

# Local beliefs and practices around menstruation

A qualitative study in selected blocks of three districts in Uttar Pradesh and one district in Uttarakhand, India



**SAHAYOG** and its partner organizations conducted an exploratory study to understand knowledge attitudes, local beliefs, challenges for menstrual hygiene management and practices around menstruation among adolescent girls and other important local actors (women, teachers, ward members and frontline workers) in three districts of Uttar Pradesh (Baharaich, Lalitpur and Lucknow) and one district of Uttarakhand (Nanital). The data obtained provides us with some glimpses into the contemporary thinking and behaviour around the topics of the study.

## Key findings on definition, information, health issues around menstruation

Most respondents indicate negative feelings around menstruation associated with feeling impure, dirty and 'untouchable'. Although most respondents agree that it is a natural or 'god-given' process obviously essential to ensure reproduction, the blood is regarded as contaminating. Hardly any girl could explain the biological origin of menstruation.

Overall there is a feeling of embarrassment in referring to menstruation, both among girls and older women. The majority of girls across the four districts said that they were not given any information about menstruation before menarche, and when they do receive information about menstruation, the content is usually focused on restrictions and personal practices. However, neither mothers, frontline health workers nor women teachers are comfortable discussing the subject.

Girls described a range of health issues around menstrual periods including irregular or delayed periods and painful cramps, but most used home remedies. Many girls reported missing school on the first day of their period because of heavy flow and cramps. None of the respondents reported attending an adolescent health clinic, and some girls report their frontline workers

showing them sanitary napkins and advising them to maintain hygiene.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education for all young people (boys and girls) must include discussion on the myths and taboos and build a positive attitude towards this normal part of life.
2. Young people's education must be accompanied by massive re-orientation programmes for male and female teachers, AFHS Clinic counselors and frontline health workers.
3. Adolescent-friendly health services and counseling must be provided in a gender-sensitive manner, making it possible for adolescent girls to actually access these services without any fear or stigma (for example, organizing school trips to the clinic every month, or a toll-free girls' Helpline)

## Key findings around local beliefs, taboos and practices around menstruation for girls and women

Across all the districts and regardless of social groups, menstruating girls and women are segregated and considered hazardous or even untouchable. A large number of girls and women across the four districts mentioned that during menstruation they are not allowed

to touch or even go near plants and trees and not allowed to go inside the kitchen, or touch certain food items. Across all the districts, women and married girls mention having to sleep on separate beds, avoiding any contact even with their husbands.

The restrictions intensify if any religious activity is being conducted or religious objects are present (shrines, sacred books or food used in a religious ceremony). The notion of ritual pollution means that menstruating girls and women cannot participate in religious activities of any kind. However, the notion of pollution does not prevent women and girls from carrying on with chores around or outside the house.

Unfortunately, the notions of impurity also mean that girls are not encouraged to maintain personal hygiene like bathing. Girls everywhere reported that owing to lack of bathrooms, they usually bathe in an open space with their clothes on, which means that they cannot wash their genitals properly during or after their periods.

### Key findings around Products for hygiene and methods of re-use & disposal of products used during menstruation

The respondents in the study areas are mostly from very low-income groups, and as such the use of sanitary napkins in these social groups is scarce.

Since the schools do not have proper dustbins and washing facilities, girls keep one pad on all day.

Rest of the time, girls reported that they use home-made cloth pads with panties to keep them in place, and these may be washed or thrown away.

At the time of the study (October- November 2014), no pads had been given to the girls despite Government of India schemes to provide them with low-cost sanitary napkins.

As these respondents are living in urban slums, rural areas, forests or mountain villages which do not have adequate sanitation services, considerable problems are faced by most women and girls in disposal/cleaning of pads. All the girls and women mentioned that they feel embarrassed and face verbal abuse if a man sees them drying or disposing the pad/cloth; and report going to a far off place like the fields or forest or a river to throw or bury the cloth/pad.

Most of the girls report some kind of toilet at school, but they do not always have water supply and do not have any provision for soap or a covered dustbin.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4- Widespread community awareness programmes must seek to break the pervasive silence around the taboo topic and encourage open discussion on and acceptance of this natural biological process. Marketing of sanitary napkins must include these in advertising messages. Adolescent Girls should be made an integral part of the awareness campaign around menstruation.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5- The absence of household toilets with water supply is a deterrent to proper washing of genitals by women, and contributes to poor hygiene and related illnesses. The gender aspects of having toilets must be part of mass awareness programmes.
- 6- Menstrual hygiene is a personal choice so in addition to sanitary napkins there must be information about more environmentally-friendly or re-usable products. In addition the issue of cost has to be addressed especially for young women who do not have purchasing power.
- 7- Disposal of menstrual products must be facilitated in schools and other public spaces accessed by girls and women. It is critical to keep environmental concerns in mind while designing these systems.
- 8- The government should have proper guidelines and establish a proper mechanism of sanitary napkin distribution. With proper distribution the government should also ensure proper disposal mechanisms in rural as well as urban slum areas.

#### A study report by 'SAHAYOG' and its partners

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