



Improving menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls in India



Figure: Artwork by an adolescent girl in Uttam Nagar's slum areas

For **Menstrual Health Alliance India** see <http://www.mh-alliance.net>

For the **paper about Uttar Pradesh** see <https://www.orfonline.org/research/a-landscape-analysis-of-adolescent-health-in-india-the-case-of-uttar-pradesh-58780>

For **Protsahan** see <https://protsahan.co.in>

For the **article in *The Wire*** see <https://www.wateraidindia.in/blog/menstrual-hygiene-a-need-to-shift-focus-beyond-sanitary-pads>

The world's first feature film on period poverty was made in India. *Padman* (2018), starring Bollywood star Akshay Kumar, is based on the true story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, who invented a low-cost machine to make sanitary pads, after seeing his wife's use of a dirty piece of cloth during her periods. It was a brave attempt to tackle a taboo subject and marked the changing conversation around menstrual hygiene management in a country with more than a billion people.

In recent years, menstrual hygiene management has received a lot of policy attention in India. In 2014, the federal government launched a new adolescent health programme, *Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram* (RKSK), which includes a menstrual hygiene scheme to increase awareness—as well as access to, use of, and safe disposal of high-quality sanitary napkins—among adolescent girls in rural areas. Organisations working on menstrual health and hygiene in the country have come together to form Menstrual Health Alliance India. In the past 3 years, several state governments have started distributing sanitary pads for free in schools in areas such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Kerala.

However, across a hugely diverse country, the menstrual experience for the 120 million adolescent girls (aged 10–19 years) is not the same. Substantial variations exist between states, villages, and cities, and between the rich and poor. The focus on school-based studies also means we know less about adolescent girls who have dropped out of school.

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, is a case in point for variations in adolescent girls' menstrual experience between states. While national estimates show that 58% of adolescent girls use hygienic methods to manage their periods,

this figure is lower in Uttar Pradesh at 43%, notes a paper by the Observer Research Foundation published in December, 2019. Monika Arora, a public health scientist and professor at the Public Health Foundation of India (Gurugram, Haryana), says that within Uttar Pradesh, adolescents in rural areas are worse off than those in urban areas in the use of hygienic methods (40% vs 69%).

According to Kranti Suresh Vora at the Indian Institute of Public Health (Gandhinagar, Gujarat), implementation of the government's schemes is a big issue. "A major problem arises when field workers do not have a full understanding of menstrual hygiene, and its dos and don'ts", she said. It's important to equip frontline workers with scientific knowledge in a language that they can understand and use for community awareness. Local context matters too; cultural attitudes towards menstruation vary across the country, and awareness campaigns should take that into consideration. But this is challenging in practice. In many states, there are not enough frontline workers who have finished school, Vora added. She points out that the accredited social health activists, the backbone of India's primary health-care system who are tasked to promote menstrual health and hygiene, are already overburdened.

"Girls living in the slum are more aware about menstrual hygiene than they were 4 or 5 years ago. But there are many families with no or little education; cultural taboos remain", says 18-year-old Sonam Sahu, a peer educator with Protsahan India Foundation, a non-profit organisation working with at-risk adolescent girls in slum areas of Uttam Nagar in Delhi. Sanitary pads may be available but not everyone knows how to use them correctly and dispose of them safely, and not everyone is vigilant about hand-washing.

Those who don't have enough money for two meals a day can't afford to buy pads. They use cloth. But shame surrounding menstruation deters girls from hanging up their washed cloth pads in the sun. "They don't always wash it properly or dry it in the sun, leading to infections", Sahu told *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*. Protsahan formed an adolescent girls' network in the slum. "We have meetings with girls. We explain to them why they need to wash the pads properly, use disinfectants, and put them out in the sunlight. Sometimes, there is resistance from the family. We talk to the mothers and sensitise them", Sahu added.

"We try to dispel various myths and misconceptions, with both girls and boys in the community. We talk about the choices available of menstrual absorbents, how to dispose them safely, and hygienic management. We also use the medium of art to sensitise girls about various aspects of menstruation", said Sonal Kapoor, Protsahan's founder and Chief Executive Officer. A 15-year-old girl who attends Protsahan's after-school programme once drew a menstruating woman as an Indian goddess who carried sanitary napkins as a badge of pride and empowerment (figure).

Chetnaben Bavla—a field worker with the Ahmedabad-based Saath Charitable Trust, which promotes the use of reusable sanitary pads among adolescents—agrees with the need to reiterate messages around the importance of drying reusable pads in sunlight after washing them with soap and water.

Many experts say that while the recent attention to a once-taboo topic is welcome, the dominant discourse is too focused on sanitary pads, their use, and distribution. In an article published in *The Wire*, an Indian portal, Arundati Muradlidharan (Manager-Policy, WaterAid India)

and Tanya Mahajan (Senior Consultant, Development Solutions) pointed out that this “diverts the conversation from comprehensive education around the physiology of menstruation, hygienic practices, and restrictive social norms to the use of a particular type of menstrual hygiene product.”

Muralidharan and Mahajan, who are also founding members of Menstrual Health Alliance India, argued that “The installation of sanitary pad vending machines in toilets, for instance, can mask the importance of, and action on safe and responsive water, sanitation and hygiene facilities to enable girls and women to practice hygiene in in schools, homes, and workplaces during their periods. Further, the emphasis on disposable sanitary pads fundamentally undermines the right of a girl or woman to choose a menstrual hygiene product that suits her needs, context, personal preference, and ability to pay.”

One big emerging challenge is safe disposal of sanitary napkins. Most sanitary pads sold in India are made of non-biodegradable ingredients and are environmentally hazardous. However, the idea of sustainable menstruation is beginning to grow. For example, the southern Indian state of Kerala has a sustainable menstruation collective that works with campaigners, gender rights and environment activists and organisations, and local manufacturers to promote sustainable menstrual products and practices.

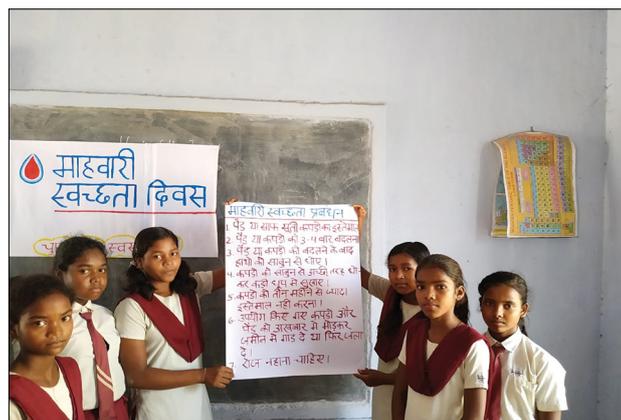
In rural India, the biggest challenge continues to be lifting the silence over menstruation, addressing period poverty, and tackling the shame that still surrounds this natural process. Progress is being made, slowly.

The Child in Need Institute (CINI) is a non-profit organisation addressing adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health and rights, among other issues, and their experience is a telling marker

of the situation of many villages in the less developed parts of India. CINI has worked with girls aged 10–19 years in several districts in the eastern state of Jharkhand. The organisation can reach out to school-going adolescent girls more easily because of the government’s adolescent health programme, RKSK. “We hold hygiene sessions during school hours in which menstrual hygiene is talked about. We tell the girls about the different options they have in the context of menstrual absorbents, like cloths and biodegradable pads. We also talk about safe ways of disposing sanitary pads”, said Sumantra Mukherjee and Amit Ghosh, who oversee CINI’s work in Jharkhand. But affordability is always an issue, and the greater challenge is to reach adolescent girls who have dropped out of school, they said.

Out-of-school girls can be reached via village-level adolescent girls’ groups, but breaking the initial silence remains a challenge. “Many of these girls don’t open up easily. The discussions have to be taken to the family [with their parents and even elderly persons in the family]”, they added. Another place where sessions on menstrual hygiene happen is anganwadi or childcare centres. CINI is also working with these girls to improve the uptake of weekly supplementation of iron–folic acid tablets, which improves their anaemic status and has a huge bearing on their sexual and reproductive health. “Most village girls nowadays want sanitary pads. They are available but the quality is an issue. In Jharkhand, a major issue is water scarcity and contaminated water. This affects menstrual health”, they added.

That economic status of the family impacts menstrual hygiene of adolescents is also clear from a 2019 survey on the situation of adolescents in Jharkhand by Dasra, a Mumbai-based philanthropic organisation that supports CINI’s adolescent initiative. The survey revealed that although the



Menstrual hygiene sessions by girls from Thethaitanger-Simdega, Jharkhand, India

use of sanitary pads appears to have become widespread in Jharkhand, reflecting perhaps the RKSK’s menstrual hygiene outreach activities, as many as 27–33% of girls use these pads only when stocks of free supplies are available, or when resources are available to purchase them.

Hearteningly, many girls are coming forward to break the silence around menstrual hygiene. In 2019, *Ab Meri Baari* (It’s my turn now), a campaign launched by the 10to19 Adolescents Collaborative, helped girl champions to present a charter of ten bold recommendations to government representatives, frontline health workers, community leaders, non-profit organisations, and peers to improve adolescent health and wellbeing. One key recommendation was the need to ensure that sanitary pads are always available in anganwadi or childcare centres.

But this is just the beginning. “It is not just about schemes or distributing sanitary pads. Much more needs to be done to make adolescent girls more aware about menstrual hygiene. Girls can’t talk about this at home. In government schools, teachers don’t spend time talking about the subject or clarifying doubts. Many girls have half-baked information. We need more openness”, says Sahu.

Patralekha Chatterjee

For CINI see <https://www.cini-india.org>

For the 2019 survey in Jharkhand see <https://www.dasra.org/assets/uploads/resources/Situation%20of%20Adolescents%20in%20Jharkhand-%20Topline%20Findings%202019-HiRes.pdf>

For the *Ab Meri Baari* campaign see <https://www.abmeribaari.in>

For the 10to19 Adolescents Collaborative see <https://www.dasra.org/resource/10to19-dasra-adolescents-collaborative-case-study>