



## **Girls' and Women's Education Policy Research Activity (GWE-PRA) Policy Brief: Menarche and Its Implications for Educational Policy in Peru March 2001**

### **The Issue**

Research has shown that in many developing countries, the onset of puberty results in significant changes in school participation for girls (Beyene, 1989; Herz, 1991; Mehrah, 1995). Menarche, which is the onset of menstruation and the most dramatic sign of girls' puberty, affects girls' socialization with family and community and may have a significant impact on their education.

### **Purpose of the Research**

Research to assess the extent to which the onset of puberty influences girls' primary school attendance and completion was carried out by the Red Nacional de Promoción de la Mujer, a local Peruvian organization, and World Education. This activity was implemented through the Girls' and Women's Education Policy Research Activity (GWE-PRA), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Office of Women in Development. The study, which



employed primarily qualitative methods of data collection, was conducted in Ayacucho, Peru, in rural communities where extreme poverty is the norm. The research seeks to inform donors and decision-makers about the importance of addressing the constraints on girls' completion of primary education. More precisely, it aims to identify family, community and school system factors that affect girls' attendance and retention and to influence policy decisions regarding girls' education. Because the sample was not randomly selected, this study does not purport to make generalizations to the larger population outside the Ayacucho area.

### **Education in Peru**

Provision of educational services for boys and girls in Peru has increased significantly in recent years. In 1995, the literacy rate was 83.0% for females and 94.5% for males (United Nations, 1999). No major differences exist at the preschool and early primary school level between boys' and girls' enrollments. However, as children progress through primary school, differences begin to emerge, especially in rural areas. In 1998 in the rural areas of the Department of Ayacucho, 60.4% of boys and 49.3% of girls completed primary school (Nuevos Horizontes, 1999).

### **The Impact of Puberty/Menarche on Girls' Access and Persistence in Education in Peru**

Menarche in Andean culture marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. In rural Peru, the beliefs and taboos associated with menstruation strongly shape girls' educational experiences and future aspirations. This discussion focuses on the findings of the GWE-PRA study in Peru. It addresses the impact of puberty (and menarche as a visible sign of puberty) on girls'

attendance and retention in school. It investigates how family, community and school factors, related to the onset of puberty, affect educational outcomes for adolescent girls. It also determines which aspects of puberty are key to girls' decisions to withdraw from school. Finally, it proposes how these barriers might best be addressed through policy and program implementation and reform.

## **Beliefs and Practices about Menstruation in Peru**

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### **Menarche changes a girl's self-perception and the way she is perceived by her family and the community**

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In rural Peru, a girl who has begun to menstruate is perceived to be different by the community. Menarche signifies the end of childhood for girls. At puberty, female roles ascribed in early childhood (i.e., performing household tasks, caring for younger siblings and serving males) become more firmly established. Additionally, girls are now seen as suitable for having sexual relations and conceiving children. Because they are believed to have special powers to attract men sexually, community norms dictate that adolescent girls' sexuality be controlled. In addition, during their menstrual period, females are believed by some to be harmful and even lethal to certain plants and to babies.

Girls' self-perception changes dramatically after menarche. They see themselves as women rather than girls. They assume a much larger share of the domestic and farming chores and are expected to marry soon and become mothers. Typically, when girls are menstruating, they perceive themselves negatively. Peers' and adults' judgmental attitudes intensify adolescent girls' feelings of exclusion and inadequacy and lessen their desire to attend school.

In rural Peru, the beliefs and taboos associated with menstruation encourage girls to remain at home during their menstrual periods. The long distance girls must travel to and from school increases their risk of being molested and contributes to their dropping out of school. Home is thought to be the safest place for girls,

and mothers create a nurturing environment for their daughters. Thus, girls are kept at home to protect them from the possibility of being sexually abused or getting pregnant (beliefs persist that women's fertile period is during menstruation). Although support from mothers strengthens the mother-daughter relationship and may provide girls with a greater sense of security, keeping girls at home during menstrual periods contributes to school absenteeism, grade repetition and abandonment.

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### **Formal education is not accommodating to menstruating girls**

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Girls do not have adequate support in school during menstruation. Schools lack bathroom facilities, water, and sanitary supplies. The prospect of sitting for long periods of time, staining their clothes with blood and being noticed and teased by boys makes adolescent girls feel anxious and uneasy. Their psychological discomfort is compounded by physical symptoms such as headaches and fatigue, which may be aggravated by malnutrition and contribute to poor school performance and absenteeism.

School rules and regulations make it difficult for girls to attend and participate in school activities during menstruation. The requirements for certain physical exercises do not always correspond to girls' needs. Many teachers (especially male teachers) are not sensitive to the special needs of girls during puberty and are unprepared or choose not to provide the support and guidance girls need.

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### **Menarche signals the time at which girls abandon school**

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Parents send conflicting messages to their daughters. On one hand, they believe girls should adhere to gender-specific roles and begin to focus more attention on domestic tasks traditionally assigned to women. They reaffirm existing perceptions that girls don't need to continue their studies. On the other hand, parents also report that they want their daughters to obtain an education, to find a job and to

improve their and the family's standard of living.

Demands of daily existence in a context of extreme poverty often take precedence over girls' education. Even though parents believe that education is a vehicle for a better life, they cannot afford their children's studies and usually exert pressure on adolescent girls to fulfill their household responsibilities and prepare for their roles as wives and mothers.

### **Policy Implications**

The results of this study confirm that puberty plays an important role in adolescent girls' participation and retention in school in rural Peru. More specifically, it concludes that menarche has an impact on girls' socialization within their family and community and interferes with girls' achieving their full educational potential. A variety of policy measures may be undertaken at the school, community, and national level to alleviate these problems. The section that follows explores a range of policy options.

#### *School Level*

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### **Provide girls with access to adequate sanitary facilities and products**

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To address the physical barriers posed by menstruation, it is recommended that schools have latrines with separate facilities for girls and boys and running water for washing. Free or subsidized sanitary napkins made available to school-age girls would increase their comfort in school. Community organizations, with the assistance of NGOs and local governments, should explore the possibility of obtaining free sanitary napkins for girls in school in poor rural areas. These measures will improve sanitary conditions, allow girls to participate more freely in physical activities, prevent girls from feeling humiliated in school and reduce absenteeism and dropout.

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### **Ensure girls' safety and adapt school activities to accommodate girls' needs and domestic responsibilities**

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In addition to problems of infrastructure, girls' lack of safety in schools is a barrier to their education. In order to address this issue, it is recommended that schools and communities provide the following: a) education on violence and sexual abuse and harassment; b) community watches to protect girls from abuse and harassment; and c) an uninterrupted class schedule with classes ending early in the afternoon so girls can get home safely. Single sex schools (on a pilot basis) may increase girls' actual and perceived safety and may be more accommodating to girls' needs in school.

Modifications in physical education requirements would increase girls' comfort at school. New classroom methodologies that reduce or eliminate homework assignments would allow girls to attend school and also fulfill their responsibilities at home.

Self-instructional student guides should be developed for girls in rural schools. If a girl misses school during her menstrual period, she is able to keep up by using self instruction materials (this type of material would be useful for all students, for example, during planting or harvest seasons when children work in the fields instead of going to school).

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### **Train teachers and implement health and sex education programs**

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To enhance Peru's national program of sexuality education, implemented in 1996, schools could include guided discussion groups for girls and boys (both separate and together), classroom instruction not only by teachers but also by health care providers, improved dissemination of instructional materials and additional training and supervision for teachers, from preschool through high school. Content in health and nutrition, normal growth and development, and reproductive health should be included in the curriculum with sufficient family-life education materials that are age, language and culture

appropriate. Offering these topics to parents through the existing Escuela de Padres (School for Parents), school parent associations (APAFAs) or other community groups, would improve parent/child communication and community and family support for girls.

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**Provide adequate nutrition**

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Schools and communities should contribute to improving children's nutritional status. Research has shown that school feeding programs designed to meet nutritional goals can have a positive impact on children's education. In conjunction with health care initiatives and improved classroom environments, school feeding programs can affect school performance and attendance (McGinn and Borden, 1995). Further research is needed on the health and nutritional status of adolescent girls and the special health problems posed by menstruation.

*Community Level*

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**Involve the community in protecting girls against violence**

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It is recommended that communities establish a neighborhood watch to protect girls from gender-related violence and sexual abuse. Community-based women's organizations can enlist members and others in the community to report cases of violence and to develop strategies for follow-up.

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**Reduce girls' workload and re-examine gender role expectations**

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The GWE-PRA study proposes addressing the issue of girls' workload and gender role expectations through community-level policy strategies. The following actions are recommended: a) create awareness among community members on the importance of educating girls and reducing their workload; b) initiate campaigns to inform parents about the socio-economic benefits of girls' education; and c) mobilize the media to publicize issues related

to girls' education and thus contribute to awareness campaigns.

Community meetings may also generate successful social mobilization through discussions on girls' education. Involvement of community leaders and local officials can foster community ownership and build support for girls' education.

*National Level*

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**Reinforce existing relationships between public and private sectors to promote actions in favor of girls' education**

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The active support of government, community leaders, and community-based organizations is key to expanding girls' education opportunities. Effecting change is a long-term process that involves national strategies and innovative approaches. This brief recommends actions that require the allocation of additional resources by the public sector, contributions from community members, and changes in policy. Specific recommendations at the national level include: a) reinforce relationships between public and private institutions that promote specific actions for girls' education in rural areas; b) coordinate with the business sector, NGOs, and the government to improve school infrastructure and provide sanitary products and other support or incentives for girls to complete primary school and high school; and c) promote expansion of the Red Nacional de Educación de la Niña (National Network for Girls' Education) with the objective of involving more people to work for the benefit of girls in rural areas.

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