

Break the silence

Not talking about menstruation is not only fatal for women but also a hindrance to building a healthy society, says Shailendra Sinha



The taboo around menstruation needs to be broken at the initial stage itself. Schools are taking up the campaign in earnest to make young girls aware of ways to take better care of themselves while, at the same time, maintaining hygiene. While it is easier to encourage such conversations in the urban space, it is difficult to imagine them taking place in the remote areas in Jharkhand. A teacher at the Kasturba Gandhi Residential Girls School, Dumka, Usha Kiran Tudu said that the girls from 11 to 14 years in school are made aware about menstruation early on. They are told that

their body will change but there is no need to panic. The Udaan programme in the school starts from sixth grade itself. She added that now the awareness among the girls has increased as they have started talking about it openly. They have not only become aware of sanitation and hygiene, but have also started sharing their knowledge with friends in their villages.

Another teacher, Sohagini Marandi, said that in some schools, sanitary pads and incinerators have been made available by the government, where Rs 5 per student has to be paid for sanitary pads. But that, too, is a substantial amount for many students who are financially weak. Thus, free sanitary pads have been provided by the government to all the girls residing in schools and hostels.

However, proper disposal of used pads is still a major problem. Citing an example, she said, "While there are 400 girls in my school, there is only one incinerator machine, in which the pad is burnt. In such a situation, many girls go to the temporary incinerator adjacent to the school toilet and burn the pad. The smoke emanating from this is dangerous to the environment."

But that is not the only reason why sanitary napkins can cause pollution. Gender co-ordinator, Mini Tudu, said that plastic has been banned in the country. But many companies which make sanitary pads are still using plastic in it, which in turn increases pollution when it is burnt. She added that the government needs to pay attention to this immediately and find better options in order to ensure that women do not contract infections while using these pads. In addition to sanitation issue, it also creates problem for the environment.

Lack of electricity is also a reason why the pads are burnt in the open. The incinerator needs electricity and many schools do not have a sufficient and continuous supply, thus negating the very purpose of this machine.

A major point of concern is also that most of the women in tribal areas such as Jharkhand do not use sanitary pads. Instead they use plain cloth as per tradition.

According to a study conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) in 2016, where 97,000 girls from all over the country were interviewed, eight out of 10 girls were forbidden to visit religious places during their periods and six out of 10 were not allowed to touch food and were forbidden to enter the kitchen during periods. In some areas, during menstruation, girls were kept in separate rooms in the corner of the house. The surprising revelation was that many girls were not aware about hygiene associated with periods. It should have been the responsibility of the mother or an elder in the house to make them aware of menstruation and other physical changes. In the absence of proper information, girls experiencing menstruation for the first time remain confused.

Sunita Kumari, a woman consultant working at Dumka Sadar Hospital, said that women should pay special attention to cleanliness during periods as it causes weakness, irritability and abdominal pain. She advised women to consume more water and fruits like watermelon during menstruation as these are beneficial. There should be an increase in the intake of fruit and milk. She also stressed upon the need to consume spinach as it contains high amount of iron which fulfills anemia.

Dietician Nirupama Singh said, “During menstruation, women should also consume more bananas, because it contains high amount of potassium and vitamin B. This helps in physical and mental health. Women eat less food during these days. This in turn leads to fatigue, mood swings and body cramps.”

Being silent on menstruation is not only fatal for women but also a hindrance to building a healthy society. When girls enter adolescence, it is very important for them to understand the changes that they are going through as physical changes directly affect mental health of young minds

—Charkha Features