

## MY MENSTRUATION AND ME

A collection of unique and quirky stories of adolescent girls' experiences with menstruation

CHETNA (Childhood Enhancement through Training and Action) has had extensive experience working with street children, particularly girls, and we've encountered numerous heartbreaking stories that shed light on the challenges they face, particularly during menstruation. One such poignant account involves girls sharing their struggles with accessing sanitary facilities while living on the streets. Many girls recounted having to use public toilets, where they are charged a fee of 5 rupees each time they need to change their pads, adding a significant financial burden. In communities where public toilets are non-existent, some girls are forced to resort to changing pads in bushes, while others, due to financial constraints, stretch a single pad's usage over two days.



Moreover, we've heard harrowing tales of girls grappling with pregnancy scares due to irregular menstrual cycles. Recognizing the importance of amplifying these voices and experiences, we realized the value in creating a platform for young girls to share their stories, assumptions, and lived experiences. Thus, our initiative to collect and share these narratives was born, aiming to provide a space where girls can find solace in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. We facilitated Menstrual Health and Hygiene Sessions with the aim of raising awareness among street girls and mothers living in vulnerable slums about the importance of menstrual health and hygiene practices. Through these sessions, we were able to reach out to over 500 adolescent girls and mothers.

Initially, each session commenced with a palpable sense of discomfort and silence, as speaking up meant exposing oneself to potential judgment from others. However, as stories began to unfold, the atmosphere transformed, and the sessions took on a life of their own. Each story shared was a testament to the diverse and often surprising misconceptions surrounding menstruation.

Each of the stories within our collection is crafted from genuine, real-life experiences shared by the girls we work with. We've made a deliberate choice not to assign real names to our characters, ensuring that the trust and confidentiality we've established with our participants are upheld, while also broadening the relatability of each story beyond specific social identities. Our primary intention is to amplify these stories, sharing them with the world so that more young girls who come across them realize that they are not alone in their experiences. By removing the barriers of social labels and fostering a sense of shared humanity, we aim to create a space where girls can find solace, understanding, and solidarity in knowing that their experiences are shared by others.

## Transitioning from silencing my own voice to expressing my own opinions.

Fourteen-year-old Punni (name changed) lives with her family in a community near the railway tracks, where they face significant economic hardships. The family's income is minimal, and her father's informal employment increases the uncertainty about their future. The lack of stable shelter, potable water, and sanitation facilities further exacerbates their living conditions, posing daily challenges for Punni and other children in the area.

Punni shared her experience of getting her first period, describing it as a frightening and confusing time. She was initially unaware of what menstruation was or why it happened, which left her feeling scared and clueless. When it occurred, she didn't know whom to talk to and was too frightened to share her experience with anyone, including her mother, fearing she might be scolded. Punni went to school without telling anyone, but her dress became stained there. Fortunately, her teacher noticed her distress, provided her with a sanitary pad, and reassured her that it was normal.



Later, her mother learned about the incident and advised her to be careful and to take care of herself during such times. After attending an educational session on menstruation, her perspective changed significantly. She learned about the biological process behind menstruation and understood its importance. This knowledge made her feel more confident about her periods and taught her the proper use of sanitary pads. The session also made Punni realize how a closed mindset can suppress one's inner voice and prevent seeking help due to societal taboos. She now tries to normalize menstruation by discussing her newfound knowledge with her friends, aiming to break the silence and stigma around periods.

## The absence of feminine support results in a significant lack of awareness.

Kamini (name changed) shared her experience as a 14-year-old girl, the first in her family to attend school. Despite this milestone, her life has been fraught with challenges. She often feels that each struggle will be her last, only to face new difficulties. Kamini's personal life has been particularly tumultuous: her parents separated when she was very young, her mother eloped, and her father, addicted to alcohol, frequently abused her. Additionally, her paternal aunt struggled with drug addiction.



Kamini deeply misses the nurturing presence of a mother, a void she felt acutely when she got her first period. She didn't initially tell anyone, but after three or four days, she confided in her paternal aunt. Her aunt, taking money from grandmother, bought her new underwear and instructed her to use cloth to prevent staining.

However, menstruation came with numerous restrictions: she was not allowed to touch pickles, visit the temple, or play with friends, and was encouraged to stay home more. It was only through a session at Chetna that Kamini first learned about sanitary pads and how to use them. Reflecting on her ignorance about menstrual hygiene, she realized that no female in her family had ever informed her about sanitary pads. After attending the session, she adopted two crucial practices: using sanitary pads instead of cloth and changing them every three to four hours. She also learned about menstrual cups and period panties. Using sanitary pads for the first time was a liberating experience, freeing her from the constant fear of staining her clothes.

## My Mother, My Savior

Chandni (name changed), a 14-year-old girl, has been living in her community for over seven years. She belongs to a financially vulnerable group, where residents struggle to secure basic amenities. The majority of the population is employed in the informal sector. Male family members typically work in factories and furniture shops, while the women either work as housemaids or homemakers.

Whenever I recall my first day of menstruation, I still wonder how I was unaware and unable to feel any discomfort. It was my mother who informed me that my menstrual cycle had begun. Like any other day, I handed my clothes to her for washing. Upon seeing the period stain, she told me that my



period had started and gave me sanitary pads, instructing me on how to use them.

I remember her becoming very concerned, advising me to rest and continuously recommending nutritious meals. She also told me to stay at home and not to speak unnecessarily. I found it strange that my period would impact me if I stepped outside the house. I don't like being forced to do something when I know it's not wrong or harmful to anyone, but at that time, I didn't understand anything.

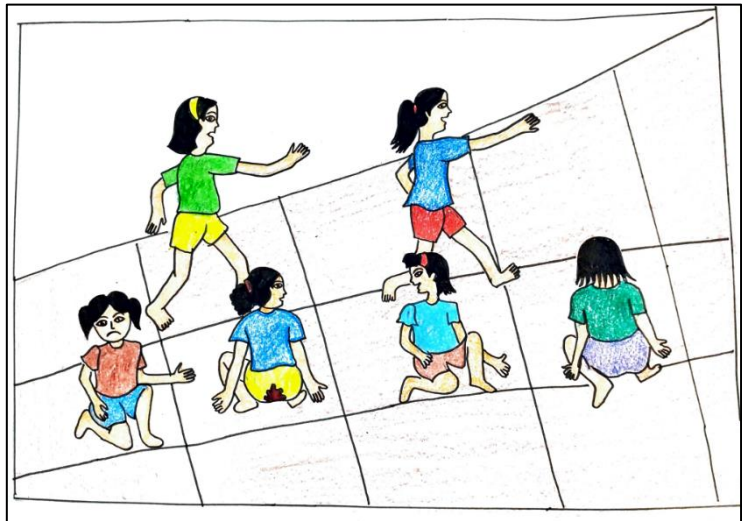
There was a noticeable change in my mother's behaviour, which I couldn't quite describe. After attending a session on menstrual health, I learned that menstruation is normal. I also learned practical information, such as the importance of changing sanitary pads every 2-3 hours to prevent infection.

Now, I confidently discuss periods with my friends, sharing my knowledge and advising them to adopt and follow clean, hygienic practices.

## **I somehow survived the bars; my daughter will not suffer the same**

13-year-old Pushpa Kumari (name changed) has been a resident of a vulnerable slum in Delhi since childhood. Her father is unemployed, while her mother works as a maid to support the family. In this community, access to basic resources like clean and potable water is not easily available. The family comes from an economically weak background, with Pushpa's mother being the sole breadwinner and struggling to fulfil their basic necessities of life.

The majority of the population in the community lacks personal washrooms and bathrooms in their homes, which adds to the challenges faced by girls like Pushpa. The absence of such facilities complicates daily life and hygiene practices, highlighting the additional hurdles that individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter.



She shared that the day I experienced my first period marked a pivotal moment in my life—a juncture where the breadth of choices before me became abundantly clear. It commenced as any ordinary day; I arose, prepared for school, blissfully unaware of the impending change. However, during our games period, while engrossed in a spirited game of Kho Kho, my school pants bore an unexpected crimson hue. Swiftly alerted by my friend Chandni, our teacher, Ms. Renuka Ma'am, gracefully intervened, providing me with a sanitary napkin before guiding me to the washroom.

Upon returning home, I confided in my mother about the day's events. Her reassuring guidance echoed the importance of using sanitary products and prioritizing rest. Yet, complications arose with the emergence of peculiar behavior from my paternal grandmother. She began curtailing my freedom of movement, resorting to abusive language and coercing me to remain indoors. Despite my inner turmoil, I felt powerless to challenge her authority.

However, attending an enlightening session transformed my outlook. The comprehensive explanation provided by our teacher regarding the menstrual cycle, along with essential precautionary measures and proper disposal of sanitary products, offered newfound clarity. Previously, my grandmother's behavior had sapped my confidence, compelling me to retreat

into the confines of my home during menstruation. Yet, armed with knowledge, I gradually shed my apprehensions and embraced this natural biological process with positivity.

A particular statement from the session resonated deeply within me: "Periods are not a malady but a blessing, signifying our innate power to nurture life." Empowered by this realization, I embarked on a journey of self-acceptance and empowerment. No longer would I allow societal taboos to confine me or future generations. I resolved that when the time came, my daughter would not endure the same constraints, but rather, she would be encouraged to embrace her biological gift with pride and confidence shared by her mother.

### **My new good habit can now save many lives in my community.**

15-year-old Asmeen (name changed) comes from an economically disadvantaged background with a meagre income. Her mother works from home making shoe straps, and her father's passing has made their lives even more difficult. They reside in a community near the railway tracks, which lacks basic infrastructure, potable water, and cleanliness, making life especially challenging for her and other children.

Asmeen shared her experience that it has been two years since I started menstruating, but I still feel uncomfortable recalling my first period. I remember it was Friday when I first got my period. I was in terrible pain and had no idea what to do. I spoke to my friend Rukhsana, who is much



older than me. I felt awful, especially since it was a holy day. With my mother out of town, Rukhsana (name changed) guided me, teaching me about sanitary pads, and how to use them, due to my lack of knowledge, I used the same pad for two days. When my mother returned after two days, she also instructed me to change the pads and advised me to avoid spicy and sour foods.

After attending menstrual hygiene awareness sessions twice, I have learned about alternative options to sanitary pads. Recently, I informed one of my friends in the village about the various methods, including the importance of washing hands and the correct placement of sanitary pads. One crucial piece of information I was unaware of was the proper disposal of sanitary

pads. Previously, I thought they could be discarded anywhere since they were waste. However, after the sessions, I learned the correct disposal method: wrapping the pad in paper with at least four to five folds, placing it in a plastic bag, and then throwing it in the garbage. I shared this knowledge with my friend, explaining the harmful consequences of improper disposal, such as the spread of germs that can cause diseases. Proper disposal of sanitary pads is vital for protecting public health.

## **Navigating my periods involves managing physical discomfort and emotional strain.**

Surili (name changed), a 14-year-old, resides in a community near railway tracks where her father works in a factory. The area is primarily inhabited by individuals employed in the informal sector, such as factory work, construction, and rag-picking. Basic facilities are lacking, with open sewers, inadequate access to clean water, and highly congested infrastructure prevailing.

Navigating the challenges of menstruation while aspiring to pursue a career in law enforcement or within a professional office setting can be daunting. Despite my aspirations, the daily hurdles I face often leave me



feeling overwhelmed and fatigued. However, I've come to terms with my circumstances and strive to make the best of them with the resources available to me.

Upon experiencing my first period, I sought guidance from my mother, who introduced me to the use of sanitary pads and performed a customary ritual to mark the occasion. While this initial step was manageable, the real struggle lies in the upkeep of hygiene during menstruation. Accessing clean restroom facilities in our community proves to be a persistent challenge, compounded by concerns for safety due to the presence of unruly individuals. Additionally, the absence of adequate water supply exacerbates the difficulty of changing sanitary pads. This not only imposes physical limitations but also instills a sense of mental unease, as my mother now vigilantly monitors my whereabouts and companions.

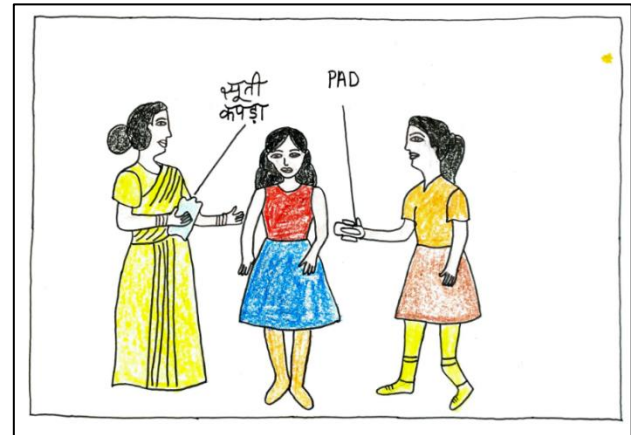
Despite these obstacles, I am determined to assist other girls facing similar circumstances. Recently, I provided guidance to a friend named Fiza who encountered her first period. Drawing from the knowledge imparted during educational the recent sessions I attended, I shared

insights on hygiene practices, proper usage of sanitary pads, and the importance of consuming iron-rich foods. Furthermore, I accompany her to restroom facilities to ensure her safety and alleviate any apprehensions she may have. In doing so, I endeavor to empower fellow girls within my community to manage their menstrual health with confidence and dignity.

## Directing the Intersection of Superstition and Medical Advice: Overcoming Cultural Taboos for Better Health

Reshma, a 19-year-old resident (name altered), resides within a community predominantly engaged in ragpicking. Situated on Railway lands adjacent to the railway tracks, this unauthorized settlement lacks essential infrastructure, including access to water and electricity. The entire population inhabits makeshift tarpaulin shelters, highlighting the dire living conditions prevalent in the area.

Navigating between superstitious beliefs and medical advice proved to be a challenging ordeal during my first menstrual cycle. As Reshma found herself caught between these two conflicting sources of guidance. Initially informed by her elder sister to use sanitary pads, Reshma encountered contradictory instructions from her mother, who advocated for traditional practices such as abstaining



from bathing for three days, avoiding cold water, and maintaining specific postures to prevent blood stains. Unaware of the potential health implications, Reshma's mother followed these customs, passed down through generations.

However, attending a session on menstrual health and hygiene brought about a pivotal shift in Reshma's approach. Learning to change her pad every 2-3 hours, she noticed a significant reduction in skin irritation previously experienced from prolonged pad usage. Moreover, disregarding the prohibition on bathing, she now adheres to regular hygiene practices, including cleansing her private areas with water. In addition to personal hygiene adjustments, Reshma has adopted dietary recommendations from her teachers, consuming nutritious foods during her menstrual cycle, and finding relief from cramps through the intake of lukewarm water.

Reshma engages in open and compassionate conversations with her mother and female relatives, sharing the knowledge she gained from the menstrual health and hygiene session. She sensitively addresses the misconceptions surrounding menstruation and gently educates them on the benefits of adopting new habits to prevent discomfort and promote well-being.

## Maturity Beyond Years: The Weighty Toll it Bears

Shabbo (name changed), a 16-year-old resident, resides in a community nestled near railway tracks. The majority of the population in this area are engaged in the informal sector, where income stability is a luxury. Unfortunately, the community grapples with a severe lack of basic amenities. Open sewage systems pose a significant challenge to sanitation, while the absence of potable water exacerbates health risks. Moreover, the infrastructure is woefully congested, adding to the community's daily struggles.

I've matured beyond my years, but it's been a heavy burden to bear. My life was once filled with joy and a productive routine, attending school regularly and enjoying time with friends. However, everything changed abruptly the day my mother passed away while giving birth to my brother. The doctors revealed the tragic details of her condition—water-filled lungs and a failing heart. With her sudden departure, I found myself thrust into a world of immense responsibility.



Having to care for my younger siblings meant sacrificing my education. As I reached the milestone of my first period, I found myself alone, without the guidance of my mother. Seeking solace from my paternal grandmother, I was met with silence, leaving me feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and anger. It was my paternal aunt who eventually offered some advice—avoid sour foods, minimize physical exertion, and use sanitary pads. Yet, the absence of my mother was keenly felt, especially during this crucial phase of my menstrual cycle.

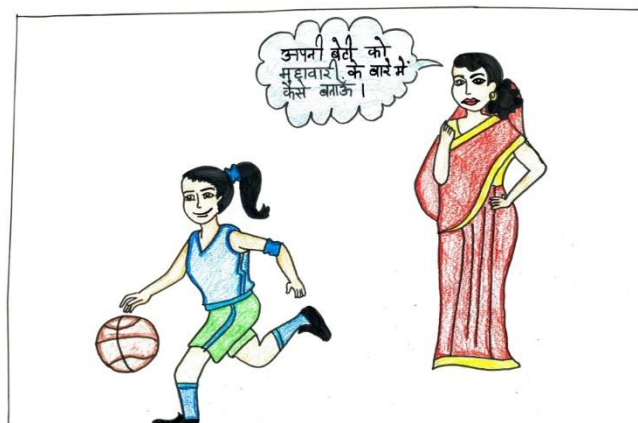
The longing for her presence intensified during moments of vulnerability, yearning for the comfort and emotional support only a mother could provide. The fear of staining my clothes in front of my father and paternal uncle added to my discomfort, a constant reminder of her absence. If my mother were still here, I believe I would navigate these challenges with greater ease, knowing she would offer unwavering support and guidance.

## Overcoming Adversity and Empowering Her Children

Priyanka, a 30-year-old mother of two, has been living with her family in a vulnerable slum community in West Delhi for over eight years. Her husband is a laborer, and despite the challenges, Priyanka remains resilient. Life became even more difficult after she lost her left

arm in an accident following the birth of her second child. The community lacks essential facilities such as clean washrooms, and the filthy, congested lanes provide no space for proper ventilation.

"I am a brave mother because I have no other choice for my children," Priyanka shares. "I have dreams and aspirations for my two wonderful children. I want them to be successful and live in decent surroundings. After my accident, life changed in an instant. I love my children deeply and know they need me throughout their lives. However, I constantly worry about whether I can provide them with the support they need.



Everyday tasks take a toll on me, and during my menstrual cycle, I feel particularly helpless in maintaining my physical hygiene. This helplessness makes me anxious for my children, especially my daughter. I fear that when she needs me, I might not be able to guide her or give her the comfort she deserves, and that she might see me as unworthy of helping her.

Recently, a session on period poverty organized by Chetna NGO was a turning point for me. The trainer explained various precautionary measures to take during periods, such as using sanitary pads and how to properly apply them. I learned that washing private parts with water is better than using soap. This session has given me the knowledge and confidence to face my fears with a brave smile. Now, I can confidently guide my daughter when she needs me."

## Striving for a Better Future for Her Daughters

Tarannum, a 32-year-old mother of six, lives with her family in a community in West Delhi, located near the railway tracks. This area lacks basic sanitation and hygiene facilities, with open drains posing a constant threat to both children and adults. Tarannum works as a housemaid, while her husband is a daily wage laborer.

"I am a mother who wants my daughters to be free from fear," Tarannum shares. "I have been living here for the last 18 years, since my marriage. Like any mother, I dream of providing a comfortable life for my children. But with four growing daughters, I constantly worry about their safety and well-being in



our one-room house with its inadequate bathroom facilities.

During my menstrual cycle, I feel a constant anxiety and fear that someone might look in while I am changing my sanitary pad. This terror is something I experience alone for now, but soon my daughters will begin menstruating, and I do not want them to lose their independence in such an environment. My concern is how to protect them from negative influences.

Although my daughters have not started their menstrual cycles yet, I feel more prepared to support them after attending two regular sessions on menstrual health. These sessions have not only enhanced my knowledge about how periods function but also taught me better hygiene practices, such as changing pads every 3-4 hours. I have also learned the importance of proper sanitary pad disposal to prevent health hazards for young children in our community, who are often cared for by their older siblings or guardians.