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Connecting the Unconnected

Tackling menstrual misinformation and period poverty in rural India

Digital Empowerment Foundation's Digital Didi project reached over 6,000 women and girls in 350 villages across 10 states to create awareness about misconceptions surrounding menstruation through digital tools and community-led programmes.



A digital didi in Uttar Pradesh explaining how to use a reusable cloth pad to the women of her community Digital Empowerment Foundation

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Connecting the Unconnected is a monthly column by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) that explores how technology can drive inclusion and

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empire of new technology, can drive inclusion and governance in India. The column focuses on how the digital divide impacts communities differently and advocates for equitable, citizen-informed solutions that ensure technology empowers rather than excludes.

Over 71% of adolescent girls in India are unaware of menstruation until they get their first period; the bleeding comes as a shock – sudden, unexpected, and terrifying. This shocking statistic from a report published by UNICEF shows how a majority of girls in our country face their first period with no prior knowledge, leading to fear, shame, and school dropouts.

To put this in numbers, Dasra, a non-profit organisation, found in a [2014 study](#) that 2.3 crore girls drop out of school every year after they start menstruating. Beyond the fact that access to education is already affected by gender, menstruation becomes another barrier. Many girls stay out of school because they don't have access to sanitary pads, clean toilets, or a safe space to change. A 2018 Global Citizen Report echoed this, stating that 1 in 5 girls in India do not return to school after their first period.

This is where the Digital Empowerment Foundation's Digital Didi project came in, by helping women and girls understand and fight health-related misinformation through digital tools and community-led programmes. The project reached over 6,000 women and adolescent girls in 350 villages across 10 states through 350 women entrepreneurs and information agents. It created awareness about misconceptions and misinformation surrounding menstruation, and communicated authentic information, and facilitated access to sustainable menstrual

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products and better health infrastructure.

Shame and stigma affects the body in different ways, but for women the shame takes shapes and forms. It becomes physical, it becomes malleable, it becomes cloaked in whispers and generational oppression. Most Indian women have heard all of these words told to them especially during their early menstruation years. For some, the shame and the stigma invades just like the first bloodstain. For others, it begins with the invisibilisation of menstruation cycles, misinformation around body autonomy, gender roles passed down from generations like heirlooms, and with malinformation.

“The women in my village in Uttar Pradesh do not talk about menstruation. When I got my period, I was in school. When I saw the blood, I went to my teacher crying because I thought I was dying. She scolded me and told me to stuff tissue paper in my underwear and speak to my mother. I missed all my classes that week,” Roopal* said.

Inherited shame and generational misinformation

Behind the silence is a force that is deeply embedded in systems of misinformation, myths, and taboos. These myths are not always born out of malicious intent, but end up with tangible effects on the physical and mental wellness of the menstruating body. The everyday challenges that women face become even more severe when it comes to understanding menstruation at the grassroots. Due to this, many women are forced to use ash, newspaper, tree leaves, or old cloth, because their families simply cannot afford sanitary products.

Other forms of misinformation around menstruation

are embedded and propagated by patriarchal systems – where misinformation is passed on not out of malicious intent but due to fear of social backlash. Grandmothers and mothers don't just shame but shape generational trauma and misinformation attached to biological processes.



Women in a village in Haryana going through a module on menstrual health and hygiene, understanding the parts of a sanitary pad Digital Empowerment Foundation

“In my community, the common midwife had told my mother that she should be careful with new products like sanitary pads that they had started advertising in the village. She told her that they will make me infertile or give me cancer and then no one would wish to marry me. So for a very long time when I was on my period, I would just use cotton balls or a handkerchief. I now realise how much at risk I was and how much misinformation I was fed since I started my period,” said Banu*.

When the first phase of the Digital Didi project began in mid-2022, 72% of the respondents admitted they were unaware of safe menstrual

...and they were unaware of safe menstrual hygiene practices and often felt anxious before their periods. By the end of the project in late 2023, this had changed significantly – 97% of the participants reported being aware of safe menstrual practices, feeling less shame around menstruation, and showing a willingness to discuss and address these issues with others in their community.

This awareness entails knowing that there are ways in which women can access the correct information around menstruation, body autonomy, and different body cycles. It means tackling myths and superstitions around blood impurity, food insecurity, and mobility. It means understanding the difference between commercial/plastic pads and reusable products. It means understanding that disposing menstrual waste in rivers, toilets or by burning or burying them is harming the environment.



Women in Madhya Pradesh drawing a woman's body and its anatomy on chart papers during a session on body rights and autonomy Digital Empowerment Foundation

“When I was young, I would use leaves from a tree in our community and put them together to make a

our community, and put them together to make a pad. I would then change the leaves at least 10 times a day. When I was 18, I switched to a napkin and it would give me rashes, but it was better than using leaves. Now, I have been using a cloth pad made with soft cotton and it is so comfortable. I don't have to change it again and again, I can wash it and hang it in the back, it makes me feel better during my periods," said Sapita*.

The anatomy of silence

So what kind of misinformation did we encounter at the grassroots?

First, we must recognise that more than 60% of rural adolescent girls still have limited or no access to the internet. This digital gap keeps them from learning about safe practices, helplines, tele-health services, or government schemes that could help them. As a result, myths, rumours, and false information abound about menstruation. This becomes one of the most serious causes of period poverty in rural India.

We came across many common myths. Some believed that girls should not bathe during their periods, or that menstrual blood is 'impure'. Others thought that touching food would spoil it, or that entering religious places while bleeding would anger the gods. At the start, 62% of those we spoke to said they avoided religious events during their periods. People in their homes – both men and women – would ask them to stay inside the home and out of the kitchen. These weren't personal choices, but rules society expected them to follow.

While many of these behaviours still exist even after our efforts, the number of women who began to question them is now higher than ever.

Projects like Digital Didi focus on dismantling

... projects like digital literacy focus on eliminating misinformation in a way where we start a conversation through discussions, trainings, baithaks, and digital access to the correct information, access to rights and right to access. Health-related misinformation hinders these rights.

For example, girls are often told to reuse unclean cloth pads or hide their rags in dark corners to avoid being seen, to hide it from the male gaze and from drying it in sunlight. This increases the risk of reproductive tract infections and urinary tract infections, which are again silenced, hushed and dealt with at home.

Through the initiative, we were able to see 94% of the women say that they were able to dry their pads in the sun once they started talking to the elder members of the community about the repercussions of hiding them in dark corners. This simple act reflects a massive attitudinal transformation.

One of the most powerful parts of this intervention is how digital literacy is combined with health education. Using a chatbot that women can access through digital devices at home or at a nearby digital service centre, they are introduced to important topics like menstrual hygiene, financial literacy, digital safety, and entrepreneurship. This way, they can learn at their own pace, in their own space, without needing to travel to a camp for information.

Misinformation around menstruation is not just about lack of knowledge or fixed gender roles – it continues cycles of deep-rooted problems like poor sanitation, poverty, bad health, and gender inequality. It stops girls from going to school, keeps women out of work. and holds back communities by

...trapping them in a cycle of poor health, environmental damage, and violence based on gender.

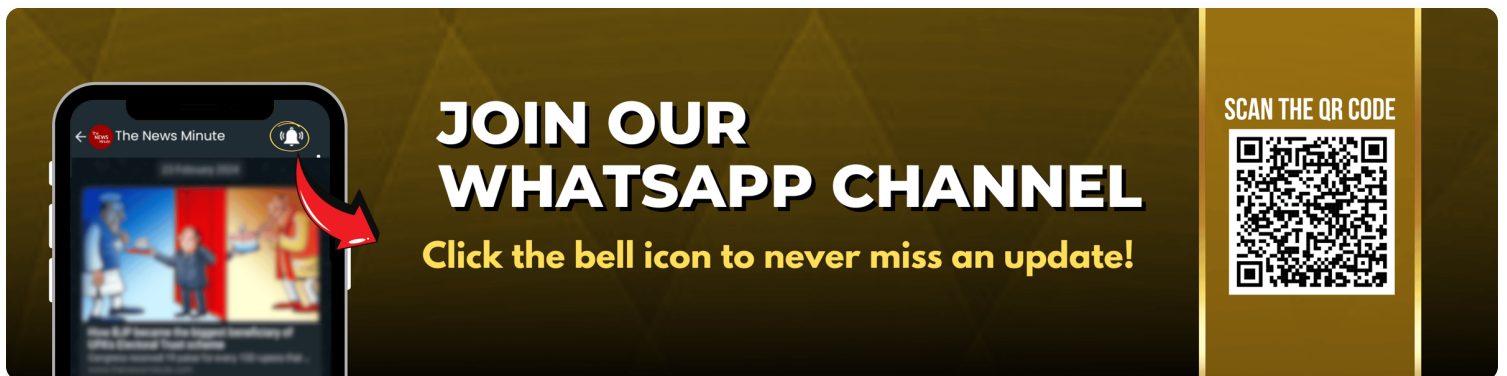
**Names changed to protect privacy*

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Views expressed are the author's own.

Menstrual hygiene

Menstrual Health



The banner features a dark background with a gold vertical stripe on the right. On the left, a smartphone displays a news article from 'The News Minute' with a red arrow pointing to the notification bell icon. The central text reads 'JOIN OUR WHATSAPP CHANNEL' in large white letters, followed by 'Click the bell icon to never miss an update!' in yellow. On the right, a QR code is labeled 'SCAN THE QR CODE'.

News

How two Indian PhD scholars won a USD 200,000 lawsuit after racial discrimination

When an Indian doctoral student reheated palak paneer in the shared kitchen of a US university, it triggered a dispute that cost him his job, derailed his PhD and culminated in a legal battle.



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