

WAG Advocates for Use of WinS Guidelines and Practices

The Country Director of WaterAid Ghana (WAG) Mr. Abdul-Nashiru Mohammed has expressed the need for stakeholders in the WASH sector especially those in educational institutions to take Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) seriously, since MHM was a subject that affected everybody, whether one was in school, the community or home environment. He said children spent a minimum of 5 hours in school, so the school environment was critical in shaping the children. "We can get it all right in the school environment and we can get it all wrong in the school environment, we just need to make sure we are following the guidelines and practices that have been established as it is the best way to help shape our pupils," Mr. Mohammed emphasized.

WaterAid Ghana (WAG) in collaboration with the Resource Centre Network (RCN) hosted the 60th edition of the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) to share the findings of a study on Menstrual Hygiene Management. The topic of the study was "Understanding the Socio-cultural, Economic, Political Factors, Challenges and Opportunities in Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and the Status of WASH in Schools in Ghana. The Director for Water at the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, Mr. Donan K. Tay chaired the event and Nii Wellington, a Consultant with the TREND Group Ghana, presented the findings. There were other presentations on the themes: "the Status of WASH in Schools" and "WaterAid Ghana's WASH in Education Programme in Ghana" by Perpetual Yirenkiewaa Diabene of WAG and Benjamin Lartey of the Global Neighbour Healthcare Development Organisation (GLONEHDO) respectively.



The study was on Menstrual Hygiene Management behaviour and practices in schools across multiple levels and how they impact WASH implementation in Ghana. It was carried out in 2 selected schools in 8 communities in 8 selected districts across the country. 319 school pupils comprising 229 girls and 90 boys were sampled for the study. 333 household heads, 64 mothers and 15 community leaders were also surveyed on the subject. The districts selected for the study in the three regions of the north were, Tamale Metropolis, Wa Municipal, West Gonja and Nadoli-Kaleo Districts, while La-Nkwantanang-Madina and Ashaiman Municipal areas and Jasikan and Krachi East Districts were studied in the southern part.

Key Outcomes of the study

The following outcomes emanated from the studies:

i) Pupil awareness and impressions about menstruation

From the study 84% of school pupils' indicated their awareness of menstruation, with 18% of them indicating their understanding of how menstruation happens. 16% of the pupils did not know at all what menstruation was. The school pupils' expressed varied impressions about menstruation as 17.3% of the pupils said menstruation was a negative phenomenon; with 66.8% indicating that it was a normal occurrence. Largely, the pupils indicated that they learnt about menstruation in school, consistent with results of similar studies in Ghana.

ii) Perceptions

The findings of the study were consistent with findings in existing literature, which indicated that menstrual perceptions were deep-seated and that influenced how menstruating girls/ women are related to. Menstrual perceptions were particularly centered on the menstrual blood, as it was held that the menstrual blood had spiritual powers to make a person impure or multiply. There was also the general perception that menstruating girls had the potential of being promiscuous.

iii) Influence of culture, religion and social norm

The study findings did not contradict with existing literature on how culture, religion and social norms influenced people's perceptions on menstrual hygiene as the findings indicated the same across the study areas. There are deep-seated beliefs about menstruation, influenced by perceptions and society (community and school) therefore engaged in practices that prevent menstruating girls from mingling with the rest of the society during their menstrual periods.

iv) Impacts

The study also confirmed that menstruation had impact on girls and their living condition, both at school and home as revealed by other studies. The study further revealed that the lack of adequate knowledge and education on

MHM in the targeted areas made it difficult for younger menstruating school girls to manage themselves both in school and at home during their menstrual periods. Aside the pain and discomfort experienced by the average girl which affected their concentration and learning at school, the study further revealed that the fear of the girls being teased by boys seemed to affect girls' openness on the subject matter and their confidence to manage the phenomenon, especially in school.

Contrast in impact findings

School Attendance of Menstruating Girls

The study also revealed contrasting findings as compared to similar studies carried out in Ghana. For instance 87.6% of menstruating girls interviewed said they attended school when they were in their menstrual periods, despite the unfriendly nature of the school environment for MHM i.e. general absence of appropriate facilities, lack of emergency menstrual hygiene kits or supplies for girls, lack of appropriate/ organized First Aid services and the general anxiety by girls that they might have menstrual accidents. The study also revealed that boys showed the readiness to support girls during their menstruations, though they had issues with it. It was also found out that girls seemed to have more room to manage their menstrual periods at home, though there were still societal restrictions.

MHM facilities

The schools visited by the study team revealed that, there were virtually no menstrual hygiene-friendly facilities for the girls. This is in contrast with the findings of other studies indicating that there were MHM-friendly facilities in schools Sanitary towels, however, did not seem to be scarce in the study areas as indicated in other studies as there were different types of sanitary towels available. The girls, however reported they used the disposable ones indicating further that it was a bit more expensive. Some mothers interviewed indicated their preference for cloth because they believed they were durable and hygienic.

Support Systems at the School Level

The WaterAid Ghana study revealed there exists structures for supporting girls at the school level as a policy framework which covers *School based Health Coordinators, District School Health Education Programme (DSHEP)* and Parent Teacher Association/ School Management Committees. However, there were challenges with these structures providing real support for girls, especially People with Disability (PWDs) as 6 PWDs were reported in the studied schools. It has been revealed that parents showed no readiness in providing backup support for their children at home and at the community level, no effective structures were identified as support system for girls' menstruation.

On MHM stakeholders, the study identified, mapped and prioritized 27 MHM stakeholders in 6 domains (school, community, private voluntary organizations, private profit organizations, international development organizations and public agencies)

Out of the 27 stakeholders identified, the study found out that, 11 were highly involved in MHM activities and were influential.

They included; Pupils, GES-SHEP, Development Partners, International NGOs, teachers, parents, LNGOs, Civil Society. The stakeholders whose activities were not prioritized because of their low level of involvement and influence included district level government agencies, service providers such as: school janitors, medicine shops, contractors and herbalists.

The study identified the following opportunities to effectively implement MHM at the national, sub-national level in Ghana:

- A willing donor environment
- Partners willing to support government in funding and direct implementation
- National SHEP Policy on MHM
- Well-developed WinS minimum standards and implementation guidelines
- National SHEP Committee that ropes in all relevant stakeholders
- GES-SHEP, a special unit set-up for WinS implementation
- Decentralized SHEP Unit and Committee at the Regional and District levels
- Dedicated coordinators (R-SHEP and D-SHEP) responsible for WinS implementation
- Existence of SHEP committee at the School level
- SbHC responsible for WinS implementation
- Involvement of all teachers in WinS implementation and coordination at class-level
- Current special attention and focus on ensuring that new schools are provided with disability and MHM-friendly facilities
- The willingness of colleague boys to provide support for girls especially during the pains and discomfort is an opportunity to commence discussions on the subject matter
- Positive practices - The average girl keeps track of her menstrual cycle and keep materials when the period is close

The study identified the following barriers likely to inhibit the effective implementation of MHM at the national, sub-nationals level in Ghana:

- Poorly resourced SHEP Unit
- Lack of effective collaboration among the main SHEP stakeholders
- Poorly resourced decentralized units
- Poor collaboration between local implementing NGOs and Coordinating units (regional and district SHEP Units)
- Poor collaboration among SHEP committee stakeholders
- Weak capacity and high attrition rates of SbHCs
- Existing school facilities do not support effective MHM and general WinS implementation
- Most schools are unable to merge their WinS Implementation Plans and School Performance Improvement Plans (SPIPs) creating funding challenges
- Poor functioning of SHEP Committees
- Challenges with current curriculum and MHM instruction
- Cultural concerns raised, religious issues identified, the norms of society have contributed to the secrecy around the subject matter
- MHM is not part of the everyday conversation of school pupils, even teachers
- Community-School alliance for MHM implementation is weak
- Ineffective community participation in WinS implementation resulting in the destruction of school facilities and poor mobilization of local resources

The stakeholders recommended that:

- WaterAid Ghana should focus its MHM interventions in schools on the identified barriers and opportunities from the study.
- An action plan should be developed for the GES WinS programme
- MHM should be incorporated into sector policies, programme and dialogues.
- WAG's partnerships with GES-SHEP and other stakeholders should be strengthened to advocate the development and strengthening of the MHM Working Group, MHM Strategy Implementation Plan, comprehensive communication plan for MHM (C4MHM) and relevant materials, as well as ensure an appropriate facility designs for effective MHM, and sustainable approach to affordable personal sanitary/hygiene products.
- GES-SHEP should provide leadership and direction in MHM implementation at the school level in Ghana
- GES-SHEP should seek support and partnerships to operationalize the WinS Minimum Standards and Guidelines
- The GES should formulate equitable school health policies that favour MHM
- GES-SHEP should establish skills-based MHM education taught within the WASH education framework, provide safe school environment for menstruating girls to stay in school and establish school-based health services as school level support system.
- The capacity of SHEP structures at schools should be developed to promote the effective functioning of SHEP committees
- MHM strategic plans should focus on programmes that connect pupils to parents at the community level
- Strengthen community-school alliance for MHM implementation

In his closing remarks the Director for Water at the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, Mr. Donan Tay, tasked stakeholders in the WASH sector to ponder seriously over how disabled girls in our schools are handled when it comes to Menstrual Hygiene Management and WASH in schools. He urged WASH sector stakeholders to collaborate effectively to reduce the impact poor school and public buildings have on school girls and women when it comes to menstrual hygiene management. Mr. Tay also indicated how critical it is for the capacities of teachers and educators to be improved across the country to ensure that they are able to address Menstrual Hygiene Management and WASH issues with school girls. "It is also important for MHM and WASH to be included in the curricular of our educational system especially at the Teacher Training Colleges as well to ensure that more teachers are trained and posted to schools to support in the handling of MHM and WASH in schools among girls" he emphasized.

Mr. Tay said the new Ministry will collaborate with the Ghana Education Service and SHEP and Ministry of Works and Housing to ensure that the minimum standards for WASH in schools are complied with especially in the design of school facilities. He further advised stakeholders to ensure that their sensitization exercises are taken to religious and traditional people, since they wield a lot of influence in their communities.

The NLLAP is a WASH sector multi stakeholder platform with the overall goal of improving sector learning and dialogue. It is hosted by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN). The platform offers learning and sharing opportunity for sector players as one of the practical approaches to improving sector engagements/sharing with the long term aim of achieving a knowledge driven WASH sector that delivers quality and sustainable services in Ghana. NLLAP meetings take place on the last Thursday of every month and opened to all interested parties. The discussions of each NLLAP meetings are summarized and shared with wider WASH community. The topics of upcoming meetings are decided on by the RCN secretariat and a list of upcoming meetings can be found on the RCN website www.washghana.net.

If you are interested to propose a topic for a meeting please contact us on:

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