

Utkarsha – An Initiative for Adolescent Girls

People like to compare a child transforming into an adult to a bud blossoming naturally into a flower. However, the process is not quite as simple for humans. We experience many physical and emotional changes during puberty.

When a boy grows up, it is usually accepted that he is old enough to take on certain responsibilities. He is treated like an adult, but is this true for girls? On the contrary, many restrictions are imposed on girls once they reach puberty. They are not allowed to play rough games; they have to be back home before sundown, and rules are made regarding what they can wear and who they are allowed to meet.



(Girl students are talking about Menstruation through a Puppet show)

Many young girls don't know much about their bodies, or about menstruation cycles. When they experience their first period, they are often scared and confused. They feel alone, unable to talk openly about what continues to be a taboo subject. What they need during this time is a friend who understands. The Sindhudurg District Council, through their '**Utkarsha**' program, is trying to do just that – extend a hand of friendship to adolescent girls.

With the motto of 'Emancipated young women mean development for Sindhudurg', Utkarsha was implemented in Sindhudurg's schools from September 2016. The program aims to make adolescent girls aware of the importance of a balanced diet and exercise and to dispel all misconceptions about menstruation. It also teaches them about hygiene during this time.

Under Utkarsha, girl students between the ages of six and twelve have their hemoglobin levels checked regularly, and provided with a nutritious diet. They are also taught self-defense skills like judo and karate, as well as yoga. Not just school-going but out-of-school teenage girls, too, have bank accounts opened in their names. Small help

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In rural India (even in the cities), there are many misconceptions and superstitions surrounding menstruation.

Through Utkarsha, young girls and their family members learn that it is a natural process, an important aspect of a girl's becoming a woman and that there is nothing unclean or unholy about it. Parents and guardians – including grandparents – are told how to take care of their daughters during this time, and about their dietary needs. The program tries to dispel the misconceptions attached to menstruation from people's minds and to help them realize its essential biological role.

The program is implemented with help from the Women and Child Welfare, Health, and Education Departments of the Sindhudurg District Council.

Initially, teachers and ASHAs (health workers at Village level) are trained to conduct the sessions. In 2016, soon after Utkarsha was launched, Mrs. Bharati Tahiliyani, State Coordinator, UNICEF, trained 836 workers – including a woman teacher, a nurse, a female health worker and a subject expert for every primary and secondary school in the district. During the training, there was an open and friendly atmosphere, and a good exchange of experiences and ideas took place.



(Teachers are talking about Sanitary Napkins while Utkarsha Workshop)

Initially, the school teachers were too embarrassed to speak openly about menstruation. But Bharati Tahiliyani, with her compassionate and friendly demeanor, soon broke the ice. Most trainees had themselves had very negative experiences while growing up. There were feelings of shame, fear, and of being unclean, associated with getting one's period. Many of them had not known anything about periods when they first got theirs – and the situation has not changed much for many of their students, even now.

This training program changed many of their views and ideas about menstruation. Bharati Tahiliyani explained the whole process scientifically, with plenty of examples to prove how baseless their superstitions were. She emphasized that if we wanted our girls to progress, we needed to get rid of the misconceptions. She spoke of how to explain all these things to young girls through plays, stories, poems, and games.

It was decided that in the academic years 2016-17 and 2017-18, female teachers, nurses, and subject experts would conduct six sessions in all schools in the district on “monthly period management”. These sessions would cover things such as: what menstruation is; why it happens; what care should be taken during the period every month; how to use sanitary towels or clean rags, and how to dispose of them; and how this is not something evil or dirty – and so a menstruating person doesn't need to sit separately or eat from different utensils during their period.

During these sessions, it was noticed that there was hardly any communication between mothers and daughters about menstruation; that mothers were, in fact, as uneducated about it as their daughters. To involve them in this program, special sessions were held for mothers on occasions like Women's Day.

The mothers not only listened to explanations on how to care for their daughters during menstruation, and the right diet for them, but the discussions with them also focused on how making the girls sit apart during their periods and not letting them take part in prayer rituals only made the young person feel ashamed and unclean. It was pointed out that there was nothing ominous involved, and that mothers ought to welcome the change in their daughters' lives and help them feel good about themselves.



(Young Utkarshadoot (Representative of Utkarsha) is talking about female genitals)

Some of the more enthusiastic and articulate girl students from Std 6 to 8 are chosen to help with the programme. These girls help popularise the programme in school and answer other students' queries about menstruation. If suddenly, a girl gets her period in school for the first time, these volunteers help her and teach her not to be afraid. They assist teachers during sessions, make contact with women from the village, The monthly period management sessions are conducted in different ways in different schools of Sindhudurg. In Sateli Bhedshi District Council School in Dodamarg taluka, they use talking dolls; others use street plays, role-play, or group discussions. With the help of the Rotary Club, some secondary schools in Sindhudurg have installed sanitary napkin vending machines as well as incinerators for disposing of used napkins. Khardekar College in Vengurle taluka, Topiwala High School in Malwan taluka, and some other schools, have boxes called the 'Utkarsha box". Students who have questions or concerns about menstruation can put their queries into the box anonymously, and these are answered every week by a trained teacher and so on. Most schools in the district have changing rooms that are equipped with a kit containing sanitary napkins, painkillers, disinfectants like antiseptic, cotton wool, and other useful items.



(Utkarsha Kit in school contains Sanitary Napkin and First aid kit)

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The "monthly period management" sessions have brought about a positive change in the whole district that is quite evident. The girls now speak confidently and without embarrassment about menstruation, as they are now aware of the "what" and "why" of it. Now they refuse to sit apart at home, and do not hesitate to enter a temple during their period. They also attend school regularly. The girls also educate other older women in their families and also talk to friends who might not be in school.

Here are some examples of the positive changes brought about through this program:

A girl student announced at home that she would not sit separately from the others during her monthly period, and she was supported by her mother and grandmother.

A camp organized for mothers helped them become aware of how to take care of their daughters' hygiene during their periods.

There is a temple right in front of Mochmod school No 1 in Vengurle, Sindhudurga District and so, many girls would remain absent from school for the first four days of their period. Once they realized that there was nothing unclean about periods and that they were not defiling a place of worship, they started attending school regularly.

Not only are the girls studying in schools in Sindhudurg educated about menstruation, but even out-of-school girls are also taught monthly period management. There are plans to conduct health camps for women, have Utkarsha workers in the villages like they have in schools, and arrange to install sanitary napkin disposal machines in the villages.

We are confident that our dream of having every girl equipped with the knowledge she needs to deal with puberty through our program 'Utkarsha' will soon come true.