

Review Article

Myths and Misconceptions about Menstruation: A Study of Adolescent School Girls of Delhi

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Abstract

Menstruation is a natural process which occurs in a healthy female's body. It starts around the age of 11 and continues for almost three decades. Beginning of the menstrual cycle brings in physiological change in the life of the adolescent girls. However, in India majority of the adolescent girls are ignorant of these changes and lack scientific knowledge of menstruation. This is because this topic is shrouded in secrecy.

The objective of the study was to assess the understanding of the adolescent girls about the menstrual cycle and the myths and misconception they have about it. The present study is based on analysis of primary data. A structured questionnaire was prepared and administered on adolescent girls of schools of Delhi Government.

The study focussed on various aspects related to menstruation. Based on the findings, proposed role of social worker has been explored to address the issue of prevailing myths, taboos and misconceptions. Also recommendations have been made to improve knowledge of girls on the subject, so that their education is not affected and they are able to avail all the opportunities for their better future.

Introduction

The menstrual cycle is a common phenomenon that happens in a healthy female body and it makes motherhood possible for a women. The first cycle of menstruation usually starts between the age of twelve and fifteen years. The

time interval between the first day of a period and the first day of the next is around 21 to 45 days. Bleeding usually lasts for 2 to 7 days. Menstruation stops when Menopause occurs among women between 45 and 55 years of age.

Menstruation is a normal scientific process, but it is surrounded in secrecy. Because of prevailing myths, misconception and taboos around menstruation, women and girls are excluded from many educational, social and cultural life during their menstrual period. This has potentially harmful implications [1] for them and for society. The existing cultural and social norms acts as a barrier for advancement of knowledge on this topic [2]. There are many restrictions levied upon women because of this menstrual cycle. This includes not allowing them to enter the “puja” [3] room, do the cooking, worshipping God, touching religious books and entering the temple [4]. The primary cause of existence of this myth is related to the cultural beliefs of impurity concomitant with menstrual cycle. It is also believed that women during this time are unhygienic and impure. So the food they cook, would get soiled and contaminated. According to a study, women participants in the study believed that during this time of the month, body releases smell or emits a ray, which would spoil the cooked food. This is also the reason why women are forbidden to touch pickles. However, scientifically, if the hygiene measures are taken care of during the cycle, the, food won't be spoiled. It is the social, cultural and religious norms, which impose taboos on menstruation. Further the traditional associations with evil spirits, shame and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction [5] intensify the negative aspects associated with it. It is against this background a study was proposed to assess the knowledge about menstrual health and prevailing myths and misconception among the adolescent school girls of Delhi.

Methodology

This study is based on analysis of primary data collected with the help of an NGO working for promotion of menstrual hygiene. A structured questionnaire was prepared and administered to adolescent girls who are studying in Delhi Government's schools. Adolescent girls studying in class 9 to 12 were included in the present study. Consent from their parents and teachers were taken to do the same. The study covered 81 sections of 52 such schools situated in East Delhi.

The objectives of the study were to explore:

- The knowledge level of participants about menstruation
- Source of the information about menstruation
- Myths and misconception associated with menstruation
- Explore relation between menstrual health management and school attendance
- Existing taboos associated with menstruation.

Based on the findings, some recommendations have also been made to address the myths, misconception and taboos and to improve knowledge on the subject.

Literature Review

Menstruation is a natural process. However, because of lack of scientific knowledge, there exist myths and misconceptions related to menstrual cycle. Plathora of literature is available on this topic. Studies have been conducted [6, 7] to assess prevailing menstruation related myths and its impact on the life of women and on the topic of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) [8] among adolescent girls in India. The aim was to find out the prevailing unmet needs of resources to maintain menstrual hygiene. The findings showed that there is a need to strengthen MHM programmes in India and introduce educational programmes. The problem of having access to resources for hygienic menstrual cycle and proper disposal of used products, needs be addressed.

Futher a research [9] was conducted by the Institute of Development Studies to assess the efficacy of implementation of the “UDAAN”, a scheme of Rajasthan Government. Around 270 adolescent girls were selected for the study. The finding of the study showed that there are stigmas attached to this topic and girls have to face many challenges because of the prevailing stigma. Majority of the respondents did not had any information before they had their first period. Whatever information they had, was given to them by their mothers. Mother was the primary source of information. A different research work [10] explored different menstrual taboos existing in India and revealed that the prevailing negative attitude and taboo has a historical religious background and is existing because of the result of a social system.

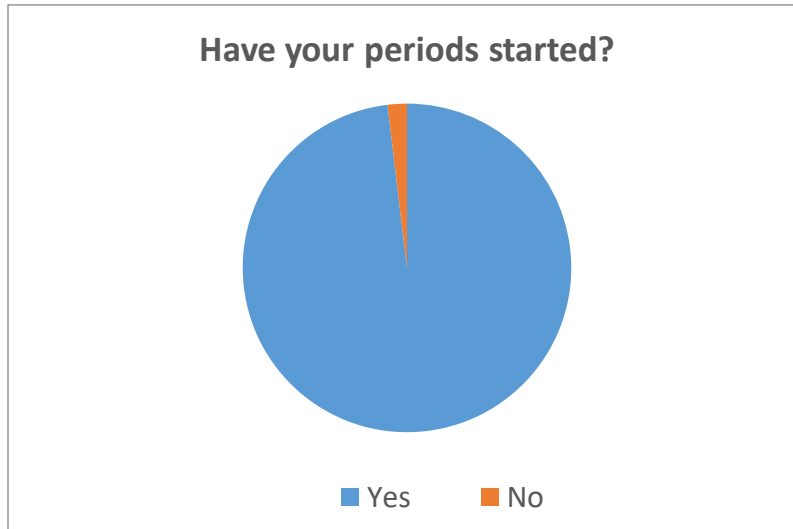
There are resources [11] which are available to provide information on menstrual hygiene. These resources provide information on good menstrual hygiene practices across the world which will be useful for all the stakeholders including professionals from WASH sector, and sexual and reproductive health sector, who are willing to address the issues of girls and women.

Gaps Identified

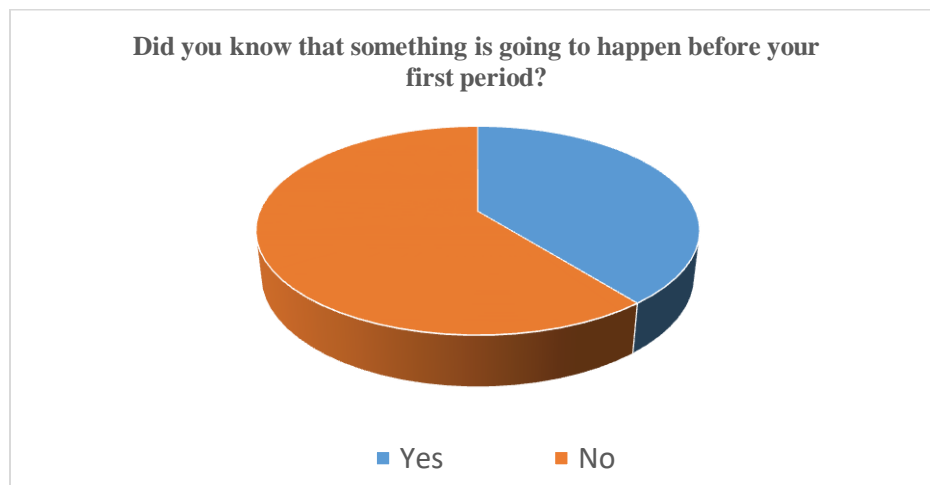
The literature review identified the critical gaps which are existing in available documents on this topic. Knowledge about menstrual hygiene and its impacts among the school girls of India, belonging to modest background, has not been researched properly earlier. The aim of this research is to address this gap. The findings of the research gives a clear picture of prevailing myths and misconception amongst school adolescent girls, who are residing in an urban set up. This would be helpful for policymakers and government representatives in formulation and initiation of programmes and policies for empowering girls and women, so that they can avail all the opportunities to grow.

Findings

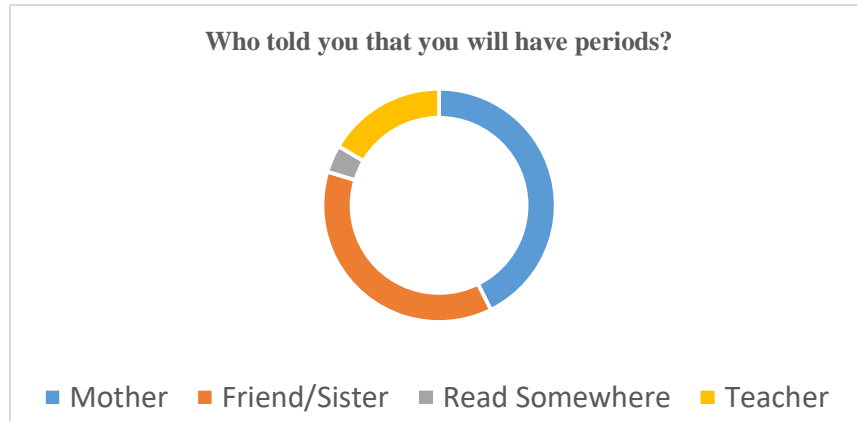
Respondents were asked if their period has started. 98% of the girls interviewed had their periods started. Therefore, the analysis includes almost only the girls, who are experiencing the periods, and the associated issues with it.



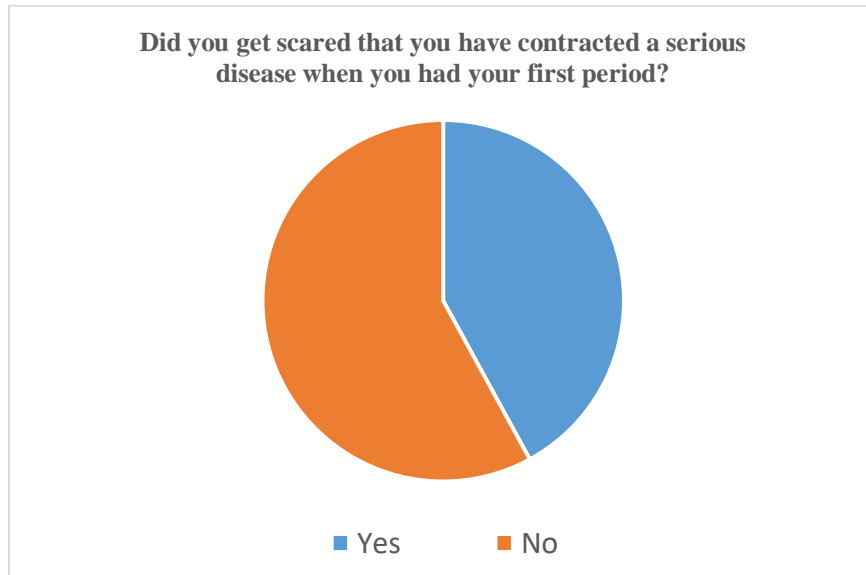
They were further asked if they had an idea that something is going to happen. Around 61% of the girls said that they were not aware earlier, that something like periods is going to happen to them. This is depicted in the following figure.



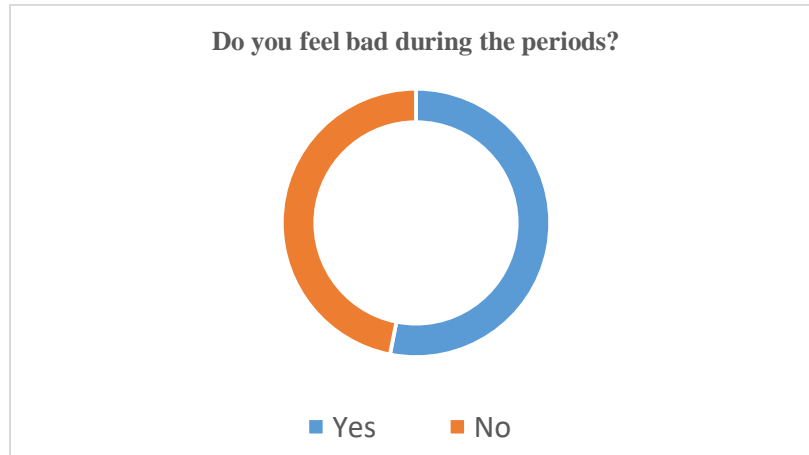
Girls were asked about the source of information about the menstrual cycle. The figure below brings out the deficiencies in the education related to reproductive health imparted to the girl students. Only 15% of the girls got the information regarding their periods from their teachers. Also, very small percentage of them read about it from the books, magazines, papers or could know about it from the Internet.



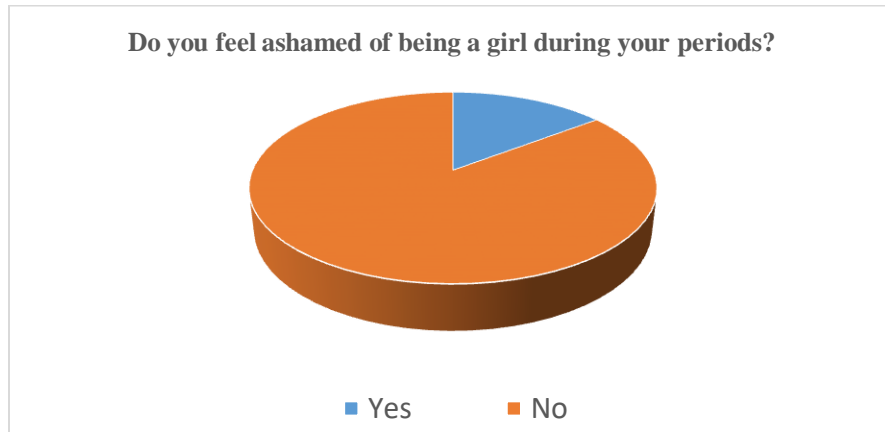
Further they were asked if they got scared when they had their first period. To this question, a substantial percentage of girls, because of their ignorance, assumed that they have contracted a serious disease when their period first started.



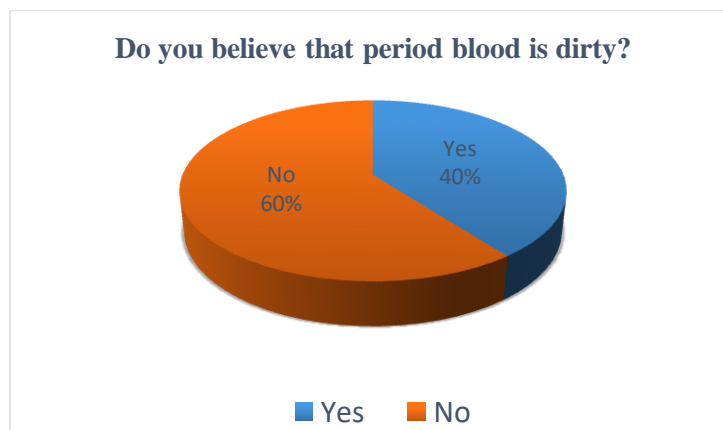
In the following figure, it is apparent that more than 50% of the girls feel bad during the periods.



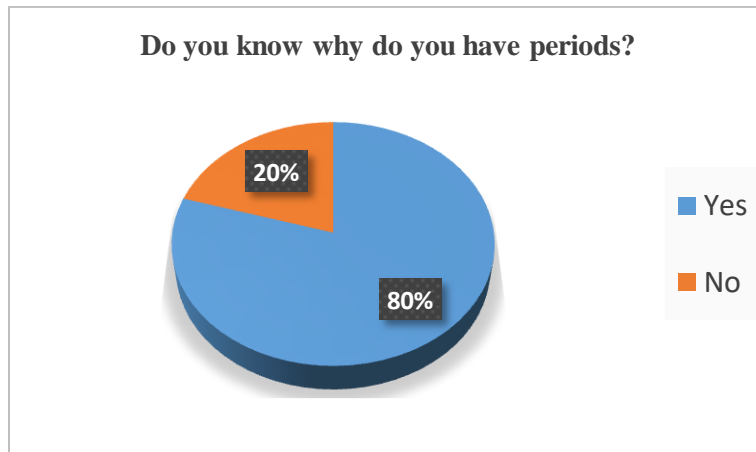
Also, there are still a substantial 15 percent of girls, who feel ashamed of being a girl during their periods. It is evident in the figure below.



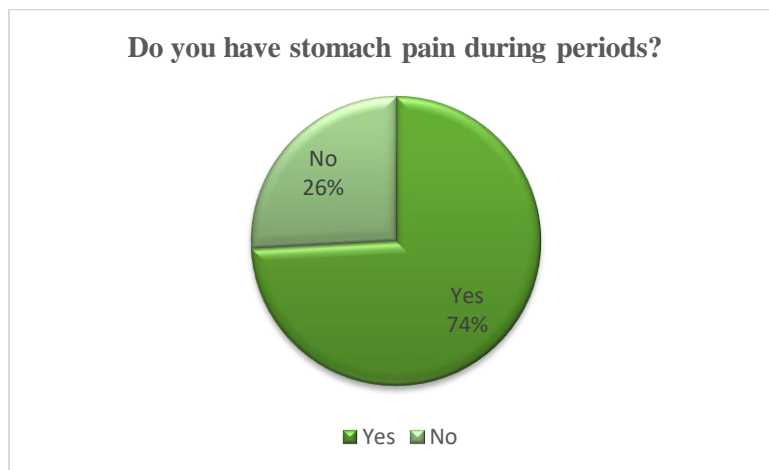
Girls were further asked if they feel that the period blood is dirty. Around 40% of the girls feel that the period blood is dirty. This means that they are not fully aware about the reasons of the period and that it is a natural process.



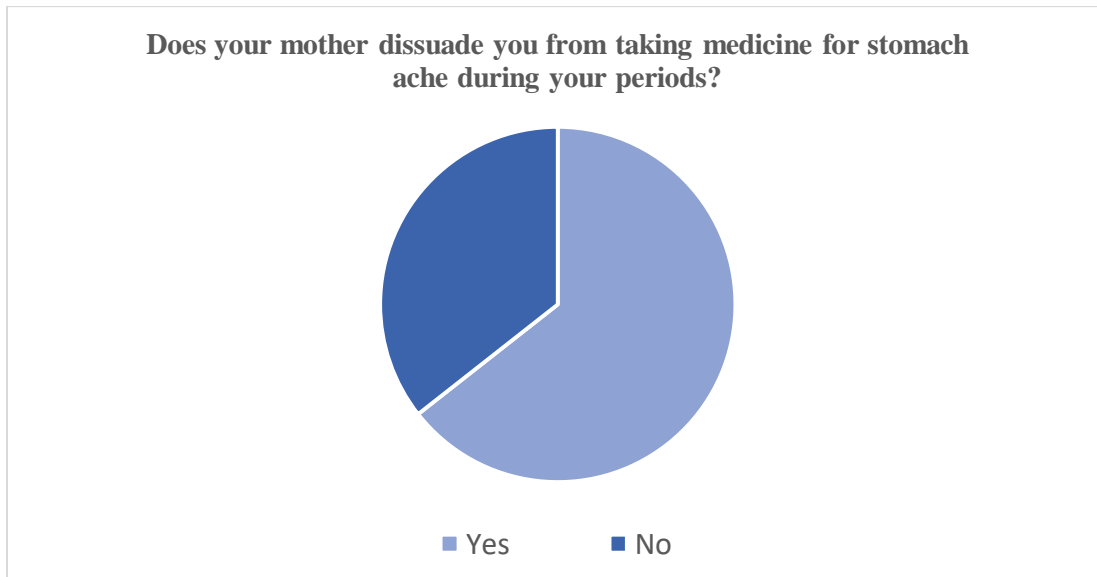
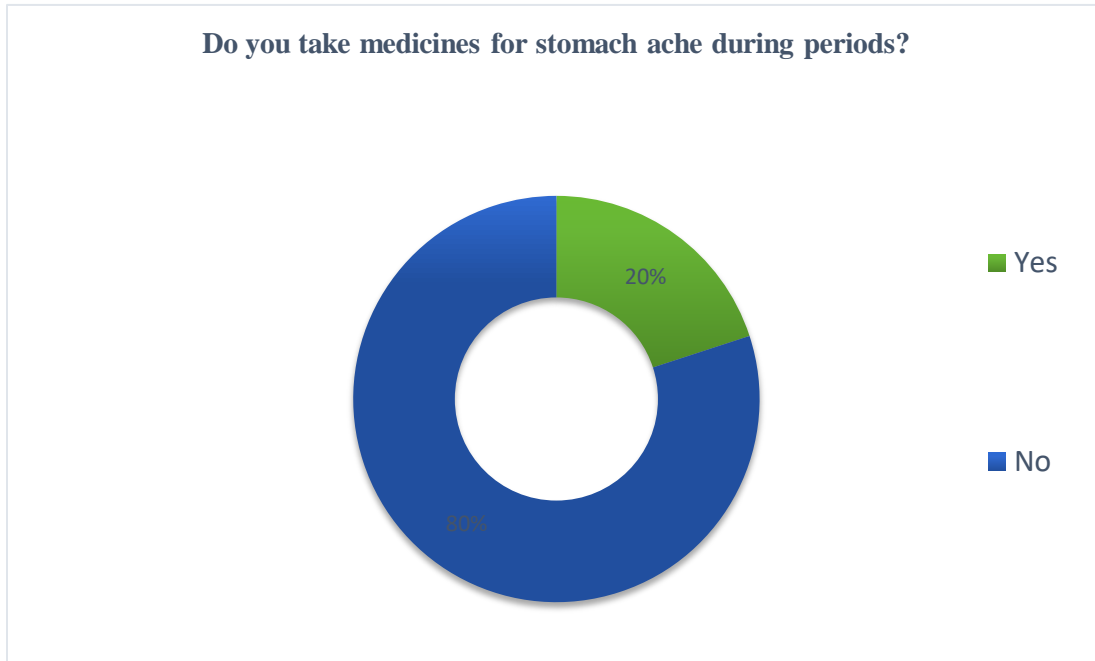
Around 20 percent of the respondents are not aware of the reason as why they have periods.



Around 75 percent of the respondents experience pain during the periods.

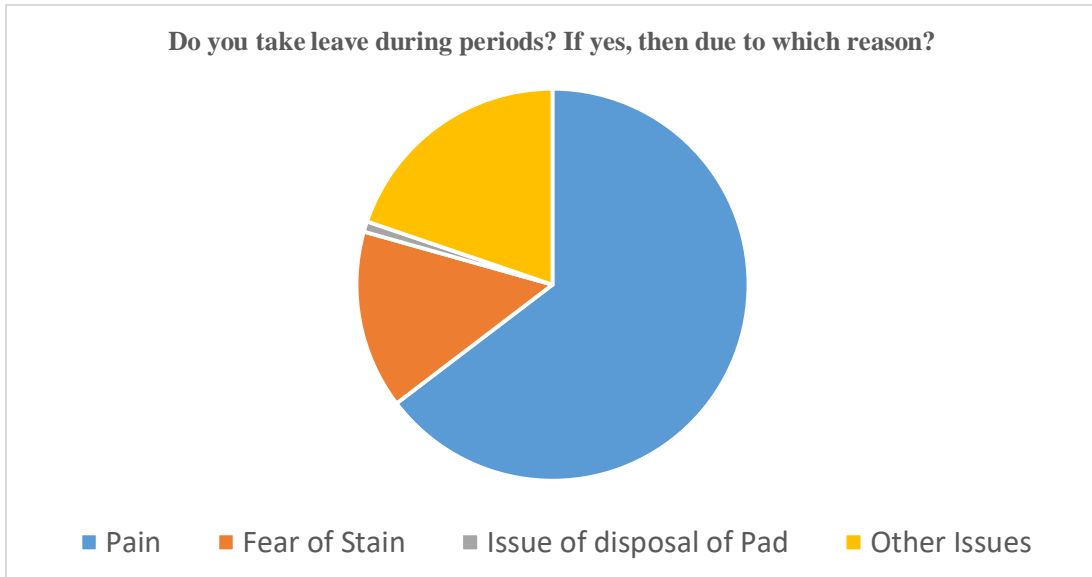


However only 20 percent of the girls take medicine during this period. Their mother dissuades them to take medicine as it is evident in the next to next figure.

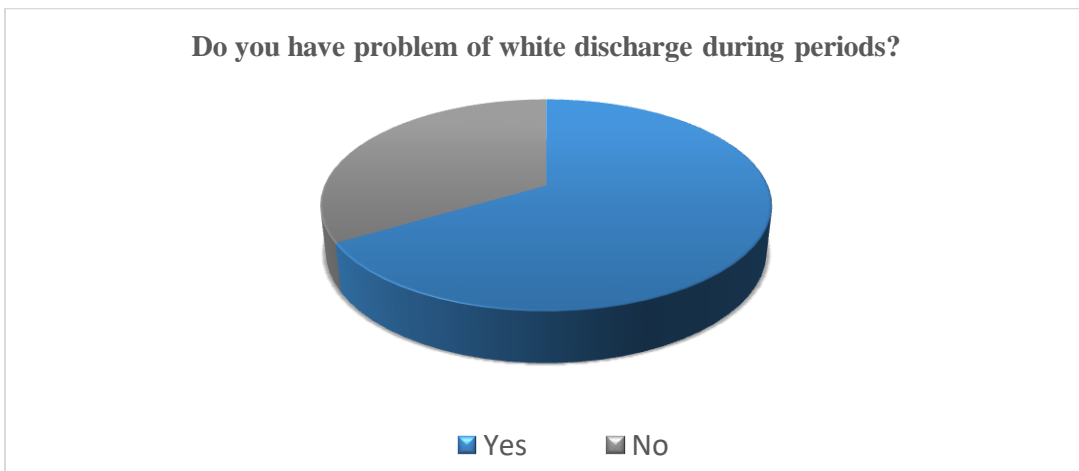


The mothers are the primary contact person who are providing information to their daughters. It is important to impart knowledge to them so that the scientific explanation of menstruation is passed from one generation to another.

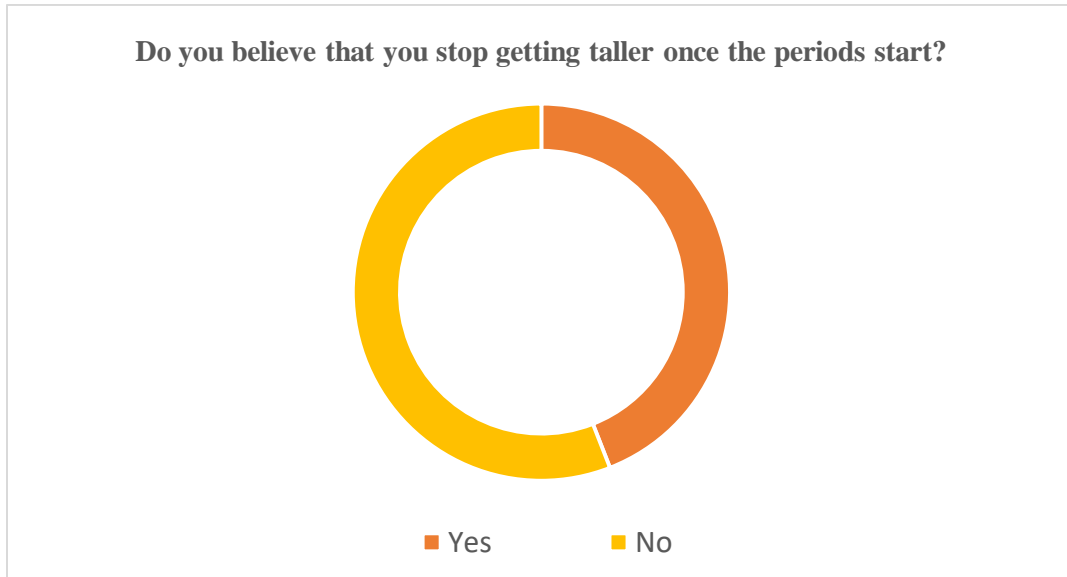
Almost all the girls admitted that they take leave during this time of the month because of pain, fear of stain, difficulty in disposing the used pad and other issues.



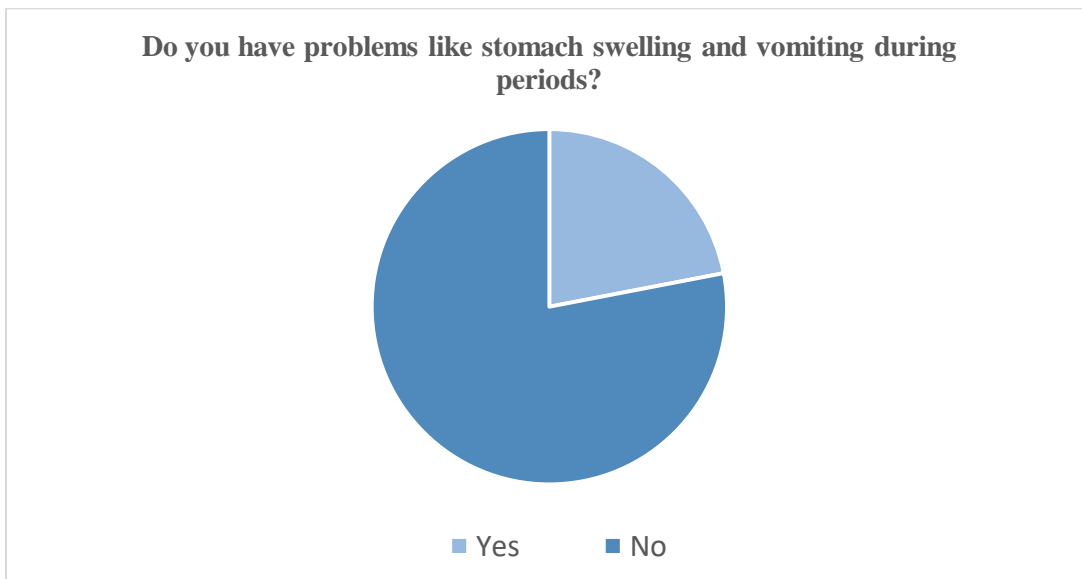
A large percent of girls face the problem of white discharge during period.

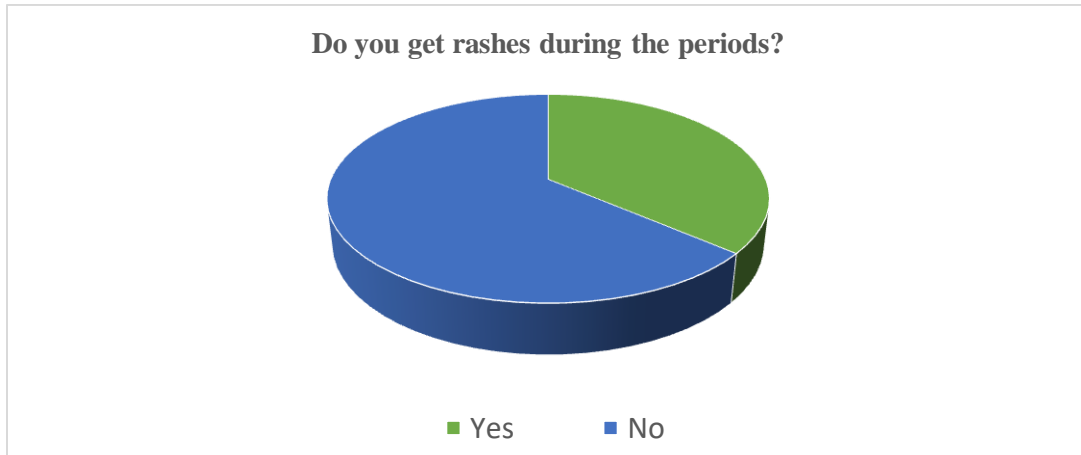


More than fifty percent of the girls believe that girls stop getting taller once the periods start.

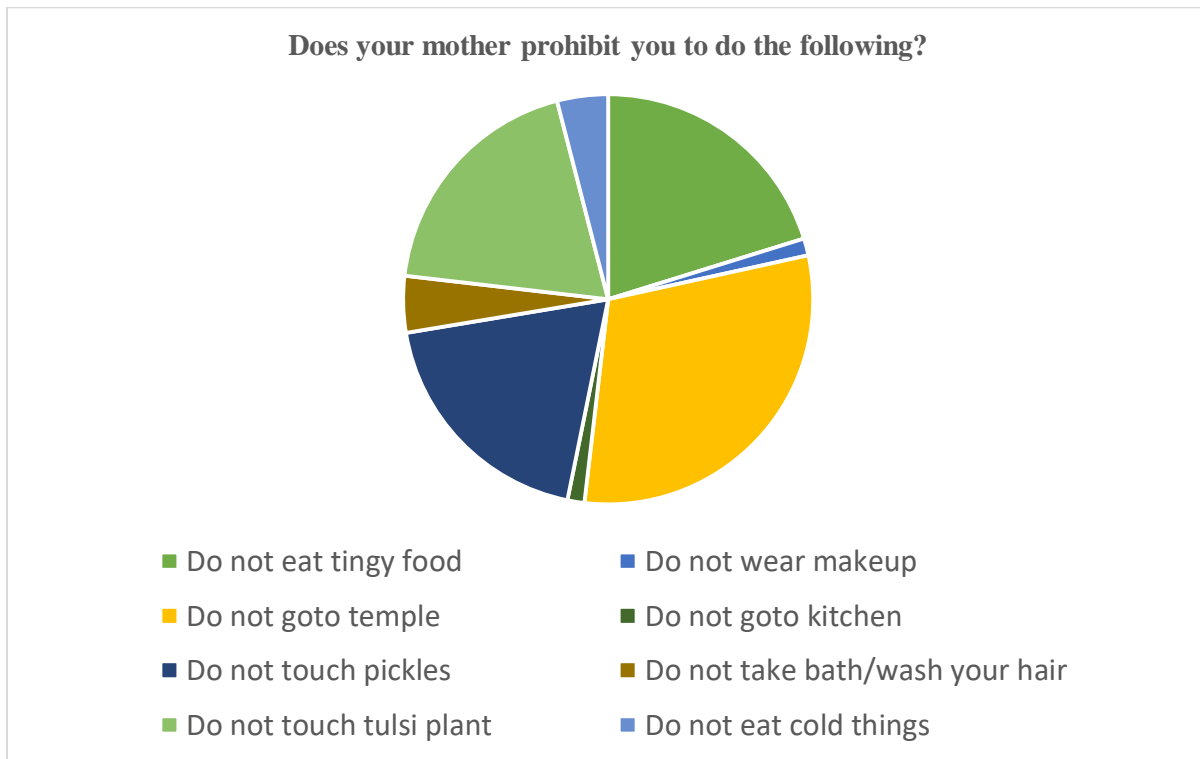


More than 75 percent of the girls face the problem of like swelling of stomach and vomiting and rashes during the periods.

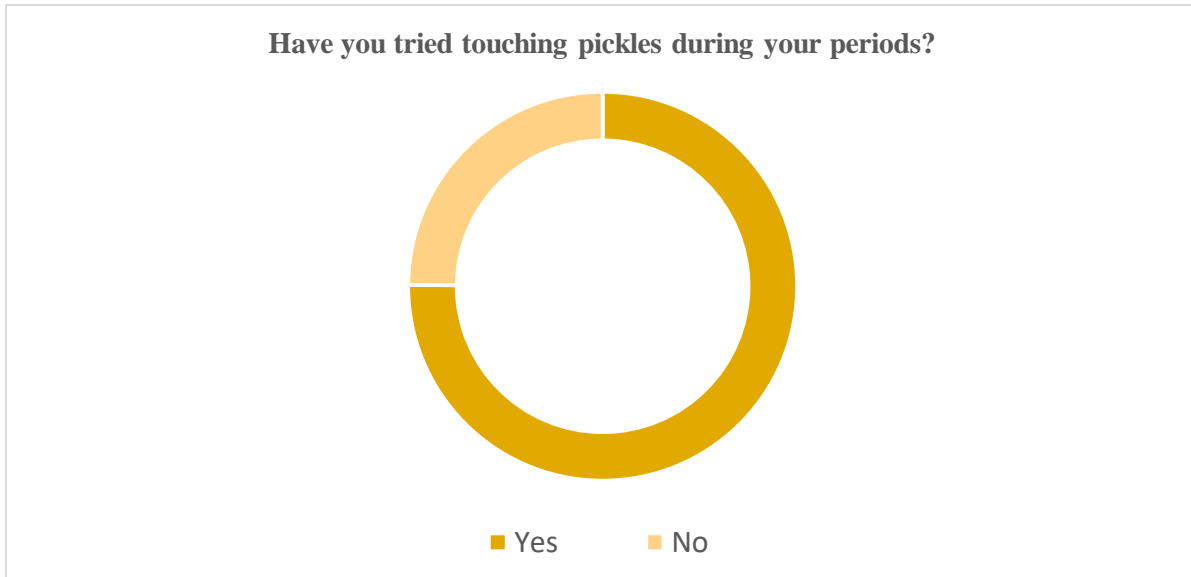




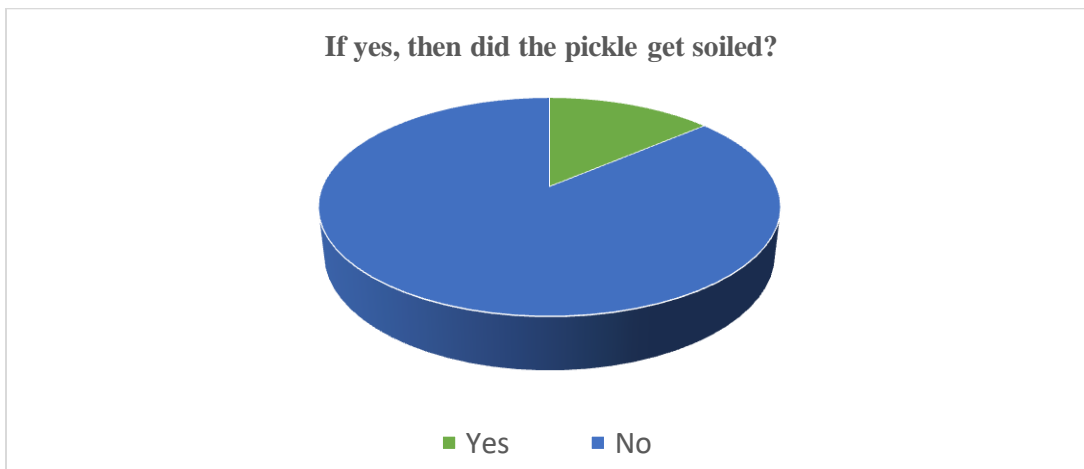
There are certain myths and misconception which are existing in the society. The respondents also experienced them as it is evident in the following figure.



Further girls were also asked if they ever tried to verify these myths. In the following figure it can be seen that a large number of respondents did try.



However, only around 20 percent of girls said that the pickle did get soiled. Majority of them realized that it does not soil the pickle.



Analysis

61% of the girls said that they were not aware earlier, that something like periods is going to happen to them. This means that the girls have not been given enough education about their own bodies and physical changes which they would experience as they grow. Culture of embarrassment is existing around the menstrual cycle, which needs to be addressed. There is a need to talk openly about the menstrual cycle with woman, so that the future generations are better informed and well prepared. The survey data further brings out the deficiencies in the education related to reproductive health imparted to the girl students. Primarily the information regarding the periods, it's reasons and its consequences, should have come from the teachers. However, only 15% of the girls got the information regarding their periods from their teachers. Also, very small percentage of them read about it from the books, magazines, papers or could know about it from the Internet. Most of them got this information either from their mother or from

their friends or sisters, where there is a distinct possibility of skew in the information being presented to them and subsequent incorrect knowledge about the issue.

A substantial percentage of girls, because of their ignorance, assumed that they have contracted a serious disease when their period first started. This again points out to serious deficiencies in the system of imparting knowledge to them about the periods. More than 50% of the girls feel bad during the periods. This is a social issue and needs to be handled with care.

40 percent of the respondents believe that the period blood is dirty. They are not aware of the scientific reasons of the period and that it is a natural process. 80 percent of the respondents are not aware as to why they have periods and what is the source of bleeding during menstrual cycle.

A large percent of respondents have stomach pain during periods. This is known as period pains which can be severe sometimes. Girls are not aware of the scientific reason behind this pain. All that is needed is to initiate a discussion on this topic. Further, only around 20 percent of the girls are able to take medicine for stomach ache during their periods. They are silent sufferers and find it difficult to talk about the pain. They have never been told as what to expect from the periods in the first place. So when something's appears wrong, they feel too shy to speak.

This pain has further negative impact on their education and other activities as it was found that a very large percentage of girls take leave because of pain, fear of stain, issue of disposal of pad, stomach swelling, vomiting and rashes, which is experienced by a large percentage of girls. A large percentage of girls have problem of white discharge during periods, which is common at the commencement and closing of menstruation. However because of lack of scientific information and explanation of these normal reproductive functions, girls take it as an illness.

The finding of the study shows that apart from myths and misconception prevailing in their mind, girls have no knowledge about the menstrual cycle itself. They lack understanding or the scientific explanation of menstruation. There are associated symptoms and physical discomfort with menstruation. The girls need to understand the same. There are many dos and don'ts which are associated with the menstrual cycle. This included not being permitting to go to temple, prohibition to enter the kitchen, not to touch pickles, not to touch Tulsi plants, not to take bath or wash hair, eat cold things etc. Girls were further asked if they tried touching pickles during the period to which a large percentage of girls gave an affirmative reply. Further they were asked whether the pickles got soiled after they touched it. Around 85 percent of girls said that it did not get soiled. Around 15 percent of the girls said that it did get soiled. Mothers are the primary contact person of these girls who are passing these myths and misconception to their children They expect their children to follow these. There is a need to break the cycle of myths and to educate women about their bodies and hygiene.

Recommendation

It is important to provide scientific knowledge about the menstrual hygiene to all the family members including male members as it is important for all. The finding of the study shows that there exist religious and cultural beliefs among the school girls. These beliefs if not addressed at this stage, would be carried to another generation. A comprehensive plan should be made to address these beliefs. Social norms and myths on menstrual hygiene is a social problem. It affects the education and health condition of girls. Because of the prevailing myths, girls are deprived of their basic fundamental rights.

There is a need to talk to these adolescents and their parents and guardians so that they do not face any challenges in achieving full growth and development. School-Girls can learn a lot about menstrual hygiene in school. The teachers and educators can provide them the scientific knowledge about the natural process which they can also share with their parents. This would also reduce the negative impact of a natural process.

There is lot of ignorance about the health problems related to menstrual hygiene. Workshop should be conducted to educate women and girls about health and hygiene issues during the menstrual period. They should be given information as how they can keep themselves healthy during their menstrual period.

Research has proved that there exist an unmet need of resources for menstrual health and hygiene. Women and girls, for lack of these resources, are bound to use unhygienic products during the menstrual cycle, which give birth to many health issues. Different organizations can be motivated to take up the task of encouraging people to help in resource generation for menstrual hygiene. Sanitary products should be available conveniently in all schools and public toilets where girls can easily avail these for their use.

There should be facility of washing, drying, storage and disposal at schools and at different public toilets. Materials to absorb or collect menstrual blood must be accessible and affordable. Water facility should be there at schools to manage menstruation hygienically. This would reduce the dropout rate of girls from the school. Further this would also reduce the negative health issues of girls.

Girls and women cannot be empowered unless there is involvement of men and boys' in menstrual hygiene. Men and boys should be educated about the menstrual hygiene, so that they understand that it is not a shameful thing to discuss.

More research is required in this area. Research work should be encouraged on this topic to discover better management methods of menstrual hygiene and increase the accessibility and affordability of sanitary napkins. A discussion on menstrual hygiene with a number of academicians and other organisations should be organised in each school with every new batch on regular basis.

Nukkad Natak can be performed with the help of trained social workers on menstrual hygiene. This would break the silence surrounding the issue in the community. Further the social workers can initiate talk at the household level where men, women and their adolescent members can participate equally. Movies/Social Media/Radio Talk can generate awareness across India. "PadMan", is a movie which broke the silence on this topic in social set up. The protagonist of the movie uses a sanitary pad to fight discrimination faced by women during their periods. These type of movies and documentary should be shown in the school and the communities.

Teachers need to be convinced that there is nothing unclean about menstruation. They have inhibitions and they themselves believe in the myth. According to a study [13], majority of the teachers believe that menstrual blood is impure. Training sessions should be conducted to make them comfortable talking to the students about their own menstruation experiences. Once their own understanding is clear, they can talk to their students freely.

Mothers in a family play a very important role in the upbringing of their children. When a girl first gets her first period, she goes to her mother. It is from them that the children learn about social taboos in the form of culture and traditions. So, it is very important that mothers of these adolescent girls are educated so that they can freely discuss this topic their children.

Seminars, conferences and workshops should be organised at the national and international level to raise awareness about the practice of menstrual hygiene. A comprehensive educational program should be initiated at the school level. The subject should be made part of the curriculum. Discussion on the subject in the schools should be encouraged. Teachers need to be trained to become a significant source of information for girls. As the girls tend to discuss menstrual problems with their peers, students must be motivated to become peer leaders and act as models, mentors, educators and counsellors.

Sanitary pad was taxed at 12 percent under Goods and Services Tax (GST) which commenced in July 2017. This decision was criticised and protests, petitions and court cases was initiated to question the government as to why sanitary pads should be taxed as a luxury rather than as an essential item. After a year, in July 2018, the government removed tax on sanitary pads. This happened because of campaigns and activist who believed that this would help in more girls attending school during their periods. This would help girls and women to stay in school, do their job and practise proper menstrual hygiene. However, we cannot achieve the desired behavioural and social change in isolation. All the stakeholders, government representatives, NGOs, parents, teachers, Health Activists, Gram Panchayat members etc. must join hands to give this revolution the necessary momentum.

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