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The Last Taboo: Menstrual hygiene management in the Pacific

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Key messages

- A formative study in Solomon Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) found that adolescent girls and women face multiple challenges to managing menstruation effectively and with dignity.
- These challenges interact, and have the potential to negatively influence physical and emotional health, participation at school, work and in the community, and impact on the environment.
- Improving menstrual hygiene requires a comprehensive approach that considers the determinants of menstrual health, with a focus on improving knowledge; challenging harmful norms; maintaining quality water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, including disposal mechanisms; and ensuring sustainable access to good quality, acceptable menstrual hygiene products.

Background

Burnet, WaterAid and the International Women's Development Agency led a qualitative study to explore the barriers to women's and girls' effective MHM in Solomon Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2016-17. The study described impacts on their participation in education and work and identified opportunities to improve women's and girls' ability to manage their menstruation more effectively. The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded the research through Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development.

Methods

The study involved focus group discussions and interviews with 307 women, men and adolescent girls, and observation of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in 10 schools and workplaces.

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Key findings

1. Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs:

Many adolescent girls in Solomon Islands and PNG lack comprehensive knowledge about menstruation and are unprepared for menarche, often resulting in feelings of shame. In contrast, adolescent girls and women in Fiji have better access to information about menstruation and its hygienic management, although gaps in knowledge exist.

Beliefs and attitudes around menstruation being “dirty” create stigma which leads to poor hygienic management practices, unwanted behavioural restrictions, and negatively impacts on emotional well-being. Girls in all three countries reported teasing by boys, contributing to feelings of humiliation, and potentially absenteeism from school.

2. Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services:

In Solomon Islands and PNG, school and workplace WASH facilities are inadequate to meet menstruating girls and women’s needs. Challenges include non-functioning toilets and showers, poorly maintained facilities lacking in privacy, toilet paper, safe disposal options, soap and water. Inadequate WASH facilities contribute to unhygienic practices or extended delays in changing materials. Some girls and women return home to change materials, contributing to absenteeism from school and work.

In Fiji WASH facilities in schools, work and public places are generally of a higher standard. Women working in informal workplaces, such as market vendors, face challenges in managing menstruation as they are often required to share and pay for public sanitation facilities. Some women and girls in rural areas have poor access to a regular water supply for bathing.

3. Menstrual hygiene products:

A wide range of reputable sanitary products are available and generally affordable in urban areas in Fiji and PNG. In rural areas, only cheaper and poorer quality brands are available. In Solomon Islands reputable sanitary products are prohibitively priced and much less accessible in rural and urban areas.

While most girls and women expressed a preference to use commercially available sanitary products, if a good quality reusable product was available at an affordable price, many indicated that they would like to use it.

In all three countries, girls and women with less access to money face affordability challenges and may rely on home-made solutions (of variable efficacy) to manage their menstruation. They commonly experience fears of leakage and staining, and are distracted from school or work. Some also opt to disengage from community life, stay home from school, or miss work.

Recommendations

A series of participatory design workshops, identified improvements to menstrual hygiene:

1. Improve leadership and policy action on MHM in the Pacific region

- Strengthen national action plans, strategies and policies commitments to addressing MHM in education, sexual reproductive health, gender, WASH and humanitarian fields
- Share progressive MHM policy examples between national governments
- Promote multi-sectoral solutions to MHM through donor investments
- Build a cross-sectoral Pacific MHM community of practice to spearhead advocacy and learning

2. Improve access to high quality information about menstruation and MHM

- Develop Pacific-wide replicable guidance on integrating MHM into school curricula
- Develop training materials for teachers and healthcare workers on adolescent MHM education
- Promote integrated WASH and sexual and reproductive health community education programs
- Design and roll-out public campaigns which address harmful menstruation taboos and beliefs

3. Improve availability and affordability of menstrual hygiene products in remote Pacific locations

- Public private partnership solutions to strengthen supply chain of sanitary pads to remote areas
- National governments to reduce or abolish tax levies on sanitary pads
- Support women-led businesses and co-operatives, to test sanitary product business models

4. Improve MHM-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, services and monitoring

- Practical guidance on MHM-friendly WASH designs in schools, workplaces, healthcare facilities
- Ensure MHM is core to regional and national WASH sector strengthening efforts
- Strengthen WASH monitoring systems and include MHM national and regional indicators
- Pilot new approaches to safe and environmentally-friendly MHM disposal systems

To read the literature review, each country report and a multi-country report, please visit: <https://pacificwomen.org/research/the-last-taboo-research-on-managing-menstruation-in-the-pacific/>

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