

## **Paving Way for Menstrual Hygiene Management in Rural Pakistan**

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### **Background**

Menstrual hygiene management is an issue that is insufficiently acknowledged and has not received adequate attention from any quarter of the society. Menstruation is a natural process in a women's life and needs special care from a physical and psychological point of view. Ironically, the health sector in Pakistan has suffered a lot due to lack of funds and progressive management. The situation was further exacerbated by many catastrophes. The government is unable to provide basic health needs to its citizens and finds it difficult to cope with the ever-worsening situation in the country especially in the remote rural areas. The challenge of providing special facilities for girls reaching puberty is a question far removed from the authorities. The lack of policy in this regard is a major hurdle. Unfortunately, authorities have not yet realized the fact that lack of facilities in schools can force girls to remain absent from schools; and on the other hand, it could cause infectious diseases costing millions to the government exchequer. The education department is yet to focus on the provision of girl-friendly washrooms where they could easily dispose of menstrual material. The problems during menarche, effects of menstruation on schooling, proper use of hygiene products, hygiene practices during menarche and sources of information for girls during menarche have not yet become a focus. Menstrual hygiene promotion will be an indirect support to gender equality, national development, high literacy rate and Millennium Development Goals' accomplishment.

### **Summary of the Study:**

This menstrual hygiene management study was carried out in Azad Kashmir UC and MC Muzaffarabad. The scope of the study was to learn about the coping mechanism of schools girls during menses. The survey questionnaire was designed and meetings were carried out with UNICEF and the Department of Education. A survey was carried out in 14 **girls' primary and middle** schools with total sample size 250, including 200 students, 25 teachers and 25 mothers in Union council Muzaffarabad. Two teams were formed comprised of two female and one male for school visits. The community was also visited in order to interview mothers, to seek their opinions. The findings of the study show that only 20% to 30% of the respondents had some knowledge on the subject and could think about its solution at their young age, while the remainder had even no idea of the issue and its management at their puberty.

### ***Justification of the study in Kashmir:***

The selection of an appropriate area is critical for the success of any study or project. The accessibility, culture and acceptability to this sensitive issue were carefully analyzed. Where poverty and unemployment rates are very high, this tends to result in poor feminine hygiene conditions. Girls have limited knowledge regarding the challenge and follow primitive methods without having any confirmation of its validity.

As in other rural areas, in villages of Azad Kashmir, female literacy rate is poor among females<sup>1</sup>, though comparatively high compared to other provinces of Pakistan. The primary school enrollment is on the high all over Pakistan but only a minority of students make it to high schools (*only 33% of boys and 19% of girls at high school age*). The lack of enrollment to higher classes has increased the vulnerability of the young girls to the challenges of menstrual hygiene.

### ***About District Muzaffar Abad:***

District Muzaffarabad is one of the four districts of Azad Kashmir. It is the capital of the Azad Jammu & Kashmir and is situated at the confluence of the Jhelum & Neelum Rivers. It is 138 kilometers from Rawalpindi and about 76 kilometers from Abbottabad<sup>2</sup>, having a population density of 258 persons per square kilometer. The literacy rate is 60%, while female literacy rate is 88% at primary school levels. Twelve percent of the district population is urban.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Target area:***

Union council and MC Muzaffarabad of district Azad Kashmir were selected for survey. The area is already a UNICEF Target area of intervention after the earthquake of 2005.

Total 200 students and 25 teachers from all of the schools were selected to be questioned. Students aged 13 to 19 years of age were selected for survey.

*The study has been carried out in order to fulfill following objectives:*

1. To analyze the hygiene issues of early age at menarche
2. To learn about the roles of parents, schools and friends during the specific period
3. To examine their hygiene practices
4. To analyze the suitability of school environment for girls at menarche
5. To assess the knowledge of newly adolescent girls about menstrual hygiene
6. To assess the level of facilities in schools for newly adolescent girls to manage menarche

## **Methodology and key investigated areas:**

Four different Questionnaires have been used as a tool in the survey about menstrual hygiene issues:

1. *Problems during menarche,*
2. *Effects of menstruation on studies,*

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<sup>1</sup> According to a new report on Kashmir, issued by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

<sup>2</sup> District Muzaffarabad derived from <http://informativebar.blogspot.com/2009/10/muzaffarabad.html>

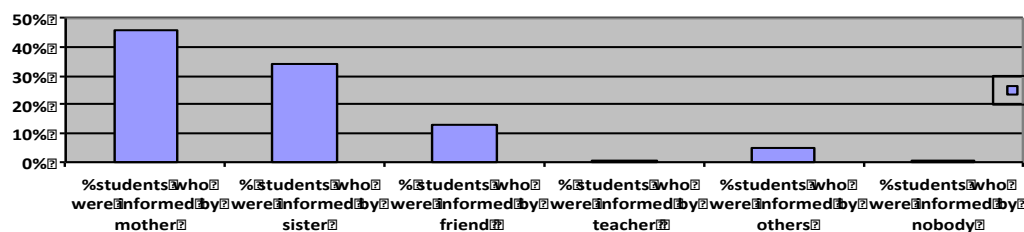
3. *Proper use of hygiene products,*
4. *Hygiene practices during menarche and*
5. *Sources of information for girls during menarche*

**The key results of the study are as follows:**

- 1- 56% of the teachers and 80% mothers recognized the issue for the first time while 44% teachers and 20% mothers tried to solve it before the intervention
- 2- 74% of the students need more knowledge. 50% students' attendance and 58% students' performance were disturbed due to the problem
- 3- 100 mothers, students and teachers were of the opinion that more information is needed about menstruation and hygiene
- 4- 71% of the students feel shy and suffer from physical problems during their periods
- 5- 78% of the girls share their problems with their mothers and sisters, 46% girls are told about menstruation by their mothers while 34% by their sisters at the time of menarche
- 6- 80% of the students said it is not easy for them to discuss the issue with anyone
- 7- 60% of the teachers demanded safe disposal equipment and 48% mothers demanded for special waste bins
- 8- In government schools, the majority of the students belong to lower and lower middle class families. They can't afford to pay for feminine hygiene products, this statement has been confirmed by 52% of the students
- 9- 70% of the students use old clothes which can be unhygienic and results in biological disorders

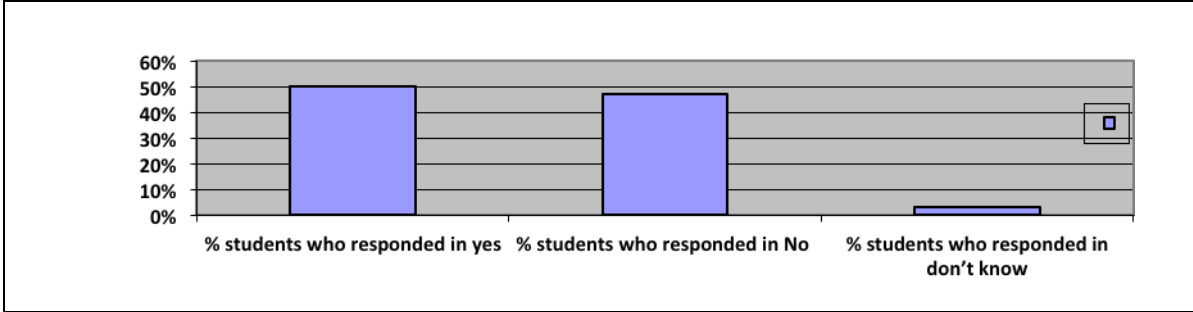
**Information about menarche for the first time:**

Total number of students interviewed	% students who were informed by mother	% students who were informed by sister	% students who were informed by friend	% students who were informed by teacher	% students who were informed by others	% students who were informed by nobody
<b>200</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>



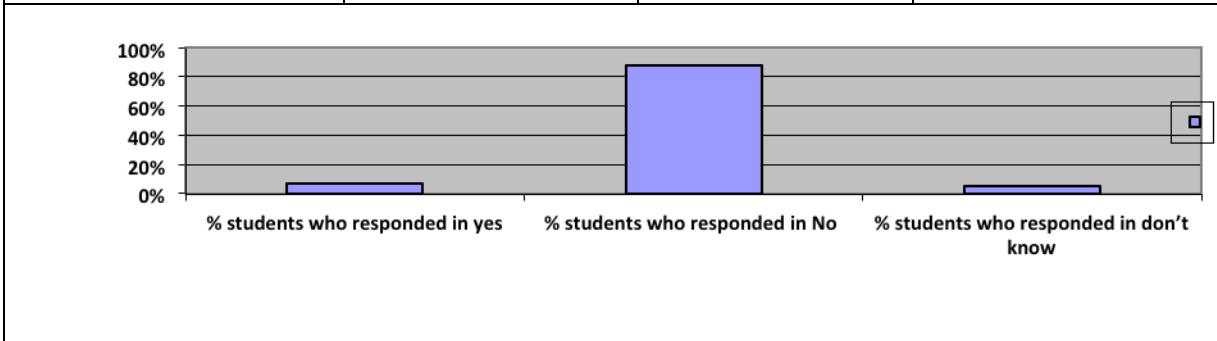
**Attendance of students disturbed during menarche**

Total number of students interviewed	% students who responded Yes	% students who responded No	% students who responded in don't know
<b>200</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>3%</b>



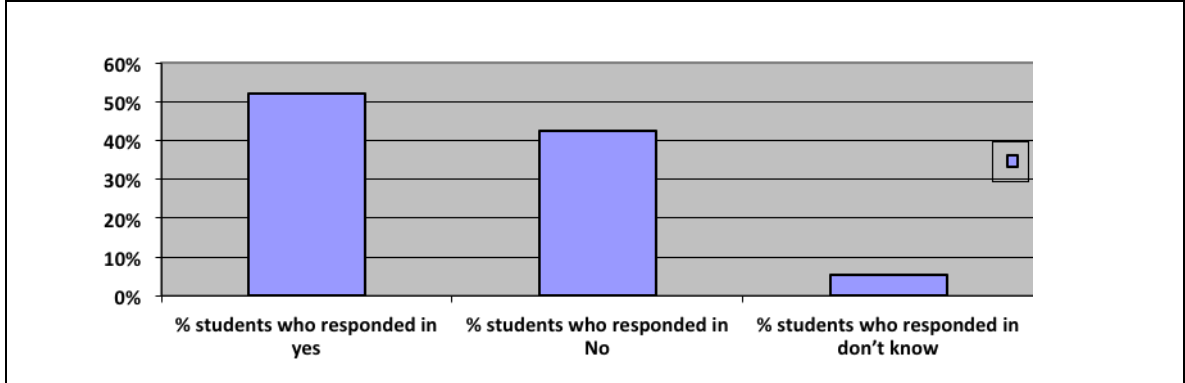
**Existence of facility for disposal of used menstrual material in schools:**

Total number of students interviewed	% students who responded <b>Yes</b>	% students who responded <b>No</b>	% students who responded in don't know
<b>200</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>5%</b>



**Financial problems for buying protective material:**

Total number of students interviewed	% students who responded <b>Yes</b>	% students who responded <b>No</b>	% students who responded in don't know
<b>200</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>42.5%</b>	<b>5.5%</b>



## How to improve the situation: Suggestions and recommendations

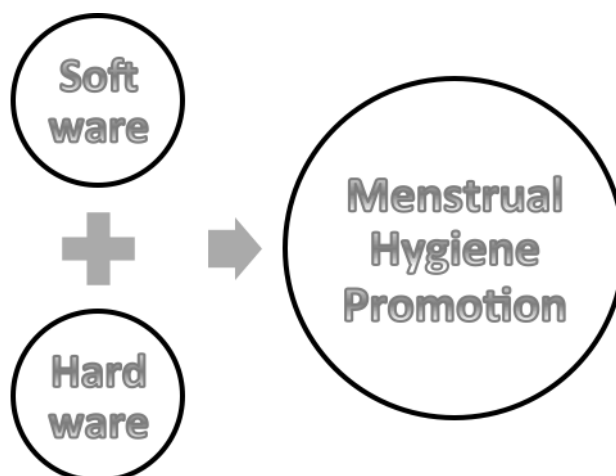
### **Short term:**

- 1- Local people may be trained to produce economical material
- 2- Extensive sessions with mothers, teachers and girls reaching puberty
- 3- Establishment of menstrual friendly space in schools with the help of education department
- 4- Proper mechanism for disposing of the used material
- 5- Establishment of menstrual hygiene clubs and arrangement of exchange visits
- 6- Advocacy with education department to focus on the issue

### **Long term measures:**

There are two areas of intervention for improvement of situation,

1. Soft ware
2. Hard ware



### **Hard ware:**

Hard ware interventions should be made in following area:

#### ***Solid waste disposal dumps:***

There is need of disposal dumps and such facilities should be in accordance with socio cultural trends of our rural areas with the following characteristics:<sup>4</sup>

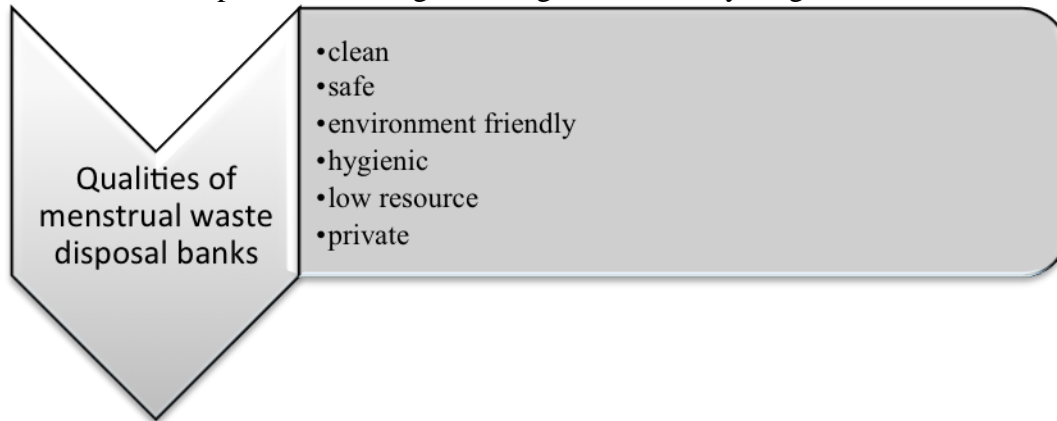
- ❖ hygienic,
- ❖ environmentally friendly,
- ❖ resource low,
- ❖ safe,
- ❖ private,

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<sup>4</sup>Should menstrual hygiene be an accelerated area of investment for girls' education?  
[www.worldwaterweek.org/documents/.../WWW\\_Menstrual\\_Hygiene.pdf](http://www.worldwaterweek.org/documents/.../WWW_Menstrual_Hygiene.pdf)

- ❖ clean

Waste can be disposed off through burning, burial or recycling.



#### ***Supply of protective material in schools:***

Protective material should be provided in girls schools so that they can get the material in case of immediate need. School girls need menstrual material that will enable them to sit and move around comfortably in a classroom for several hours.<sup>5</sup> It will also be an advantage for those girls who belong to financially weak families and do not afford such material.

#### ***Provision of facilities:***

- ❖ A proper sanitation standard should be set for example, with proper water supply in order to wash their hands after changing menstrual material,
- ❖ A clean and well-constructed facility where menstrual material can be changed at least once or twice during the school day,
- ❖ Facility for washing clothing in privacy in case of stains.

#### **Software:**

Soft ware includes following areas to be handled:

#### ***IEC material development:***

IEC material can be developed so that the silence can be broken about the issue of menstrual hygiene. Health and hygiene sessions can also be held in rural areas.

#### ***Awareness about unhygienic practice:***

- ❖ Proper awareness generation in the community on negative impacts on health due to unhygienic practices
- ❖ Religious teachings should be used in awareness generation on hygiene issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

***How to observe Hygienic practice:***

- ❖ How rags should be washed, dried and stored;
- ❖ Proper disposal of sanitary pads,
- ❖ How to make low-cost home-made sanitary pads,
- ❖ Counseling for overcoming cultural barriers, especially embarrassment

***Links between teachers and students:***

Link between teachers and students can be established through focus group discussions in schools.

***Trainings for active segments of society:***

Trainings for teachers and lady health workers can be conducted about these issues so that they can properly motivate the society.

***A few other suggestions:***

1. Importance of taking rest should be highlighted with the permission of one leave to students on the first day of periods in every month.
2. Relevant knowledge should be included in the school curriculum especially in girls specific subjects like home economics.
3. Advocacy with different government bodies, responsible for child rights, should be done on menstrual health and hygiene.
4. Special sanitation standards should be established for girls' school construction.
5. Sanitation cloths or pads should be provided in schools.
- 6.

***Hurdles in conducting the study:***

Following challenges were faced during the survey:

1. There was less strength in primary schools so IRSP team had to find more schools in order to complete our survey.
2. Girl students in primary schools of far-flung areas are not confident enough to discuss these issues, being a part of rural society. These issues were addressed through informal meetings with the teachers and students so that they could feel comfortable with the data collection team in discussing the issues. Introduction about our organization and work was given to them as well. In this way the team handled the hurdles faced during the interviews.

***Lessons learnt during the study:***

Following lessons are learnt during the studies;

1. Proper homework about all the stake holders and activities should be done before the study.

2. All important activities and meetings should be planned before the studies so that everything can be concluded at proper time.

