

How the Community Table Tennis program helped Rishita enhance her understanding of menstruation



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Stigmatization of menstruation in the Indian society is widespread, where periods have long been considered dirty and impure. Numerous myths associated with menstruation, such as restrictions on physical contact, dining together, entering prayer rooms (*puja*), and kitchen activities, are prevalent in India even to this day.

It is essential for these cultural taboos to be addressed so that girls do not grow up with a misconception about menstruation. Failure to clear these misconceptions can lead to a perpetual cycle of discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Hence, these social stigmas should be dispelled by making girls aware of the natural changes their bodies experience during puberty, in a supportive manner. Moreover, it is important to provide them with accurate and comprehensive knowledge, as feeding misinformation related to menstruation can further stigmatize the topic.

Sport can be a powerful tool to help girls become familiar with their bodies and instill a sense of assurance that there is nothing wrong with bodily changes. It offers a platform for children to stay fit, teach them about the physical and mental changes they go through during puberty, and allay their fears.



Rishita Barik

Normalizing menstruation

The [Community Table Tennis \(CTT\)](#) program, a two-year initiative between Pro Sport Development (PSD) and the ITTF Foundation, engaged young people from marginalized areas of Bhubaneswar, Odisha, utilizing table tennis as a tool to address issues relating to gender equality.

As part of the program's objective to promote gender equality and sensitivity, one of the themes covered was building awareness on menstruation and menstrual hygiene among all the participants. The program sessions

offered reliable information on the menstrual process and effective ways to maintain menstrual hygiene, while also attempting to debunk myths associated with menstruation to promote a healthy understanding.

Rishita Barik, a class 10 student from Beena Bharati Vidya Mandir School in Bhubaneswar and a keen participant in the CTT program, faces a different reality at home. Menstruation is considered taboo at Rishita's home, creating an atmosphere of discomfort around the topic.

For the longest time, misconceptions about menstruation restricted Rishita from engaging in basic activities like praying in the *puja* room or entering the kitchen during her period. Rishita's upbringing led her to think that these constraints are social norms that must be strictly adhered to. Before joining the CTT program, her understanding of menstruation was based completely on myths and assumptions, as she shares:

“There are some rules in the society during periods - when your period starts, you should sleep alone and, on the floor; you can't eat with anyone, you can't feed anyone, you can't touch anyone. This was my understanding of menstruation before I joined the CTT program.”

The CTT program has been instrumental in transforming Rishita's perception of the changes experienced by her body, helping her understand that these are natural and absolutely normal. Having been at the receiving end of the taboos and myths associated with menstruation, the program sessions allowed her to reflect on how these misconceptions have shaped her ideas about her body. Furthermore, participation in the CTT program helped Rishita unlearn these notions and she is now aware that these are just myths that exclude and marginalize women and girls.

With this knowledge and awareness, Rishita now courageously stands up to her parents and tries to educate them about menstruation, as she notes:



“During periods, my mother refuses to let me go into the puja room, but allows me to do everything else. After attending the gender sessions, I informed her that there is no problem in going to places of worship during periods, but they don't listen to me.”

Rishita understands that these myths can negatively impact women and girls across various spheres of life, spanning from playgrounds to workspaces. This motivates her to constantly and consistently put in efforts to change her parents' mindsets towards menstruation despite the resistance she has been facing from their end.

Inspiring a change

The CTT program's gender sessions have had a significant impact on Rishita's mindset, especially with regard to menstruation, as she wishes to educate more people in her community. Inspired by her learnings from the program, she wants to teach her peers about the physical and mental changes that boys and girls undergo during puberty. Rishita strongly believes in the importance of imparting accurate information to children from an early age, particularly on topics like menstruation. She understands the fears that her younger peers may have about periods, having experienced them first hand:

“This information is very important for those who don't know about menstruation because of the fear they have in their minds about periods - why periods happen and what happens in our bodies (during menstruation). It is absolutely necessary for everyone to know about this. Maybe they will not be so afraid of menstruation after learning about it. They will also know that at a certain age, boys and girls go through various other changes in their bodies.”

Pragatee Sathy, PSD's Community Sports Trainer, noticed that during their initial interaction, Rishita seemed hesitant to talk and showed disinterest in sharing her thoughts about menstruation. However, after regularly participating in the CTT program, she has started voicing her opinions more freely and has even taken the initiative to share information on menstruation with her younger peers. Pragatee,

who has closely observed this change in her, talks about the journey Rishita went through after becoming a part of the CTT program:

“Rishita would initially shy away from talking about menstruation. With time, she realized that what she had heard earlier about menstruation is incorrect. Menstruation is not a bad thing. She also believes that it is necessary for all children to receive information related to menstruation, just as how she and her peers received it through the CTT program. Rishita is now very comfortable talking about periods. She shares information about menstruation with other young people at school and in the neighborhood.”

Rishita’s story exemplifies the transformative power of sports to build awareness and sensitivity around menstruation. Through her constant effort, she is breaking barriers, attempting to foster awareness, and empowering her peers to embrace a more informed and accepting perspective on menstruation. Her zeal and dedication has the potential to influence others in her community to challenge social taboos and promote open conversations about menstrual awareness.

The Community Table Tennis program is a collaborative effort between [Pro Sport Development \(PSD\)](#) and the [ITTF Foundation](#) to increase access to sport for young people and utilize table tennis as a tool to promote gender equality by supporting the holistic development of boys and girls from marginalized sections in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The two year program, which took place from 2021-23 was supported by the ITTF Foundation.