

Catalyst

CHANGE TAKES SHAPE THROUGH PERSISTENCE

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Warm greetings,

We have entered a new year that brings resolutions and renewed hope for a more inclusive and destigmatised society. It also encourages me to reflect upon what has been built and to consider what must now be strengthened to keep the relevant conversations ongoing.



As Catalyst completes one year, it has reaffirmed the belief that has guided our work for over two decades: meaningful change emerges not from isolated interventions, but from creating safe spaces where lived experiences can be shared. Across mental health, menstrual health and education, our understanding has consistently deepened.

Over the past year, Catalyst has helped us bring together stakeholders and collaborators to foster partnerships and amplify our voice for advocacy. We acknowledge the support and are grateful for the changes we have been able to bring at the grassroots level. Our work continues to create integrated ecosystems that help us bring about systemic, lasting change in building a resilient society.

It has been deeply heartening for me to witness the shifts gradually taking shape. Support-seeking behaviour is becoming more visible, taboos are being questioned and conversations that were once marginal are finding their place in classrooms, workplaces and public discourse. These shifts reflect a deeper cultural change that is essential in India.

As we step into the year ahead, our responsibility remains clear. To continue investing in people, partnerships and programmes that help us create a lasting impact.

Warm regards,

Mrs. Neerja Birla
Founder & Chairperson
Aditya Birla Education Trust



Cataloguing Lived Experiences

Making Space for Lived Experiences

On a rainy Saturday in June last year, Sandesh Kodtarkar turned into a 'human book' at Mpower's Hughes Road centre in Mumbai, sharing his experience of coming out to his parents. As the narrative unfolded, revealing a story of courage, vulnerability and resilience, his audience of 24 listened with rapt attention, without any judgment or prejudice. Three more speakers followed. Their lived experiences different, but each equally moved and emboldened by the acceptance they felt in a room full of strangers.

It was a moment of quiet reflection for the listeners, too, with many of these lived experiences striking an emotional chord and resonating with their own. Since then, Mpowered Voices, Mpower's new initiative, has organised multiple 'Human Library' sessions in which volunteers become open books to find synergies for themselves or their loved ones, to overcome their mental health struggles.

Worldwide, Human Libraries are emerging as impactful agents of change, as they make knowledge and experience-sharing more personal, empathetic and interactive. They provide safe, inclusive platforms where people can voice their raw, unfiltered truths without fearing societal sanctions.

While the concept of Human Libraries is not new to India, it is essential to nurture more such intimate and stigma-free storytelling environments in our country. There is a need to normalise conversations, invalidate long-standing prejudices, build an ecosystem of respect and understanding and encourage more individuals to open up and seek help.

At Mpowered Voices, the purpose is to help them find their voice. While the platform offers a cathartic experience for the speakers, it's a journey of healing, rediscovering courage and rebuilding resilience for the 'readers'. Over the past few months, we have engaged diverse cohorts of society, including adults, teens and the youth, through Human Libraries.

When Kinjal Dholakia, one of our volunteers, recounted the struggle of rebuilding life after losing her parents, her journey of rediscovering strength and stability resonated with many. Similarly, Aamina Shareef's account of repairing her relationship with her father was a deeply moving reflection on reconciliation, healing and intergenerational understanding. Each lived experience acted as a catalyst for others to know that mental health is not taboo and that they are not alone in their struggles.

As a participant aptly put it, "I felt less alone knowing that all of us have our own struggles and stories that are similar. It helped me look at pain from a different perspective".

We plan to take Human Library conversations to multiple cities to ensure that lived experiences become a beacon of hope for larger communities.



57% Dip in Menstrual Myths

A Period of Profound Impact

"I changed my mind about periods. Now I support my sister during her periods".

These are the words of a schoolboy from Maharashtra who, not long ago, viewed menstruation as impure, shameful and even abnormal due to deeply rooted social conditioning. His voice of change is among the many such shaped by Ujaas, over four years of consistent effort to script a holistic shift in India's menstrual health landscape.

For centuries, periods have been perceived as a 'women's issue', not only by men who are a part of their families, workplaces and communities, but by women themselves. Silence further perpetuated myths, stigmas and taboos. As a young organisation, it continues to be one of our biggest challenges to bring these muted conversations into the mainstream.

The first step is, of course, acknowledgement, which opens the door to awareness and, in turn, meaningful action. But acknowledgement cannot rest with women alone. While working with communities at the grassroots level, we have realised that menstrual health is shaped by a wider ecosystem that includes families, schools, healthcare providers, workplaces and local leadership. When the onus shifts beyond the individual and becomes a community responsibility, we shall witness a societal shift. While menstruation is solely a woman's biological reality, effective menstrual health management is influenced by factors that extend far beyond her.

From the outset, Advaitesha envisioned Ujaas as a way to build an ecosystem around period poverty, one that moves beyond awareness to sustained understanding and shared responsibility. This vision is brought to fruition at the grassroots level through a comprehensive and structured approach that involves all stakeholder groups by breaking taboos, building awareness about adopting healthy menstrual management practices and providing sustainable interventions.

Our team has conducted around 17,000 awareness sessions across the country so far, touching over 6,00,000 people. These efforts are finally beginning to bear fruit, with the figures projecting an optimistic future. The Ujaas Impact Report 2024-25 is deeply reassuring in more ways than one. It not only captures the inroads we have made, step by step, but also illustrates how we have tried to address multiple interconnected issues cohesively. While these early shifts are meaningful, they underscore how much remains to be done. Deep-rooted beliefs take time to undo and the work ahead remains both necessary and ongoing.

The goal is to enable more such shifts, not just in perspectives and practices, but in building an ecosystem that drives systematic changes at the policy and community levels. We intend to join hands with other organisations working in this space to document lived experiences, identify the gaps in existing policy and advocate for action that encourages young girls' increased participation in schools.



Bridging The Menopause Gap

Making Menopause Seen, Not silenced

It took me a few years to understand one of the most profound and isolating shifts I have experienced as a woman: Perimenopause and menopause. Initially, I attributed the sleepless nights, heightened emotional responses, brain fog and a subtle yet real sense of disconnection from myself to stress and age. There was no definitive understanding of the change I was experiencing. Eventually, I connected the dots and labelled what I was going through is perimenopause. Giving language to my experience has been deeply empowering.

As I write this, 1.1 billion women across the world are navigating the same shift, a majority of them unaware and unsupported by family, employers and society at large. It is not just a biological milestone but a life-altering phase that spans a decade or more. Also, an unacknowledged and misattributed phase that is not spoken about enough.

Creating safe spaces for open conversations is crucial in a country like India. While menstruation continues to be surrounded by stigma and taboo, perimenopause and menopause are even more deeply shrouded in silence in the subcontinent. It is estimated that while 10 per cent of the country's population is currently in the perimenopausal or menopausal stage, less than 25 per cent seek medical or psychological assistance. This gap is telling, underscoring the silence that shapes how menopause is experienced.

The first step towards shifting the narrative from silence to support is building awareness to help women label what they are experiencing. We need to encourage open, informed conversations within families and at workplaces to remind women that they are not alone and that what they are feeling is valid. This can bring in a culture shift. A shift similar to what we are witnessing with mental health, at large.

At Mpower, we are working towards fostering safe, inclusive spaces where women feel heard, validated and supported, be it through our mental health helpline, community interventions, or workplace wellness efforts. Our efforts are focused on building initiatives that integrate their emotional well-being, workplace sensitivity and community understanding.

Speaking about perimenopause and menopause in public forums like the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO) was an essential step in this direction. It encourages more women to label and acknowledge the issue and validate their experiences. While each woman's journey through menopause is unique, it is also, after all, a shared experience.

The need to understand menopause is not just a personal struggle. It is a public health issue that impacts workforce participation, economic productivity and gender equity. It is time we empowered and equipped women to navigate this phase of life with strength, along with sensitisation at workplaces and in families. Menopause needn't mean a pause, but a time to realign and rebuild. When it is named, understood and supported by systems of care, women can navigate this transition with strength.



Bringing a Sustained Shift in Society

As a social entrepreneur, I have witnessed the power of lived experiences more than once; how they transform lives, transcend barriers and triumph over challenges.

I remember how, more than a decade ago, I watched with deep concern as my eldest daughter, Ananya, battled mental health issues. As a mother and caregiver, the lack of well-informed and reliable support systems was isolating. It was a taboo topic, more so back then and there were no avenues for open dialogue. That silence and the absence of structured care left a lasting impression.

It became clear that while conversations were the first step, they alone were not enough. What was needed were pathways that could support individuals consistently and with dignity. This journey laid the foundation for Mpower, which aims to end the silence surrounding mental wellness and offer accessible, affordable interventions.

In fact, every cause Aditya Birla Education Trust (ABET) has championed, we have constantly strived to enhance awareness through a structured, systematic approach and translate it into sustained action through WHO SDG goals. Be it mental health, menstrual health or education, the focus is on: how conversations are sustained, how mindsets shift and how systems are built to support that change over the long term.

This approach has unfolded gradually. In mental health, opening dialogue led to increased help-seeking, but it also highlighted the void in seamless care and trained support. Over time, this translated into deeper engagement with institutions such as the Central Industrial Security Force, where sustained interventions over three years contributed to a significant reduction in suicide rates. The progress has been encouraging, but it has also reinforced how essential it is to stay engaged well beyond initial outcomes.

I have witnessed in many ways, how ABET has pre-empted the shift in Indian philanthropy to stewardship philanthropy. Through Mpower alone, over seven million individuals have been reached and more than six lakh teachers have been trained. While not undermining the importance of monetary resources in the success of public welfare initiatives, today's social entrepreneurship is increasingly centred on shaping long-term, sustainable and scalable impact. This is done through coalitions and collaborations, a coming together of change-makers, supporters and all stakeholders to work systemically to create institutions that work long-term to enable societal programmes and development.

At ABET, it has always been our intent not just to initiate conversations but to keep them going till they enter collective consciousness.

When Ujaas was launched, it was with a clear vision that the solution to rural India's period poverty is not unidimensional, confined to just ensuring the accessibility of affordable menstrual hygiene products. It has led to years of concerted efforts across multiple fronts: from breaking myths and involving men in period conversations to addressing gender inequality and environmental harm through sustainable, eco-friendly livelihood initiatives. The shifts we now see in menstrual health literacy and cross-gender attitudes are the result of sustained, patient work and has impacted 6 lakh beneficiaries.

Transformational change takes time and we still have a long way to go. As the new year begins, the intent is to continue building on these learnings and take steady steps towards systemic change.