Menstrual Hygiene Management in Low-Income Countries

By: Santora, Elizabeth Keywords: menstrual hygiene management, low-income countries

Menstrual hygiene management, or MHM, is a concept that concerns girls’ and women’s access to the appropriate information and resources to manage menstruation[4]. In December 2012, the Joint Monitoring Program, or JMP, was one of the first organizations to define MHM as a global development goal. Since then, other organizations like WaterAid and the United Nations have expanded the JMP’s definition to include menstrual education that is biologically accurate and free of taboo and stigma. Many women in low-income countries lack those necessities for MHM due to high prices of menstrual sanitary products, lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and social and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation[4] that prevent it from being talked about. However, as more organizations began to frame MHM as an issue of public concern rather than a woman’s private problem, more researchers, organizations, and governments have begun to address issues at the root of inadequate MHM.

Menstruation, also called a period, is when blood and endometrial tissue, or tissue lining the inside of the uterus[5], sheds from the uterus[5] through the vagina[5]. Menstruation occurs approximately once every twenty-one to forty days and typically lasts three to five days. Menstruation is a part of the menstrual cycle, the cycle in which women’s bodies prepare for pregnancy[5] each month, and occurs as a result of ovulation[5]. Ovulation is when an egg[6] cell is released from the ovaries, through the oviduct (tube)[5], and into the uterus[5]. If a sperm[7] cell fertilizes an egg[6] cell, the resulting fertilized egg[6] cell is called a zygote[3] and begins to travel to the uterus[5]. In the uterus[5], the zygote[3] begins to divide, sending nutrients to the embryo to grow into a fetus[2]. But if fertilization[1] does not occur and an embryo is not formed, then the endometrial tissue is not needed and expelled through the vagina[5] during menstruation[5].

In order to properly manage their menstruation[5], women need access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, materials like sanitary pads and tampons, and knowledge of why and how menstruation[5] occurs according to the United Nations Children’s Fund, or UNICEF. Such resources are vital to women’s MHM in both high- and low-income countries. The World Bank, an international organization[13] made up of financial policymakers from 189 different countries, categorizes countries according to their gross national income, or GNI per capita, which counts the average amount of money a person in a certain country makes each year. As of 2021, the World Bank defines low-income countries as having a GNI per capita between $1,045 and $4,095 US dollars, while high-income countries have a GNI per capita of $12,696 or higher.

In low-income countries, women are often unable to access the resources necessary for proper MHM due to circumstances such as the lack of necessary sanitation infrastructure and the inability to afford menstrual products. However, resources such as menstrual pads are often too expensive for the average woman in a low-income country, so they end up using materials such as cloth or toilet paper instead. Such materials do not keep women and girls clean as they are not as absorptive, which can put a woman at risk of health problems such as urinary or reproductive tract infections. Many low-income countries also lack clean and private water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, which UNICEF calls WASH facilities. That may exacerbate the feelings of shame and embarrassment girls might experience when menstruating because they do not have a private place to change or dispose of their sanitary pads. Additionally, even when women and girls do have access to facilities, those facilities may be too far away to dispose of sanitary pads or may be dirty or unsanitary. As a consequence, girls who do not have access to WASH facilities may be more likely to miss school days due to the inability to manage their menstruation[5].

Additionally, according to Marri Sommer, a public health and development researcher at Columbia University[5] in New York City, New York, many societies hold certain stigmas around menstruation[5] that can lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment for menstruating girls. That stigma exists worldwide but may be more profound in low-income countries, according to Sommer. Women and girls may be excluded from schools, religious gatherings, and other social and cultural events as a result of the stigma around menstruating. For instance, in Delhi, India, Sommer states that women and girls were found to be prohibited from entering places of religious worship while menstruating, because cultural beliefs viewed menstrual blood as dirty. According to UNESCO, such negative feelings toward those menstruating defined four targets they hoped to achieve by 2040. The second target specifically addressed and defined menstruation[5] as a possible reason for that lack of prioritization, arguing that viewing menstruation[5] as a biological process may cause girls to feel marginalized in their communities, discouraging them from participating in school or other public functions. Moreover, according to Sommer, because menstruation[5] is a stigmatized topic that many communities do not publicly discuss, important conversations about getting the necessary resources for MHM to girls on a societal level do not happen.

Sommer explains that international researchers, organizations, and companies began to pay more attention to MHM after realizing its connection to girls’ school dropout rates in low-income countries. In 2001, the Rockefeller Foundation[14] funded research studies in Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe that documented the challenges related to menstruation[5] that girls faced in school. The Rockefeller foundation found that girls in low-income countries often miss days of school while menstruating because they do not have the resources to manage menstruation[5] and may feel ashamed of menstruating. All poverty-level girls and young women in menstruating countries such as those that helped motivate international organizations and companies to direct their efforts to addressing barriers to MHM to help girls stay in school. For example, in 2006, the US-based hygiene company Procter & Gamble founded a program called Always Keeping Girls in School. Always Keeping Girls in School encourages girls in different African countries to attend school while menstruating and funds puberty education and provides sanitary pads to local communities in Africa where those necessities are lacking. Sommer notes that at the time of the program’s establishment, the Procter & Gamble-founded puberty education was the only resource many girls had to learn about menstruation[5].

Around the same time, in 2005, UNICEF held a meeting titled Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Education for Schools in Oxford, United Kingdom, to call attention to the consequences of a lack of WASH facilities on many health issues, including MHM. At that meeting, Vanessa J. Tobin, then chief of the Water, Environment, and Sanitation section of UNICEF, expressed the need for girls to have clean and private WASH facilities to adequately manage their menstruation[5]. At that meeting UNICEF shared a message from a Nigerian girl named Chidinma Ejere to highlight the need for improved WASH facilities. In her message, Ejere stated that girls at her school often left school while menstruating due to a lack of access to water and sanitary facilities necessary for the girls to stay clean.

Also at that meeting, Archana Patkar, the founder and former director of a social development organization[16] called Junction Social in Mumbai, India, gave a presentation on the effects of menstruation[5]-related challenges on girls’ education. According to Sommer, Patkar was one of the first people to use the term MHM to address stigma surrounding menstruation[5] and a lack of WASH facilities in many low-income countries. In her presentation, Patkar stated that the lack of WASH facilities for menstruating girls and menstrual education is a barrier to MHM in low-income countries. To help address that problem, in 2011, the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, and the Rockefeller Foundation[15] launched a program called MHM in Ten, a ten-year plan for addressing MHM in schools, specifically in low-income countries. MHM in Ten is an interdisciplinary approach to address challenges related to menstruation[5] in schools, including researchers, non-governmental organizations, and governing bodies like the United Nations. The plan is aimed at improving water and sanitation and reproductive health education in an effort to improve MHM in low-income countries. As of 2020, UNICEF holds the annual Virtual


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- World Health Organization
- Procter and Gamble Company
- UNESCO
- Columbia University
- Feminine hygiene products
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