

#Women and girls speak

About **Menstruation**

**Voices From Five Districts Of
Gujarat State, India**



CHETNA

For Women Young people Children

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Women and girls, in most settings, have been socialised to maintain a culture of silence, particularly on reproductive and sexual health issues. Though a natural process, discussions on menstruation are still restricted. Several norms and practices around menstruation often restrict women and girls' mobility and compel them to adopt behaviours which are discriminatory, dehumanising and thereby detrimental to their health and their self esteem. Some such practices include restricted intake of certain foods, treating them as polluted beings, restricted entry to spaces within and outside homes etc. These practises violate human rights, especially right to human dignity, right to non-discrimination, equality, bodily integrity, health, privacy and the right to freedom from inhumane and degrading treatment.

Several efforts have been made to break the silence around menstruation and encourage women and girls to adopt healthy practices. The Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram is making efforts to promote menstrual hygiene amongst 10-19 years old adolescent girls at scale, across the nation. The Swacch Bharat Mission, takes up Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) as one of the components of solid and liquid waste management.

CHETNA has implemented several educational efforts on body literacy, fertility and menstrual hygiene since last three decades. Given the current programmatic focus, CHETNA initiated discussions with women and girls in 5 districts of Gujarat to understand their beliefs and practises regarding menstruation.



The study was done for Tata Trust and Costal Salinity Prevention Cell- CSPC in their implementation districts.

The Study

Quantitative and qualitative research methodology was used to collect data. These included interviews with women, girls, providers and educators using a pre-tested structured questionnaire. Group discussions were held with women, men and boys.

One block was identified from each of the five districts. From each of the five blocks, 25% of the villages were randomly selected which amounted to 4-5 villages per block. The selection criteria for villages included distance from the block head quarters, number of households and population of adolescent girls and women in the village.

A total of 596 women and girls participated in the discussions. Discussions were also held with about eighty men. A total of 12 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) and 16 AWWs (Anganwadi Workers/ Government Creche workers) were interviewed. A total of 18 schools were visited to observe the arrangements for school going girls and teachers role in educating girls about menstruation.

About the women and girls who participated

Of the **596** women and girls, their age ranged between 13 to 35 years. **40%** had completed primary education; **36%** had completed secondary education while **9%** were graduates or postgraduates. **15%** of them had no formal schooling. Most of the girls were unmarried and **57%** lived in joint families



Recommendations for Menstrual Hygiene Management programmes

1. Any programme directed at improving menstrual hygiene must adopt a comprehensive approach and include various facets of menstruation
2. Educate adolescent girls, boys; women and men about menstruation. Expand health education from personal hygiene and management of pads to body literacy, scientific information and social beliefs around menstruation.
3. Mothers of young girls and boys need to be equipped with life skills to inculcate self confidence to challenge some of the customs and practices such as the notion of 'pollution'. This would also allow girls to feel free to discuss menstrual matters without any inhibitions.
4. More and more girls are now being enrolled in school. Equip the teacher with proper training and learning material so as to impart information about menstruation to adolescent girls and boys.
5. Train, ASHAs and AWWs on comprehensive menstruation hygiene and management to impart information to adolescent girls and boys; women and men.
6. Establishment of girl-friendly spaces in schools.
 - a. Display and make access to education materials related to nutrition, body literacy and, menstruation to girls.
 - b. Make pads / cloth pieces available free of cost to girls in case of emergency.
 - c. Provide a full size mirror so the girls can comfortably check for staining.
7. Ensure facility to counsel girls about their concerns related to menstruation in school.
8. Make facility for disposal of adsorbent in the toilet to maintain privacy of girls.
9. Ensure that girls and women have proper sanitary facilities at home.
- 10 Women and girls should be provided with choice of absorbent to be used- sanitary napkin, flannel or any other. Since women and girl chose "Flannel " its availability can be increased.

Findings

Knowledge about Menstruation

'Time ma thavu', 'masik avwu', 'periods aavi' or 'kapada avi' were some of the terms used for menstruation.

Women and girls knew that menstruation is a process in which blood comes out of the body every month. Some also expressed that it was unwanted blood.

Knowledge about the process of menstruation was same across all age groups.

None articulated the physical, emotional or psychological changes that happen before and during menstruation

Most of them could not share about the changes during adolescent phase and puberty. They did not share any information about the biological process of menstruation.

Mothers and elder sisters formed the vital connect for young girls to know about Menstruation. Some of the girls, who attain menarche before other girls, become a source of information for others.

Television, books, and magazines were other sources of information. Very few shared that they received information from AWW and ASHA.

Teachers have not been a source of information about menstruation, for girls.

Material for Soaking Blood:

Of the **596** women and girls interviewed,

About **87%** said that they used a dark coloured flannel cloth to soak menstrual blood. Mentioning its advantages, they said that it's- easily available in the market, economical, soft and comfortable.

13 %, especially adolescent unmarried girls (13-19 years age) said that they used sanitary napkins from the market.

25% of the girls shared that they used both sanitary napkins and cloth. Sanitary napkins are used when they go to the market or attend a social function.

77% said that they wash and then dry the cloth in sunlight.

72% women and girls said that they re use the keep the cloth. This cloth is kept in the cupboard or in a separate packet, where it is not accessible. Others said that they keep the cloth in their the backyard.

81% women/girls shared information that they changed the cloth 2-3 times a day. Majority of them shared that they use a cloth because they prefer it. Reasons have little to do with affordability or accessibility to other products. Unlike sanitary napkins, most women are familiar with cloth and change it more frequently than they would change a sanitary napkin, resulting in better hygiene.

When asked,, they said that the cloth is disposed by burning (**39%**), throwing on the garbage dump (**29%**). Few said they threw it in water bodies.

Personal Hygiene

All women and girls said that during menstruation, they took bath at least once a day and washed their l genital organs with hot water and soap as well.

83% of them said that even during their menstruation, they continued with their daily work – be it at the school, workplace, doing labour or agricultural work

Food

93% of the respondents stated that they had knowledge that they must consume a regular diet during menstruation. Restrictions are on sour foods like lemon, turmeric, green leafy vegetables, curd and sweet foods.

Attitude

60% of women and girls said that they consider menstruation as impure.

65% of them mentioned that they felt unclean, 64% felt weak and took rest, 38% stated they prefer being alone while 47% stated they felt anger during menstruation.

29% of them shared that they were shy to speak or discuss about menstruation. While 67% stated they would keep it a secret.

Restrictions

Most women and girls shared that several restrictions on their mobility are imposed during menstruation. There are restrictions to their access in the house, utensils or cooking.

25% of women and girls said that during menstruation, girls must not play. **40%** believed that women must avoid agricultural work during menstruation.

Some of the commonly shared restrictions were going to temples, mosques, social functions or performing religious rituals at home.

Though **68%-75%** felt these restrictions are against the women, yet only **25%-27%** said that they did not follow these restrictions.



87% women and girls shared that they can cook food during menstruation but only **16%** shared information that they cooked food during menstruation.

"Women and girls who are not allowed to go for farming usually go out to collect fodder to feed animals. They are also not allowed to go to their own farm and especially where vegetables are grown". (Focus Group Discussion with women).

What did men say about menstruation ?

A total of eight group discussions were held with about 80 men and boys.

For most men and boys, it was a first time discussion on menstruation

Most of them shared that they did not have knowledge about menstruation and hence prefer to disassociate themselves.

"In the Quran it is mentioned that women should not attend any religious functions during menstruation. They have to take pills to avoid menstruation during religious ceremony, marriage etc. We know that it is not good for women's health but they have to follow it." (Focus Group Discussion in Kutch)

"The Bhuva who does rituals in the temple of goddess- Kulmata has informed us that women need to follow these restrictions."

(Focus Group Discussion in Amreli district)

"We keep cattle at home even when they are in heat. But we impose restrictions on women and girls. We do not believe in these restrictions but have to follow because of social norms." (Focus Group Discussion in Gir somnath)

Facilities at School

17 out of 18 schools that were visited, did not have sanitary napkins or any other material which could be used by girls if they need it during the school hours. There was no provision or arrangement for disposal in 13 out of 18 schools.

15 out of 18 schools did have separate toilets for boys and girls. Only five schools had dustbins in the toilet. The toilets do not have any facilities for physically challenged girls.

Majority of girls said that they usually go to their home to change the cloth or sanitary napkin or continue using it for more than eight hours. None of girls linked school dropout with menstruation and the facilities for hygiene.

In all the 18 schools, nine women teachers were designated to impart health messages. However they were not given any training on menstruation, personal hygiene or adolescent health.

Role of ASHAs¹ and AWWs²

12 ASHA and 16 AWWs were interviewed to learn about their contribution in educating girls on Menstruation.

Out of the 28 ASHAs/AWWs, 26 said that they imparted information regarding menstrual hygiene during Village Health and Nutrition Day. Contradictory to this information, only 6 out of 596 women and girls shared having received information about menstruation from ASHA.

ASHAs and AWW mentioned that that girls hesitate to discuss menstruation and therefore there is usually very poor participation in such discussions.

All the ASHAs and AWWs believed that there should not be any restriction during menstruation. However majority of them complied with those restrictions. One of the ASHA workers who has done a course on nursing, also shared that she followed such restrictions during menstruation.

¹ ASHA- Accredited Social Health Activist

² AWW- Anganwadi Worker, creche worker appointed by Government

Women from Dahod district said that...

"During menstruation we are not allowed to do any house hold work, we even eat in separate utensils. We are also not allowed to move freely in the house and we stay in one corner during all those days . We are not allowed to go in the kitchen and have to ask for water when thirsty.. If there is nobody in the house, a separate earthen pot is kept outside the house for us to drink water during those days When we are served food, care is taken that they do not touch our plate We are not allowed to go to our own farm, especially where vegetables are grown. We are also not allowed to touch flowers because flowers are used for religious rituals. We are not allowed to go to the kitchen and touch ghee, milk etc. because these items are generally used for religious rituals"

"If the family members eat food cooked by women/girls who are menstruating, then the family members will fall sick and start vomiting and the woman will be considered, a sinner. The woman sometimes has to cook her own food outside the house in a separate stove 'chullah' where her cooking utensils are kept separately."

"We are not allowed to milk the cows and buffaloes because this milk will be consumed by men in the house and it is considered a sin. We have to clean our own clothes in a separate place. Generally the place is covered with stones. We have to follow the restrictions inside the house for 5 days and after that we are allowed to do everything."

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