

Up scaling retention of girls in school through Menstrual Hygiene Management

Zabzugu District in the Northern Region and North Dayi District in the Volta Region are more than 340 kilometres apart but their behaviour patterns are as closely knit as the leaves of a book.

This is how: in both districts, menstruating girls become isolated from family, school and the public. This does not just happen because of cultural beliefs but also because of the lack, or inadequacy, of appropriate Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools.

Preliminary findings of a study conducted in Zabzugu and North Dayi districts as part of the UNICEF-led Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools for Girls (WinS4Girls) programme are showing that girls are increasingly finding it difficult to attend school when they are menstruating.

These were revealed at the fifty-fourth edition of the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP 54). This edition, which took place on Thursday 28th January, 2016 at the Coconut Groove Regency Hotel, in Accra, was under the theme: “*Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)*.” UNICEF Ghana led the discussions at this forum, which it organised with the collaboration of the Ghana Education Service/School Health Education Program (GES/SHEP) and the Resource Centre Network (RCN). This communiqué has been put together as a means to share with you, dear WASH sector stakeholder, key highlights of NLLAP 54.

On this occasion, chaired by Madam Kate Opoku, Director of SHEP, WASH sector stakeholders including sector ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), development partners (DPs), civil society organizations/non-governmental organizations (CSOs/NGOs), the media, the academia and students were in attendance.

Menstruation means isolation in Zabzugu and Dayi

Returning to conditions in the Zabzugu and North Dayi districts, “The general understanding at the household/community level is that menstruation is not a normal thing and [so] should be treated differently. So, household members limit their interaction with menstruating girls,” Osman Alhassan, Lecturer, University of Ghana reported at NLLAP 54.

He also said there was “A general sense of (the person menstruating) being contaminated and should be restricted in movement and contacts.”

Presenting on “MHM in Zabzugu and North Dayi Districts – Some Preliminary Extracts,” Alhassan revealed that “In some communities menstruating girls are relieved of their normal routines and may be isolated or confined (in a particular room or hut).”

To compound the problem, “The lack of support in schools (changing rooms, toilets, running water, supply of sanitary pads, etc.) makes girls stay at home during menstruation” and “Longer distances from homes to schools is also influencing girls’ attitudes to absent themselves from school during menstruation.”

In the study conducted to, among others, obtain a better understanding of school girls' experiences and behaviours during menstruation, researchers compared rural and urban settlements. They also pitched schools with WASH against others without WASH, selecting three apiece in each district to arrive at a total of 12 schools.

The researchers also used purposive sampling of pupils in Junior High School "since it formed the middle cohort where many girls had experienced menstruation."

Respondents included school girls, teachers (SHEP Coordinators), school boys, fathers, mothers, and opinion leaders, traditional leaders, religious leaders, district education administrators, district administrators, and health workers.

WASH in Schools and menstruating girls

Earlier studies conducted by WaterAid in 2012 for example show that as a result of menstruation, 95% of girls in Ghana sometimes miss school days. The study further reveals that in the country, 48% – 59% of girls in urban areas and about 90% of girls in peri-urban/rural areas felt shame during the menstrual period.

Also in 2012, it was reported that girls miss up to five days a month of school days due to inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of sanitary products at school and feeling of discomfort, such as cramps (Montgomery et al., Sanitary Pad Interventions for Girls' Education in Ghana, 2012).

Since such conditions further put girls in a disadvantaged position, the Government of Ghana (GoG) in partnership with UNICEF Ghana has been implementing the WinS4Girls programme to improve educational outcomes. One key outcome of the programme is addressing gender inequality and increasing girls' attendance and retention in schools. This is being delivered by making Menstrual Hygiene Management (MMH) a major component of the WinS programme, which is a two-year project spanning November 2014 to September 2016.

The WinS programme, which is supported by Canada, has 14 participating countries, including Ghana. In Ghana, the project is located in the North Dayi District of the Volta Region and the Zabzugu District of the Northern Region.

The objective is "To strengthen evidenced-based advocacy and action on MHM in Ghana through the UNICEF-supported WASH in Schools, leading to a more supportive school environment that is ready for girls."

The execution of the project involves strategies and activities such as:

- ❖ mobilizing local academia, CSOs, Ministry of Education and other relevant partners;
- ❖ Conducting research and disseminating report;
- ❖ Reviewing WinS guidelines to incorporate gender sensitive MHM into existing national WinS programme;
- ❖ Developing and disseminating MHM basic tools; and
- ❖ Training (capacity building at various levels).

Anticipated benefits of the programme include providing the WASH sector with a credible document for MHM programming in the country, as well as, contributing to increase in girls' school attendance and retention rate.

Defining Menstrual Management

In 2004, the UNICEF and World Health Organisation, (WHO) wrote that Menstrual Management is “Women and adolescent girls using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.

Menstrual management is recognized within the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. Indeed, “Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is a global emerging issue,” Mr. Charles Nachinab, WASH Officer at UNICEF, stated in a presentation on *Challenges of Poor Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in Schools* at NLLAP 54.

Consequently, an Annual Virtual Conference on MHM has been instituted with the 4th edition taking place last October. In addition, Menstrual Hygiene Day (MHD) has been established and is observed on the 28th of May every year. This year (2016) would be the third in a series of commemorations.

What to do

After NLLAP 54 presenters had made their arguments and participants – working in groups – had contributed their ideas, the following crystallised points were formulated for taking for the MHM agenda:

- ❖ Increase number of female teachers (for now have at least one female teacher in JHS). In this regard, District and Regional Education Directors should ensure gender balance in the posting of teachers.
- ❖ Improve school environments (urinals, toilets, changing places (lockers), first aid kits including stock of sanitary pads).
- ❖ Make hygiene education, including MHM, a key component of general education.
- ❖ Allow for more involvement of community members in the running of schools (SMCs exist though).
- ❖ Resource schools to be able to monitor (make checks on) girls when they stop school abruptly.
- ❖ Intensify education about MHM thus reducing socio-cultural perceptions shrouding MHM. This should include the formation of education and psychosocial counselling groups.
- ❖ Sustain and expand the Global/Ghana Partnership for Education Grant (GPEG) programme to benefit many more schools in the districts.
- ❖ Sensitize and involve religious leaders in the discussion of MHM issues.
- ❖ Identify and break myths surrounding MHM.
- ❖ Foster education on personal hygiene at home, including display menstrual chart at home.
- ❖ Older women should become role models for younger girls.
- ❖ Puberty rites should be modified.
- ❖ Communities should support building and maintaining of WASH facilities.
- ❖ Education on MH should involve teachers and pupils (all genders).
- ❖ Education should start from upper primary level

❖ Reusable fabric shouldn't be thrown away