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**LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES**

**Menstrual hygiene management to improve the attendance
of primary school-aged girls in Central North, Burkina Faso**

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How to improve the conditions for girls to attend school, to reduce failure and drop-out rates of adolescent girls, while ensuring their dignity and protection? This was the consideration that motivated the Kom-Yilma project, implemented by Catholic Relief Services in Burkina Faso and financed by the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, to undertake a behavior-change strategy for menstrual-hygiene management in 118 schools in Bam and Sanmatenga Provinces. Discussions and behavior-change communication activities, providing an appropriate space for girls and the active participation of women leaders have already demonstrated positive results for a subject generally considered taboo in the intervention zone.

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon for girls at a certain age. It can be accompanied by symptoms that inconvenience some girls, including pain. This monthly occurrence can also happen when girls are at school. The impact it can have on school attendance and performance, in particular in rural areas in Africa, is well known: absenteeism during menstruation, lack of concentration, loss of self-confidence, fear of being noticed, incomprehension based on lack of information, and the fear of being teased. What are the optimal conditions needed to deal with this situation? What is available within the school system? How to improve the situation? A study conducted by UNICEF in Burkina Faso and Niger (2013) identified the following priorities for intervention: improve knowledge and give useful information to girls about menstruation and how to manage it, offer adequate WASH installations so that girls can manage menstruation, create conditions for psycho-social support and involve the community to ensure respect for cultural issues and parental participation. These priorities were the basis for the strategy that the Kom-Yilma project, financed by the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust in 118 primary schools in Bam and Sanmatenga provinces, used to promote menstrual-hygiene management for girls as part of its overall goal of certifying WASH-friendly schools.

Kom-Yilma's approach to menstrual-hygiene management in schools

1. Improving knowledge and sharing information on menstruation and its management

Menstruation is not generally discussed among mothers and daughters

Information about menstruation is an important element to help girls cope with this natural phenomenon. Many statements by girls pay witness to their lack of understanding about menstruation before it happens ("I thought I was ill," said one girl) and their fear or feelings of helplessness. Very often, there is no communication between mothers and daughters about what is happening to the girls. This exacerbates the problems girls face if they are in public or outside of the home. For this reason, the project made it a priority to educate and improve communications with (pre-) adolescent girls (3rd through 5th grade). This was done by:

- Training male and female teachers, parents and pupil WASH-club members in the WASH-friendly school approach with an integrated aspect for menstrual-hygiene management. This training touched on themes such as adolescence and menstruation, the menstrual cycle, hygienic menstrual management, and myths
- Organizing monthly discussion sessions in the 118 schools with all girls aged 10 and above. These discussions were facilitated by mentors responsible for supporting the same girls in their communities, as well as teachers who were prepared to discuss the subject
- Inclusion of the subject in the regular mentoring program (in which female volunteers support girls to attend and perform well in school), and with Mothers' Associations and teachers

In order to ensure high-quality content and group dynamics, the project developed a discussion guide, which gives information about menstruation management and suggests themes for the monthly meetings with girls in the schools. Subjects included:

- Menstruation: a natural phenomenon
- How menstruation manifests itself
- What to do if I suddenly get my period while at school or a ceremony?
- How to use sanitary pads or napkins



Image 1. Illustrated Guide developed by Kom-Yilma (CRS Burkina Faso)



Image 2. Discussion on general knowledge around menstruation with mentors at the school in Nabegniam, Bam (CRS Burkina Faso)

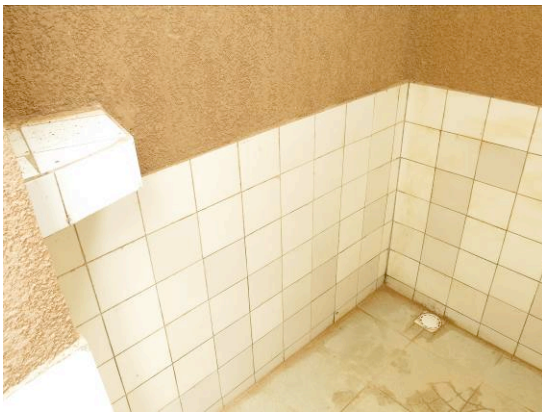


Image 3. Practical demonstration on how to use sanitary towels at the school in Foula, Sanmatenga (CRS Burkina Faso)

2. Adequate WASH installations to help girls better manage their menstruation

Where to go when one is menstruating, how to discreetly clean oneself and change the sanitary napkin? Using the studies previously cited and through focus groups, individual interviews, field visits and meetings with stakeholders, the Kom-Yilma project developed a model for a changing room with the following characteristics:

- The room should be spacious enough to accommodate a bucket with water and soap, well lit (part of the roof is made with translucent sheeting), where the girl can change, and wash and dry her sanitary napkin in privacy (this takes the common practice of using re-usable cloth pads or napkins into account)
- The changing room is not a latrine stall and is thus less exposed to odors that might make the girls spend less time there
- The door can be locked from the inside
- The room is adjacent to a latrine block for girls and thus not isolated, to reduce stigma
- Attached to the girls' latrine block, the changing room is well separated from the boys' latrine block, which helps to ensure a certain amount of privacy, protection and dignity
- Waste water is channeled to an exterior drain that is covered with a concrete slab



Bag shelf and drain



Shelf for water bucket and soap

Images 4 & 5. Interior of a changing room (CRS Burkina Faso)



Image 6. Girls' latrine block constructed by Kom-Yilma, with changing room to the far left (CRS Burkina Faso)



Image 7. Interior of a changing room adapted from a latrine stall, as used by girls in Wendboulgou (CRS Burkina Faso)

3. Psychological support for girls

Teachers' and mentors' willingness to discuss with girls and support them is another important factor for putting girls at ease, and builds trust between the girls and adults. In this way, girls also have a choice between a family member, teacher or mentor who they feel most confident to approach. On the other hand, the girls also support each other, which reinforces their bonds of friendship.

4. Involving local communities in promoting menstrual-hygiene management for girls

Communities are heavily involved in promoting menstrual hygiene for girls by having leaders participate in the trainings of mentors and members of the Mothers' Associations. These women help ensure that local culture is taken into account, and can reassure parents who may sometimes feel uncomfortable openly addressing topics generally considered taboo to discuss.

Results

The results are clear: the percentage of girls who said they felt comfortable managing their menstruation at school went from 65.5% in July 2014 to 89.0% in May 2016.

One mentor expressed it such: "We can see that the girls have understood; they aren't afraid anymore when they get their period. We also notice that they still come to school even when they are menstruating."

One girl stated: "We appreciate the discussions with the mentors. We listen to them and take their advice, and that helps us a lot. In my case, for example, I used to always tell my parents I was sick and I would miss school for two or three days when my period started. But now, with the mentors' advice, I don't miss school anymore. I wash myself when I want in our changing room." Source: individual interview, May 2016.

In terms of ownership of menstrual-hygiene management, schools that did not benefit from a changing room as part of the Kom-Yilma project took their own initiative:

- Certain schools created changing rooms out of existing latrine stalls or rehabilitated abandoned latrines
- Others dedicated a stall from the teachers' latrines to create a changing room in order to protect the dignity of girl pupils. This contributes to reduce fear, and improves relationships between teachers and pupils
- Another schools even built a changing room on their own using local materials. This cost around \$160, and the school WASH committee visited a school where Kom-Yilma had built a changing room in order to take inspiration for the design

In almost all schools, parents provide soap for the girls' personal hygiene.

In one case of positive deviance, during the WASH-friendly schools training, fathers committed themselves to discuss menstruation management with their daughters if the mothers refused. They said they could not accept that their daughters would fail at school because of a natural phenomenon that is not within their control.

Change was also observed with regard to the main target group, the girls themselves. In some places the changing room serves a double purpose: several pupils remain at school over lunchtime and take turns using the changing room to shower, with positive results for personal hygiene. In the case of Kinkirgo, 94 pupils were observed using the changing room to shower between classes. One of the mentors confessed that at times things can get a bit crowded, because even the younger girls want to wash, and the boys are starting to ask for their own space to wash as well.



Image 8. Changing room constructed by the community in Loada (CRS Burkina Faso)



Image 9. Girls' changing room in between teacher latrine stalls, Barkana (CRS Burkina Faso)

In the 58 schools where implementation of this activity was closely monitored, all girls (3481) over the age of ten received at least one message regarding menstruation management from teachers and mentors. In total, it is estimated that 6891 girls across the 118 schools received these messages from teachers or one of 553 mentors. In addition, International Menstruation Hygiene Management Day, celebrated every May 28th, was commemorated in some schools through girls' discussions, bicycle races, and debates and exchanges with health agents.

Finally, we note that given the importance of the subject, teachers have begun to request that it be integrated into their teacher training, and that the activities be scaled up to regional and national level. The discussions are as rich for the teachers as for the girls.

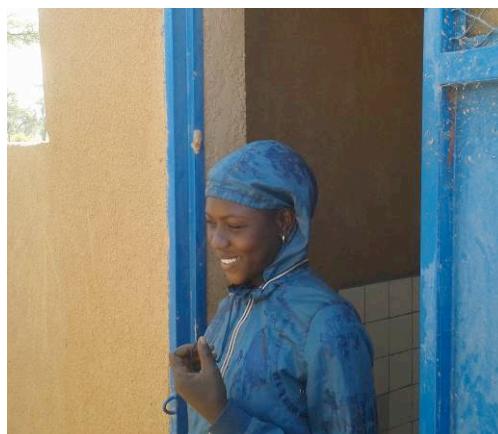


Image 10. A satisfied girl leaving a changing room constructed by the project (CRS Burkina Faso)

Difficulties encountered

- Insufficient project staff to effectively monitor the monthly discussion groups. The results shown here are from motivated communities and are incomplete for lack of proper monitoring
- Absence of mentors to work on the issue in 58% of the schools
- The refusal by some male teachers to discuss the subject. For them “it’s just a topic for women”

Lessons learned

- Stakeholders welcome and appreciate the subject matter. It is an interesting and important topic that is not often dealt with

- Communities have the creativity, motivation and dynamism to change the situation and their perceptions
- Men can take the lead in communicating around menstrual hygiene
- Mothers and daughters can find it a difficult subject to discuss amongst themselves. Bringing the discussion to a more impersonal venue (e.g. in a group) makes it easier to tackle without embarrassment
- Mothers and trainers need capacity building with regard to menstrual-hygiene management, for example how to avoid transmitting diseases or infections, so that they are prepared before they are asked questions or need to intervene in a given situation

Next steps

From experiences and lessons learned during the 3 years implementation (including field visits, stakeholder meetings, focus groups and interviews) of this WASH in school project emerge some recommendations.

Of these recommendations, the following activities could be undertaken:

- Conduct a deeper evaluation of the actions taken, usage of the changing rooms and a KAP survey in all 118 communities
- Break the silence around menstruation by encouraging girl-to-girl exchanges and intensify the support by supplying positive responses to their concerns
- Build the capacity of all mentors, teachers and girls for menstrual-hygiene management
- Involve women to be mentors for girls in school
- Organize a meeting in every school to discuss the subject, give information and encourage parents' commitment to support girls
- Provide suggestion boxes in the schools to collect and respond to girls' feedback regarding menstrual hygiene management
- Monitor and encourage stakeholders and the government to celebrate International Menstruation Hygiene Management Day every year
- Broadcast a radio emission on menstrual hygiene management followed by a quiz competition to improve retention of information
- Evaluate the level of need and appropriateness of local production of sanitary pads and napkins
- Encourage schools to provide "emergency kits" with sanitary supplies in case a girl starts menstruating unexpectedly.

Conclusion

The improvement of latrines by adding a changing room along with discussions, mentoring and capacity building of different actors has contributed to improved well-being for girls during menstruation in the schools where the project intervened. During the two years of implementation in 118 schools, the percentage of girls saying they feel at ease to manage their menstruation at school increased by 23.5 percentage points.

At the same time, much remains to be done to break the silence around menstruation that continues to be a contributing factor to girls' abandoning school, with all the negative effects that brings for the country's development. The time has arrived for all stakeholders to act in synergy to bring down the barriers so that menstruation should never put a break of girls' reaching their full potential. What is our role in this synergy?

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