Told with



“I FEEL I AM VALUABLE.”

Engaging Adolescent Girls on Understanding Nutrition

THE HUNGER PROJECT INDIA

By

What is nutrition? Why does it matter? Whose voice remains excluded? Who is heard?

Part four of the "Enhancing Nutrition Outcomes" series focuses on the often invisible voices of adolescent girls across villages in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. One story recognises constraints of gender and caste. One story recounts new learnings. One story unlearns myths. While many stories imagine the possibilities. Read parts I, II, and III.





As The Hunger Project, India team travelled across villages, we held separate meetings with adolescent girls to address their concerns. The girls spoke with pride about their newfound knowledge – how to stay healthy, how to access anganwadi services, how to address gender and caste-based discrimination, how to manage menstrual hygiene, and how to access nutritious food. Most importantly, they spoke of how they learned to communicate better. Many said it helped them articulate their Dalit identity, address caste discrimination in their schools and villages, and build a new sense of community.

In Madhya Pradesh, 16-year-old Kavita* and 15-year-old Seema* explain why meetings with THP have been an eye opener: “Before this, nobody came to us, sat us down and decoded complicated concepts about health and nutrition in simple terms.”

Many girls spoke candidly of earlier misconceptions about menstrual health, particularly when it came to taking IFA (iron and folic acid) tablets. This wariness of IFA tablets is common to women and girls alike. Myths abound that such tablets are really a family planning method that will affect childbirth. Such myths are slowly being dispelled. These habits are changing. Now they refuse to miss their weekly dose of tablets, either in school or at the anganwadi, as a nutrition supplement to prevent anaemia or at least keep it in check. “I understand its benefits, particularly during our menstrual cycle,” says 14-year-old Asha* from Karnataka. “I need to keep taking them and combine them with good nutrition for proper growth.”

In Rajasthan, 21-year-old Gunjan* is glad to have learned useful information on menstrual hygiene – how to dispose of sanitary pads or how to use cloth strips without causing infection. She adds that, after the meetings, girls in her village were also more aware of take-home rations. For girls who are out of school, and therefore cut off from the government's mid-day meal scheme, these rations fill a huge nutrition gap.

Many girls have also started kitchen gardens, which they say has prompted them to rethink food habits. "We have access to vegetables like papaya, bitter gourd, leafy greens and local seasonal fruit like jamun [Indian blackberry], guava, custard apple, berries and banana," says 13-year-old Lomi Jaani* from Odisha. "We have much more choice."

Access to healthier food can break the intergenerational cycle of nutritional and gender disadvantages. In Madhya Pradesh, 19-year-old Deepa* speaks of how she was too weak to attend school regularly. "I could barely move because of fatigue," she says. "Now I look forward to enrolling again. I hope to complete my education and earn a good living."





Left: Gunjan, Rajasthan; Right: Lomi Jaani, Odisha

The meetings were also purposed to include conversations on government welfare schemes and opportunities for the future. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, many girls have learnt about the Ladli Laxmi Yojana, which provides financial assistance for girls' education. In some cases, girls about to finish school have been steered towards vocational courses. 18-year-old Pooja* from Madhya Pradesh did not wish to pursue higher education but wanted to earn a livelihood. “I learned about a three-month tailoring course, from which I just graduated. I am getting orders and earning Rs 5000- 6000 a month,” she says, sounding delighted. Jaspa Saurabu*, a 19-year-old from Odisha, faced a similar dilemma: to keep studying or start earning. She chose the latter, helping her father make jewellery and earning Rs 2000 a month. At a financial literacy session held by THP, she learnt how to manage online payments for their small business. “It has helped a great deal; I feel I am valuable,” she says.

The sense of being “seen” and “heard” seemed particularly keen among Dalit girls, who said they found the meetings to be important “education”. Caste is an implacable barrier in villages; accessing spaces and services is not easy for Dalit communities. Seema describes the caste discrimination she faces in her village in Madhya Pradesh: “We are still asked to walk on the other side [of the road from upper caste houses], to keep a distance because we eat eggs and meat. Attending these meetings is helping us claim more agency in our lives and our equal right to nutrition.”



Left: Pooja, Madhya Pradesh; Right: Jaspa Saurabu, Odisha

The meetings became a safe space where girls can find their voice. Creating awareness about the right to nutrition and health has led to a vital shift in their confidence and, in turn, broadened their aspirations for the future.



Text by Surbhi Mahajan. Photos by Anurag Banerjee (Karnataka & Odisha), Menty Jamir (Rajasthan), Nipun Prabhakar (Madhya Pradesh). Supported by Citibank. *Names of girls aged 21 and under have been changed to protect their identities. Published on August 11, 2025.