

# Menstruation in Girls | How it Impacts Their Learning

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There is a fine line between learning and not being able to learn. Often, the reasons behind children's inability to learn, despite implementing various strategies, remain unclear. However, when we start unfolding the underlying factors layer by layer, many reasons emerge. Menstruation is a key cause of girls' inability to concentrate and study in class. This article presents some experiences that have been shared on the connection between learning and this common physical phenomena.

It is important to understand how school processes integrate a routine yet taboo process like menstruation. 'Routine' because it is a normal biological process, and 'taboo' because it is seldom discussed openly. This lack of dialogue leads to disruptions in the regular attendance and learning of girls in school. Realising this, I sought to identify ways in which to incorporate this natural process into the school processes to ensure that girls come to school and learn during these days.

I work in the Berasia block of Bhopal. A large part of my work is to help teachers in government schools improve their teaching processes. We have often seen that the reason why children are not learning in the classroom is because of teaching methodologies that do not align with their needs and become a hurdle in their learning. Additionally, there are some behavioural and physical problems that impede their learning process, but these are

seen as separate from their overall learning experience.

## Changing uniform due to menstruation

To understand the issue, my plan included visits to three girls' schools and two girls' hostels in Berasia block for six months. I decided to discuss the issues related to reproductive health systematically with middle-school girls in these schools. During our first session itself, while talking about menstruation, girl students had all kinds of questions and shared their difficulties. Some of the girl students said that they do not go to school during these days because they are worried about staining their uniform, which is a white salwar and dupatta with a light-blue kurta. They said that they have to pay a fine if they do not come to school in uniform. This is why, unwillingly, they miss classes for 3-5 days every month, which results in the accumulation of homework.



Figure 1. A discussion on the difficulties faced by students during menstruation.

A class VIII student became emotional while sharing her experience related to menstruation. She narrated her experience, 'Once I came to school for a few days wearing my home clothes during menstruation. Seeing me in those clothes, a boy in the class would pass a comment every day. One day, he said to one of his friends, "You are wearing different colour pants, did your pants also get stained?" I felt ashamed hearing this.' To avoid this kind of trouble every month, the students said that the colour of their school uniform should be dark so that stains would not be visible. They mentioned that their opinion and convenience were not considered while deciding on the uniform. When some students shared these problems with their teacher, she took the issue seriously.

This teacher raised the issue with senior teachers, but it remained just a topic for discussion among them. Some teachers were of the view that the students may be using cloth instead of pads or they might not be changing their pads on time because of which they may be facing these problems. On the question of taking half-day leave to go home early during their periods, the teachers replied that some pain is normal during such times and that they too had been through all this but never faced such problems. They were of the view that children nowadays tend to exaggerate their problems. The teacher who expressed sensitivity on this issue finally said that she would provide whatever support she could, but changing the colour of the uniform was an issue to be decided at a higher level.

## There were other difficulties too

I told the principal that I would like to first conduct a session on menstruation with those girls who have not yet started menstruating. Most of these students were from classes V and VI. The principal replied, 'Why confuse them by telling them now? When and by whom were we told, but we also managed.' However, a few days later, a class VI student got her period in school for the first time. She knew nothing about it. Stunned, she started crying when her clothes got spoiled. Somehow, the teacher managed to accompany the child to her home. After this incident, the principal allowed me to conduct a session with these students.

Some other problems also came up during these sessions, mainly, the dearth of sanitary pads, water, dustbins, unclean toilets and no place for rest in the school. As mentioned above, no discussion or deliberation was held on this subject in these schools in the context of changes in behaviour during this time, reasons for menstruation, care, etc. What is more troubling is that this problem is seen as unrelated to the problems of learning, although it has been affecting the studies of girl students in one way or the other. Just as the students are connected to the school, this issue is connected to them, so, it is natural for this problem to have an adverse impact on their learning. At times, because of the pain, it becomes difficult for them to sit through the class. Similarly, when they show signs of



Figure 2. Ongoing conversations facilitate effective solutions.

withdrawal and irritability, they hardly have a teacher in the school who is willing to talk or explain things to them.

“ **The students said, ‘We feel better. Earlier we used to talk to the teacher only about studies, but now we can also talk about topics like menstruation.’** ”

Apart from the school, I also visit the girls' hostel to conduct these sessions. Staying away from their families, these girls face similar difficulties there too. After a prolonged effort, a joint dialogue was organised on this issue with these students and the teacher, who is also their warden. Owing to the continuous efforts of the students, discussions related to topics like reproductive health, menstruation, etc. began to take place regularly in the hostel on the last day of every month. Proper arrangements for sanitary pads were also made. The

students said, ‘We feel better. Earlier we used to talk to the teacher only about studies, but now we can also talk about topics like menstruation.’

Considering such a topic important in the hostel and the work done on it has brought awareness among students, and efforts are on to talk openly in the group, and to bring everyone's questions to a single platform. If one pays attention, one can understand that many factors affect children and their education, while many of these may not be apparent, they need to be considered as part of the entire learning process.

This long-standing problem is likely to be addressed through the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023, which prioritises the creation of an inclusive education system that addresses the needs of all students, including those from marginalised communities. A classroom should be an inclusive, enabling, learning environment that provides every child with freedom, openness, acceptance, meaning, and belonging.

*Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal*



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