



Health: Both a prerequisite and an outcome of sustainable development.

[BRIEF]

Menstrual Hygiene Management

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are based on the right and the ability of all individuals to decide over their own bodies, and to live healthy and productive lives.

Addressing SRHR is thus key to ensuring sustainable development. Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is part of the overall efforts within SRHR. MHM has an impact on development as it has implications on the life of girls and women related to health, education, work, mobility and security. This guide gives a brief overview of why menstruation matters and how to consider menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in development and humanitarian projects and programmes, as well as within national and international policy processes.

WHY MENSTRUATION MATTERS

The lack of proper sanitation facilities and proper and affordable hygiene materials for the use by adolescent girls and women at home, at school and at workplaces, affects their health, their potential to access education, employment, overall safety and quality of life. Many girls and women in low- and middle income countries face various barriers in managing menstruation. Special attention must be given to women and girls in vulnerable situations, and especially to women and girls who have been displaced or affected by emergencies.

- **Health related risks:** Unsafe and unhygienic materials to absorb menstrual blood can lead to vaginal infections, with possible long-term effects on reproductive health.

- **Psycho-social effects:** Menstruation is often associated with shame and disgust, resulting in negative attitudes. Restricting socio-cultural practices surrounding menstruation is common.
- **Education:** In many cases, girls will not attend school for the duration of their periods^{1,2,3}. This is particularly evident in schools with inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.
- **Productive work time:** Women will be constrained to pursue and maintain employment when they are not able to manage their menstruation hygienically and in privacy at work.
- **Environment:** With lack of or limited waste management, non-reusable and commercial items are often disposed into the environment.

Definition of MHM

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) has been defined as: "women and adolescent girls using a clean menstrual management material to absorb and collect blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the period, using soap and water for washing the body as required and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials".⁴

1 http://www.unicef.org/esaro/7310_Gender_and_WASH.html

2 WHO and Unicef Progress on sanitation and drinking water 2013 - update

3 Menstrual hygiene management and school absenteeism among female adolescent students in Northeast Ethiopia. Tegegne and Sisay BMC Public Health 2014, 14:1118
<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/14/1118>

4 Unicef (2013, and 2014) Proceedings of the MHM Virtual conference

KEY CHALLENGES AND ENTRY POINTS FOR SIDA

WASH infrastructure

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities are essential for MHM. A safe, clean and private space for changing materials, water and soap to maintain personal hygiene and –if required- also for washing and drying materials is essential. According to the UN Development Goals Report approximately 2 billion people still do not have access to proper sanitation facilities⁵. A majority of schools in developing countries do not provide for adequate WASH facilities that assure functionality and gender-segregation. Maintaining personal hygiene, changing, disposing and/or washing absorbents can become major tasks, hence due to this hardship girls are forced to stay away from attending school.

Menstrual absorbents

Women and girls resort to using unhygienic, unsafe materials during their menstruation due to several factors such as: unavailability, shame experienced when purchasing products publically, and/or inability to pay or a matter of choosing not to spend limited financial means on menstrual needs. The use of inappropriate materials or the unhygienic handling of unsafe materials may also be linked to a lack of knowledge. To make menstrual materials more affordable, more accessible, as well as to reduce harm to the environment, various strategies have emerged in recent years such as:

- Sustainable, ecological and/or lower-costs options, such as washable pads or menstrual cups.
- Subsidize sanitary pad distribution in schools. Unfortunately the experience is mixed in terms of sustainability and has been causing disposal problems.
- Locally produced pads by community based organisations (CBOs).
- Countries such as Canada⁶ and Kenya⁷ removed the luxury and/or consumer tax from sanitary products.

While it is expected that the market for commercial products will continue to grow in developing countries, it is important to acknowledge that many women/girls in low-income settings will not be able to benefit from this.

Disposal

Safe disposal will prevent exposure, human contact and achieve a harmless destruction of soiled materials.

If possible materials should be collected and disposed with municipal solid waste management. If that system does not exist, on-site disposal should happen through safe technology (deep burial, composting, pit burning and incineration). Small-scale incinerators are a viable option, but there are health concerns when burning plastic, and they are not always fully functional. The lack of or inadequate unsafe disposal for soiled materials, with women being forced to dispose it in secrecy will reinforce the stigma and shame surrounding menstruation. More research is needed for appropriate disposal solutions that are safe, effective, and affordable.

Information and Education

Receiving factual and comprehensive information about biology and the different aspects of good MHM is crucial to ensure that women and girls can act on their needs.

In many low and middle income countries there is no mandated and very limited education in schools concerning menstruation. Teachers are hesitant or unwilling to discuss MHM due to the taboo, being uninformed themselves. Girls are mostly receiving information from their mothers. Comprehensive sexuality education and education and training in SRHR should ideally include MHM. Capacity building to teachers and health workers etc. is also highly required. It is important to include men and boys in training and education to increase their understanding and foster their support, particularly by not imposing discriminatory practices. Existing socio-cultural taboos and discriminatory practices around menstruation need to be challenged.

MHM IN A DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

The key development sectors where MHM could be included are health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), education and gender. The private sector is also increasingly being engaged. The inter-linkages are clear: the lack of education around puberty, including menstruation and pregnancy, is acting as a barrier to girls'/women empowerment and their ability to make good decisions about their sexual and reproductive health over the course of their life. In the same time provision of good WASH services is essential for achieving reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health.

Policy at national and global level

MHM is a concern not only for women, but for women and men equally, and for societies. It should be addressed at policy level to ensure proper actions. Addressing MHM needs to be highly contextualized and very country specific. In countries with high awareness concerning reproductive health, it might be possible to address MHM

⁵ United Nations Development Goals Report 2015

⁶ <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2015/05/29/3664080/canada-tampon-tax/>

⁷ <http://www.irinnews.org/report/48694/kenya-women-praise-kibaki-s-directive-to-drop-tax-on-sanitary-towels>

up-front. In other settings it might be necessary or easier to start approaching MHM indirectly from the WASH sector. While implementing a standard around gender/MHM-friendly infrastructure is possible, the design of interventions and policies need to take into account important factors such as local cultural practices, different needs of different age groups etc.

MHM in emergency and humanitarian crisis situations

In emergency/humanitarian crisis situations women and girls are particularly vulnerable. MHM is often not properly addressed, thus many women and girls lack or have difficulty in accessing adequate hygienic and absorbent menstrual materials and WASH facilities. In regards to MHM, these are some of the proposed actions suggested in emergency situations in the SPHERE Handbook:⁸

- Provision of appropriate materials for menstrual hygiene (dignity or sanitary kits).
- Provision for discreet laundering or disposal of menstrual hygiene materials.
- Adequate access to water and soap for daily hygiene as well as for the increased needs during menstruation.

Research

More research and evidence is needed in order to demonstrate the positive overall effects on society and economic development based on of the provision of proper MHM. There is a growing body of research, particularly around knowledge, attitudes and practices. However, some of the gaps are:

- Evidence from programmes that combine hardware and software interventions, in particular for better understanding of the nuanced effect improving MHM may have on girls' attendance at school, on health, as well on changing attitudes and self-esteem.
- Health effects of poor MHM, health risks associated with the use of certain products and certain practices.
- The economics of investments on MHM programs and impacts on overall development.
- Socio-economic impacts of product donation/tax reduction programmes.
- Product standards and new sustainable and affordable innovations.
- Effectiveness and standards for different low-cost disposal options.

Entry points for Sida

- Support the development and dissemination of policies, guidelines or programmes around MHM, including capacity building on all levels.
- Support multi-sectorial collaboration among ministries and stakeholders on all levels to develop strategies, policies, and/ or programmes that include MHM.
- Ensure that humanitarian organizations are including MHM in emergency responses.
- Support applied research that provides evidence for programme impact as well basis for policy and programmatic decision-making.
- Support the development and provision of sustainable and ecological solutions and innovations related to MHM.
- Support distribution schemes for schools and workplaces/ institutions, but only if professionally designed, with proper allocation of funds; and ideally embedded in broader programmes with education, infrastructure and disposal.
- Support programmes that provide education to girls, boys, and teachers in schools, ideally that are involving family, men and community. Programmes should be sustainable in that they include long-term engagement strategy for schools.

⁸ Sumpter, Torndel (2013): A systematic review of the health and social effects of menstrual hygiene ; PLOS 1

KEY READING

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