

A photograph of several young girls in a classroom setting. They are wearing school uniforms and hoods. One girl in the foreground is smiling, while others are looking down or to the side. A pink backpack is visible on the left.

CASE STUDY · 2023

When 1,320 Adolescents Learned to Question the Rules They Were Born Into

The Adolescent Empowerment Program in the tribal SC/ST schools of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur & Bankura — implemented by Anahat for Change Foundation, supported by Mukesh Himatsingka Foundation.

West Bengal, India

April - December 2023

4 Government Schools

1,320

ADOLESCENTS
REACHED

800

GIRLS

520

BOYS

11

SESSION MODULES

Adolescent Empowerment Program · Implemented by Anahat for Change Foundation · Supported by Mukesh Himatsingka Foundation

THE CHALLENGE

Adolescence arrives here without a manual

In the tribal-dominated districts of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur and Bankura, growing up is something that happens to children — unexplained, unspoken, and wrapped in generations of silence.

Baseline assessments revealed just how deep the gap ran: **95% of students had never heard of "puberty", 99% did not know what menstruation actually is, and 98% of girls followed at least one restrictive myth** during their periods.

The stereotypes ran just as deep. Asked to draw a farmer, **99% of students drew a man** — even though most of their own mothers work the fields, their labour uncounted and unpaid. Even teachers carried gender biases into the classroom.



Don't wash your hair

Don't touch tulsi

Don't do puja

Don't talk to boys

Don't eat pickles

Don't go outside the house

Some of the menstrual myths girls reported following — later written on balloons and burst, one by one.

THE RESPONSE

Learning by doing, not lecturing

Instead of chalk-and-talk, the programme used games, drawing exercises, wall debates, role play and balloon-bursting to let students discover — and question — their own assumptions. Eleven activity-based modules were delivered:

Ice-breaking & gender awareness

Life & work — who does what, and why?

Societal views on women's & men's roles

Growing up & puberty

Taking care of body & mind

Menstrual health management

Masculinity & expressing emotions

Breaking menstrual myths & taboos

Effective communication & consent

General Q&A with trainers

Distribution of reusable menstrual kits

■ All students ■ Girls only ■ Boys only



Energisers before every session



Puberty explained, questions welcomed



Group debates on gender roles

THE IMPACT

What changed in six months

Before the sessions

95% had never heard the word "puberty"

99% didn't know the meaning of menstruation

98% had no idea how to track menstrual dates

99% drew a man when asked to draw a farmer

98% of girls followed at least one menstrual myth

After the sessions

63% could properly explain puberty

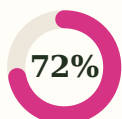
82% could define menstruation correctly

48% could calculate their menstrual dates

58% could identify body changes of puberty

46% could name emotional changes too

The reusable cloth pads won them over



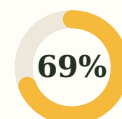
liked the cloth pads and preferred them at home or hostel



found absorption as good as disposables — some lasted overnight, stain-free



had no itching, dryness or infection after switching



said they will continue using the pads

DIGNITY, DELIVERED

The Anahat Unnati Menstrual Kit

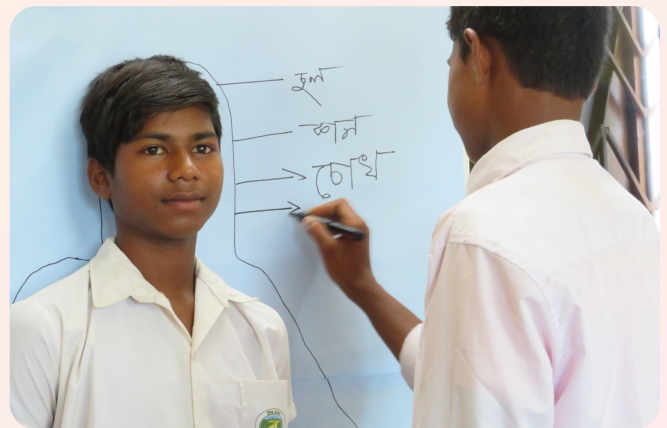
Every girl went home with more than knowledge. Each kit contains:

- ✿ 4 large reusable cloth pads — 100% cotton, leak-proof lining
- ✿ One underwear
- ✿ A storage pouch and a leak-proof pouch

Washable and reusable for up to **3 years**, the pads offer rural girls a safe, affordable and stigma-free alternative to disposables — and to the old cloth many were using in silence.



Kit distribution day — 800 girls, 800 kits



The boys' sessions: masculinity, emotions & consent

VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM

In their own words

“

For the first time, somebody spoke about puberty and menstruation. I didn't know about these topics. My mother never told me.

— A GIRL PARTICIPANT

“

I had never supported my elder sister in household work. After the session, I understood gender roles — and have promised myself to help her from now on.

— A BOY PARTICIPANT

TURNING POINTS

Three students, three stories

Soumen, 13

The only child in his family kept in school — his two sisters dropped out for housework. Through the sessions he recognised the bias in his own home. He now dreams of becoming a doctor, and of funding his sisters' dreams the day he starts earning.

Anita, 14

She lost her father during Covid; her mother now farms by day and runs a grocery shop by evening. Asked to draw a farmer, Anita was among the very few who drew a woman — her mother. Her lived experience had already broken the stereotype.

Arati, 12

Recurring infections from plastic disposable napkins had sent her to doctors with no relief. After switching to the reusable cloth pads, the infections stopped. Now she wants her sister to make the switch too.

**All names changed to protect the students' identities.*

LOOKING AHEAD

Six months. Four schools. A generation asking better questions.

In just six months, the programme made commendable progress in challenging harmful norms, opening inter-gender and inter-generational dialogue, and building the confidence of adolescents in some of West Bengal's most underserved communities.

The road ahead lies in sustaining these gains — mentorship networks, deeper community engagement, and integration of empowerment principles into school curricula — and in extending the programme's reach to many more schools and communities across the region, so that no adolescent has to grow up in silence.



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