



SANITATION
FOR MILLIONS



MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

A contribution of Sanitation for Millions to improved gender equality and safer hygiene

Table of contents

Introduction	4
Menstrual health and hygiene: an age-old challenge	4
Beyond WASH: Sanitation for Millions’ approach to menstrual health and menstrual hygiene management	6
The case studies: supporting menstrual health and hygiene in Jordan, Pakistan and Uganda.....	7
Sanitation for Millions’ involvement in MHM in Jordan	8
Activities and interventions	8
Insights and reflections	10
Sanitation for Millions – experience from Pakistan.....	12
Activities and interventions	12
Insights and reflections	15
Sanitation for Millions – experience from Uganda	17
Activities and interventions	17
Insights and reflections	20
Reflections on menstrual health programming	21

Acknowledgements

On the occasion of Menstrual Hygiene Day 2021, *Sanitation for Millions* would like to thank the entire project staff and partners who have enthusiastically supported us in embracing menstrual health as one of the ways in which we can promote the life chances of women and girls far beyond our sanitation objectives. We are pleased to be part of a growing global movement that strives to end period poverty and empowers women and girls around the world through safe menstrual health and hygiene. The authors would like to extend a sincere thank you to Rabia Baloch, Shahana Tabassum, Hashim Khan, Heba Ababneh, Teresa Haerberlein, Jumana Alayed, Saba Anaqrash, Gladys Nantume and Diana Nampeera for sharing their experience and insights during interviews, supporting translations and offering feedback on preliminary drafts of the case studies. We are grateful to Laura Kieweg and Elena Wenninger, who supported the smooth and professional finalisation of this publication. The generous support of our donors, the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Water Unite is gratefully acknowledged.

Menstrual Health and Menstrual Hygiene Management

A CONTRIBUTION OF SANITATION FOR MILLIONS TO IMPROVED GENDER EQUALITY AND SAFER HYGIENE

Menstrual health and hygiene: an age-old challenge

“Good menstrual hygiene enables women and girls to live a self-determined life. It facilitates access to health, education and equitable livelihood opportunities”¹

Dr Maria Flachsbarth, BMZ Parliamentary State Secretary

Every day, millions of women and girls have to manage their menstruation, an entirely natural physiological process,² yet one that often remains considered too ‘private’ to discuss, let alone manage confidently. Menstrual stigma remains entrenched in societies the world over, but the lack of adequate hygiene facilities and safe menstrual products is particularly acute in many developing countries. Cultural and social attitudes towards females’ place in society – as well as, quite simply, poverty – often stand in the way of women and girls being able to manage their menstrual cycle safely and in dignity. This has profound and wide-reaching implications not only for women’s and girls’ health and well-being, but also for their participation in education, economic activities and social life.

The links between gender equality and menstrual health are slowly gaining traction, and the global Covid-19 pandemic has once again shone the spotlight on period poverty. Despite successful campaigns in recent years to address unfair pricing of menstrual hygiene products, there are many women and girls who depend on charitable donations or sanitary pads being freely available at school.³

Period poverty

Period poverty describes the struggle to afford or access menstrual hygiene products to manage a period. It affects vulnerable women and girls in every society, whether through financial constraints, stigma or ignorance, or a combination of this ‘toxic trio’.

¹ Source: https://twitter.com/BMZ_Bund/status/1265936097479135232 (own translation).

² *Sanitation for Millions* acknowledges that menstrual health and hygiene needs do not exclusively affect females, nor all do all people who identify as female menstruate. In line with recent UNICEF Guidance, we use the ‘women and girls’ rather than the gender-neutral term ‘menstruator’ (which includes transgender, intersex and non-binary people, some of whom also menstruate) to increase readability of this paper.

³ A total of 36 governments, including Germany, the US, Scotland and Uganda have reduced or abolished the ‘tampon tax’. The number of countries offering menstrual products free of charge to schoolgirls is steadily growing, but calls for donations of sanitary products to food banks have risen during the pandemic.

With this safety net temporarily suspended, period poverty soared around the globe. However, even without lockdown-imposed restrictions on mobility, freedom and choices, access to menstrual products and guidance is severely restricted for many women and girls living in low- income countries. They often have no choice but to resort to unhygienic alternatives; 'traditional methods' such as rags, dried plant materials or patties of animal dung double as makeshift sanitary pads.

To make matters worse, in the absence of easily available information that would help girls confront misconceptions and keep themselves healthy, menstruation can quickly become an undignified and traumatic process. Despite national policy frameworks inching towards greater gender inclusivity, school curricula usually remain silent on taboo topics such as menstrual health and hygiene, access to information services for adolescents is limited, and adequate female-friendly facilities are all but missing in public institutions. When school environments so rarely cater for girls' needs during menstruation, it comes at little surprise that many end up missing school days or dropping out of school altogether.

Menstrual health and hygiene on the global agenda

Menstrual health first appeared on the global agenda when the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme adopted this definition for menstrual hygiene management in 2012: 'Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.'

Given that menstrual health is an important part of women's and girls' lives, its protection as a right is woven into the Agenda 2030 and several Sustainable Development Goals – it features prominently, though without explicit mention, as an indicator of access to safe sanitation and hygiene (SDG 6.2). Safe menstrual hygiene management and good menstrual health (clearly an aspect of SDG 3) play a critical role in achieving gender equality (SDG 5), affect educational and economic opportunities (SDGs 4 and 8) as well as sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12).

Clearly, period poverty in combination with menstrual stigma is a worldwide problem with sweeping consequences. On reaching puberty, girls face a multitude of challenges beyond the immediate practicalities of learning to manage a monthly inconvenience. In many cultures the onset of menstruation affects not just a girl's body, but also her role and status in the community. Particularly in socially conservative societies, the experience of puberty is profoundly different for boys and girls. Whereas boys tend to enter a phase during which to project socially constructed masculinity and supremacy, adolescent girls are introduced to expectations of sexual purity or social subservience. Against this background, menstrual health has naturally been struggling to fight its way to being acknowledged – let alone addressed – as a barrier to social development.

Beyond WASH: Sanitation for Millions' approach to menstrual health and menstrual hygiene management

In many partner countries of German cooperation this is the reality for many girls and women, endured on a monthly basis, and quite evidently restricting their life chances. Especially for young women and adolescent girls, the stubborn silence around menstruation is severely affecting their ability to keep themselves safe and healthy at a time when they are more vulnerable. Inappropriate menstrual hygiene practices tend to be more prevalent in more remote and rural areas, and there are links between unsafe customs and low income, social status or educational background.

Sanitation for Millions recognises that good menstrual health comprises more than the practical aspects of menstrual hygiene management (MHM). The programme purposefully looks beyond the sanitary materials, facilities and services needed for safe and dignified self-care during menstruation (i.e. the hygiene part of menstrual health) to consider broader cultural and social factors that affect menstrual health and well-being. Its inclusive approach to menstrual health and MHM seeks to address socio-cultural barriers alongside efforts to extend access to safe products and infrastructure. To this end, *Sanitation for Millions* works closely with local implementing partners to reach out to women and girls, as well as men and boys: a wide range of custom-designed hygiene behaviour communication and capacity development activities complement the construction and rehabilitation of gender-sensitive sanitary facilities. Programme design and indicators are informed by those employed by WHO and UNICEF to monitor MHM as part of sanitation in schools.⁴ Interventions not only meet high technical standards of health and hygiene, but are adequately resourced to ensure the responsible institutions are in a position to cover recurrent MHM expenses. As always, *Sanitation for Millions'* activities cover the entire sanitation chain and are geared towards long-term sustainability, meaning that the environmental impact of menstrual product disposal is considered as an integral part of MHM. Importantly, there is a clear emphasis on culturally appropriate messaging that promotes the empowerment of women and girls whilst remaining respectful of social beliefs, religious norms and customary laws.

The case studies from Jordan, Pakistan and Uganda that follow give an insight into how *Sanitation for Millions'* bottom-up approach to menstrual health and menstrual hygiene management generates direct and tangible impacts, which then feed into the national policy dialogue.

⁴ UNICEF and WHO. 2016. Core questions and indicators for monitoring WASH in Schools in the Sustainable Development Goals. Available at <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-08/SDGs-monitoring-wash-in-schools-2018-August-web2.pdf>



Sanitation for Millions' involvement in MHM in Jordan

Sanitation for Millions' involvement in MHM in Jordan

A wide range of MHM challenges are reported from Jordan, where they are perhaps most acutely felt by women and girls living in 'temporary' refugee settlements. As MHM interventions in schools are coordinated by the Jordanian Ministry of Education, *Sanitation for Millions* looked for alternative ways of contributing to safe MHM, especially for vulnerable women and girls, that linked with existing GIZ activities in the country.⁵ A starting point was offered by the 'Water in Religion' project, which implements sanitation infrastructure improvements in mosques in combination with hygiene awareness campaigns. In Jordan, religion plays an important role in daily life, and cleanliness holds a special place in the Islamic faith. *Sanitation for Millions* has thus been working in partnership with the Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places (MoA) in furtherance of their common objective of promoting hygiene within local communities.

Activities and interventions

Guidance for religious teachers

As the vast majority of the Jordanian population are Muslims, many people have some familiarity with Islamic teachings regarding routine and ritual hygiene practices. The Holy Qur'an and the other religious texts contain clear instructions for maintaining physical as well as spiritual hygiene, and specific mention is made of menstrual hygiene. Although menstruation is generally approached with the same discretion as in other parts of the world, the Islamic religion openly addresses bodily functions and gives specific advice concerning obligations during and after the menstrual period. Given that menstruation is regarded as a natural part of women's lives, scholars and teachers are therefore well-positioned to influence women and girls' MHM choices. Women can turn to waithat, female preachers, for help and advice on navigating all manner of questions in everyday life. Their high standing in Jordanian society and close rapport with local women make waithat an ideal conduit for positive MHM messages.

Providers of religious guidance routinely deliver lessons and lectures and engage their local communities through other activities. In cooperation with the MoA, the General Iftaa' Department, and the Ministry of Water's public relations department, *Sanitation for Millions* developed 'WASH in Islam', a guidebook on water, sanitation and hygiene grounded in Islamic values.⁶ The guide brings together relevant scientific evidence and interpretation of religious opinion to assist religious teachers and staff in relevant government departments with directing individuals towards best practice hygiene behaviours. Designed to be used during training workshops, it offers reference materials and practical ideas for how to engage worshippers and community members, including children, and promoting hygiene principles and concepts through interactive sessions. The guidebook includes a section on MHM that emphasises the importance of supporting mothers and other trusted adults to prepare adolescent girls adequately and addressing MHM-related issues without embarrassment.⁷ Waithat and female school teachers are identified as key resource persons.

⁵ The way the programme is structured, *Sanitation for Millions* relies on existing bilateral programmes for implementation.

⁶ Sanitation for Millions. 2020. WASH in Islam. Guide on water, sanitation and hygiene from an Islamic perspective. GIZ. Bonn.

⁷ The relevant chapter covers the biological aspects of the menstrual cycle and how to practise general menstrual hygiene, as well as a section on the ritual aspects of MHM, such as the full-body purification (bathing) after menstruation.

“Menstruation and postpartum bleeding are a natural part of the physiological composition of a woman's life. It indicates her health and is a normal part of the human existence”

WASH in Islam. Guide on water, sanitation and hygiene from an Islamic perspective, p. 25.

Training to promote hygiene- and MHM-awareness

The guidebook was widely distributed amongst stakeholders, including the Department of Women's Affairs within MoA. A series of short training workshops were held in April 2019 to introduce recipients of the guidebook to its objectives and content, as well as for participants to become acquainted with tools and strategies for awareness raising and hygiene promotion. In December of the same year, *Sanitation for Millions* facilitated workshops for imams and waithat in different Governorates (Mafraq, Irbid, Amman and Karak), which specifically focused on their role in hygiene promotion. These workshops allowed space for peer-to-peer exchanges on relevant experiences from the field and encouraged joint brainstorming of approaches for future lessons on hygiene. Altogether, 220 waithat participated and can now also act as trainer of trainers: in Irbid, for example, all 60 waithat under the regional directorate for Women's Affairs have been trained on hygiene-related matters.

Although waithat may be involved in raising awareness in schools and offer summer camps, where the topic of MHM is raised with girls, the main avenue for sharing MHM advice are the weekly (or more frequent) sessions offered as part of their regular religious lessons to local women. Here, the guidebook is proving useful in channelling knowledge into the communities: by encouraging openness ('there is no shyness in religion')⁸ about information gaps and practical problems, waithat report having helped boost women's confidence to talk to their daughters. Some waithat have been able to share hygiene kits containing sample MHM products procured by *Sanitation for Millions* to discuss and demonstrate appropriate use of different options. Others organised sessions with a specific focus on MHM, to which they invited medical specialists that could offer a complementary perspective on the religious instructions regarding hygiene and MHM. Whichever format is used, the sessions tend to generate open discussions. Attendees, who tend to be more mature ladies rather than young women and girls, feel empowered to share their knowledge and understanding further within their own families and wider communities.



Impressions from the waithat trainings held in a mosque.

⁸ As hygiene has a basis in religious instruction, waithat are comfortable in talking about all aspects of MHM, unconstrained by feelings of shame or embarrassment, which in turn enables other women to share their experiences and concerns.

Insights and reflections

Although local *Sanitation for Millions* staff have modestly described the MHM-related activities in Jordan as ‘very humble’, strengthening the connection between religious and scientific/public health aspects of hygiene has been remarkably impactful. Incorporating MHM in the hygiene guidebook and offering practice-focused trainings for waithat has opened conversations around a topic that remains sensitive despite Islamic scholars’ matter-of-factness about it. By building on their customary educational and advisory role, waithat have become skilled multipliers of essential MHM-related knowledge – knowledge that they assert is every woman’s right and they are going to great lengths to share.

The community sessions routinely delivered by waithat have highlighted a number of concerns, such as the impact of poverty on safe MHM management. A low-income household with several daughters can quickly struggle to provide adequate menstrual hygiene products for all. Particularly in more remote and rural areas, educational levels can be low, which again affects women’s understanding of MHM and ability to prepare the next generation. Waithat try to reach as many women as possible, and may target specific groups, such as staff at teaching centres, to amplify the multiplier effect. While there is some hesitancy and also some practical obstacles to continuing with certain aspects of MHM awareness raising under the umbrella of MoA (e.g. the distribution of hygiene kits), the links forged through the *Sanitation for Millions*-supported activities are sure to outlast the programme itself: strong relationships have been formed at an individual as well as an institutional level. Cooperation on health and hygiene promotion is extending to encompass the Ministry of Health and other high-level organisations, such as the Royal Health Awareness Society. At the very local level, waithat will continue to use their platform in the community, and can support each other, whilst they will be supported through planned refresher courses and other activities coordinated by the MoA’s Department of Women’s Affairs.



**Sanitation for Millions –
experience from Pakistan**

Sanitation for Millions' involvement in MHM in Pakistan

Sanitation for Millions has been engaged in promoting and facilitating safe menstrual health management in Balochistan, the poorest province in Pakistan, since 2017. MHM-related interventions have drawn on and extended WASH activities with *Sanitation for Millions'* local implementing partner, the Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP). Balochistan not only has the highest proportion of out-of-school children in the country (70%), but the overall lowest levels of female school enrolment.⁹ In a region where deeply entrenched gender attitudes continue to curtail girls' education and deny women an equal place in society, offering female-friendly WASH facilities in schools and empowerment through MHM is a significant break with convention. The widespread dearth of safe sanitary products and WASH facilities in homes and institutions is a reflection not just of a general lack of resources but also of a conservative culture, which *Sanitation for Millions* is having to navigate with a high degree of sensitivity. Many programme activities might still be perceived as conflicting with traditional values, which makes awareness raising and sensitisation at every level a high priority for the programme.

Activities and interventions

Female-friendly toilets in schools

Having identified WASH in schools as an entry point to raise the profile of MHM in Pakistan, *Sanitation for Millions*, through BRSP, initially constructed or rehabilitated sanitary facilities in public schools in Quetta district. These infrastructure measures were complemented with extensive, culturally appropriate hygiene awareness campaigns. Special consideration was given to creating female-friendly toilets in middle and high schools, to ensure that girls and female teachers would be able to change sanitary products and wash in privacy. A female-friendly toilet is furnished with a storage cupboard (almirah), mirror, covered waste bin, water bucket, wash basin and also contains an emergency MHM kit, which holds all items a girl or woman might need. As parents had cited poor access to WASH services as one of the reasons for not sending their daughters to school, these new facilities were also intended as a safeguard against adolescent girls missing classes or altogether dropping out of education. WASH clubs were established to involve pupils (boys and girls) in the maintenance of all new facilities and to raise awareness on personal hygiene and, especially at girls' schools, on menstrual health.



Female-friendly toilet at a school in Pakistan. Teachers showing MHM wheel at MHM training.

⁹ Primary school enrolment for girls is only 34%, compared to 58% for boys, and the figures drop for middle and secondary education. GIZ. 2019. Gender Analysis for the project Sanitation for Millions in the province of Balochistan, Pakistan.

Broadening access to information on MHM

Whilst the provision of adequate sanitary facilities to manage the practical side of menstruation during school was a major step towards safe and dignified MHM, what girls needed just as much was reliable information and guidance. Few had access to a knowledgeable, trusted adult they could turn to for help, as even mothers often lack the confidence to broach the subject, let alone offer qualified advice.

Once again, schools acted as a safe space for disseminating information on MHM, which is vital for girls' health and development. Initially, extracurricular activities were offered to compensate for the silence around MHM, which extended to a complete lack of mention of the subject in official school curricula and teacher training. Later on, *Sanitation for Millions* introduced specific teaching materials and facilitated capacity development for teachers. Professional 'train the trainer' sessions were delivered to middle and high school teachers to impart knowledge and demonstrate appropriate communication tools. Most importantly, these sessions aimed to create a culture of openness and trust that helped persuade teachers to take on the role of MHM advisor for their pupils. Meeting off premises, outside of school hours, and in small groups of around 25, participants gained the understanding and confidence to discuss what is still widely regarded as a taboo subject.

Since 2019, *Sanitation for Millions* has extended its awareness raising activities to basic healthcare units, which have also been upgraded with female-friendly sanitary facilities. Lady health workers (LHWs)¹⁰ have been invited to attend the training sessions and are envisaged to offer another avenue for reaching out to women and girls in the wider community. In total, 200 participants – 161 teachers and 39 LHW – had been trained by the end of 2020 and are now in a position to deliver sessions and act as trainers themselves, such that further teachers and healthcare workers can be trained.

As unsafe menstrual hygiene practices are a critical though mostly hidden medical issue, the programme had initially sought to involve doctors as another trusted source of information. *Sanitation for Millions* had been able to mobilise medical staff to give voluntary talks in schools, but these visits were hampered by cancellations due to emergencies and frequent unavailability of doctors. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and lengthy school closures, the plan had to be dropped.

By then, however, teachers had already emerged as skilled and better placed to offer guidance to their students. In fact, they are becoming experts at sensitively assisting girls with the challenges of puberty, and are now routinely giving competent advice on dealing with all aspects of MHM. Girls are being enabled to make informed choices and now also have the means to look after themselves during menstruation; MHM kits containing a hot water bottle, bag, sanitary napkins, underwear, brown paper bag, disinfectant soap, green tea, and a dark scarf to cover accidental stains have been distributed. BRSP's social teams regularly visit schools to give guidance and inputs for the MHM sessions and oversee progress.

"I am from an educated and liberal family but when it was to discuss menstrual issues, there was a kind of barrier and I was really hesitant to share my issues with my mom and teachers. After getting training by GIZ, I not only gained confidence to discuss MHM at any platform but was also started boosting confidence of young girls so that they don't feel hesitant and discuss issues if they face any"

Saira – Public Teacher and participant of the Training of Trainer sessions offered by Sanitation for Millions

¹⁰ A lady healthcare worker is similar to a (female) health visitor in the UK, or in Germany, a social worker, though with a focus on health-related matters. LHW play an important role in the Pakistani healthcare system and assist with the health needs of more vulnerable populations in particular.

Sanitation for Millions also promotes the inclusion of MHM into the life skills school curriculum for both girls and boys:¹¹ growing up equipped with proper knowledge and an awareness of each other's needs is expected to promote acceptance and tackle the persistent stigma of menstruation. Drawing on existing government-approved educational materials originally developed by UNICEF and other development organisations, *Sanitation for Millions* is currently in discussions with the government of Balochistan on how to mainstream this highly sensitive topic into school routines.

Mainstreaming MHM beyond schools

While nascent national and provincial MHM Working Groups connect the development partners active in MHM in Pakistan with the relevant government stakeholders, the challenge of raising the profile of MHM and effecting substantive change remains. Looking for ways to broaden the impact of its programme interventions through effective partnerships, *Sanitation for Millions* used a national workshop in June 2019 to discuss experiences and approaches employed by other organisations and government representatives and the way forward for MHM in Pakistan. A wide range of stakeholders, including public officials, development partners such as UNICEF, external support agencies, CSOs and academia¹² came together to exchange knowledge and discuss the design and implementation of MHM concepts in all four provinces.

During the workshop, participants identified weak coordination, policy gaps, severe resource and capacity constraints, lack of data and monitoring, and persistent socio-cultural and religious barriers as key challenges for universally accessible safe MHM. For Balochistan, one of the recommendations was to review and strengthen the provincial MHM working group, which had remained largely dormant since its inception. From mid-2020, *Sanitation for Millions* facilitated a more active working group by employing a provincial coordinator on MHM. With the help of the coordinator, the group has been revived, a secretariat established and the MHM subject introduced to various government representatives. Government authorities, external agencies as well as NGOs/CSOs recently have been invited to nominate a focal person for the WG, and the group is now working on an action plan for the province.

While there is still some hesitancy and culturally ingrained inhibitions amongst local stakeholders, political support is gradually forthcoming, notably also from male politicians. *Sanitation for Millions* has been able to convince a member of parliament to act as an MHM ambassador. Her support in spreading the message and breaking taboos is considered highly valuable. Various stakeholders have endorsed the involvement of *Sanitation for Millions* as a 'neutral' broker whose approach is focused on developing local capacities. Through its close working relationship with the Department of Education in Balochistan, *Sanitation for Millions* has been able to integrate MHM into policy such as the Balochistan education sector plan, which again is a significant step forward.

"I confidently talk about my menstrual health and hygiene and that menstruation does not become a barrier in my life"

Shakila Naveed – Member of Provincial Assembly of Balochistan, Pakistan – MHM Ambassador for the MHM coordination group and MHM in Balochistan

¹¹ At the moment, the primary curriculum makes no mention of MHM at all, whereas lessons for middle and high school pupils do not cover MHM in sufficient depth.

¹² The workshop attracted over 70 participants, including senior male decision makers.

Way forward

In order to broaden its reach, especially amongst some of the more vulnerable girls and women, *Sanitation for Millions* is looking into extending its WASH interventions into religious schools. Many low-income households and refugee families prefer to send their children to a religious school (madaris). With the context steeped in conservative traditions, this move will require careful adjustments to sensibilities.

As the *Sanitation for Millions* approach to MHM comprises the safe disposal of materials used during menstruation, the programme is also looking to address the environmental impact created by the changing usage patterns. Although the uptake of commercial pads is still relatively low, disposables create a significant amount of potentially hazardous waste, which again needs to be managed. Unlike in neighbouring Bangladesh and India, there are currently no biodegradable disposable products available in the Pakistani market. With a view to offering a balance between comfort and safety for women and girls, ensuring affordability and minimising environmental impact, *Sanitation for Millions* is exploring partnerships with local manufacturers to develop and introduce biodegradable pads into the market.

Insights and reflections

The activities and interventions described in this case study are all ongoing, so this is less an evaluation of outcomes than a reflection on progress. *Sanitation for Millions* has successfully piloted and improved its conceptual approach to MHM in Balochistan, counting some significant achievements, notably the inclusion of MHM into education policy. The programme is taking great care to forge alliances and partner with other stakeholders' efforts in improving MHM in Pakistan. There are still misgivings about 'gender issues' and MHM in some quarters, with people being wary of a 'Western agenda' being promoted. The MHM Working Groups provide an opening for true mainstreaming across sectors and hierarchies. Involving government officials, parliamentarians, private sector stakeholders and civil society is aimed at institutionalising and embedding MHM in national and/or provincial policy and maximising impact.

At the community level, the prevalent lack of awareness cannot be overemphasised: in many districts, MHM remains a complete taboo. Trust and cultural sensitivity are key to connecting with women and girls as the primary target groups, but also their wider families and community members. Relationships are supremely important, which is why teachers have become invaluable: even more so than medical professionals, teachers have proved to be effective messengers, as they are well-respected in their communities and speak the right language in every sense of the word. By establishing a network of trainers, *Sanitation for Millions* is harnessing the multiplier effect of skilled and confident female champions for safe MHM. There are first indications that these efforts are bearing fruit, as a decline in absenteeism amongst older girls has been observed in various partner schools.



Sanitation for Millions – experience from Uganda

Sanitation for Millions – experience from Uganda

In Uganda, *Sanitation for Millions* is implementing a range of MHM-related activities as part of a wider programme of infrastructure measures and accompanying capacity building. Although menstruation continues to be steeped in misconceptions, especially in far-flung areas of the country, the programme is sailing in the tailwind of strong government support: in 2015, the Government of Uganda formally recognised MHM as ‘fundamental to the dignity and wellbeing of girls and women’.¹³ In a groundbreaking statement, the national Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter acknowledged the negative cultural associations of menstruation that stigmatise girls and women, as well as the everyday practical challenges they face, notably the lack of access to suitable WASH facilities and MHM materials.

Sanitation for Millions’ comprehensive package of interventions, which initially focused on public schools and health centres, responds to the call for innovative facilities that cater for the needs of women and girls and the wider promotion of MHM. The programme works in close partnership with *Kampala Capital City Authority* (KCCA) and the local authorities of a number of smaller towns in the Apac cluster in the North of the country. The Global NGO *Days for Girls* (DfG) was brought on board as an experienced facilitator of empowerment for girls through targeted, hands-on and gender-inclusive MHM interventions.

Activities and interventions

Female-friendly facilities in schools

Model facilities have been constructed in a total of 17 schools in Kampala and Apac district to showcase good practice for inclusive sanitation that can easily be replicated in other schools and public spaces. New gender-separated toilet blocks were constructed, or old ones rehabilitated, and all girls’ blocks were equipped to allow for dignified and safe menstrual hygiene management. Waste management considerations formed an integral part of these upgrades, as few schools were found to have incinerators to ensure safe disposal of menstrual hygiene products.



Newly handed over sanitation facilities at Kibuli Demonstration school, a public school in Kampala.

In addition to providing the new hardware, *Sanitation for Millions* emphasised the need to ensure cleanliness and functionality. School administrators and senior leaders received guidance and training on operational and maintenance aspects, and the entire school community is becoming involved in keeping

¹³ GoU 2015. Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter – Uganda 2015.

their new WASH facilities hygienically clean and in good repair. Peer-to-peer learning visits to demonstration schools were facilitated to disseminate emerging best practice. The whole-school approach has been reinforced through indirect measures: in the 'Toilets Making the Grade' school competitions, teams of pupils, parents and staff responded with great enthusiasm to the challenge of identifying WASH needs and developing their own solutions for improving facilities in their schools.

Given the strong association between school attendance and menstruation, and also poverty, *Sanitation for Millions* is supporting schools in creating awareness on the emergency measures directed to educational institutions on menstrual hygiene products to provide emergency MHM supplies. Whilst it has become mandatory for schools to make sanitary pads and spare uniforms available for girls in need, many schools struggle to cover these additional expenses with their meagre budgets. Arguably, this is another example of the wide gaps between well-intended requirements and the stark realities in an over-subscribed public school serving a low-income catchment. In response, *Sanitation for Millions* has been supporting KCCA in rolling out the 'Three Star Approach' (TSA) for monitoring WASH in Schools, which aims to anchor incremental improvements towards the national standards in each school's budget plan. A recently published implementation manual on the TSA¹⁴ includes a dedicated section on MHM, and 'next steps' recommendations are now offered by KCCA as a matter of routine upon evaluation of annual school self-assessments. Currently only one of the 79 public schools in Kampala holds a three-star rating (for having an MHM space, emergency kits and a functional incinerator), but 32 have been awarded two stars for keeping basics available.

Broadening access to information on MHM

Alongside creating safe spaces for MHM in schools, *Sanitation for Millions* also sought to address the host of misinformation about menstruation and inadequate preparedness for menarche. Without ready access to easy-to-use products and a proper understanding of their changing bodies, especially younger girls are frequently left at a loss of how to deal with their periods effectively and confidently. As embarrassment and fear of being teased are particularly relevant in a school setting, it was decided that interventions to promote improved knowledge, attitudes and practices should not be limited to girls and female teachers. Building on their existing training model 'Make Your Own', *Days for Girls* delivered hands-on sessions for boys and girls to communicate basic knowledge on reproductive health and hygiene and to teach making their own set of DfG's custom-designed washable sanitary pads. As reliable data on existing MHM practice and needs in Uganda is scarce, all training was informed by an assessment conducted in five schools in Kampala, as well as one school and one health centre in Apac. DfG surveyed students in the upper primary years (P7), interviewed staff and invited parents and guardians for focus group discussions.¹⁵

Two-day training sessions for mixed groups of boys and girls were held in 2019 in seven Kampala primary schools and one Apac school, covering a wide range of MHM-related topics including puberty, the menstrual cycle, anatomy and hygiene, as well as 'strong choices' and self-defence. Lecture-style and discussion-based learning was complemented with teaching of practical skills: girls learned to hand-sew pads (protective shields and foldable, absorbable liners), whilst boys sewed the beautiful bags that complete the DfG kit. Every girl received a small DfG kit of washables to keep for her own use, but trainers gave demonstrations of the wide range of other menstrual hygiene products that are available to ensure every girl could make informed choices. Incidentally, the DfG kits proved very popular not just amongst the students, but also teachers expressed their interest. Made of high-quality 100% cotton flannel in attractive colours, the pads are quick and easy to wash and, as they resemble a handkerchief, they are

¹⁴ Pizzacalla, K. and Nantume, G. 2020. WinS Models that Work. Step-by-step actions to reach the national standards for WASH in Schools (WinS) in line with the Three Star Approach (TSA). First edition. GIZ, Sanitation for Millions.

¹⁵ Nampeera Akampikaho, D. 2019. 'Make Your Own Project' in Kampala and Apac. GIZ Final Project Report.

inconspicuous on the washing line when drying. Also, whilst disposable pads are readily available and used by a majority of girls surveyed for the project (61%), they are expensive – sometimes too expensive even for teachers.

Sessions for students were complemented with ‘train the trainer/trainee’ (ToT) sessions for educators. Within the schools, MHM is already touched upon in lessons, though these vary in content and quality. Together with DfG and steering committees comprising school management and senior leaders, *Sanitation for Millions* worked with schools to offer training based on a WASH training manual covering all aspects of MHM: from understanding puberty and menstruation to common myths and misconceptions, and of course the standard infrastructure required. Key focal staff, mostly headteachers, deputies, sanitation teachers or other male or female senior teachers, were identified to participate in ToT sessions from October 2020 onwards – in total, 69 attended, with an almost equal male/female split (34 males and 35 females).

Whilst the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has added a further set of obstacles to MHM and efforts to support women and girls, the new circumstances also offered opportunities: parents, whose limited support to girl children has been cited as a significant challenge especially in disadvantaged contexts, are now being reached more easily as a result of the phased approach to school reopening after Covid closures. With staggered school starting times, informal meetings can now be held to talk to parents not only about new Covid protocols, but also about menstrual health.

Mainstreaming MHM beyond schools

To increase the reach of the project, Infection Prevention and Control officers at health care centres as well as division health inspectors from all five divisions in Kampala were also invited to attend the training. The latter were chosen for their role in hygiene promotion in the wider community – another opportunity to spread the MHM message widely. Capacity building within schools and beyond is bearing fruit; participants in the ToT sessions have themselves been delivering training sessions in institutions and the community since January 2021. Addressing both genders has been a learning curve, but one that is being managed with increasing confidence.

Sanitation for Millions continues to engage in the national MHM coalition, through which the programme has had input into the proposed MHM strategy for Uganda. The cross-sectoral coalition, which comprises numerous ministries¹⁶ and non-state actors, is currently working on producing a standard manual for the delivery of MHM/reproductive health education. Uganda is fortunate to count itself amongst leading countries in the MHM space, in terms of infrastructure, standards and active partners. However, even as policy is developing and firming up, this does not automatically translate into action on the ground – it continues to rely on the engagement with individuals and communities, connecting all the social and practical aspects that enable safe MHM, and unlocking the funding to implement necessary actions. Preparations for MHM Day 2021 are in full swing, with a broad programme including a national workshop as well as radio and televised talk shows planned to strengthen advocacy and address the lingering cultural taboos surrounding menstruation and menstrual health and hygiene.

¹⁶ Ministry of Health, Ministry of Water and Environment, Ministry of Education Science, Technology and Sports, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and Ministry of Local Government, along with the Parliamentary WASH Forum.

Insights and reflections

The *Sanitation for Millions* interventions have been commended for their holistic approach to MHM, which looks at the full range of enabling factors and empowerment for disadvantaged girls and women. Much-needed MHM products were offered in combination with the necessary WASH facilities, and training was centred around improving the knowledge of the child, including boys. Ignorance often lies at the root of shame, which is why the participatory sessions engaged pre-teenage girls and boys (ten- to twelve-year-olds). Perceptions are clearly changing, as the programme has registered significant improvements in attendance and general confidence of girls. The overwhelmingly positive response of many boys came as a surprise: their requests to be allowed to sew not only carry bags for their classmates, but washable pads to take home for their sisters shows an appreciation of MHM needs that bodes well for the profound change in attitudes that is needed to support girls and young women through their future lives.

“One thing I liked about Sanitation for Millions was that it looked at menstruation as a whole, not just the period. It’s not enough to provide pads for the three or four days.”

Diana Nampeera, Country Director, Days for Girls East Africa

The newly built or rehabilitated, well-maintained and clean facilities are having a positive impact on MHM and hygiene behaviours. Equipped with the knowledge and awareness of WASH and MHM guidance (e.g. emergency kits) and O&M requirements, schools are now in a better position to budget. Division education supervisors ensure that reporting requirements are met and schools are working towards national standards. Often it was the more indirect measures that proved enormously impactful. The school competitions, for example, sparked self-reflective assessments of WASH in school, leading not only to truly tailor-made and cost-effective solutions, but also a greater mutual understanding of the WASH needs of everyone in the entire school community – including girls’ (and female staff) MHM needs.

Stakeholder engagement has been crucial to the success of the programme: *Sanitation for Millions* has built broad coalitions at the local level. From pupil to head teacher, parent to governing board, every school stakeholder was encouraged to become actively involved. Capacities have been built through ToT and peer-to-peer exchanges, and institutional links have been fostered across the education and health sectors. Whilst the programme could count on invaluable political support, looking ahead, funding constraints remain a critical challenge. Menstrual products are a significant expense for many low-income families. Washables are increasing in popularity in Uganda, not least for their familiarity and lower environmental impact, but the larger initial investment required can be a barrier. *Sanitation for Millions* and its implementation partner DfG are reviewing the cost of basic kits and materials, though these expenses must be weighed against the life skills gained during practical training. With regard to disposable options, the management of menstrual waste remains a challenge and will become an area of focus going forward.

Reflections on menstrual health programming

Piloting the *Sanitation for Millions conceptual approach to MHM* together with local implementation partners and stakeholders has been an invaluable opportunity to push the boundaries of sanitation and hygiene programming. The three case studies not only illustrate how *Sanitation for Millions* is addressing the immediate predicament faced by girls and women with regard to menstrual hygiene. Of course, as a programme primarily tasked with advancing access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene, all MHM-related interventions were either integrated with or complementary to *Sanitation for Millions'* infrastructure support measures. Critically though, the various activities trialled in Jordan, Pakistan and Uganda offer a glimpse of how to nudge perceptions at the individual level, whilst catalysing at the national level the systemic changes needed to ensure menstrual health: attitudes need to shift and supportive policies need to be introduced and then implemented within and beyond the WASH sector.

There are many similarities between Jordan, Pakistan and Uganda in terms of the individual experience of women and girls – many of which are shared by women and girls in other countries, North or South. There are also crucial contextual differences related to social attitudes and cultural practices, which were put front and centre of what became three unique pilots. This final chapter shares what we have learnt so far and reflects on our ambition to provide a holistic way forward, one where menstrual health is not hemmed in by narrow definitions of a 'hygiene problem' but instead becomes a means of promoting inclusivity and empowerment.

Knowledge helps with understanding – education can change the future

Especially for girls, but also boys, understanding menstruation as part of a normal and healthy reproductive cycle is a first but significant step towards safe and dignified menstrual health and hygiene. Menarche is a critical transition point in a girl's life, where personal confidence and a supportive environment can have a decisive influence on her longer-term path of success. Menstruation is a sensitive topic for many prepubescent girls, no matter where they are growing up, but too many girls are literally caught unawares by their first period. Equipped with the right knowledge at an early enough age, girls are far more likely to have a positive first menstrual experience, which makes having a trusted source of reliable, practical information so very important.

By offering educational activities alongside new female-friendly sanitary facilities in schools, *Sanitation for Millions* has been helping to reframe menstruation as entirely natural and manageable. Including boys as a matter of course helps everyone understand and appreciate each other's needs. The much-dreaded shaming and teasing is often linked to ignorance, but gender-inclusive participatory sessions can be surprisingly effective. Better still, they hold the promise for a more female-friendly future: the Ugandan boys who asked to sew sanitary pads to give to their sisters will soon grow into men who may well be more empathetic towards the women in their lives.

Building and amplifying capacity

However, where this education was never available to mothers and teachers, they may not be able to provide the necessary support even if they wanted to. *Sanitation for Millions* has invested in capacity building for school teachers, religious counsellors and healthcare workers. As a result of the hugely popular and successful 'train the trainer' sessions, each country now has a growing cadre of advisors with the skills and confidence to break taboos and dismantle the many misconceptions that compromise menstrual health. Girls and women can now seek guidance from teachers who are at ease with the topic and give straightforward answers, removing some of the awkwardness that so often acts as a deterrent. As these professionals go on to train further MHM advisors, this multiplier effect creates more and more skilled champions of safe MHM.

At the same time, capacity development has also focused on supporting institutions with providing (or overseeing the provision of) the products, facilities and services that are needed to support menstrual health and hygiene. To avoid revamped toilets following the usual trajectory of gradual decline and disrepair, *Sanitation for Millions* has made efforts to understand the challenges faced by institutions such as schools and helped to take pre-emptive or corrective action. For instance, no infrastructure built or rehabilitated by *Sanitation for Millions* is handed over without training on operations and maintenance. Local authorities are supported to monitor and guide towards incremental improvements, with MHM explicitly included as an essential part of WASH in school.

Supportive networks to institutionalise long-term change

Sanitation for Millions is fostering supportive networks across sectors and hierarchies. At the local level, stakeholder collaborations are helping to move MHM forward for individual women and girls; engaging with broader coalitions of NGOs, civil society and government at the national level, aims to institutionalise and embed forward-thinking menstrual health policy. The education and health sectors have proved excellent entry points, though depending on context there may be very alternative options, which are perhaps less immediately obvious. Drawing on shared objectives of religious doctrine and public health, for example, has been very impactful.

Embracing cultural change to end period poverty and ensure menstrual health

There is no denying that poverty remains a critical challenge for safe menstrual health and hygiene. If financial hardship is forcing low-income households in comparatively wealthy countries to choose between sanitary products and other basic necessities, period poverty is immeasurably worse in low-income countries. Women's and girls' needs are not always a high priority when family budgets are allocated, particularly where household finances are managed by people with a very poor understanding of MHM and all its implications. This only serves to reiterate the point that while helpful and generally welcome, providing MHM products and facilities is not enough to create a world without period poverty and menstrual stigma. While the case studies offer no quick and easy answer to the persistent financing problem, *Sanitation for Millions* has taken on board the calls for an approach that put women's rights and empowerment at the heart of menstrual health. Transforming culture holds the key to transforming menstrual health.

As a final thought, it may be helpful to remember that menstruation is beset with taboos in almost every culture. But if 'culture' is essentially a social construct, it can change – or be changed – over time. Indeed, as the Jordan case aptly demonstrates, it is possible to harness 'culture' in support of women's and girls' physical and emotional needs. It pays to look very carefully at local beliefs and attitudes to identify entry points for engaging with specific target groups and the wider community. With patience and determination (or cultural sensitivity and competent technical backstopping), education and capacity building can complement hardware interventions to realise the 2030 vision of a world in which menstruation no longer holds women back. *Sanitation for Millions* fully recognises the transformational potential of menstrual health and is embracing the challenge.



SANITATION FOR MILLIONS

Funded by



BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation



Implemented by



In Partnership
with



In cooperation
with



Published by

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
Registered offices Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

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On behalf of

German Federal Ministry for
Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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Design

by creative republic / Germany

Photos by

© GIZ/ BRSP/ Abdul Wahid (Photographer), 2019-2021
(pages 1,12,13)

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2019-2021

As at

April 2021

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