



BUSTING MYTHS AROUND MENSTRUATION WITH ADOLESCENTS IN PANIPAT
A conversation with daughters of Domestic workers





Date: 6th December, 2021

Location: Swabhiman Kendra, Bichpadi village, Panipat

Total Number of Participants: 13

Background

Over the last 7 months, the Martha Farrell Foundation has supported women domestic workers and their adolescent children in running the Swabhiman Kendra - a community support center providing them with a safe space of their own, empowering them with voice, agency and space.

Domestic workers across India were amongst the most disadvantaged sections as several Indian states returned to lockdown conditions. The almost complete collapse of the health system with shortages of oxygen beds, ICU equipment and even crematoria consumed everyone's attention so much so that the needs and rights of women in the informal economy, majority of whom lost their livelihoods overnight and lacked any protection, were left unrecognized and uncared for. Consequently, their adolescent children, particularly daughters, faced challenges as well, including being pulled out of school, forced into domestic work and compromised health and nutrition.

During the 16 Days of Activism, a global campaign to counter and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, Martha Farrell Foundation partnered with 13 adolescent girls in Bichpadi, Panipat, to empower participants with a strong understanding of the need for nutrition, health and wellness, and to debunk myths around menstrual health and hygiene. The session was facilitated on December 6, 2021.

Session Highlights

Perhaps for the first time in their lives, adolescent girls in the community of Bichpadi, Panipat, who are a part of the Swabhiman Kendra, held conversations about the food they are able to access and eat. Through shared conversations and anecdotes, adolescents realised the importance of eating nutritious food, and the potential impacts of their current dietary choices on their body.

Box 1: Participants speak about nutrition

“Ma’am mujhe chocolates aur chowmein dono bahut pasand hai, mai har roz vahi khaati hu, mujhe nahi patah tha ki isska sehat pe itna bura asar padta hai.” (Ma’am, I really like chocolates and chowmein, I eat it almost everyday, but I wasn’t aware that it can have such bad effects on health.)

“Mai kabhi doodh nahi peeti thi, par ab mai koshish karungi ki yaa toh mai doodh piyu yaa phir haddiyo ki majbooti ke liye kuch doodh ki chize khaau” (I never used to drink milk, but now I will try to drink milk everyday so that my bones can grow really strong.)

“Hume nahi patah tha ki iss umar mein dhyaan rakhna bhi itna zaroori hai” (I was not aware that it is important to take care of ourselves at this age.)

Adolescent girls also broke the silence on their bodies, and the changes they were observing in their bodies upon the onset of menstruation. The shared discussions and exchange of experiences from peers within a safe environment, in which they were able to ask as many questions as they wished to, helped adolescents overcome their extreme hesitation to speak about their periods.



Participants discuss changes in their body and the need to nourish it with nutritious food

Box 2: Participants speak about menstrual myths and practices

“Ladkiyon ko school nahin jaana chahiye, jab unko ladies problem ho” (Girls shouldn’t go to school when they have a ‘ladies’ problem’ i.e. menstruation)

- Tanya (name changed), 14 years old

“I don’t send my daughter to school when she has her period. Other girls will also ‘catch’ it otherwise”

- Meera (name changed), domestic worker

“Aachar chune se aachar kharaab hojata hai” (If the pickle box is touched when we are menstruating, the pickle gets spoiled)

- Naina (name changed), 16 years old

“Ma’am ji, nahane dhone se bhi mana karte hai aur mandir jaane se bhi mana karte hai, kaha jata hai ki iss waqt ladkiya ashudh hoti hai” (Ma’am, we are told not to take a bath or even go to the temple, it is told that the girls are impure while they are menstruating)

- Riya (name changed), 15 years old

Some of the key learning outcomes for adolescents were:

1. Menstruation is not a disease, it's a natural body phenomenon
2. Menstruation is not just a 'ladies' problem'
3. Menstruation doesn't make anyone impure.
4. During menstruation, it is very important to maintain cleanliness and hygiene and it is okay to take a bath while menstruating.
5. Girls on their period can do whatever they want to do - that they shouldn't touch aachar (pickles) or work in the kitchens during their monthly cycle is a myth
6. Menstruation can start from as early as 10 years old as well, and there is no shame in it



Participants discuss the importance of consuming iron rich foods.

Key Learnings

1. Despite government schemes such as the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) of 2014 to promote all round development of adolescents including sexual and reproductive healthcare and rights, myths and misconceptions around menstruation continue to exist in the district of Panipat.
2. Lack of conversation and silencing of the issue of menstruation is another contributor to lack of information and awareness around it - across two generations in Panipat.
3. There is a critical need to open up conversations about self and wellness of adolescent girls. Such conversations are rarely facilitated among families, putting girls and women at high risk of health and nutritional issues.



4. The number of questions that participants asked during the questions revealed the extent to which there's a lack of information on this issue among adolescent girls in Panipat.
5. Lack of information and constant silencing of any conversation on the body, wellness and menstruation, menstrual stigma and shaming, are heavily hampering mental health of adolescent girls in Panipat