

# PERIOD POVERTY



## Key Findings on Menstrual Health Awareness and Challenges

Analysis reveals critical gaps in menstrual health education, accessibility, and socio-cultural perceptions among adolescents in the Middle East and North Africa Region. The data highlights disparities between girls and boys in knowledge acquisition, school attendance, and social discourse surrounding menstruation.

The principal findings are as follows:

### 1. Deficits in Menstrual Health Education

- 20% of female respondents reported insufficient knowledge about menstruation, indicating systemic shortcomings in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education.
- 10% of male respondents lacked awareness of where to access accurate menstrual health information, underscoring gendered disparities in health literacy.

### 2. Educational Disruptions Due to Menstruation

- 30% of girls missed partial or full school attendance during menstruation, suggesting that inadequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) infrastructure and socio-cultural stigma contribute to barriers in educational access.

### 3. Social Stigma and Restricted Participation

- 10% of girls expressed feelings of embarrassment associated with menstruation, reflecting entrenched cultural taboos.
- 20% of girls faced limitations in sports participation during their menstrual cycles, reinforcing gender-based exclusion from physical activities.

### • Communication Barriers and Support Needs

- 20% of girls and 30% of boys reported not discussing menstruation with anyone, demonstrating a pervasive culture of silence that perpetuates misinformation.
- 20% of girls identified a need for improved pain management resources and digital tools (e.g., cycle-tracking applications), highlighting gaps in accessible, youth-friendly health interventions.

These findings underscore the urgent need for multi-sectoral interventions, including policy reforms to integrate menstrual health into school curricula, infrastructure improvements for gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, and community-based awareness campaigns to dismantle stigma. Addressing these challenges is essential for advancing gender equity, educational attainment, and public health outcomes.

## Challenges Faced by Adolescent Girls During Menstruation in the MENA Region

Adolescent girls in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region encounter significant socio-cultural and structural challenges during menstruation, which adversely affect their health, education, and overall well-being. A pervasive culture of stigma and shame surrounding menstruation in certain communities contributes to the suppression of open discourse on menstrual health and hygiene, further marginalizing the issue. This societal taboo exacerbates existing barriers, including insufficient access to comprehensive menstrual education and economically viable hygienic products, often resulting in the adoption of unsafe menstrual management practices.

Moreover, infrastructural deficiencies particularly the scarcity of clean, private, and gender-sensitive sanitation facilities in schools and public spaces pose a critical challenge, impeding girls' ability to manage menstruation with dignity and comfort. The intersection of socio-cultural stigma and inadequate resources frequently leads to restricted participation in public and educational activities, perpetuating gender disparities.

Within the Iraqi context, empirical evidence underscores these challenges, with nearly one-third of female respondents reporting limited access to sports and physical activities during menstruation as a primary concern. This restriction not only reflects broader systemic inequities but also highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address menstrual health as a fundamental component of gender equity and public health policy in the region.

## The Impact of Stigma, Taboo, and Stereotypes on Girls' Wellbeing During Menstruation

Menstrual stigma, entrenched cultural taboos, and restrictive gender stereotypes significantly constrain girls' physical, social, and psychological wellbeing during menstruation. Findings from the research indicate that menstruation adversely affects girls' mobility, participation in public spaces, and engagement in routine activities. A notable proportion of respondents reported experiencing discomfort and social exclusion while menstruating, with 10% expressing embarrassment and 20% facing restrictions in sports participation a phenomenon corroborated by the Iraq MICS 2018, which found that nearly 9% of girls and young women (15-24) abstained from social, educational, or occupational activities during menstruation.



Moreover, 10% of girls explicitly identified the need for institutional and societal support to counteract menstrual stigma, underscoring the pervasive nature of discriminatory norms. Despite menstruation being a fundamental biological process, sociocultural constructs continue to marginalize menstruating individuals, limiting their autonomy, physical activity, and full participation in public and private spheres. This systemic exclusion not only reinforces gender inequities but also **perpetuates adverse health and educational outcomes**.

### **Knowledge Gaps in Menstrual Health Among Adolescents**

Comprehensive menstrual health education is essential to prepare girls for menarche, mitigate distress, and promote effective self-care practices. Empirical evidence, such as the Survey of Young People in Egypt (2014), demonstrates that adolescent girls (10-19) who lacked prior knowledge of menstruation were nearly twice as likely to experience shock, fear, or distress at menarche (74%) compared to those who were informed (40%) (El-Gibaly et al., 2019).

The data further highlights critical deficiencies in menstrual health literacy among both girls and boys. 20% of girls reported insufficient knowledge about menstruation, while 10% of boys lacked awareness of where to access accurate information. Additionally, 30% of boys indicated they had no one to discuss menstruation with, reflecting deeply ingrained communicative taboos. These findings illustrate a systemic failure in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, with dire implications for gender equity, health-seeking behaviors, and social normalization of menstruation.

Addressing these gaps necessitates evidence-based, gender-transformative interventions, including:

- School-based SRH curricula that normalize menstruation for all genders.
- Community awareness campaigns to dismantle stigma.
- Accessible digital resources (e.g., cycle-tracking apps) to bridge informational gaps.

Without such measures, menstrual health disparities will persist, further marginalizing girls and undermining their rights to education, health, and social participation.

### **References :**

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