

**WATER For
PEOPLE**



Menstrual Hygiene Management

A Pilot Study in West Bengal, India



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Menstrual Hygiene Management

- A Pilot study, West Bengal, India



The logo for Water For People, featuring the text "WATER For PEOPLE" in a bold, sans-serif font. The word "WATER" is on the top line, "For" is in a smaller font size on the second line, and "PEOPLE" is on the third line. The text is centered between two horizontal lines.

**WATER For
PEOPLE**

A smaller version of the Water For People logo, consisting of three horizontal lines.

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We sincerely hope that the findings of the study will be extensively used and acted upon by all those who wish to make a difference in the lives of the vulnerable and underprivileged.

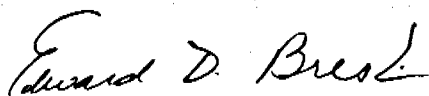
FOREWORD

The International Year of Sanitation is almost over and the results of the year are mixed. At one level, sanitation has moved out of the shadows. Many agencies and activists who have prioritized sanitation, and pushed leaders to recognize the importance of sanitation as a key development intervention, should be proud of their efforts as we are seeing some movement in pushing sanitation up the development ladder.

Yet sanitation successes remain elusive because the sector still has not worked out creative, holistic ways to programme sanitation. Unsustainable and unreplicable subsidies still dominate the sector, latrine construction still carries the day, and millions of toilets still go unused or, even worse, unusable because the toilets are poorly managed and unhygienic.

Success requires not only rethinking the approaches we apply to sanitation, but some basic assumptions around sanitation that continue to dominate the day. If we are really to break through and transform the sector, we need to pull the curtains back on a range of issues that we rarely wish to discuss. Sadly, menstrual hygiene remains a mystery to far too many sector role players. Simple assumptions like "girls will attend school if there is a latrine" have proven to be false, as the challenges teenage girls (and their role models, female teachers) face is far more complex than simply improved infrastructure. Water For People - India understood that the construction of new latrines was not sufficient in itself and undertook the brave effort to investigate this taboo subject.

The following report is an important step in better sanitation programming with a meaningful gender focus. The shame and difficulties expressed by girls and teachers throughout the report should give us all pause, and make us realize that we need to probe these harder to reach socio-cultural areas if we are to play a truly transformative role through the vehicle of improved water supply and sanitation. This report is but a first step in understanding the complexities of menstrual health and hygiene. But it is an important step, and one that can lead to better programming if we are willing to ask hard questions of our work.



Director, International Programmes
Water For People, Denver, USA



Background:

Menstruation is shameful - this is what women have been taught over decades. Women indirectly, if not directly, absorb the messages that menstrual blood is dirty, smelly, unhygienic and unclean. Menstruating women are considered impure and not allowed to participate in social functions. Thus, a natural physical process is translated into a situation where women want to hide their blood and throw it away as trash. The embarrassment surrounding menstruation is a somewhat universal phenomenon, found in most cultures of the world.

As if inevitable, the subject of menstrual hygiene has remained elusive not only in development initiatives, but also in 'gendered' debates and programmes. Yet, the manifestations of this neglect are not difficult to gauge if one looks deep into the standard indicators of women's health. However, as the problem is central to women's own needs of privacy and comfort, given her social and economic status, it is unlikely that 'she' will lend it priority, voice her needs and demand change. It is even more unlikely that planners and policy influencers (who by and large are men) will gain an understanding about the issue and act upon it with spontaneity.

This pilot study stems from the need for understanding and bringing into the open, various issues that surround prevailing practices of menstrual hygiene among rural disadvantaged women and girls. It attempts to diagnose the factors that influence practice, the coping mechanisms women choose and to document their impact on women's health. It is hoped that findings of this effort will spark interest about the subject of menstrual hygiene and prompt appropriate action from all sections, to enable women to have healthier and more dignified lives.

'..... Menstrual Management is missing from the literature whether it is manuals to sensitize engineers to gender needs or technical manuals on latrine designs, sanitation for secondary schools, solid waste issues composting, bio-degradable materials or even simple training modules for health and sanitary workers.'

- Sowmyaa Bharadwaj and Archana Patkar in *Menstrual Hygiene & Management In Developing Countries: Taking Stock*, November 2004.

The subject of Menstrual Health Management (MHM) is striking in its absence in policy debates. Practical work also does not reveal an understanding and action on what adolescent girls and women require to manage their menstrual needs, in terms of materials, education and facilities for management and disposal. Summarised, existing literature and programme interventions point to the following areas that require immediate attention:

- Although poor sanitation is correlated with absenteeism and drop-out of girls, efforts in **school sanitation** to address this issue have ignored menstrual management in toilet design and construction. Wider aspects of the issue such as privacy, water availability and awareness raising amongst boys and men remain largely unexplored by development initiatives.
- Initiatives in **Gender mainstreaming in the Water & Sanitation** sector are restricted to very small pilots, with poor follow-up and poor dissemination of results. Programmes do not pay attention to areas of adequacy of water for washing and bathing, availability of hygienic materials and solid waste management of disposables..
- **Hygiene promotion** efforts have recently initiated a focus on this area but mainly on the software aspects i.e. telling girls and women about correct practices. These efforts are limited and sporadic. They do not currently target men and adolescent boys, nor do they systematically influence infrastructure design.
- Minimal effort has gone into **production and social marketing of low-cost napkins**, reusable materials, research into bio-degradables, etc. Research and development efforts have been limited to commercial ventures that even today are unable to market products that are affordable for the poorest of the poor.
- The issue of washing of soiled materials and environmentally friendly disposal of napkins is absent from **waste management training**, infrastructure design and impact evaluation.

Pilot Study, West Bengal

This pilot study was conducted in villages of South 24 Parganas and East Midnapore districts in West Bengal, India. The villages and schools fall within Water For People - India's operational plan for 2008-2011. Respondents included adolescent girls, their mothers, school authorities, teachers and community development workers.

Interviews, focus group discussions and observation, were the probing techniques used. In addition, some of the young girls were given a camera to capture the management practices in the villages.

The study enquired into the following areas:

- Knowledge and access to information about menstruation
- Perceptions and attitudes about menstruation
- Menstruation management practices, coping mechanisms and problems faced
- Related social and cultural issues that influence menstruation management

Findings

Knowledge

When a girl begins menstruating, it is usually her mother or other elder women in the family who induct her into her menstrual habits. Knowledge about menstruation is generally limited to what the elders know or think should be passed on to the young girl. Seldom is this information positioned as a natural biological phenomenon and even more rarely is the woman's bodily functions explained to her.

Instead, what is passed on is the social burden of being a woman and how it is her responsibility to manage without the world coming to know of her 'condition'. A number of misconceptions are also shared, primarily because those providing the knowledge are themselves unaware. Even as the girl matures, there is no scope for adding on to what she already knows.

First learnings	Existing Knowledge
<p>MENSTRUATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Happens monthly ○ Occurs when girls 'grow up' ○ Is 'bad blood' ○ Is releasing of body waste (a polluted substance) ○ Happens when blood comes out of the body due to pressure being built inside the body by accumulating blood ○ Happens when bad blood flows out of the body, keeping one healthy ○ Releases blood from which babies are formed 	<p>MENSTRUATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Means bad & polluted blood ○ Happens when girls grow up ○ Happens due to pressure of blood that flows out of the body every month, keeping one healthy ○ If it doesn't happen, one cannot bear children ○ Is related to motherhood & child birth ○ If it stops prematurely, eyesight gets affected ○ Women who do not menstruate become hijras (eunuchs) ○ Happens but we don't know why ○ Releases blood which should not be burnt - it burns a woman out

Usage

'Catching' menstruation blood is most commonly done using 'old cloths' or 'torn old clothes'. Under no circumstances can discarded clothing of male members of the family be used.

The same cloth is washed and reused for over two to three and sometimes six months. In most cases the same cloths are used till they tear and disintegrate or are no longer fit to be used.

Very few girls use sanitary napkins. Few who do, are those who live in villages closer to the city and only when they go out. Napkins are expensive and hard to find in the remote villages. In some villages women's Self Help Groups have been taught how to produce low cost sanitary napkins and programmes have promoted their use. However, these are rarities and the quality of the sanitary napkins supplied by the Self Help Groups does not meet the needs of the girls, eventually proving to be costlier than what is available in the open market.

Washing

".....How can I wash the blood in the toilet? The drain that leads out is not covered. My father and brothers are in the courtyard."

A teenager from South 24 Parganas

Menstruating women and girls wash themselves and their soiled cloths in the pond where they bathe. Bathing is a public activity where women are required to be fully clothed all through the bath. Waist deep water is the only privacy they get to wash themselves during menstruation. At times soap or detergent is used to wash the cloth. Few who have toilets at home; wash indoors, with water collected from the neighbouring pond, tap or tubewell.

Amongst some Muslim women, the practice is to initially wash off the blood from the soiled cloth with water from their 'bodna' (jug used in the toilet) and then wash it further in the pond using detergent. There is also the practice of washing the soiled cloths in buckets, with water collected from ponds and then re-wash in the pond. The bucket is usually kept on the banks of the pond, inside the, latrine, bathrooms or any other private space.

The village pond is used for bathing by almost all members of the community, including the livestock. A menstruating girl may have to wait for over an hour to find a less crowded moment. The girls hold their stained cloths under their feet, buried in the wet clay, while they wait along the banks of the pond. They usually wait till sundown to do the cleaning up.

Girls are also advised not to use ponds that are used by men.

'.....it appears that women and girls in rural areas, who are often also the poorest, can not afford to buy sanitary napkins, catch their menstrual blood in an extra sari, or in cloths. Washing the cloth is problematic, because the women must often walk to distant spots near a river or a lake. As a result, women and girls run an increased risk of becoming victims of sexual violence and abuse'

(Research by UNICEF, in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh)

Drying

"We were taught at the meeting that we should sun dry our menstrual cloth. I had once spread it out in the courtyard after washing. My father returned home from the field and spotted it. He was very angry. He shouted at my mother saying she had not taught me how to dry the cloth and that I should be ashamed that my brothers and uncles had witnessed this ugly sight. I know that drying in a dark corner is unhealthy but my family does not allow me to sun dry."

Adolescent programme participant, South 24 Parganas

Drying patterns clearly indicate the overpowering concern to keep the menstrual cloth outside the view of all, especially the men folk. Drying is usually done on a cloth line behind their homes, allotted specifically for drying menstrual cloth. Otherwise the cloth is spread out over the tiled roofs of the kitchen or toilet, or over sacks of kitchen fuel wood or cowdung cakes, or on broken boundary walls away from the hut etc. Drying under the bed is also a common practice.

Almost universally, the practice of drying takes place at night and the places chosen are the darkest and dirtiest corners of the house.

Disposal

The most common form of disposal of menstrual cloth is to bury it in the clay inside or on the banks of the pond. To prevent the used cloths or napkins from bloating and floating in the pond, they are pinned to the clay with sticks. Burying the soiled cloths by digging holes on the banks of the ponds or other water bodies is also done. Used menstrual cloth are also thrown into ponds that are no longer in use (i.e. covered by water hyacinths and weeds) or into thick bushes or bamboo groves.

A large number of used sanitary napkins were found when a village pond was being dredged. They were traced down to the home of a young adolescent who had participated in a programme with the Self Help Group women to promote use of sanitary napkins made by them. A net full of the discarded napkins (that were lifted out of the pond) was dumped in the courtyard of her home.

Group discussion, South 24 Parganas

For want of better alternative sanitary napkins are disposed into latrines. This causes clogging and becomes a menace in girls' toilets in schools. Added to the problem is that the disposal is usually in plastic bags, whether into water bodies, bushes or even the latrine. Shrinking open spaces and water bodies in villages do not give much option to the women and girls for disposal. Therefore, a switch to disposable sanitary napkins or cloth is likely to emerge as a major environmental hazard, unless appropriate methods of disposal are worked out.

Burning soiled menstruation cloth or sanitary napkins is not considered an option by many. It is commonly believed that burning one's own blood would result in the same amount of blood being depleted from the person's body causing weakness and illness. To burn the cloth women would need to dig a pit in their courtyard. Women hesitate as this would raise a lot of curiosity and embarrassment, especially from the men, who may resent the entire act of burning menstrual cloth.

Storage

As the practice is to reuse the same cloth for a few months, the menstrual cloths are dried and stored in plastic bags under the mattress or the bed. Women also choose spaces in the house that are least likely to be visited / discovered by the menfolk e.g., between tiles in the roof, in the bamboo ceiling, in the cowshed or kitchen.

However, despite the constraints and prevailing taboos about burning used menstrual cloth, there are instances of disposal by burning amongst some of the women and young girls. These habits are a result of awareness programmes conducted in the village or habits which women have carried with them from their maternal homes in other more progressive villages.

Problems faced during menstruation

Talking or reflecting on the discomfort or problems faced during menstruation is alien to the women and girls who view associated discomfort as part and parcel of menstruation. In general, village women are malnourished and anaemic and suffer from chronic body pain and weakness. Leucorrhoea (white discharge) is common to majority of the women which, coupled with poor hygiene, leads to perpetual infections and itching. In particular, women and girls listed the following work situations which become even more difficult to handle during menstruation.

- Working as agricultural labour in someone's field where the hours are fixed
- Multiple tasks in the household, particularly those requiring arduous labour and walking long distances (e.g. water collection, open defecation)
- Catching 'tiger prawn fries' in brackish water. This is the principle source of earning in the island villages performed usually by women and children. Women and children stand in waist deep water for six to eight hours every day, even when they are menstruating.

Avoiding School

The gender-unfriendly school culture and infrastructure, and the lack of adequate menstrual protection alternatives and/or clean, safe and private sanitation facilities for female teachers and girls, undermine the right of privacy, which results in a fundamental infringement of the human rights of female teachers and girls

'Menstrual Hygiene: A Neglected Condition for the Achievement of Several Millennium Development Goals',
Dr. Varina Tjon A Ten, Europe external Policy Advisors, October 2007

There are several reasons that prompt young girls to stay away from school when they menstruate. Some of them are cultural, when the girl is asked to stay away (from 'male' contact), but the primary reason is the absence of sanitation facilities in majority of the schools. In most schools, there is no available water source inside or outside the school. Schools which do have some facilities are poorly managed and unfit for use.

'How would you like your school toilet to be designed? What are the changes you suggest?'

Silence.....

'Don't you have any suggestions?'

"How can we suggest, we never visit the toilet. It is always dirty the stench comes into our class rooms. We don't know what the inside of the toilet looks like."

So how do you manage, especially during menstruation?

"We hold on We don't come to school on those days.....If it happens suddenly at school, we are sent back home."

Student, East Medinipur

Girls avoid entering the toilets at school as they are perpetually dirty and do not have water. Usually, a person needing water in the toilet has to walk up to the nearest pond and fill up a bucket or a mug. Girls do not like to be seen visiting the toilet, especially during break time when the entire school is out in the field.

During exams or special school events, it is difficult for the girls to stay away. They carry their menstrual cloth to school and for want of any disposal facility, carry back the soiled cloth or napkin with the books, in their school bags. Some cope by using double layers of cloth or napkins to last the day.

None of the schools keep a stock of sanitary napkins or cloth to handle emergencies. If a girl suddenly starts menstruating while in school, she is reprimanded by the teachers and asked to go back home. Home usually means a long walk back, sometimes over an hour or two away.

In most schools, it is rare to find women teachers. Cultural barriers stop girls from approaching the male teachers. Male teachers are hesitant to help the girls, even when they sympathise with their need.

Most schools have white uniforms. In an unfriendly sanitation environment, poor or non-existent disposal facilities and a low sense of personal hygiene, girls are forced to bear with stained uniforms, and ensuing embarrassment and mental stress.

On an average, about 5 to 7 school days are lost every month on account of menstruation.

A young class VIII student of a co-educational school stained her clothes during school hours. She was so embarrassed and in a state of shock, that she stopped going to school. After days of counselling she resumed school, but could never be persuaded to attend school during menstruation.

A 15-year-old girl always stayed away from school during menstruation. But she could not avoid the exam. At the end of the three hour exam she found that she was badly stained. The frustration and shock was so severe that she refused to leave the classroom until her mother came to the school with fresh set of clothes. She never went back to school again.

Interviews, South 24 Parganas

The teacher's predicament

The pilot study was intended to focus on the adolescents, especially the school children. However, interacting with the teachers brought forth a host of concerns about infrastructure facilities for female teachers that impact their attendance in schools.

Toilet facilities

Women teachers are in a minority in most co-educational schools. Very often male and female teachers and non teaching staff share the same toilet. For example, in one of the co-educational schools visited, there was a toilet block for all teachers, which has a number of 'female' (squatting) urinals and a common latrine for all. In another school there is only a single separate urinal for (ten) women teachers, whereas the single latrine is demarcated for use only by male teachers. In 'all girls' schools the facilities, if any, are shared with the students and in extreme cases some of the urinals or latrines are kept under lock and key for the teachers.

Availability of water for use in the toilets is a common problem. Most schools do not have running water inside the toilets. Water is sometimes stored in an enclosure inside the toilet, but these are rarely filled up. When the adjacent pond dries up or the tubewell breaks down, there is no water for long stretches of the year.

Drainage facilities in existing toilets are poor or non existent. Getting hold of a sweeper seems to be a problem, as they are not easily available in the villages. Cleaning toilets is a task performed by the 'lower caste'. Anyone else would rather go into a dirty toilet than mobilise a broom and mop to clean up. There have been instances when students have been motivated for cleaning drives, but parents have resented and complained.

In one of the 'all-girls' schools, there were many teachers who had been associated with the same school for over 20 years. They have accepted the situation where they need to refrain from urinating or using the toilet in the school for prolonged hours, including the time they take to commute from their homes. This could be 3-5 hours, over and above the school hours.

Menstruation management by school teachers

To avoid staining, women teachers wear nylon or synthetic sarees instead of cotton. These can be washed easily and they dry quickly. Teachers prefer wearing dark coloured nylon sarees whereby the stain is less likely to be visible. Some dexterously lift the outer layer of the saree while sitting on a chair or bench.

In the absence of a system for disposal or changing inside the school, teachers, like their students, pack two or more napkins on the days of heavy bleeding.

Disposal of sanitary napkins and changing facilities

Absence of disposal facilities is universal. There are no changing rooms either. Often female teachers find it difficult to change clothes especially during monsoons etc. In times of such need, they request their male colleagues to vacate the office where they can change.

Choking latrines is a common problem in all schools. This becomes an awkward issue for the male teachers and school authorities to handle.

In one of the 'all girls' school, a teacher recounted how she, for the past twenty years had disposed her used sanitary napkins into the latrine hole. She did not view this as a problem, as in all her years in the school the septic tank had to be cleaned only twice and it had never clogged. Interestingly the other female teachers of the same school had no idea about this method of disposal, indicating yet again the overbearing need for individuals to maintain privacy about their own menstrual management practices.

Majority of the school committee members are men. Women teachers find it impossible to raise the issue of menstrual hygiene at school committee meetings. At most they might press for a separate latrine for themselves, but never expressly highlighting the special needs for menstrual management.

Knowledge

Like their students, knowledge about menstruation amongst teachers is clouded by societal taboos and misinformation. Except for rare instances e.g. a Life Science teacher, almost all teachers came up with little or half baked knowledge about the subject. In majority of the schools teachers admitted their drawbacks and were eager to receive and learn more about menstruation and proper practices.

Experiences during onset of menarche

Menstrual management practices are formed and nurtured by a young girl's first time tryst with menstruation. Infrastructural constraints only partially influence behaviour. The factors which dominate are social, cultural and psychological.

Associated shame, fear, guilt

Adolescent girls experience fear and shame when they first begin to menstruate, an experience narrated by almost all the young girls. A large majority also mistook menstrual bleeding for an injury or wound.

Female family members mother, aunt or elder sister, are usually the first source of information. When asked to recount what exactly they remember of their first time experience, they did not speak about the management practice or the process, but the need to maintain privacy about the subject. They were told that women should not speak openly about menstruation and doing so risks violation of her dignity and honour. Menstrual blood is impure blood coming out of their bodies and this is something women should be ashamed of and hide from the world.

Customs and sanctions

Feelings of shame and fear are further set off by a host of customs and sanctions that adolescent girls experience at the onset of menarche. Girls report severe restrictions on mobility for the initial 3 days she is not allowed to go out of the room and is prevented from seeing the face of any man. In many instances some special 'puja' is performed after completion of her first menstruation and despite the privacy that it demands, her maturity into womanhood is declared to the outside world.

Change in family attitude

One of the first social messages that girls receive from the elders is the 'message of impurity'. She is taught to regard herself as impure during menstruation.

Girls reported being told by elder members of the family that they have now become 'grown up' and 'attained the age of marriage'. Many families start getting / looking for marriage proposals as soon as menstruation begins.

Restrictions are imposed on the girl's mobility, her interaction with boys, she is prevented from playing with boys of her age group and is told not to run, or jump or move about freely. She is disallowed from going places alone.

Girls, at this stage, are told that the issue of 'family honour' lies in their hands and are also asked to keep distance from boys, men and even male members of family.

Restrictions during menstruation

Social and cultural restrictions are placed on every adolescent girl at the onset of menstruation. While no information is provided to her about the process, the changes her body undergoes and healthy management practices, the restrictions are categorical.

Participation in religious and social functions/ ceremonies

Restrictions on:

- Entering puja (prayer) room
- Performing or participating in rituals
- Entering mosques
- Performing namaaz
- Keeping fast (roja) during Ramzaan
- Participation in socio-religious functions such as marriages, rice eating ceremonies (annaprasan), thread ceremonies, women's rituals during marriage ceremonies (stree achar) etc.
- Attending funerals and death ceremonies

A newly wed wife stood with her husband in the temple courtyard of the village deity, as is custom. She however could not climb the stairs to the temple's sanctum sanctorum and remained fixed at the temple courtyard as she was menstruating at that time. The entire village who had assembled at the village temple to catch a glimpse of the new bride watched her wait in hesitation.....

Group discussion, South 24 Parganas

Cultural and Social restrictions

Restrictions on:

- Attending school and/or 'madrasa'
- Physical proximity with men (avoiding touch etc.)
- Touching people who are sick - with chicken pox, measles etc.
- Avoid travelling in boats
- Avoid crossing rivers and pay the token 'fine' while crossing
- Entering the betel leaf plantation or touching the plough

.... I remember my mother taking me aside and pushing a few coins into my hand while I was leaving for school. I asked her if it was for a snack on the way back. She reprimanded me and told me it was for the river I was to cross to reach school. She asked me to drop the coins from the boat, but to do it discreetly and make sure no one watched me do it. She told me that all menstruating women have to pay a fine for polluting the river while crossing it. I was too young to understand why she never gave me anything to buy food but was prepared to waste the money by throwing it into the river. Later my friends told me they were all asked to do the same."

Student, South 24 Parganas

Domestic restrictions

Restrictions on:

- Touching kitchen utensils
- Touching the drinking water pitcher
- Taking sour food
- Refraining from entering cow sheds ('goaal ghor')
- Refraining from sex

.....despite the prominence of the ceremonial attention to "coming of age," very little attention is paid to informing adolescent girls about the actual facts of life of menstruation. Much of the information about menstruation imparted to a young girl is in the form of restrictions on her movements and behaviour, along with some other superstitions'.

-Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, Pondicherry - A study of the social dimensions of menarche and menstruation

Conclusion and recommendations

Two key factors determine menstrual practices. The first, and the most overpowering, are the **prevailing socio-cultural dictats** that demand that the entire phenomenon of menstruation remains closed and private. Women and men are equally bound by the stipulations of culture and jointly serve to perpetuate the cycle of unhygienic practice and poor health. The subject of menstrual hygiene thus needs to be addressed as a **'gender' issue rather than a 'woman's problem'**. This would mean:

1. To bring the issue out in the open and discuss and deliberate on it in 'joint' rather than 'women's' forums.
2. Demystify 'menstruation' and initiate mechanisms whereby young girls and boys understand the process as a normal and natural phenomenon that requires proper management
3. Highlight the health impacts of socially determined poor menstrual hygiene practices
4. Position menstrual management as a basic human rights issue and deliberate in wider forums of gender and human rights

The second determinant is the widespread **lack of available facilities** that would allow young girls and women to manage their menstruation with efficiency and dignity. There is need to:

1. Invest in facilities at home, schools and workplaces that would allow hygienic practices. This would mean adequate safe water and proper sanitation with facilities for washing and disposal of menstrual waste and appropriate privacy.
2. Involve women and young girls in voicing their needs and participating in planning and policy making for infrastructural development

3. Highlight the social costs of **poor menstrual management** to ensure its inclusion in policies and plans for education, health and employment
4. Promote affordable and sustainable options that would allow women and girls to manage their menstruation better. Low cost sanitary napkins are a welcome input, provided they meet the needs of quality, come with adequate environment friendly disposal options and associated social communication to ensure sustainability.

Some programmatic recommendations

Sensitisation and Awareness

- *Menstruation as a subject in all school text books*
- *MHM awareness programmes for school girls from middle school*
- *MHM awareness programmes in communities, about dealing with taboos, myths and misconceptions*
- *Sensitisation of parents about impact of poor menstrual hygiene*
- *Sensitisation of teachers, school authorities and planners about the special needs of girls*

Change at Policies & Programmes

- *Incorporation of Menstruation Health Management (MHM) issues in School Health & Sanitation Programmes*
- *Designing of toilets keeping in mind special needs of women and girls*
- *Orientation of school management committees and government representatives about MHM and the need to address it with sensitivity and authority*

Enabling Environment at Schools and Workplaces

- *Access to clean toilets & water*
- *Availability of sanitary napkins or substitutes in schools and workplaces for crisis situations*
- *Disposal facilities that are environment friendly*
- *Avoid white and light colours for school uniforms of adolescent girls*

Low Cost Sanitary Napkins

- *Support for Training & Production of low cost, quality sanitary napkins by women's groups*
- *Sharing of experiences of women's groups from different parts of West Bengal & India and Bangladesh in the area of production and marketing of low cost sanitary napkins*
- *Advocacy for production and marketing of low cost sanitary napkins in rural areas, by leading manufacturing companies*

Addressing the menstrual needs of women and girls requires concerted and immediate attention. This report is an attempt to bring forth into the open the various dimensions that constitute the subject of proper menstrual management and possible areas that deserve attention. It hopes to spark an understanding and interest among various stakeholders, who in their own capacities will take the process forward. Water For People - India has begun work with school children and communities in its operational areas. We will be happy to share our experiences and work in collaboration with anyone else who wishes to participate in '**Breaking the Silence**' about Menstrual Management.

PHOTO GALLERY

Menstruation Hygiene Practices

- Washing
- Disposal
- Drying
- Storing
- Privacy
- Workload

Washing



... in the village pond



... in the village pond



... in the village pond



... in the village pond



... in the village pond

Disposal



... looking for safe disposal



... burying reused cloth in the wet clay



... throwing into the 'boja pukur'
or 'closed pond'



... hoping the dirty cloth disappears
in the dirty pond

Drying



... on the cow dung cakes



... in the ceiling behind the house

Drying



... high on the ceiling



... behind the house, amongst household discard



... on the outer wall next to cowdung cakes



... on the toilet roof



... on the cow's feeding bowl



... underneath the roof

Storing



... in the ceiling outside the 'house'



... in the ceiling of the kitchen



... most commonly in the 'goal ghar' (cow shed)



... in a secluded corner outside the house

Privacy



... mother asking the son to stay away while she bathes



... checking-ensuring no one is looking while she washes up



... hiding cloth in 'saree' folds on the way to the pond



... the white uniform easily stains



... always the need to ckeck

Workload



... collecting water for the family is her responsibility



... working as labourer in the field



... carrying the fuel back



... cooking



... carrying the fish back



... walking over an hour to collect water

Photo documentation of Menstrual Hygiene Practices by school students and frontline workers of Water For People - India

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