



## FEATURED INSIGHTS

DELIVERING CONSUMER CLARITY

# BREAKING THE MENSTRUATION TABOO

## HOW WOMEN CAN BE EMPOWERED TO ENSURE A HEALTHY SANITARY LIFESTYLE

The changes that accompany the onset of puberty—both psychological and physical—are significant for any young girl making the transition into womanhood. However, if these changes are accompanied by social stigma, the effects can be significantly detrimental on their young impressionable minds—as well as their overall health.

It is therefore unfortunate that a large number of adolescent girls and women, particularly in rural India, are still weighed down by unfounded taboos that surround menarche and the subsequent management of the menstrual cycle. The silver lining is that awareness is on the rise, and society is becoming increasingly conscious of the need to empower women by emancipating them from unscientific beliefs about menstruation.

## THE SITUATION TODAY

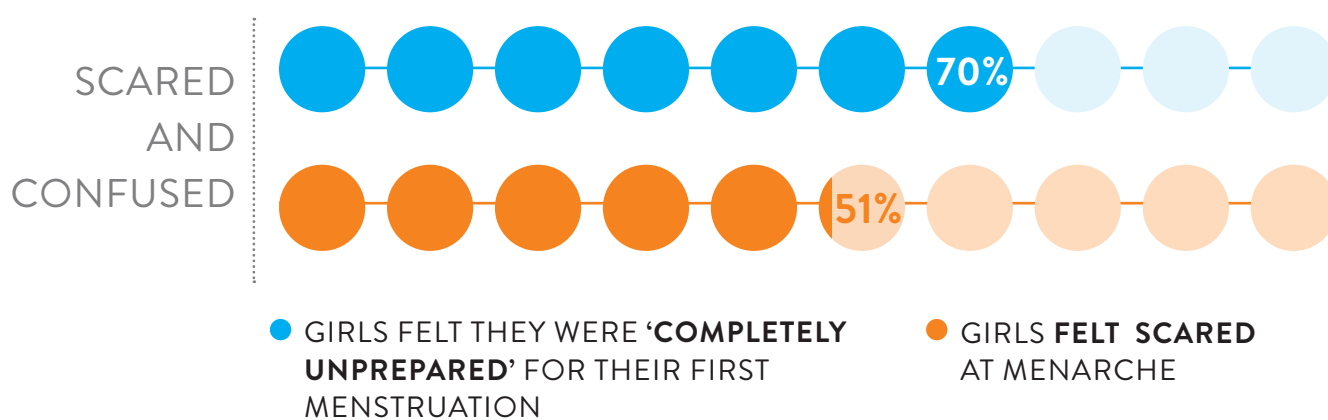
To be able to dispel myths, society must first be able to identify them as such. As a result, knowledge about menstruation and hygienic habits during this time are essential for adolescent girls. This knowledge will not only give young girls the confidence to talk freely about the subject without getting embarrassed, but also help them to ably manage it.

In a study carried out by Nielsen on behalf of UNICEF in rural areas of Bihar and Jharkhand, a framework was created on the understanding that exposure to communication on the subject could lead to increased awareness. This in turn would lead to change in practices and eventually benefit the lives of entire rural societies. The ensuing sections present key findings from rural Jharkhand.

## HOW WELL IS SHE PREPARED?

With the stigma attached to discussing menarche, it is hardly surprising that an astounding 70% of girls felt completely unprepared for their first menstrual experience. But it is not just young girls who lack knowledge. When shown a body map of the female reproductive system and asked to identify the source of menstrual bleeding, only around a quarter of the girls and their mothers could correctly identify the source as the uterus. This knowledge was slightly better among teachers and the front line workers (FLWs), but clearly, a lot remains to be desired.

### KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MENARCHE



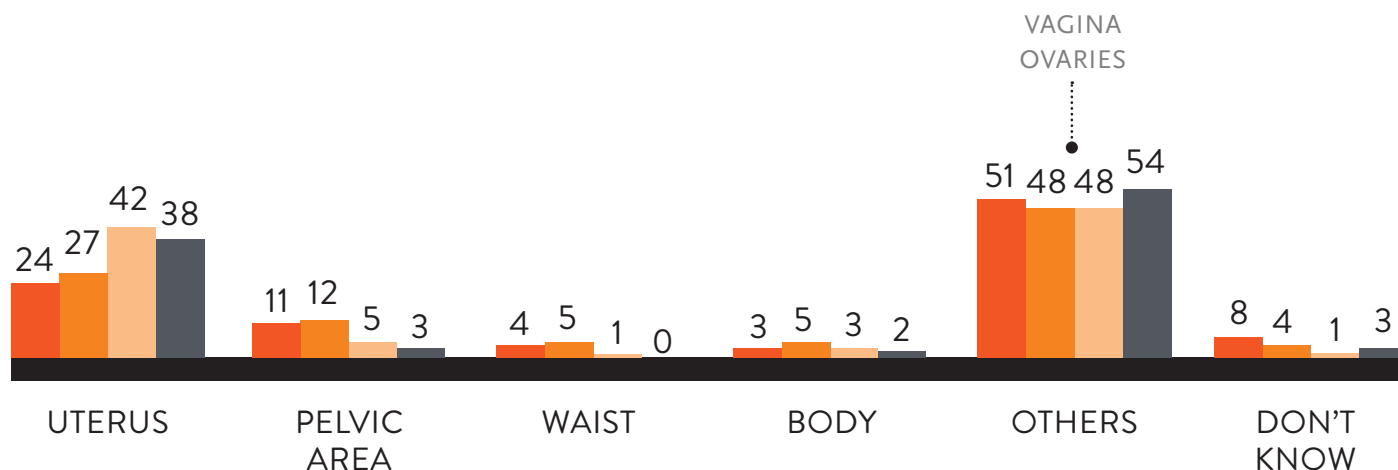
Base: post menarche girls: 1200

Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

### NEGLIGIBLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

#### IDENTIFYING SOURCE OF MENSTRUAL BLOOD

● POST MENARCHE ● MOTHER ● FLWs ● TEACHERS



Base: Post Menarche: 1200, Mothers: 1200, FLWs: 300, Teachers: 298

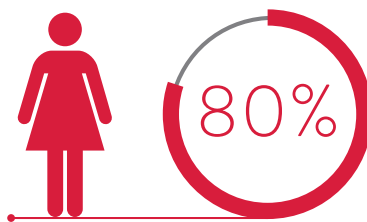
Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## HOW AWARE IS SHE ABOUT MENSTRUAL HYGIENE?

A vast majority of girls are perilously unaware of the health implications of poor hygiene in the management of their menstruation. And while teachers and FLWs have relatively high awareness of hygiene issues, this knowledge doesn't seem to percolate to young girls who can also benefit from the same.

### MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

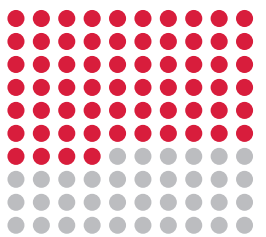
POST MENARCHE GIRLS WERE UNAWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF WASHING MENSTRUAL CLOTH WITH SOAP AND DRYING IT OUT IN THE SUN TO KILL GERMS.



Reasons for washing menstrual cloth with soap and water  
POST MENARCHE GIRLS

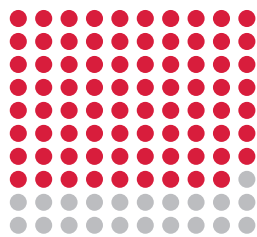


Reasons for drying menstrual cloth in the sun  
POST MENARCHE GIRLS



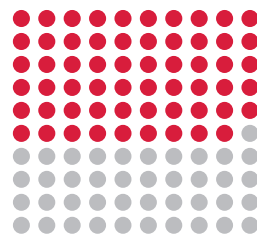
FRONTLINE WORKERS

&



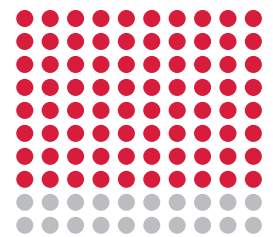
TEACHERS

REPORTED WASHING USED MENSTRUAL CLOTH WITH SOAP AND WATER TO KILL GERMS



FRONTLINE WORKERS

&



TEACHERS

SAID DRYING MENSTRUAL CLOTH IN THE SUN KILLED GERMS

Base: Post Menarche: 1200, Teachers: 300, FLWs: 300

Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013



80% OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS ARE UNAWARE OF THE HEALTH IMPLICATIONS THAT COULD OCCUR DUE TO POOR MENSTRUAL HYGIENE.

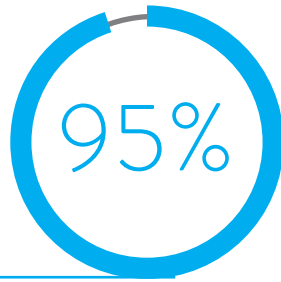
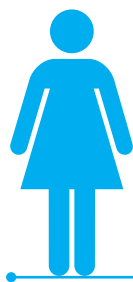
## ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENSTRUATION

Hearteningly, studies reveal that mothers are strongly in favour of empowering girls with knowledge about menstruation before they get their first menses. However, this attitude often does not translate to action, as mothers do little to equip their young daughters with knowledge, possibly because they shy away from discussing the ‘embarrassing’ issue.

Alarminglly, respondents from all backgrounds expressed negative attitude towards burning as a method of disposal for absorbents. Not only young girls and their mothers, but teachers and FLWs too associate burning with fertility-related misconceptions. For example, many believe the practice could cause ‘drying up of the womb’, resulting in conception troubles in the future.

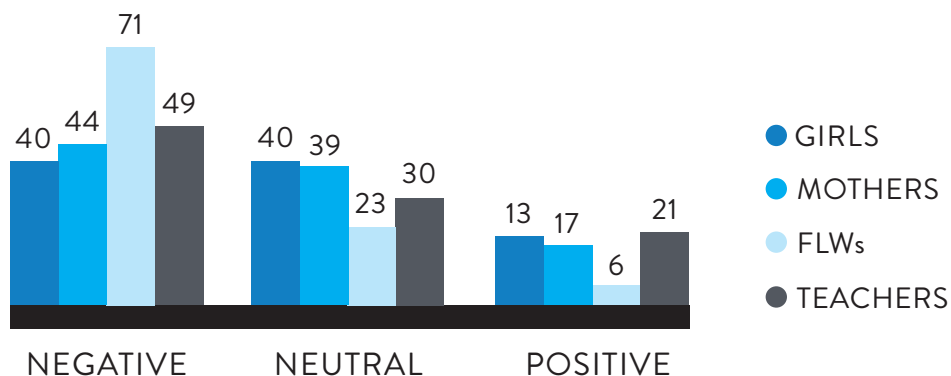
## POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS PREPARATION

THE BASELINE RESULTS REVEALED POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING GIRLS FOR MENARCHE.



MOTHERS WERE POSITIVELY INCLINED TOWARDS ADOLESCENT GIRLS KNOWING ABOUT MENSTRUATION BEFORE ITS ONSET.

## NEGATIVE ATTITUDES ON BURNING AS ULTIMATE DISPOSAL



Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

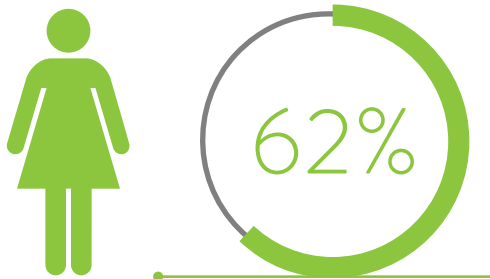


95% MOTHERS ARE IN FAVOUR OF EDUCATING THEIR DAUGHTERS ABOUT MENSTRUATION BEFORE THEY ATTAIN MENARCHE, YET THEY DO NOT INITIATE THIS DISCUSSION WITH THEM.

## SELF-CONFIDENCE AND MENSTRUATION

Several socio-religious restrictions still hold sway, like a restriction on menstruating women attending religious functions or touching items of worship. Adolescent girls are largely not confident about challenging such norms in the face of opposition from their families. Such regressive social norms also discourage girls from following best practices for absorbent disposal like burning menstrual absorbent cloth for ultimate disposal.

### LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE TO CHALLENGE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS



GIRLS EXPRESSED LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE TO CHALLENGE RESTRICTIONS ON ATTENDING SOCIO-RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS



GIRLS EXPRESSED LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE WHEN IT CAME TO BURNING MENSTRUAL ABSORBENT CLOTH

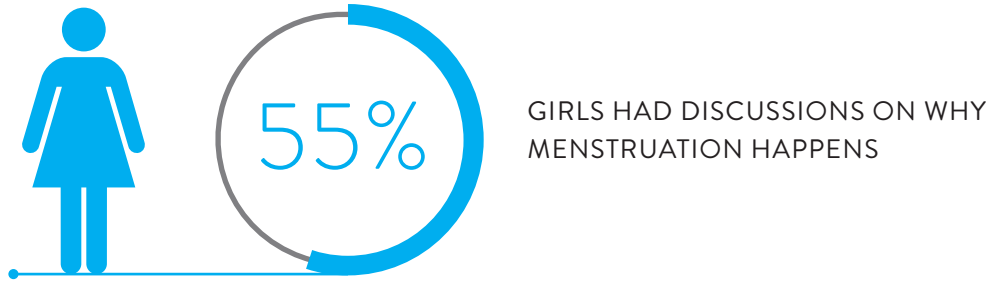
Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## THE 'M' WORD

As discussion around menstruation is largely taboo, young girls frequently turn to friends as the safest option for information. Not surprisingly, our results revealed that most girls included in the study had discussions with someone, mostly friends. These discussions were primarily about how to manage menstruation: what to do, what to use, how to reuse cloth and other similar topics. Encouragingly, a majority of the girls also discussed why menstruation happens, proving that the discussion can go beyond just the functional. Interestingly, girls expressed that they were least comfortable discussing about menstruation with their teachers (female).

## DISCUSSIONS ON HOW TO MANAGE MENSTRUATION

IN JHARKHAND, GIRLS ARE OPEN TO DISCUSS ISSUES RELATED TO MENSTRUATION.



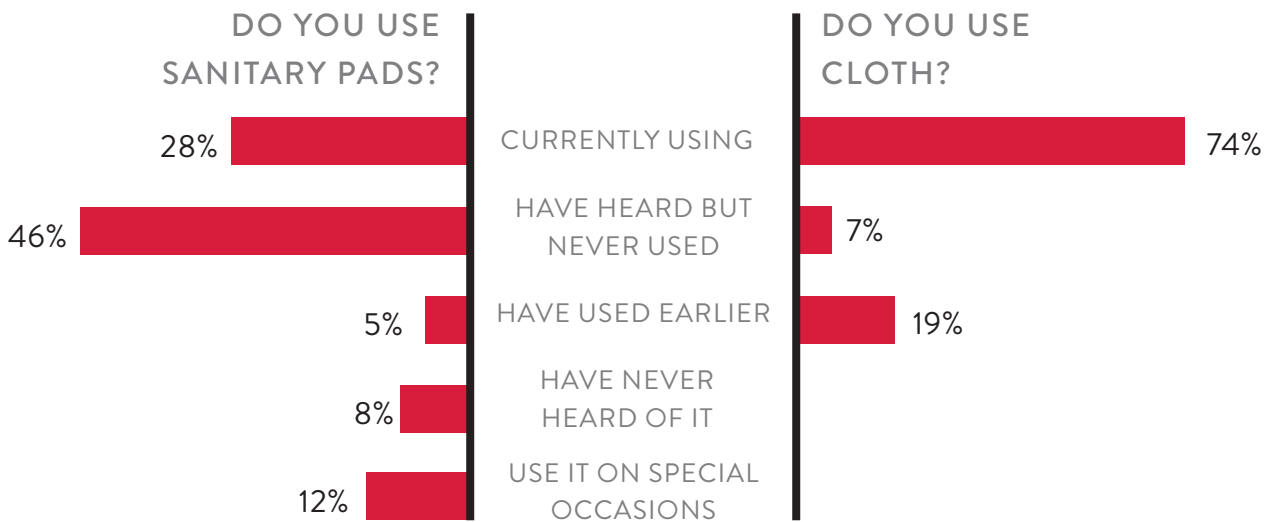
### DISCUSSIONS PRIMARILY ON...



Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## MENSTRUATION PRACTICES

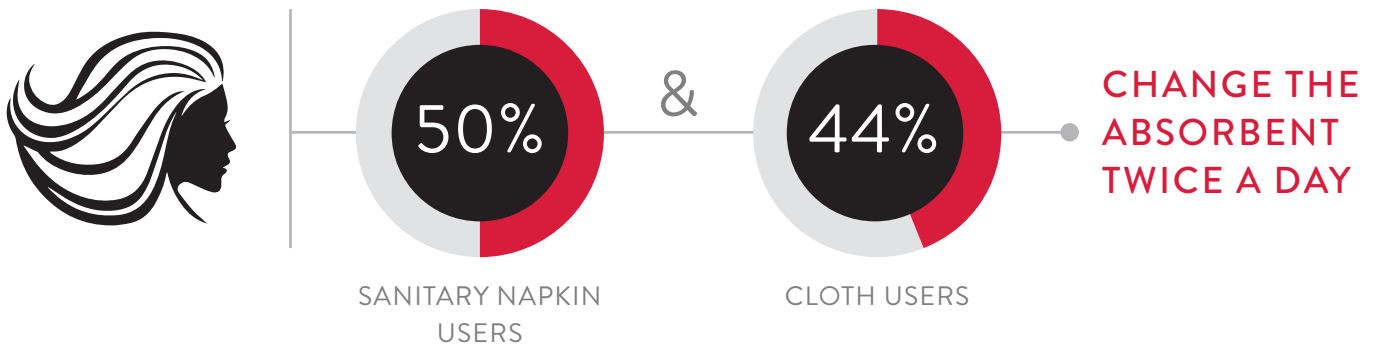
Almost every girl we spoke to as part of the survey, used cloth as a menstrual absorbent for the obvious reasons of its ready availability at home, re-usability and cost-effectiveness. 28% report current use of sanitary napkins, and close to half had heard of sanitary napkins but had not used one themselves.



Base: Post Menarche Sanitary Napkin Users: 891

Base: Post Menarche Cloth Users: 1017

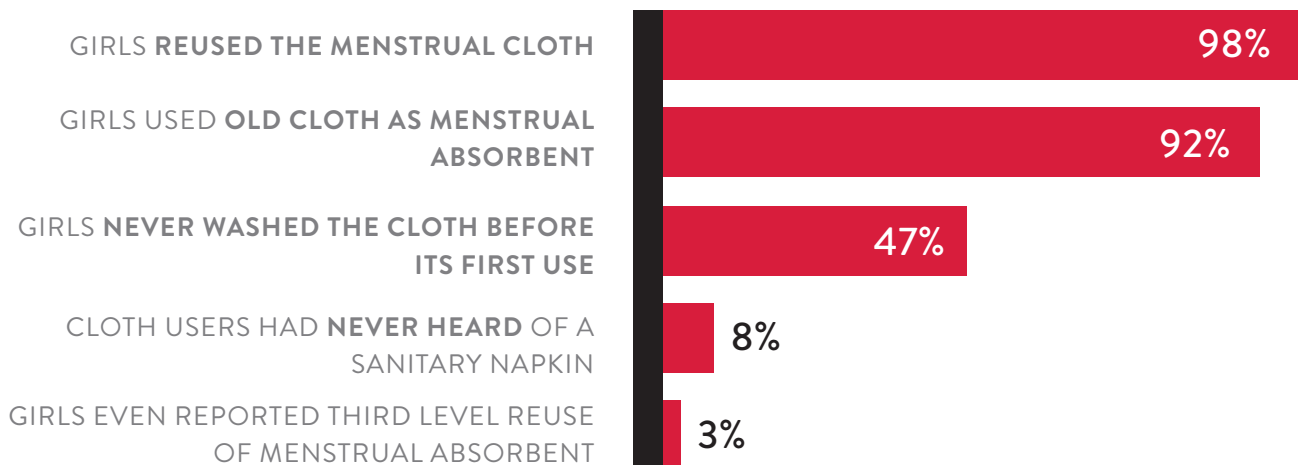
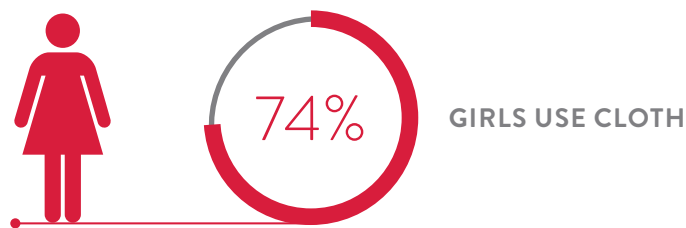
## FREQUENCY OF CHANGING ABSORBENTS



Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## CLOTH AS THE PREFERRED CHOICE

CLOTH IS THE PREFERRED CHOICE AS IT CAN BE REUSED AND IS EASILY AVAILABLE

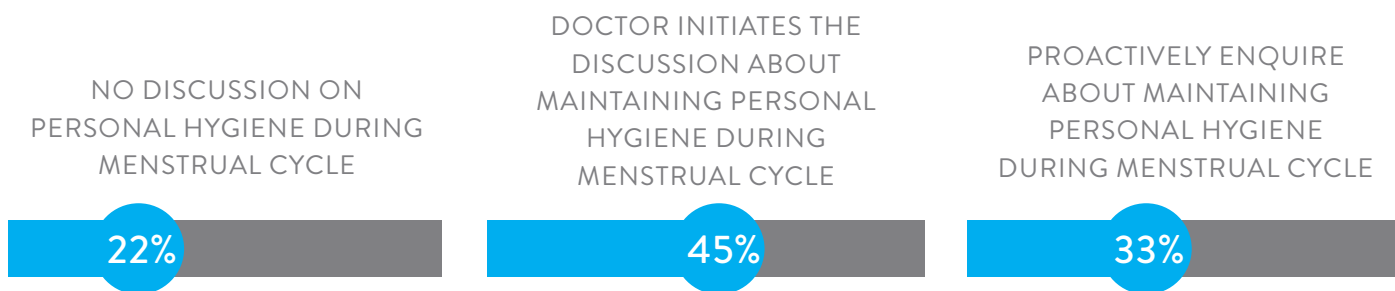


Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## THE GYNECOLOGIST'S VIEW

A separate study Nielsen conducted among gynaecologists in understanding their views on menstrual protection found that only a third of the patients proactively enquired about improving their personal hygiene during menstruation. The discussion on safe menstrual practices was led by the doctors in majority of the cases.

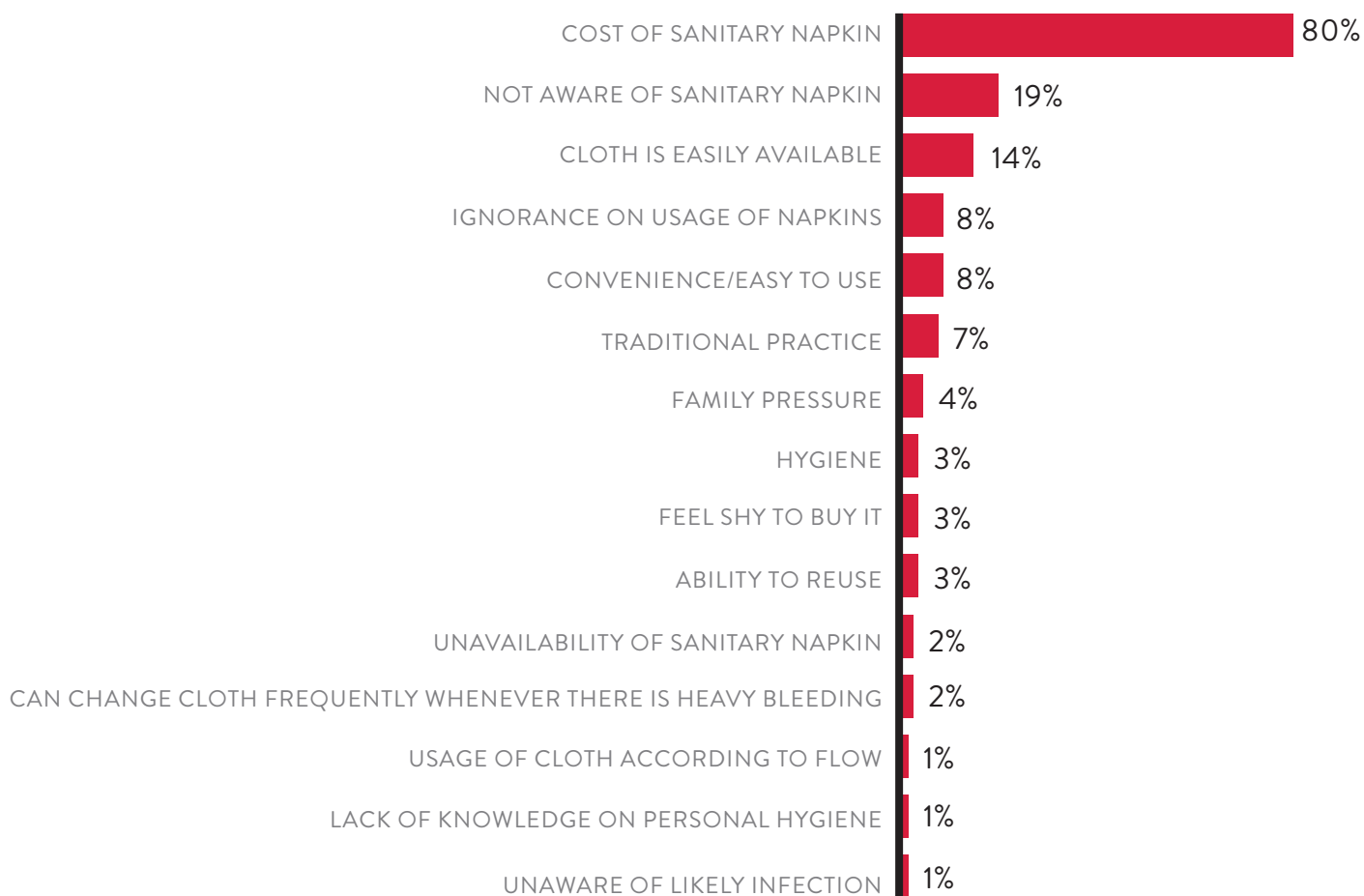
## DISCUSSION ON PERSONAL HYGIENE DURING MENSTRUAL CYCLE



Base: All Respondents (505)  
Source: Nielsen

While doctors are helping to get the message for healthy habits out, most women report not using sanitary napkins due to the high cost. This was followed by lack of awareness.

## REASONS BEHIND USE OF CLOTH/ HOMEMADE NAPKINS



Base: All Respondents (505)  
Source: Nielsen



## EFFECTS THAT LAST WELL BEYOND A FEW DAYS OF THE MONTH

Alarming, the stigmas and taboos surrounding menstruation regularly and adversely affect most women, especially young girls. About nine in every 10 girls missed a day or two of school every month during menstruation, mainly due to physical discomfort as well as the fear of staining clothes. Almost six in every 10 girls reported high restrictions related to religious activities and a majority of them felt embarrassed because of these.

### IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE



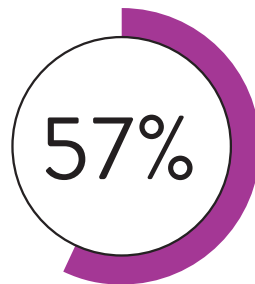
### REASONS FOR MISSING SCHOOL DURING MENSTRUATION



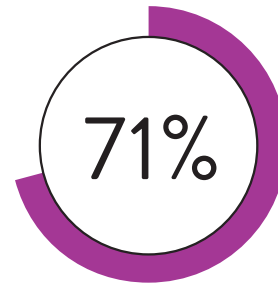
Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene) UNICEF, November 2013

## RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED

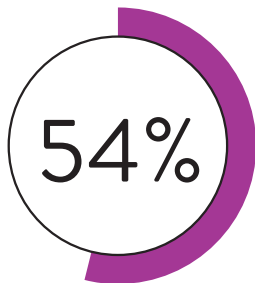
### ABSTAINED FROM RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES



GIRLS REPORTED HIGH RESTRICTIONS  
IN ATTENDING OR CARRYING OUT  
RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

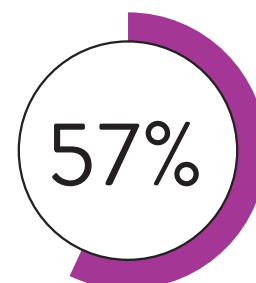


OF GIRLS REPORTED THAT THEIR  
MOTHERS IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS



GIRLS EXPRESSED EMBARRASSMENT  
AND HUMILIATION OVER THESE  
RESTRICTIONS

Base: Post Menarche girls: 1200



GIRLS CONSIDERED MOBILITY  
RELATED RESTRICTIONS AS 'FAIR'

Base: Post Menarche girls: 163

Source: Breaking the taboo; Research Highlights- Jharkhand (Knowledge, practice, attitude and norms on menstrual hygiene)  
UNICEF, November 2013

## A SOCIETY STRIVING FOR CHANGE BUT LOOKING FOR THE COURAGE TO EFFECT IT

While awareness is still very low, mothers do want and expect their adolescent daughters to be empowered with knowledge. Therefore, communication campaigns designed specifically to provide information will be useful and well-received. A quarter of the girls who were respondents of the study read newspapers. Moreover, given that 72% of this audience has access to mobile phones and another 57% to television, media can provide the perfect platform for change.

Based on the current needs of this segment, communication is needed around washing, drying and storage of reusable menstrual cloth. Another possible subject to cover is hygienic disposal because very deep-rooted taboos currently surround burning as a method. The definite need of the hour is training of peer educators, as girls presently are most comfortable talking to their friends.

## THE NIELSEN QUALITATIVE VIEW

- SARBANI SEN, DIRECTOR, NIELSEN INDIA

The social taboo and awkwardness associated with menstruation has resulted in negligible conversation around the subject perpetuating misconceptions. Unfortunately, for most women, even among the educated and the 'liberated class,' the vocabulary is mired in negativity: "*I am down*" is the most common expression used by a woman to convey that she is menstruating. Communication campaigns like that of Sofy's (*#iamnotdown*) and Whisper's (*Don't touch the pickle*) will go a long way in combating existing myths and infuse positive cultural codes.

In the urban scape, another positive driver is changing parenting codes, which have been democratised over a period of time. Today, at least in urban India, daughters enjoy considerable freedom to discuss the subject with their mothers and friends. Mothers who are well-educated and savvy also pave the way for discussion around the topic. This coupled with conversations on social media are helping bring about a change in outlook.

The real challenge is among women belonging to lower socio-economic classes where social and economic constraints are far more prominent. Here, category recruitment for sanitary napkin usage is still minimal. There needs to be sustained awareness initiatives, as well as social endorsement by role models that women from this segment can look up to. Such programmes would give them the much needed courage to go and buy sanitary napkins or start practicing safe and hygienic methods to manage their menstruation.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

This baseline study on menstrual hygiene management of girls and women was conducted for UNICEF among 9000 respondents including pre-menarche and post-menarche girls, their mothers, fathers, teachers, community leaders, village health functionaries, shopkeepers and members of local self-help groups in parts of Bihar and Jharkhand. The objective was to understand the menstrual hygiene behaviour of adolescent girls and women in rural areas. The study covered the issues around planning and preparation of girls for menarche, management of menstruation post that and maintaining hygiene during menstruation. The study also tried to understand the effect of menstruation on the everyday lives of girls, including the communication and discussion on the subject amongst themselves, and with people around them. The second study was conducted among 505 gynecologists to find out their views and estimations on sanitary protection habits among their patients during menstruation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Pattabhiraman Iyer from the Nielsen Pharma team contributed to this issue of Featured Insights

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