

## **When Periods Push Girls Out of School**

### **Abstract**

*India has achieved near-universal enrollment of girls at the primary level, yet a sharp decline in participation emerges as girls enter adolescence. This drop is closely linked to the onset of menstruation, which continues to function as an invisible but persistent barrier to schooling. Inadequate sanitation facilities, limited access to menstrual products, lack of timely puberty education, and entrenched social stigma combine to disrupt regular attendance and undermine learning continuity. These challenges are intensified for girls from economically marginalized and rural communities, where water scarcity and household constraints further restrict menstrual hygiene practices. The cumulative effect of repeated monthly absences often leads to declining academic performance, disengagement, and eventual school dropout. Addressing menstrual hygiene as a peripheral health concern has proven insufficient. Sustainable retention of adolescent girls in school requires a structural approach that integrates functional school infrastructure, puberty education, and community engagement. Ensuring dignified menstrual management is central to advancing gender equity in education and carries significant long-term social and economic benefits.*

### **The Gap Between Enrollment and Retention**

As girls reach adolescence, many quietly begin to disappear from school. For millions, the start of menstruation becomes the turning point. What should be a normal biological process instead turns into a monthly barrier to education. Girls begin missing classes, fall behind, and eventually drop out altogether. This is not because they lack ambition or ability, but because the education system is still not built to support them through puberty.

Official data shows that while almost all children are enrolled in elementary school, far fewer remain by the time they reach secondary education. This sharp drop happens around the same age most girls begin menstruating, typically around 12 to 13 years. For many adolescent girls, periods bring practical problems that schools fail to address. There may be no private toilets, no water to wash up, no place to safely dispose of used menstrual products, and no teacher willing to talk about what is happening to their bodies. Faced with embarrassment, fear of staining their clothes, or being teased by classmates, girls often choose to stay home during their periods. Missing a few

days every month may seem minor, but over a year it can mean losing nearly one-fifth of classroom time. Over several years, this learning gap becomes impossible to bridge.

### **Menstrual Poverty Is More Than a Lack of Pads**

Menstrual poverty is often reduced to a shortage of sanitary pads, but the problem runs much deeper. It includes lack of clean toilets, water, privacy, information, and social support. Even today, many girls reach their first period without knowing what menstruation is. When it happens at school, panic and shame often follow. Schools are meant to be safe spaces for learning, but for menstruating girls, they can become sites of anxiety. Teachers are often uncomfortable discussing periods, and puberty education is either absent or limited to brief, girls-only sessions that reinforce silence rather than understanding.

The impact of poor menstrual hygiene disproportionately impacts girls from poorer households, rural areas, and marginalized communities, who face greater barriers. When families struggle to afford food, spending on menstrual products is easily deprioritized. In drought-affected regions, water scarcity makes hygiene even harder to maintain. Caste and economic status further shape outcomes. Girls from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities are significantly less likely to complete secondary education. For them, menstrual challenges add to existing pressures to leave school early and take on domestic responsibilities.

### **From Absence to Dropout**

Menstrual related absenteeism rarely shows up clearly in official records. A girl may still be counted as enrolled even if she regularly misses classes. But over time, repeated absences affect confidence, performance, and engagement. Girls report difficulty concentrating during periods, missing tests, and falling behind in subjects like mathematics and science that build year on year. Eventually, many disengage completely. What begins as a few days of absence each month often ends in permanent withdrawal from education.

### **Policies That Help, and Where They Fall Short**

The Indian government has recognized this crisis through several initiatives, most notably the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS), launched in 2011 to distribute subsidized sanitary pads. Schemes that distribute subsidized sanitary pads have increased awareness, but results still remain

mixed. Supply is often irregular, product quality is uneven, and distribution alone does not address stigma or school conditions.

Some states have begun to rethink their approach. Initiatives that combine menstrual education, better school facilities, and sustainable products show more promise. For example, Karnataka's recent move to provide reusable menstrual cups in government schools aims to reduce long-term costs, waste, and dependence on continuous supply chains. Transitioning to reusable products is expected to save the state between ₹10 and ₹17 crore annually while drastically reducing the 113,000 tonnes of menstrual waste India generates each year. Menstrual health cannot be treated as a one-time product delivery, as it requires sustained support and grassroots-level changes.

### **Building Systems That Keep Girls in School**

To effectively address this crisis, interventions must go beyond the simple distribution of products and focus on a holistic transformation of the school environment itself. Model schools that combine product access with focused puberty education and safe infrastructure have successfully halved the rates of menstrual-related absenteeism. Empowering Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) to act as community educators rather than just pad distributors is essential for breaking the stigma at the village level.

Boys and men must be part of the conversation. Menstruation is still treated as a “girls’ issue,” and excluding boys only deepens stigma. When men control household finances without understanding menstrual needs, girls go without basic supplies. When boys are educated about menstruation, bullying and harassment in schools decrease, creating a safer climate for girls. This helps reduce the stigma, improve school support, and help normalize menstruation.

Peer Support Networks must be fostered by establishing student platforms like Meena Manch for girls to share experiences and normalize menstruation within the school setting. Train mothers to provide accurate biological information that helps dismantle the culture of silence and ensures girls are prepared before their first period. Teachers must be trained to speak openly and supportively.

Supporting Self Help Groups (SHGs) to manufacture low-cost sanitary napkins using locally available materials such as bamboo pulp or banana fiber can improve availability, especially in remote regions. Schools need to track menstrual-related absences, and the system needs to move beyond counting distributed pads to measuring actual school retention and health outcomes.

Keeping girls in school is an economic imperative. Supporting girls through menstruation is not just about health or dignity. It is about education, workforce participation, and economic growth. Girls who complete secondary education are more likely to enter skilled employment, marry later, and have healthier families. Estimates suggest that keeping girls in school could add billions to India's economy over time. The cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of toilets, education programs, or sustainable menstrual products.

