bhi bola, unka bhi achaar kharab hua par main fir se koshish karungi.”*

Khushboo, who is merely 16 years old, explicitly knows why and how periods happen. She says that like we get upset about a guest cancelling on us after our preparations it happens to our body. Our body is prepared for the egg to be conceived but the egg dies which results in our menstrual cycle hence, the pain and spasm. Jyoti has also shared with her male teacher during emergencies about her having menses.

AWARENESS AND EXPOSURE THROUGH MEDIA

It was clearly observed that the girls got aware about sanitary napkins and its usage from media like advertisements on television and movies more than any other source.

Almost everyone in group from Jankipuram has seen the movie Padman and they liked it, to which Anjali says, *“Bhaiya dekh rahe the TV pe mujhe sharam aayi toh main uth ke aa gayee.”* Some of the girls also discussed about the advertisements on sanitary pads but none of them were able to clearly recall it except the color blue, which indicates Stayfree sanitary pads.

Girls from Indira Nagar told that they now feel comfortable in watching sanitary napkin advertisements. Earlier Jyoti was confused about its use, *“Yeh dawa hai ya kapda jisse chot lagne par laga lo toh sahi ho jaata hai.”* Ayesha shares an incident when her younger brother pointed to the advertisement and said, *“tumhare wale huggies ka ad aaya hai.”*

Apart from both these locations, the female respondents in Thakurganj claimed that they have seen ads related to sanitary pads on television but they clearly do not remember it.

PAD/CLOTH

The choice between using pad or cloth during menstruation heavily depends on the financial conditions of the girls and women. 30-35 % of girls chose cloth just because they couldn't afford sanitary pads every month due to less income and high prices of the pads available in their area.

In some areas pads were not even available in the nearby shops. 65-70% of girls prefer pads over cloth as they were told about them by intervening groups such as World Vision in Indira Nagar Anganwadi, WaterAid in Thakurganj and Amberganj, mothers & sisters in other areas.

Khusboo, "ek bar pad na hone pe gharpe kapda laga liya tha par usme bohot uljhan hui to subah hote hi mai pad leke aayi. Uske baad se maine kabhi kapda nahi lagaya."

PRIOR INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Menstruation always has a lot of stigma around it. Only education can help people to come over all the stigmas surrounding it. It was found that in every area schools failed to provide basic education regarding menstruation and hygiene during this time among girls.

It was observed that groups like WaterAid, FEED, Vigyan Foundation and World Vision played a key role in educating not only the girls but also their families and made them very comfortable with this natural phenomenon. They even introduced girls to pads and taught them how to dispose them properly. Girls who were educated by these groups had proper knowledge about menstruation and even questioned the social stigmas surrounding it from time to time.

Priyanka told, "Hume ab pata hai ki periods kyun hote hain or hume kya karna chahiye isliye ab isse hume darr nahi lagta."

INTERVENTIONS

It was found that areas where there was a presence of intervention groups (NGOs) had basic knowledge about menstrual hygiene and were more open to talk and discuss their problems and issues. Knowledge played a key role in dismissing age old taboos and stigmas related to menstruation and hygiene. However, in areas where no intervention was introduced, high level of ignorance and stigma on menstruation prevailed. In case of Indira Nagar where World Vision played a key role in education and prior information to the girl, the girls were way more aware and informed about the functionality and scientifically understood the stigmas and myths that prevailed since years in comparison to Jankipuram where there was no intervention from any organization, the respondents were pinned to stigmas and myths and were uneducated and had no prior information.

EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL CHANGES

Emotional and physical changes are related to the monthly menstrual cycle through which every girl goes. Almost everyone, felt mood swings headaches, anger issues and sudden food cravings. While physical changes involved body pain and low energy to all. These changes are very common but girls who aren't aware about these changes are unable to differentiate between normal and hormonal shifts.

PERCIEVE AS HINDERANCE

As per group discussion, 50% still find periods as hindrance. They find mensuration often as hindrance. While discussing this, Nisha said, "*Yeh 6 din bitane bhaut mushkil ho jate hain aur kaam bhi nahi ho pate.*" She keeps this problem to herself.

Girls around 13-14 years, do not go to school as their period cramps do not let them participate actively. On asking, they even said that they face huge problems during their day today activities and household chores due to this they suffer emotional stress.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE: A SERIOUS ISSUE

Menstruation hygiene is a serious issue that almost every women and girl faces once she enters Adolescence around age 12 and until she reaches the menopause somewhere in her late 40s. While interacting we saw a need for change in family and community norms and beliefs in this regard.

According to discussion we found that Interventions byNGOs had a great impact. While interacting to Samya, she shared, "*Periods ke time khule mein toilet nahi jaana chahiye, aisa World Vision ki meeting mein bataya tha.*"

Girls and young people have a right to know about the issues which touch them directly and indirectly now or later.

DON'TS DURING MENSTRUATION



Menarche - ascension into womanhood

Girls usually experience menarche at different ages, as young as 12 and as old as 15. While talking to the female respondents about when they had their first period, the responses were varied.

	AMBERGANJ	THAKURGANJ	INDIRANAGAR	JANKIPURAM EXT.
Menarche – ascension to Womanhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Were Between 13-15 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Were Between 13-15 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Were Between 12-14 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Were Between 12-16 years.
	<p>[Some clearly could not recall their first period].</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Neither were they aware about this phenomenon nor what exactly is happening to their body when they first menstruated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Most of the girls were not aware of the fact they have started with their periods. <p>[It's both psychological and mental changes which we go through].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Not aware of the fact they have started with their periods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Most of the girls were not aware about this phenomenon and got scared whereas some of them had prior information.

First Reaction

“Felt embarrassed & ashamed of myself”

“Acha hota ki hum ladke hote, ye sab na ihelna padta”

“I was really stressed out about not having or experiencing the same earlier”

“I was playing carom with my elder brother when my mother saw stains on my clothes & slapped me whereas I was unaware about

Main darr gayi thi, boht darr laga ki mummy ko na pata chale! Mujhe pehle se pata tha sab kuch iss liye naadaan ban gayi.”

“Hum soche chot lag gayi, fir bua se bataya toh unhone pad diya aur kaha ki kisi ko iss bare mei batana nahi”

“Main darr gayi thi ki ye kya ho gaya mere sath”

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

AMBERGANJ

33% of the female respondents told their mothers

66% talked to their sisters.

THAKURGANJ

33% of the girls were informed by their elder sisters

22% by their friends

42% by their mothers.

INDIRA NAGAR

57% of the group received the information about their menses from their mothers

43% received it from WORLD VISION INDIA meeting.

JANKIPURAM EXT

58.3% of the group members received information from their family members (mothers and sisters);

41.6% received it from their friends.

AMBERGANJ	THAKURGANJ	INDIRA NAGAR	JANKIPURAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 33% used cloth - 66% used sanitary pads when they first had their periods. - used cloth during the initial years - Now usually use sanitary pads - Use cloth instead of sanitary pads when do not have access to it or could not buy it due to its high price. - Was informed about using cloth as a protection mother. - Prefers using sanitary pads because it is more hygienic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 28% of the girls uses cloth <i>“Humare ghar me sab aurate humesha se kapda hi lagati hai. Ye hi sahi hai.”</i> <i>“Ek baar mene bola mummy ko ki pad istemaal karte hai, par wo boli usse bimari lag jaati hai.”</i> - 42% uses sanitary pads and 30% uses both pad and cloth as per availability - Use old clothes due to unaffordability of sanitary napkins. - Change it on an average 2-3 times a day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All the girls prefer using only pads but confessed using cloth sometime or the other. - Using pads since the starting. - One participant shared getting sanitary pad from “WORLD VISION” for her first periods. - When sanitary pads are not available, she uses a cloth but it feels uneasy. <i>“subah hote hi sabse pehle pad khareedne chale jaate hai”.</i> - Prefer sanitary pads because of hygiene purpose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 72.7% of the girls’ still use cloth when they are out of pads or can’t afford it but only use cotton cloth. <i>“uss waqt jo mil jata wo use kar lete hai”.</i> <i>“Pad achcha lagta hai par asaani se milta nahi hai aur mehnga bhi bohot hai”</i> - 27.27% stick to sanitary pads only because of the comfort and ease factor. <i>“Mehnga toh hai par araam bohot deta hai, un dino mei dikkat nahi hoti”.</i>

AMBERGANJ

"khatta khaane se mahvaari jaldi aati hai".

"Asked not to eat or touch pickles or any tangy food items during menstruation".

"ped nahi chhoona chahiye, woh murjha jaate hain"

"Neither visit any religious place- masjid nor keep roza (fast)".

"Must take bath on the second day of the period and must stay away from perfumes".

"Do not indulge in physical activities".

THAKURGANJ

"Ammi ne bataya hai unn dino na namaaz adah kar sakte hai na Quran shareef ko chuh sakte hai"

"Ammi ne pehli baat yahi samjhai thi k abbu ya bhai se ye sab baat na batani hai"

"mujhe khatti cheeze khaane ko mana krta hai mummy, bas yahi baat mujhe bohot kharaab lagti hai.can't even touch the pickles according to their belief it gets rotten when touched during periods.

Not allowed to enter kitchen

Not to take bath for the first 3 days, as it weakens the joints.

Myths and Restrictions

INDIRANAGAR

"mujhe bataya gaya tha ki periods mei achaar chhoone se achaar kharab ho jaata hai, par maine chooa aur kharab ho gaya. Shayad humara haath hi kharab tha. Maine apne doston ko bhi bola, unka bhi achaar kharab hua par main fir se koshish karungi".

"Asked not to wash their hair"

"Prohibited from touching the QURAN".

"Not to go to the temple during her periods"

"sab kehte hai agar bhagwaan ko chhoo denge aise time toh chhoot lag jaegi. banaya toh bhagwaan ne hi hai, par duniya ki reet chali aa rahi hai".

JANKIPURAM EXT.

"choti nahi bnanate period ke time aur sir nhi dhote"

"periods ke time pe na aachar khate hai na choote hai".

"Hme to kahin bahar hi jaane ko nhi milta, I play at school during that time".

"Cannot enter the kitchen"

"Get unhygienic and unclean and hence the food we prepare or handle can get contaminated"

"Not allowed to touch sour foods like pickles".

Awareness

The female participants in **Amberganj** were neither aware of this phenomenon nor what exactly is happening to their body when they first menstruated, they at first were really stressed out about not having or experiencing the same earlier.

None of them knew why they lose blood every month, why periods are important, why and how does it happen?

At a point when they get their first period, they are clueless and scared, sometimes even traumatized. One of the respondents at Amberganj says, "**hume kisi ne bataya nai tha, na hum aage batayenge. Ise log battameezi maante hai**".

Response of one of the participants was shocking. When asked if they will educate their sisters about menstruation one participant said, "**abhi toh ye boht choti hain**".

"Agar meri beti hoti tou mae usse nai btati mahwari ke baare me. Jab honge khud pata chal jaega. Maa-beti me ek parda

The teenage girls in **Thakurganj** were not aware about menstruation before it happened to them. As told by them neither the schools nor their parents enlightened them with this phenomenon

Two girls shared that they were informed and taught about this in school but very casually.

Some of them who go to Madarsa were never taught about it, remaining few do not even go to school.

They think girls need to be educated about it. Also said that it would have been better, if they knew about it before actually entering this phase of life.

Muskan, a resident of Jankipuram ext. was totally unaware. She said, "Hume pata nai chala kab periods shuru huay." And the similar case was with other girls as no prior knowledge was provided to them which led to shock and self-consciousness when they experienced their first menstrual period.

Khushboo, a resident of Indira Nagar, who is merely 16 years old explicitly, knows why periods happen and how periods happen. She says that like we get upset about a guest cancelling on us after our preparations it happens to our body. Our body is prepared for the egg to be conceived but the egg dies which results in our menstrual cycle hence, the pain and spasm. Jyoti has also shared with her male teacher during emergencies about her having menses.

DISPOSAL OF SANITARY NAPKINS & CLOTH

AMBERGANJ	THAKURGANJ	INDIRA NAGAR	JANKIPURAM EXT.
<p>They dispose the sanitary pads or cloth in the public sewer or garbage, wrapped up in polythene.</p>	<p>Taught how to dispose of sanitary napkins properly so that they do not clog sewers or do not make the surroundings dirty.</p> <p>Everyone had the same way of disposing by wrapping it in a daily newspaper and throws in the dustbin kept outside of the house.</p> <p>When asked about other ways of disposing a sanitary pad to which one of the participants said “mummy kehti hain jalana nahi chahiye” and everyone agreed to it.</p>	<p>Naina has a unique method of disposing soiled sanitary napkins, “matke mei pads ko daal ke sookhne tak ka chod do aur fir jala do”</p> <p>She explains further that “soiled sanitary napkins should not be disposed in open. Kids playing barefoot bring back the bacteria home”.</p> <p>Ayesha wraps the sanitary napkins in a paper, put it in two polythenes and disposes it off.</p>	<p>When asked about how they dispose the sanitary pads after use, almost everyone had the same way of disposing by wrapping it in a daily newspaper and throws in the dustbin kept outside of the house.</p> <p>When asked about other ways of disposing a sanitary pad to which a participant said “mummy kehti hain jalana nahi chahiye” and everyone agreed to this.</p>

AmberGanj

The girls shared that hygiene is an important aspect and one must take care of it to stay away from diseases and infections.

50% respondents usually change sanitary pads or cloth twice in 24 hours of time & 33% changed thrice a day whereas 33% four times a day.

Use of soap for cleaning their hands was found common among all girls.

Thakur Ganj

Cleanliness to all these girls is important and they are aware of the effects and outcomes of maintaining cleanliness during their menstrual cycle.

The girls, who take bath on third or fourth day, maintain cleanliness by washing their lower body properly on their first 2 days

Indira Nagar

Started using pads since the initiation of their periods

One of the participants shared that they got sanitary pad from the **WORLD VISION** for her first periods.

Also, when sanitary pads are not available at home they use clean cloth but it feels uneasy, *"subah hote hi sabse pehle pad khareedne chale jaate hai"*.

A participant said "it is very important to stay clean during periods and her mother told this to her".

"Periods ke time khule mei toilet nahi jaana chaye, aisa meeting (WORLD VISION) mei bataya gaya tha".

"My mother pays attention to the cleanliness though her friend was told not to take bathe during periods.

"Beemariyan hoti hai boht kapde istemaal karne se. emergency mei lenge agar toh saaf hi kapda lenge. Ek baar mene naya cotton ka kurta phaada tha".

"Should bathe inspite of periods and should wash their undergarments with disinfectants. Jyoti says that she avoids taking protein during her periods. She was advised to do so by a male doctor whom she was very hesitant to ask questions initially.

"should bathe during periods and should wash the undergarments with disinfectants".

HYGIENE PRACTICES

Janki Puram Extension

Around 60% of the girls change their pads or cloth 3 times a day

"kabhi zyada aata hai or kabhi kum par teen baar toh badal hi lete hai".

And around 33% change twice a day.

"subah school jaate time ek aur wapas aakar ek badal lete hain".

"kabhi kabhi toh teen baar naha lete hain aise time"

ganda lagta hai agar aise time na nahaye toh".

Roller coaster Ride

“Ye six days bitane bohot mushkil ho jate hain, aur kaam nai ho pate”

Anger, irritability, mood swings, cramps, head/ body ache, lower abdominal pain, leg pain and sometimes feel bloated.

Feel low due to the pain and emotional changes.

Get tired easily, the cramps don't let them work so actively, the mood swings are responsible for every wrong decision taken

Hindrance in their daily routine as they are not able to work freely and normally



EXPERIENCES

Stigma around this issue makes us suppresses our emotions which ultimately lead to stress.

Swelling in particular part of their body like stomach, thighs, and calf portion of their legs

Get irritated over normal things that they get over during other days of the month.

Education in Schools/Colleges

Literacy rate among girls in **AmberGanj** was found to be very low. Most have just done primary schooling.

Lack of proper knowledge & Awareness led to a very narrow-minded approach towards bodily changes and menstruation itself.

Girls in **Thakurganj** Were informed and taught about this process in school but very lightly.

Those who go to Madarsa were never taught about it.

The group in Indiranagar did not get any prior information from school.

Girls were educated about periods in the meetings conducted by the **WORLD VISION ORGANISATION**.

Sanitary pads are always available for the girls in schools for which they do not have to pay; also their female teachers are very supportive and helpful.

One of the participants shared that while studying biology as a subject in school she was informed about periods.

In **Jankipuram** Sanitary pads are always available to them in schools for which they do not have to pay and also their classmates are very supportive and helpful.

School provides two packets of sanitary pads every month to every girl student without having to pay for it.

Contrary to this, Devki who is 18 One of the participants shared that that "school mei pad milta hai par hum lete nahi kyuki acha nahi lagta lete huay".

CONCLUSION

The four sites that we visited for this study were Thakurganj, Amberganj, Indira Nagar and Jankipuram Extension. All except Indira Nagar (urban area) were semi urban sites. During the focused group discussions with all eight groups (two FGDs at each site), we intended to observe the difference in the knowledge, awareness and practice/behaviour among the groups based on their demography, their geographical locations (Urban/Rural/Semi-urban) which is somewhere related to their exposure and accessibility to health services and products, the community they belong to, their educational levels, family & cultural values as well as the amount of interventions by governmental and non-governmental.

It was observed that the groups of Indira Nagar had the highest level of awareness among all other. It was noticed that the awareness that they had was a result of an intensive intervention of World Vision Organization. It could be said that there was a correlation between the numbers of meetings they attended, which were organized by the said organization and the level of awareness and confidence among the group members. During the discussion it came to the fore that the girls had no prior knowledge about menstruation and personal hygiene during menstruation as regular meetings were conducted in order to educate and aware them. The girls were very vocal and spoke openly about this topic with our team members and told that they are comfortable in talking with their family members about this as well. We can also attribute their level of awareness to their urban background which results in more exposure as well as proximity to the health care systems and easy availability of sanitary napkins.

In Amberganj and Thakurganj, there was an intervention of FEED organization, though not very intensive, and hence the amount of confidence and the level of awareness was not the same. Though the demography of the groups in Amberganj and Thakurganj was the same but difference in level of awareness was observed between these groups too. The girls in Amberganj were a little hesitant initially but later they spoke about the topic of discussion and shared their experiences as well as hygiene practices they follow and it was observed

that they were quiet aware and were following healthy menstrual hygiene practices. Despite the same demographics and the same amount of intervention by FEED, the level of confidence was observed to be quite low among the girls in Thakurganj. This difference could be attributed to the presence of elderly women (their mothers, aunts or sisters) in the same vicinity at the time of discussion. The girls were not so vocal and did not find themselves comfortable talking about menstruation in front of them.

The girls in Jankipuram extension were not a part of any intervention at all. The level of awareness among these girls was the lowest and they had no access to the health care services as well as any contact with the health workers. They did not even prefer to speak. They were quite ignorant and also hesitant to talk about this topic.

The other factors like the family income and the awareness among the parents should also be taken into consideration before concluding anything. Apart from the fact the girls in Jankipuram Extension were not reached out by any organization with awareness generation activities, the family incomes were also low and most of the parents were working as daily wage laborers or hawkers. Even the girls who were aware and wanted to practice hygiene were not in the position to afford sanitary napkins all the time.

The income to some extent affected the education & awareness levels, hygiene practices and disposal of sanitary napkins/Cloth. Girls of Amberganj, Thakurganj, and Indira Nagar managed to buy sanitary napkins in times of emergency or otherwise, while girls of Jankipuram extension found it expensive/unaffordable because of which they mostly used cloth at the time of their menstrual cycle. In Jankipuram most of the girls were school drop outs because of financial problems. A couple of girls shared that they get sanitary napkins in their schools every month and they use it but one participant shared that she does not avail this facility as she is hesitant to ask for it.

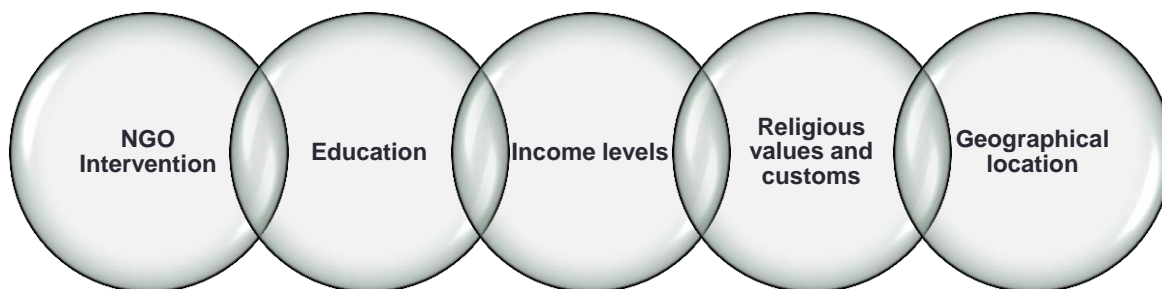
The religious or cultural values across the groups and geographical locations were the same. In Thakurganj and Amberganj most of the girls were from Muslim community whereas the other four groups in Indira Nagar and Jankipuram were composed of girls mostly from the Hindu families. During the discussions, it was observed that the various religious and cultural values, myths and misconceptions were common and no such

noticeable differences were observed due to religious or cultural factors. The restrictions imposed on them during their menstrual cycle were of same nature like not visiting Mosque or Temples, not observing fast, not touching the religious books or the gods & goddesses, not entering the kitchen, not having pickle or anything tangy, not washing their hair or taking bath on the first 2-3 days of their menstrual cycle and so on, which were being followed by the girls of all the groups without questioning the elderly women in the family. A couple of girls in Indira Nagar shared that they tried breaking the norms and will try doing that in future too. They have also asked their friends to do the same. They shared that they touched the pickle and also consumed it despite instructions by the mothers or elderly women in the family or locality for not doing the same. Few of the girls of other groups also shared washing their hair and taking bath even on the first two days but none of the group members talked of entering their place of worship or touching the religious books or the gods& goddesses.

During all the group discussions, irrespective of the geographical location, religion, family income, education, it was observed that there were some girls who were quite open and vocal about the issue and others were a little hesitant or less vocal, however the level of openness or reluctance varied. The important thing that was noticed is that there is a very strong correlation between the level of awareness and openness among the girls and the level of awareness and the amount of sharing between the mother and the daughters. Where the mothers themselves were hesitant to talk about the phenomenon with their daughters or believed in maintaining distance with the daughters, there the level of confidence among the girls was low and they were hesitant to talk about it whereas the girls who were close to their mothers or sisters and were informed about this phenomenon before initiation or immediately after that, they were more confident and aware of it and the also at some point in time tried to the defy some of the norms and even questioned these practices. Education also had a positive role in this. The girls who were attending the schools where the teachers were open about it and educated the girls about this phenomenon or informed them about the hygiene practices with the girls, the level of awareness was high and they were less hesitant to talk about it in the group as compared to the other girls.

At last we could say that factors such as education, income levels, religions values and customs, the accessibility and availability to health services as well as products do have some kind of impact on the Knowledge, attitudes and practices of the individuals but these factors are inter-related and it is difficult to see the effect of each factor in isolation.

FACTORS AFFECTING AWARENESS LEVELS



Though these factors are interwoven and interrelated but we can say for sure that regular and consistent intervention by the NGOs bear results and it has a very positive impact on behaviours and practices of the adolescent girls who otherwise are ignorant and unaware of the phenomenon and the related issues. Along with the intervention with the girls, it is also important to sensitize the mothers or other elderly women in the house so that this issue is discussed openly with the girls and the amount of reluctance among the mothers to share with their daughters also reduces. This will lead to an enabling environment and their will be better awareness on the issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ➡ Basic menstrual education in schools should be provided to the girls at an early age. Their parents and family should also be included in these educational sessions so that a positive environment can be created.
- ➡ Areas where girls are not getting proper school education should be reached either through campaigns or through intervention groups to educate everyone about menstrual hygiene.
- ➡ Myths & misconceptions related to menstruation should be discussed and all the queries must be answered scientifically.
- ➡ Free health camps and checkups along with sessions on menstrual hygiene should be organized to educate the masses about infections and diseases.
- ➡ Help of mass media (audio-visual) should be taken to inform & educate the masses about menstrual hygiene as most people are reluctant towards this.
- ➡ Good quality alternatives/socially marketed sanitary pads must be made available in remote areas which should be in-line with the minimum pricing strategy.
- ➡ Health infrastructures at the local level should be utilized for generating awareness and sensitizing people on this issue.