

Finally no more reason for girls dropping out of school

Hurdles to girl child education run deep in many societies, with menstruation being one of the most common causes of grounding girls at home. Teacher Seema Chaturvedi deals with the issue head on — with the entire village.

Name: Seema Chaturvedi

School: Government Middle School, Syahimudi, Korba

State/UT: Chhattisgarh

Nearly a year ago, Seema Chaturvedi, a government school teacher in Chhattisgarh, was facing a problem of absenteeism and drop out among girls in her school. One of the major reasons was menstruation.

Many girls are subjected to cultural, religious and social restrictions once they reach puberty. They are not allowed to enter the kitchen, any revered place or even touch a pickle jar as girls are considered impure during this time of the month.

“How can someone lose out on studies and their future due to something that is happening to them naturally? The girls want to come to school but cannot. Sometimes they are not allowed and sometimes they are not properly counselled and guided about these sudden changes in their body. They get scared and do not come to school,” she said.

One such example is Kumari Anu, a student of Chaturvedi’s Government Middle School in Syahimudi village in Korba district. Anu got her first period two years ago in 2016 when she was only 11 years old. She was not able to understand the sudden changes her body was taking at such a tender age as the topic was never discussed even among the female members of the family, given the rural setting she lived in.

Soon she came face to face with the reality of how her life had changed from being a carefree girl to attaining puberty, and facing the taboos and stigmas that came along with it.

“I was scared and confused. My mother said I cannot go outside for the next 4-5 days as I was inauspicious. Slowly I understood why girls in my school used to stay absent for some days every month,” Anu said.

Chaturvedi was disturbed by the way girls were treated during menstruation, but despite her efforts of a dialogue, she was not able to break the ice on the subject with the community members. These superstitions



Girl students during an awareness program on menstrual hygiene

are passed on from generation to generation and are deep rooted in people's psyche.

“Menstruation is not a very comfortable topic in many societies in India due to the shame and taboo attached to it. The situation is worse in the rural areas. Due to lack of awareness about the subject, girls are not encouraged to share their problems related to menstruation and often grow up with many misconceptions attached to it,” she said.

Finally, in September 2017, Chaturvedi started talking to the village women about menstrual hygiene, the misconceptions related to it, and proper use of pads and their disposal.

Her campaign got a boost when she attended the teacher orientation program under Sri Aurobindo Society's Zero Investment Innovation for Education Initiatives (ZIIIEI) in December that year. Hearing ideas from many other attendees, she began looking at the task at hand from a zero-investment perspective and structured it better, starting with organisation of seminars on menstrual hygiene.

“I approached doctors, women activists and local leaders to sensitise women and girls in schools and villages about the benefits of menstrual hygiene. Initially it was not easy. The villagers refused to talk on the subject. The women didn't turn up for the seminars. But with repeated emphasis and inclusion of doctors and women activists, I have been able to make inroads into the community,” she said.

By September 2018, one year down the line, Chaturvedi has conducted 4 seminars in Siyamudhi and other neighbouring villages. She is concerned that girls these days are reaching puberty at a much younger age of 11-12 years as compared to earlier days when girls started menstruating around 14-15 years.

“We have to prepare these young girls psychologically so they are ready to handle the situation. There is still hesitation in the society but we cannot brush this topic under the carpet. It is a serious problem and the society will have to address it,” she added.

The teacher explains that while menstrual cycle is a problem for the rural girls, hygienic disposal of sanitary napkins is a bigger struggle.

“Majority of the girls are from poor families and cannot afford sanitary napkins available in the market so they have to settle with cloth. For disposing it, they wash the cloth, dry it and then bury it in a deep pit, so dogs and other animals cannot access it and create a public nuisance,” she added.

So, going a step further, Chaturvedi has created an incinerator from earthen pots and empty tin boxes to dispose off the pads in an environment friendly way. “The used pads are put inside the incinerator along with dry leaves or other flammable material and reduced into smoke and ashes,” she said.

Chaturvedi said that she first created a model in her school and now girls have replicated this in their homes. Gradually, her efforts are paving the way for a positive change in the society. Also, she has been able to address the problem of girls' absenteeism.

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Girls and their mothers now understand that their lives can go on smoothly even during their periods. They do not have to stay away from school and miss their studies due to this.

Now girls rarely miss school during menstruation

~~Seema said

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