

POSITION PAPER



2018

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) at Schools

Genesis

Before 2014 there was little or no information about MHM which can provide detail idea about personal hygiene practices and the situation related to knowledge and facilities available at schools for Menstrual hygiene management of the students. However since 2014 we have a first ever national hygiene baseline under local government division which is giving a new direction to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). The report reveals that 86% students are using old cloths during menstruation. Besides around a quarter of the female students do not go to school during menstruation and almost one third think that menstrual problems interfered with school performance. Based on the situation government, private sectors, NGOs, and CSOs started to address the issue in many ways. Now local government and other sectors are observing menstrual hygiene day jointly and discussing the issues with different platforms by organizing round table and other activities to bring attention about the importance of this management in schools.

According to Bangladesh Education Statistics 2015, a total of 6317963 girls students are at secondary school and Madrasah in Bangladesh while quarter (1579491 Girls) of them do not go to school during menstruation. This is an unaddressed issue. Students had to spend considerable time at schools and their access and use of toilets are very natural. But now this is a very crucial personal hygiene issue to tackle with which is mostly related to personal wish and desire shaped by knowledge, attitude and above all the overall environment the individuals live in.

MHM in schools fosters social inclusion and individual self-respect. There are many natural aspects of femininity that people feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about. One such thing is that girl's menstruation, sanitation and hygiene. But, very few talk about health consciousness in this regard. Lack of MHM facilities, the girls have to stay absent in school. Even they are increasingly under threat of chronic physical problems. Menstruation is a particularly salient issue because it has a more pronounced effect on the quality and enjoyment of education than do other aspects of puberty. It involves a learning component as well as elements affected by the school environment and infrastructure. These include access to menstrual hygiene materials, latrines and places to change, safe water and sanitation, and good hygiene practices like hand washing with soap. Without these, the school environment will be considered as unhealthy, gender discriminatory and inadequate.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in School Perspective:

In rural areas as well as in the Upazila level there are common toilets (pit latrine, latrine on the disc, etc) in most of the primary schools. Common toilet means both boy and girl student use these toilets jointly. In secondary schools, there are two toilets in average. Very few schools have separate washing basin. The toilet in most schools are inadequate for girls' menstrual hygiene management, because they are generally small, poorly maintained and lack proper waste disposal facilities. This makes it difficult for girls to change and dispose of absorbent materials discreetly. Pit latrines can be so uninviting that girls avoid them altogether and leave school to manage their menses at home. Moreover, toilets are often out of order, and even when functional, students avoid them because they are reported to be unclean, smelly and poorly lit. According to National Baseline Survey published in 2014, there is one toilet per 187 students but 45% of the toilets stay closed for many different reasons. There is no supply of water and soap inside or near two-thirds of the toilets. Moreover, windows of the toilets are tiny; there is lack of light and air; even if there is electric connection, the light bulbs either stay out of order or go missing; and bad smell pollutes the environment.

Poor management of toilets in educational institutions affects the health problems of girls and their attendance. Most of the girl students are not willing to attend school during their menstruation. Unhealthy and unsafe toilets indicate school's hesitancy on this issue as well as students' confidence to go to school during their period. When they fail to attend school 80% of total classes, they get deprived of getting stipend. This is an one of the untold story behind the adverse impact of not having MHM friendly toilets in Schools.

According to baseline of RITU in February 2017 in Netrokona, majority of girls reported that toilets are not MHM friendly as they lack of running water, soap and bins. Despite this 89% of the girls reported to use toilet at school. However, 32% of girls (who have started menstruation) said they did not use the toilet at school when they are on their period. Furthermore, 75% reported that they do not change their pads or cloth at school. Baseline report also been highlighted that 78% of the girls had a private toilet at home. This answer reflects that students feel comfort to not to go to school during period rather they would like to stay at home. However, in 2015, Ministry of Education has issued a circular by giving 11 directives on School while in the introduction of circular student to toilet ration is 187:1 which is a reflection of giving importance on the issue. Well, in RITU project, the ratio 159: 1 in Netrakona in October 2016. But the situation is in progress due to the different types interventions took place as the ratio is recorded as 115:1 (January 2018). The expected standard ratio aims to 50:1 mentioned in sector development plan 2011-2025.

Process of engagement of the stakeholders:

Schools alone can't address this issue while other stakeholders as well as duty bearers need to engage in MHM improvement. There are service providers (Department of Public Health Engineering -DPHE and Education Engineering Department EED) who are directly or indirectly connected to the WASH service in school. But it is not clear to school (service recipients) who are doing what and to whom they should go. The Department of Public Health Engineering is the national lead agency for provision of rural drinking water supply and in the country excepting Dhaka, Narayanganj and Chittagong cities where WASAs operate. Local Government Division of Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has committed to allocate 20% of the Upazila (Sub-District) development grant for improvement of sanitation while Union Parishad (the lowest tier of local government system) can access that budget by incorporating school sanitation budget in the scheme. Union Parishad can also allocate budget from their Local Government Support Program -LGSP to the schools. These are the windows or options from where school can get support for building a separate MHM friendly toilet. Connecting and accessing different local resources and engaging their budgeting process can bring many changes in the MHM system. Operationalization of the circular is a very important instant where 11 directives are related to MHM and its sustainability. Demands and need should come from schools (through SMC) to Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad as well as District Administration through various approaches. DPHE and EED should also engage in the process as they are responsible government service authority.

Way Forward

MHM-friendly WASH facilities cannot solely be tackled by installing hardware. A new toilet will not lead to MHM-friendly WASH facilities unless the toilets are maintained, clean, and have running water, soap and a disposal system. This requires a shift in the current school culture and the community, as identified in the needs assessment.

Availability of sanitary napkins at school, safe disposal of sanitary napkins can also bring confidence to the students during their periods. This is also one of the directions of govt circular, and students can avail it upon request, which is one of the important gate ways for better MHM in schools.

More engagement of duty bearer alone with school teachers and School Management Committee (SMC) can accelerate the process. We have experience that MHM issue is still not openly discussed at various institutions like union parishad, upazilla parishad, zilla parishad who are mostly interlinked with service providers and can able to improve the MHM situation in their area including schools. Investing on MHM system is very essential for its sustainable result.

Finally, to address the lack of MHM knowledge, the recommendation is that girls must be supported to understand the changes to their bodies as part of a wider focus on gender equality, with an emphasis on self-esteem and challenging self-stigma around menstruation. Working with teachers to ensure that they have the necessary facts and that they are prepared to teach these subjects should be prioritised. It is also recommended that training with teachers must espouse a gender equality perspective.

