



Period Poverty:

Impact of Taboos and Barriers on
Information and Resources for
Menstrual Health and Hygiene.

Listening Brief is developed by UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional
This Office Gender Section and Strategic Monitoring and Research Section.

[This survey was done on the UReport platform with support of UNICEF HQ UReport team.](#)

WHAT IS U-REPORT?

U-Report is UNICEF's platform to engage young people in programme priorities, emergency response and advocacy actions. It supports adolescent, youth, and community participation; and works as a tool to share information, raise awareness, and collect quantifiable data on specific areas that impact children, including the most vulnerable. The received responses are analyzed in real-time, mapped, and displayed on a public dashboard, ensuring the young people's feedback can be actioned by local and national decision-makers.

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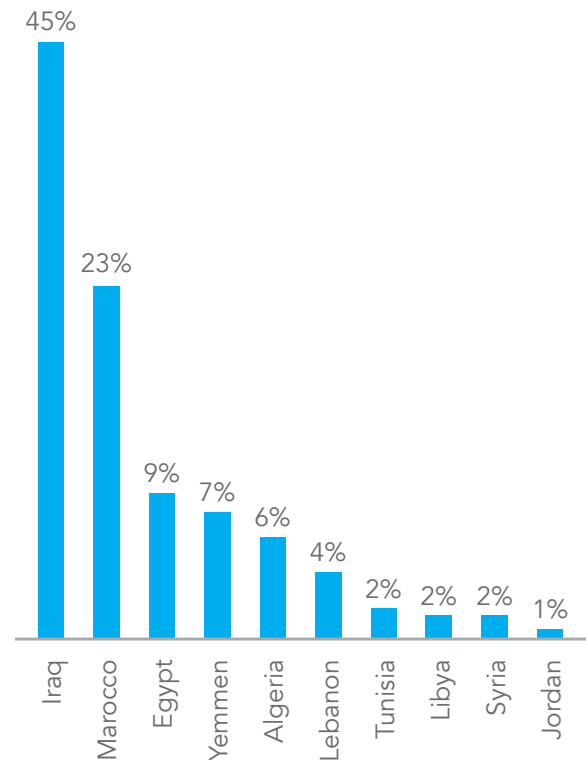
Disclaimer

The U-Report data are not statistically representative, and the results should not be interpreted as prevalence data. The results reflect the perspectives and attitudes of the respondents to the U-Report and cannot be read to do any inference on the perspectives and attitudes of the overall population. U-Report does not reach and does not aim to reach the entire population of children and youth in your country since it requires access to digital platforms and proactive willingness and motivation to respond.

U-Report on Menstrual Health and Hygiene

Introduction

In commemoration of Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day on May 28th, 2023, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Regional Office launched a regional U-Report to amplify the voices of both young females and males across the MENA region. The U-Report findings¹ sheds light on crucial aspects of a dignified menstrual health and hygiene such as awareness, challenges, usage of menstrual supplies, strategies to manage the menstrual cycle, and the significance of being able to speaking openly about menstruation.



Participation in U-Report on Menstrual Health and Hygiene in MENA

Figure 1:
Distribution of participants in U-report Poll

Around 2,800 people from 17 countries in the region responded to the poll, with 45% of responders being from Iraq. Among the participants, 55% were females, with 31% adolescent girls (aged 10-18) and 69% young women (19-25). Males represent about 41% of the respondents with 26% adolescent boys and 74% young men.

TOP FINDINGS:

According to the answers received take it up the respondents participating in this U-Report poll:

- **20%** girls lack necessary information on periods.
- **30%** girls are missing some or all of school during their period.
- **10%** girls reported feeling embarrassed during their period.
- **20%** girls experienced restrictions in playing sport during their period
- **20%** girls expressed the need of support to manage menstrual pain as well as an app to track cycles.
- **20%** girls do not speak to anyone about menstruation.
- **30%** boys do not speak to anyone about menstruation.
- **10%** boys do not know where to find information about menstruation.

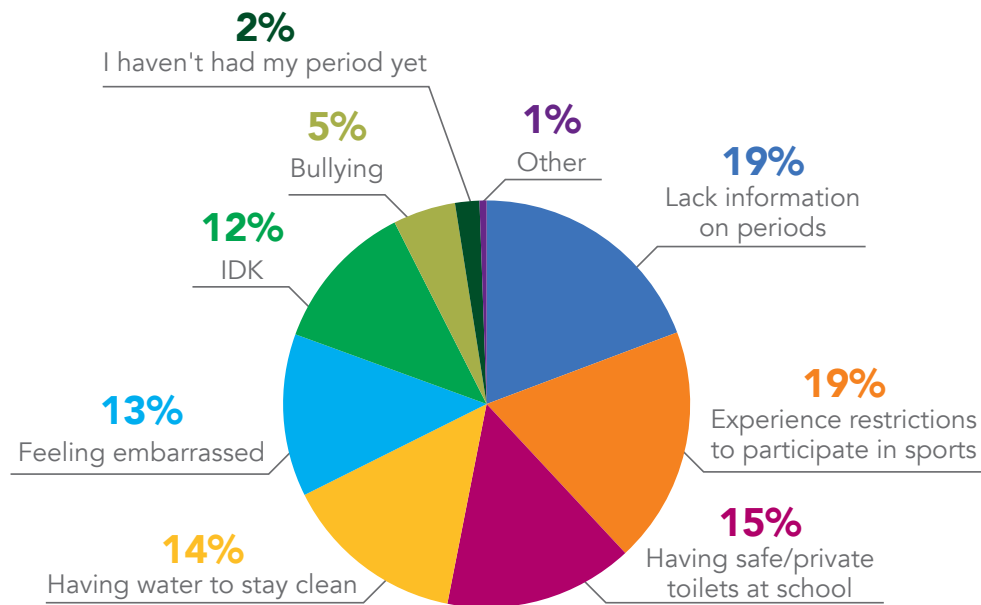
¹ Kindly see data disclaimer in the end of this Brief.

Girls challenges during menstruation

Girls in the MENA region face several challenges during their periods, including stigma and shame in some communities, leading to a lack of open discussion on menstrual health and hygiene. Additionally, limited access to menstrual education and affordable hygienic menstrual products may lead to unhealthy practices. The availability of clean and private toilets or sanitary facilities in schools and public

can also be limited in MENA, making it difficult for girls to manage their periods comfortably. These challenges, combined with stigma, can limit their participation in public activities and affect their well-being and education. In Iraq, specifically, almost a third of the Iraqi women and girls' respondents highlighted their restricted access to sports as a main challenge during their menstruation.

What are the challenges during menstruation? Girls say that they:



What we heard and learned?

Girls are at risk of missing out on education

From the U-Report respondents, 1 out of 3 girls reported they are missing at least one day of school during their last period.

One of the main challenges girls face during the menstrual period is access to clean water and safe toilets. Among the female respondents, 15% stated having challenges accessing safe, private toilets at school, while 15% reported not having access to clean water for hygiene.

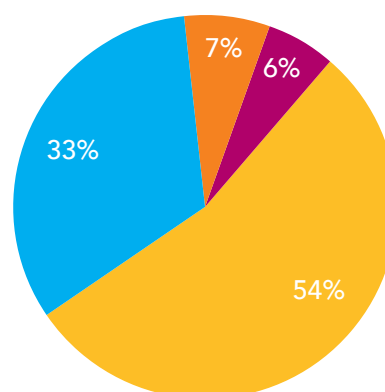
This is in line with data on the availability of sanitation and hygiene services in MENA region schools, where an estimated 31% of schools in the MENA region lack access to water and soap for handwashing and 15% lack access to basic sanitation services in 2021.²

The increased risk for girls to miss school might lead to girls falling behind in their education or even dropout completely. Low levels of education and interrupted education for increases the risk of child marriage.³ Access to education is an enabling factor for a successful transition to adulthood, and lack of access may contribute to increased gender inequality. Realizing every girl's right to education is vital to achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 5 on gender inequality.



Do you go to school/ work or do you go out during your period

- No, not at all
- Other
- Yes, always
- Yes, but not during the whole period



KEEP IN MIND:

- When designing WASH programmes, it is vital to address the specific needs of adolescent girls and facilities for girls, especially in schools including gender-responsive toilet facilities with water connectivity for personal hygiene and appropriate disposal system for sanitary waste.
- In WASH programming in schools, it is important that any hygiene awareness session includes menstrual health and hygiene to increase girls' opportunity to have a dignified period.
- Engaging school administrators and the Parent Teachers Associations can ensure an enabling social environment to support girls' education and learning.
- Female athletes are role models who demonstrate how they can face challenges around stigma and restrictions for girls in sports, showcasing how they can remain active during their period.
- Gender-responsive pedagogy and curriculum in schools can break stigma and taboo for menstrual health and hygiene.

² WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2022).

³ UNICEF, CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: FACT SHEET, 2022.

Stigma, taboo and stereotypes restrict girls and impacts their wellbeing

The U-Report poll found that girl's wellbeing is affected during their period with limited mobility to public space and activities outside the home. Many girls reported not feeling comfortable or accepted whilst menstruating.⁴ For example, 1 out of 10 girls reported feeling embarrassed during their period and 1 out of 5 did experience restrictions in playing sport. The barriers to taking part in sports during menstruation reported in the poll and in line with Iraq MICS 2018) with found that almost 1 in 10 (9%) of girls and young women (15-24) did not participate in social activities, school or work during their menstruation. Furthermore, 1 out of 10 girls highlighted the need for support to deal with stigma and taboo.

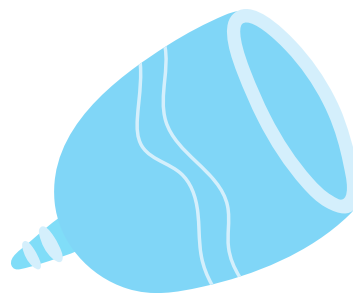
Periods are a natural part of the reproductive cycle of the body, yet many girls across the region continue to feel stigmatized and embarrassed during their period, which in turn limits their ability to stay active, engage in private and public spheres and continue their daily routine normally.

KEEP IN MIND:

- Harmful gender stereotypes, taboos and stigma should not stop girls from appreciating their body's natural cycles and enjoying activities that they enjoy. Engaging caregivers, peer-network communities in awareness raising on menstrual health and hygiene can increase for girls' activities and sense of wellbeing during their period.
- Girls can be changemakers in their communities and can be involved in the design of programmes and support peer-to-peer learning and social networks within circles of girls in their communities.

Girls and boys do not have adequate knowledge about menstruation

Awareness of menstruation is crucial for girls in preparing them before puberty to understand their body and physical changes, enabling them to manage their menstruation effectively. For example, the Survey of Young People in Egypt (2014) found that adolescent girls (10-19) who were unaware of menstruation before their first period were nearly twice as likely to experience shock, upset, and fear compared to those who were already aware of menstruation at menarche (74% vs. 40%).⁵ Girls and boys participating in the U-Report highlighted that they do not have accurate information and adequate knowledge about menstruation. For example, 1 out of 5 girls reported lacking necessary information about periods and 1 out of 10 boys did not know where to find information about menstruation. 1 out of 3 boys stated that they cannot speak to anyone about menstruation.



Menstrual Cup

4 Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS). IRAQ, 2018.

5 Survey of Young People in Egypt, 2014.

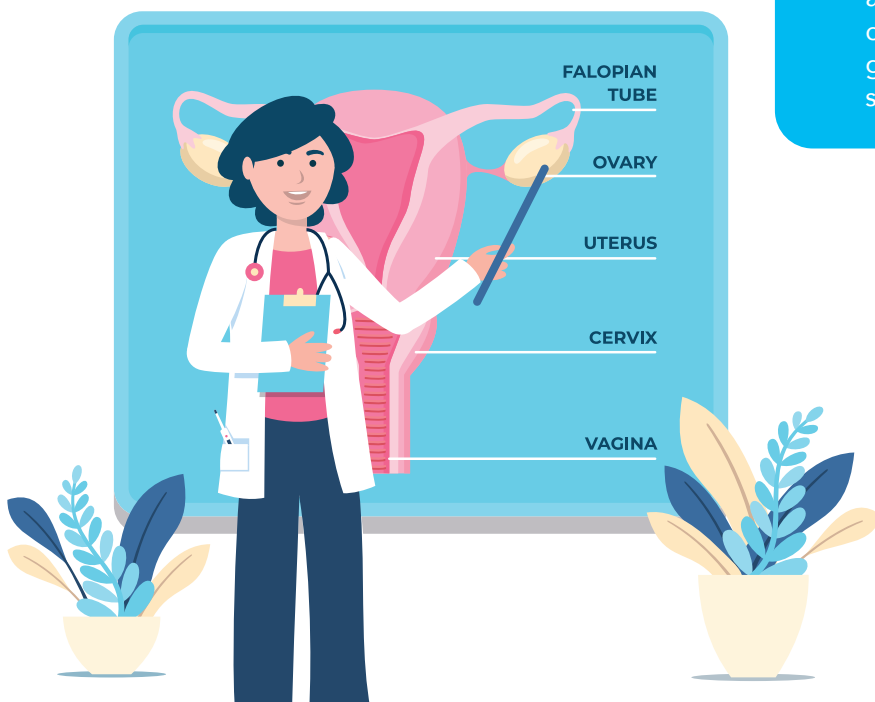
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The lack of necessary information on menstruation results in girls not knowing their bodily cycles and the changes they are going through during their puberty. 1 out of 5 girls reported that they do not know how to manage their menstrual periods and how to take care of themselves, indicating the need for support and greater menstrual health and hygiene awareness raising. The U-Report highlights that most girls and boys rely on social media and internet to obtain information about menstruation. However, this information may not be accurate nor reliable and the platform exposes them to risks for online harassment. Without vital information, girls and boys may choose unsafe and unhealthy practices. Lack of information is also manifested in use of menstrual supplies, for example male respondents tended to underestimate the proportion of girls and young women using pads and overestimate the use of cloth. Approximately a quarter of male respondents reported not knowing what supply is most commonly used to manage menstruation. However, young men and men are often responsible for doing purchase of menstrual supplies for their mother, wives, sisters and daughters and this might result in them not getting their preferred supply.

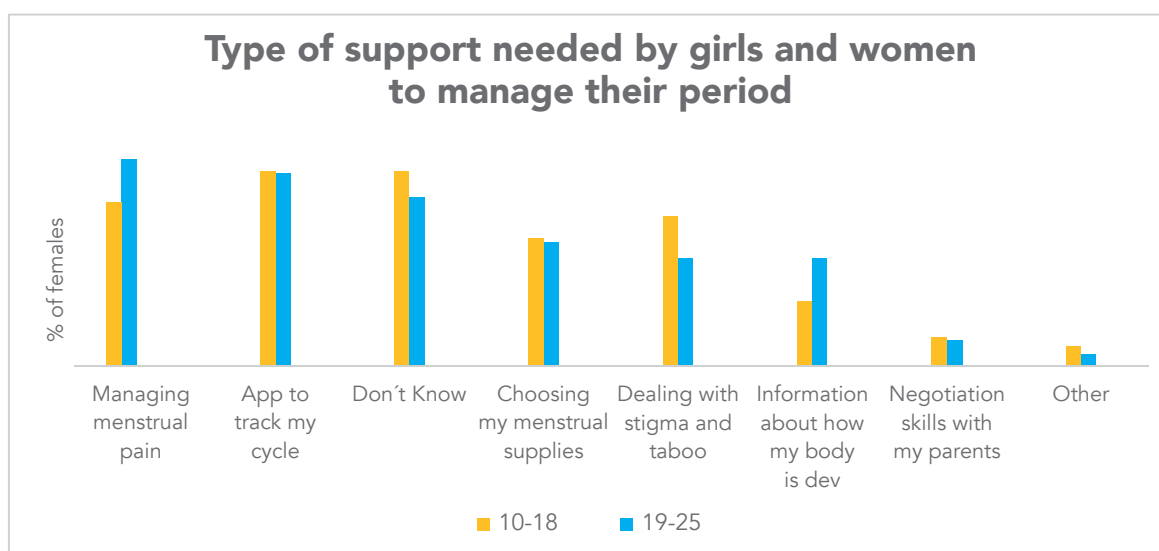
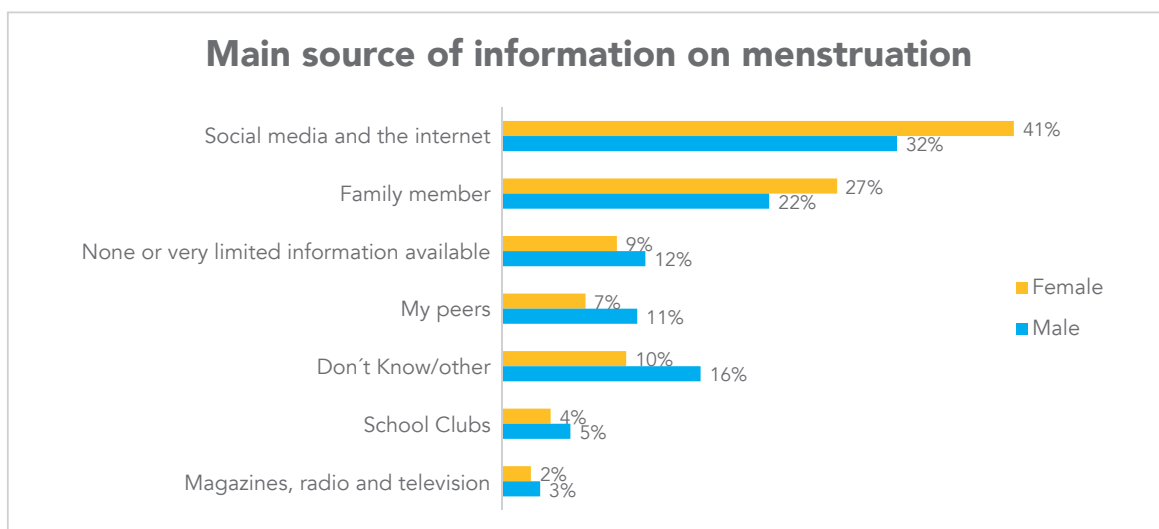
KEEP IN MIND:

- Having safe and correct information is critical to a dignified menstrual health and hygiene. Reliable technology platforms are available to support adequate access to information, including Internet for Good things and apps like OKY that are for girls and created by girls.
- Family health centers and social work force frontline workers can provide caregivers with gender responsive MHH awareness raising and mitigate stigma and taboo to speak about menstruation openly in private and public spaces.
- Since boys and girls have limited access to reliable sources of information about menstruation, schools and safe spaces can be valuable places for awareness raising on MHH and comprehensive sexuality education, including managing pain as well as dealing with stigma and taboo.
- Given boys, adolescent boys and young men's interest to learn about MHH as well as their role in purchasing supply, there is an opportunity to specifically target males in awareness raising sessions on MHH.
- In emergencies or humanitarian settings where menstrual supply is distributed as a part of dignity kits, it is important to communicate with affected populations to get feedback on their preferred menstrual supply.



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have restricted choices and limited access to a range of supplies by both girls and boys which can make menstruation an isolating and misunderstood experience.



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UNICEF listened and is prepared to support adolescent girls:

- Adolescent girls emergency kits includes distribution of hygiene kits and hygiene promotion.
- Sanitation initiatives include information and safe waste disposal.
- WASH programming prioritize rehabilitation of school with attention to safe and sex separated latrines.
- Water resource management includes engaging women and girls in WASH committees for design and management”.



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