

Vikas PD Gawai, Ph.D. Student of Applied Economics, UW-Madison

Summary Report For IRIS Summer Graduate Student Fieldwork Award, 2019

In the context of Indian culture, menstruation health is surrounded by a social taboo of secrecy and myths and is considered as dirty and impure. Menstruation excludes women and girls from many opportunities in social and cultural lives. Discussing this topic in the formal and informal setting is considered impermissible; thus, women and girls are reticent to talk about it. Many studies have documented the adverse outcomes of the misconceptions attached to menstruation health. No wonder, the formal education about menstruation health is absent from school curricula. One report by WHO says that up to 12 percent of the school year missed by girls is during their menstruation. Another national-level survey data (NFHS) shows that about 52% of girls are unaware of pre-menarche changes in their bodies. A study also suggests that the misinformation about the menstruation is passed to the girls by their mothers, whom themselves lack knowledge of menstruation due to low literacy and socioeconomic status.

This research work aims to quantify the impact of a newly initiated national campaign, *Clean India: Clean Schools*. The primary purpose of the policy is to have a functioning and well-maintained water, sanitation, and hygiene facility in every school. Another essential part of the policy is to create awareness among the students, especially girl-students, about their health, improve knowledge, develop better practices. Historically, most of the schools in India lack the necessary sanitation facilities, and this policy poised to become a cornerstone to achieve this target. One salient aspect of the section of this policy is focused on pubescent age schoolgirls, called *Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)*. Through this research, I wish to quantify the impact of MHM on the knowledge, perception, and attendance of the schoolgirls.

During this summer, I visited a district in India, *Sindhudurga*, which undertook an initiative to implement the MHM policy, named as *Utkarsha*, meaning growth. I visited the district chief executive officer (CEO), who benevolently provided me in-depth information about this program. She also introduced me to the team members who were involved in designing and implementing the policy at the district level. They provided me with the technical details required to answer the research question, such as the academic calendar of the program. I understood that each calendar year has ten informative lectures to be delivered by female

schoolteachers for the knowledge of girl students. I spent more than two weeks of my time with the policymakers to understand the full particulars of the policy.

The next step of my plan was to visit some local schools and understand the implementation of the policy. I attended a school and interacted with a few teachers about their experiences about the policy. My hypothesis was the policy may not have been implemented satisfactorily given the social barrier of this topic. To my surprise, the policy was implemented promptly. The schoolteacher explained to me how the training is given to girls, what are the responses of the students, what improvements are required, what support they need at the school level.

This opportunity of conducting fieldwork and networking with the stakeholders helped me to understand the salience of the question I want to answer. It exceptionally enabled me to develop qualitative knowledge needed for a quantitative researcher. I know that even socially crucial policies can be implemented effectively by meticulous planning and consistency. The information and documents I received from the district office and a school are instrumental in evaluating the impact of the policy. This helps me to plan my next step of the task, i.e., design a questionnaire for the schoolgirls to conduct a survey and collect the data about their perception and knowledge of the MHM program. This will help us to quantify the impact of the MHM program on its' targeted beneficiaries.

To put it in a nutshell, my visit to India for the research fieldwork this summer had a profound impact on me both personally and professionally. As a researcher, the ability to connect with the policymakers and local implementors of the program provided a practical understanding of the policy that contextualizes and increases the relevance of my work. I believe, without the fieldwork, this research would have been incomplete. I am grateful to IRIS for funding this research work.