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MENSTRUAL HEALTH MATTERS - A PHOTO ESSAY



UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Our mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

UNFPA's efforts focus on three transformative results • ending unmet need for family planning • ending preventable maternal death and • ending gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child marriage and gender biased sex selection.



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*A photo essay on managing menstrual health as part of UNFPA's programming
for empowerment of adolescent girls*



Menstrual Health Management – A critical aspect of programming for empowerment of adolescent girls

Menstrual health and hygiene is essential for the overall health, well-being, self-esteem, and mobility of women and girls. For this, they need access to information, guidance, and adequate, safe and clean water, sanitation and disposal facilities.

Yet, many women and girls encounter challenges in managing their menstruation. They deal with inadequate access to private, safe and clean water and sanitation facilities and lack access to hygienic products for menstruation management that are effective and affordable.


Many girls reach menarche without adequate information and guidance, and experience shame, fear, and embarrassment. Menstrual taboos and social restrictions further endorse stigma and discrimination. These factors, impede the daily routine for women and girls, and isolate them from their friends and local communities. They may lead to increase in the risk of school absence and drop-out, adversely affect work performance and have negative implications for women and girls' reproductive and mental health.

UNFPA supports the government and civil society partners to implement policies and interventions that raise awareness about menstrual health management, dispel taboos, and generate evidence on scalable and sustainable innovations to ensure that women and girls experience menstruation safely, freely and with dignity.



Stigma, Taboos, Misconceptions

Menstruation taboos and stigma reinforce gender discrimination, restrict women and girls' participation in routine activities, and isolate them from friends and family

A young girl with dark skin and short hair is sitting behind a partition made of an old sari. The sari has a teal background with large, stylized yellow and orange floral patterns. She is wearing a colorful, patterned shirt. The room has a pink wall above the sari and a teal wall below it. A wooden beam runs horizontally across the middle of the frame. In the top left corner, some white and blue fabric is hanging.

A part of the front yard is cordoned off with an old sari, behind which 15-year-old Pallavi Meena (name changed) sleeps during her periods.

She wears the same clothes and uses the same utensils every month during her periods. These are not taken into the house even after the periods end as they are seen as unclean.




Mamta, Mridul and Nandini (names changed) spend time together during their periods.

They aren't allowed within the house premises and can't do most of the household chores as they are considered unclean during this time. They even bathe in a separate village pond for those days.

Sonali (behind) is not as diligent about the rules to be followed during menstruation as her elder sister Pratima is. Hence they keep her utensils for those days in the animal shed, else she tends to mix them up. What she is happy about is that she doesn't have to help out with the household chores like washing utensils during her periods, as she is considered unclean.






16 year old Sumita Garasiya's grandmother was very strict about not entering the house during period days. After she passed away, Sumita's mother has been understanding and allows her to enter the house during her periods.

However, her access to the prayer room and vegetable fields remains restricted and she is not allowed to touch some food items such as pickle and papad, as it is believed that they may get spoiled.



Water and Sanitation

Lack of readily available sanitary materials and safe, clean and accessible water, sanitation and disposal facilities can pose substantial challenges to menstrual health management

A photograph showing two young girls in school uniforms (tan tunics and brown trousers) walking away from the camera on a dirt path. They are carrying a large green plastic bucket between them. In the background, there is a small, yellow-painted concrete building with a blue door, which appears to be a toilet facility. The area is surrounded by lush green vegetation and trees under a cloudy sky.

At an upper primary government school, girls carry heavy buckets of water to use the toilet facilities. School environments need to be equipped with clean and easily accessible water, sanitation and disposal facilities.



For Class 6 student Binodini (name changed), her periods started only this year.

Her school distributes sanitary pads to all girls. However, they don't have garbage bins for disposal. She ends up hiding them between the stones in a back wall near the toilets.

17-year-old Lata Kharari (name changed) does not go to school. Like other women in her family, she uses old pieces of cloth during her menses. She is always worried about staining her clothes. Lata confines herself to the outhouse during her period and isn't allowed to visit the front yard.



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Action Areas for Menstrual Health Management



Girls attending meetings at the local Anganwadi centre in Rajasthan are taught about their period cycle using simple tools like the menstrual wheel during a life skill session with girls supported through UNFPA's intervention. This very important conversation to understand menstruation as a biological process is rarely held - especially for girls who are no longer in school.

UNFPA collaborated with the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Odisha to install a sanitary pad manufacturing unit within the institute. The institute now manufactures pads in-house for distribution to all girls enrolled in their school.



UNFPA is also investing in models for manufacturing sanitary pads at the community level in Madhya Pradesh, and making it available at affordable prices. The model engages young men and women in the manufacture and distribution of the sanitary pads and in raising awareness about menstrual health management.



As part of life skills education, girls perform skits that enable free dialogue around rigid issues such as menstruation.

Free distribution of sanitary napkins in Government residential schools for children from tribal and disadvantaged communities, enables girls to have access to hygienic means of protection during menstruation.

UNFPA provided technical assistance to the state Governments of Odisha and Rajasthan in developing and rolling out schemes and programmes related to menstrual health management.

"Because of the preparedness in school, I did not have to leave and go home when I got my first period"

Girl attending a residential school in Odisha





Rupali, a member of an adolescent girls' club supported by UNFPA in urban slum settlements in Maharashtra, says that every time she had her periods, she used to feel severely restricted.

As part of the girls' groups she participated in discussions related to menstrual health management. "I realized how could the blood be impure if we were born with that blood" says Rupali. She says that she experimented for herself by once lighting the lamp in front of the family idol..... "nothing untoward happened to me".

Rupali herself makes efforts to dispel myths around menstruation by providing counter arguments and talking to her peers..."I ask them, even women who make garlands for worship outside temples, or the women who work in pickle factories must be menstruating, but are they not still adding value through the work that they do?"

Canada



UNFPA acknowledges the kind support of the Governments of Canada and the United Kingdom for contributing to our programme on empowering adolescent girls and ending child marriage in India