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**ASIA REGIONAL SANITATION AND HYGIENE  
PRACTITIONERS WORKSHOP**

**Improving menstrual hygiene facilities in secondary schools  
Initiatives from BRAC-WASH Program**

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*A key priority for women and girls is to have necessary knowledge, facilities, and cultural environment to manage menstruation hygienically and with dignity. In the life of a woman, she has to manage 3000 days of menstruation. For her basic schooling period ranging from grade IV to X the number of such days is 450. Across the developing world, the lack of appropriate and adequate sanitation facilities prevent girls from attending schools, particularly when they are menstruating. Despite major developments in the hygiene and sanitation sector in recent years, the menstrual requirement of women and adolescent girls has largely been ignored. To address these issues BRAC-WASH along with financial support from school authorities is constructing separate sanitary latrines for girls with menstrual hygiene facilities in secondary schools. For better management and maintenance of the provided facilities, 'Student brigades' and 'School WASH Committees' are formed in each school. To further sensitize the students and teachers, training and orientations have been organized in different parts of Bangladesh. School authorities are being made conscious to make sanitary napkins available for girls in schools in times of need. Field experience shows girls are now attending schools with much more confidence and comfort even during their menstruation. Though a large number of schools are optimistic in addressing the issues surrounding menstrual hygiene there are some obstacles too, however the program is trying its best to overcome the problems.*

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## **Introduction**

A key priority for women and girls is to have necessary knowledge, facilities, and cultural environment to manage menstruation hygienically and with dignity (WaterAid 2010). Menstruation is a normal, natural process that occurs in all healthy adolescent girls and adult women who haven't reached menopause. Girls begin to menstruate between eight and twelve years. In the life of a woman, she has to manage 3000 days of menstruation. For her basic schooling period ranging from grade IV to X the number of such days is 450 (Nahar and Ahmed 2006). While good hygiene and better health are directly related, poor menstrual hygiene among women can cause urinary tract or other infections. Women refrain from seeking medical remedies or advice due to non-availability of female practitioners in rural area and thus many times serious infections are left untreated (Fernandes, 2010). Reproductive tract infections, which has become a silent epidemic that devastates women's life, is closely interrelated with poor menstrual hygiene. Therefore, proper menstrual hygiene, correct perceptions and beliefs can protect the womenfolk from this suffering (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008). So, safe, hygienic menstrual practice should start from early life. Despite major developments in the hygiene and sanitation sector in recent years, the menstrual requirements of women and adolescent girls have been ignored (Ahmed and Yesmin, 2008).

## Literature Review

Across the developing world, the lack of appropriate and adequate sanitation facilities prevent girls from attending schools, particularly when they are menstruating (Nahar and Ahmed 2006). In India a good percentage of girl students, particularly from rural areas, after attaining menarche are reluctant to attend school during menstruation, due to lack of facilities at school and fear of being teased by the boys. All this leads to high dropout rate of girl children (Fernandes, 2010).

In focus group discussions in one study in Nepal, many girls revealed that when they did attend school during menstruation they often performed poorly, due to worry that boys would realize their condition. Similar findings were reported by a survey undertaken by WaterAid in India, in which 28 percent of students reported not attending school during menstruation, due to lack of facilities. Many mentioned that fear of staining on their clothes caused them stress and depression (WaterAid 2010). Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to dropping out as many are reluctant to continue their schooling because toilets and washing facilities are not private, not safe or simply not available. When schools have adequate facilities - in particular, ones that facilitate menstrual hygiene - a major obstacle to attendance is removed (UNICEF, 2009). There is evidence to show that girls' attendance increases once hygiene, water-sanitation facilities are available (Nahar and Ahmed 2006).

There are around 17,000 secondary and junior secondary schools in Bangladesh. In most of these schools, there is a serious lack of adequate functioning water and sanitation facilities. Under such circumstances menstrual management by girls during their period becomes extremely difficult (Nahar and Ahmed 2006).

## Background and Context

Building on its long experience in providing water-sanitation services in the community BRAC initiated the WASH program with the goal to facilitate, in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh and other stakeholders, the attainment of the MDG's related to water, sanitation, and hygiene for all, especially for underprivileged groups in rural Bangladesh and thereby improve the health situation of the poor and enhance equitable development.

The programme with the support from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands has been designed to ensure access to sustainable sanitation services that are effectively used by 17.6 million people, along with providing education on good hygiene practices to 38.8 million people and safe water supply services to 8.5 million people living in 150 upazilas (sub-districts) of Bangladesh. The five-year programme has the following three main objectives:

- Provide sustainable and integrated WASH services in the rural areas of Bangladesh
- Induce safe hygienic behavior to break the contamination cycle of unsanitary latrines, contaminated water, and unsafe hygienic behavior.
- Ensure sustainability and scaling-up of WASH services.

## BRAC's initiative to improve menstrual hygiene

### Hard Ware Support

Before starting implementation of the WASH program, BRAC identified that there was a high demand for separate latrines for girls in secondary schools. To address these issues, WASH along with financial support from school authorities is constructing separate sanitary latrines for girls with water availability and menstrual hygiene facilities in girls' secondary schools or co-education secondary schools in 150 upazilas.

The technology used for the latrines is off-set two pit latrine with running water facilities. Where running water facilities is not possible, installation of tube wells inside the latrine is done so that the girls can collect water for cleaning while maintaining their privacy. For hand washing, wash basins are installed with a looking glass and soap tray. Plastic paint is used to ensure easy washing and cleaning. A covered waste bin inside and dumper outside the latrines have been provided to address disposal of sanitary napkins or pads. Menstrual waste collected from inside are collected and disposed in the dumper outside the latrines. To maintain financial transparency during construction a 3-4 member purchase committee is formed involving representatives from both school authority and BRAC WASH staff.

### Hygiene Education

Children are eager to learn. If children are taught hygienic practices and given health education, they should be able to take care of their own health and that of their relations and friends. As tomorrow's parents, the children are likely to carry hygienic behavior on to the next generation. Keeping this in mind the schools where sanitary latrines have been constructed are encouraged to conduct sessions on health and hygiene on a regular basis. For this reason two teachers (one male and one female) from each school are given a day-long orientation on water, sanitation and hygiene related issues with emphasis on menstrual hygiene. After attending the orientation, teachers are required to prepare rosters to deliver messages on health and hygiene related issues in the schools on a regular basis. In those sessions students are encouraged to carry this imparted knowledge to their families and communities. To facilitate the sessions a module and a flipchart are used to ensure messages are delivered smoothly.

### Means of maintenance of the infrastructures

BRAC WASH has taken an initiative with the cooperation of school authorities that the facilities are maintained in a self-sustaining manner. Student Brigade and School WASH Committee are formed in each school where construction is completed. However the schools are being constantly monitored by the BRAC WASH field staff.

### Student Brigade

In each school provided with a sanitary latrine, a Student Brigade is formed with 24 students from Class Six to Class Nine (equal number of male and females in co-education schools who secure the top position in the merit list). At times, priority is given to the students having leadership quality like the members from Girls Guide, Boys Scout and class monitors. Members' number can be increased following the same criterion. Student brigades are responsible for proper use and maintenance of latrines as well as the total cleanliness of the school premises with the assistance from their teachers. To further sensitize the students on WASH, eight students and two teachers from some schools are given a three day residential training at BRAC Training Centers located in different parts of Bangladesh. The training is being conducted in a very interactive manner following a "learning by doing" approach. During the training, the student brigade members get basic ideas on water, sanitation and hygiene issues with emphasis on menstrual hygiene. In most of the cases the head masters participated with their students.

### School WASH Committee

In addition to the Student Brigade, a 14 members School WASH Committee is also formed in each school where the Head Master is the Chairperson and a female teacher is the Member Secretary. Representatives of the School Management Committee, guardians and students are selected as members of the committee to ensure equal representation at all levels. The committee meets regularly to review the WASH activities.

Table 1. Some outputs (Till June, 2011)	Number of Schools	Participants		
		Teachers	Students	Total
School Latrine Construction	3957	-	-	-
Teachers Orientation	3718	7404	-	7404

Student Brigade Training	1610	3207	12870	16077
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### Creation of fund and availability of sanitary napkins

To carry out the objective for proper operation and maintenance of WASH facilities the schools are encouraged to create a fund to meet the expenses for soap, cleaning materials and so on. In addition to that the school authorities are being made conscious of the need to make sanitary napkins available for girls in schools. To ensure a smooth supply of sanitary napkins to school BRAC WASH staff help establish a link between the school and the local BRAC health volunteers who sells sanitary napkins.

### Conclusion

Field experience shows that facilities and imparted knowledge on menstrual hygiene are bringing about some positive changes among the adolescent girls at school. Girls are now attending schools with much more confidence and comfort even during their menstruation and in some cases their results in different school examinations are better than before.

Though a large number of schools are optimistic in addressing the issues surrounding menstrual hygiene, there are some obstacles too. Lack of resources, unavailability of fund for the maintenance of WASH facilities, affordability of sanitary napkins and above all poverty are some of them. Since menstrual hygiene facilities in schools can make an enjoyable environment of learning for girls free from worry and also plays a vital role in reducing reproductive morbidity, this silent but essential concern should be considered seriously.

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