

Learning brief

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN BANGLADESH



Plan International UK

Plan International UK strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world.

This learning brief draws on key findings from research by Creative Social Change and Oral Testimony Works commissioned by Plan International UK and Bangladesh to better understand the knowledge, experiences and barriers that girls face during menstruation. The researchers reviewed existing secondary documents and carried out participatory primary field work with adolescent girls, boys, women and men in Bangladesh.

The research revealed information regarding: the context of stigma, shame and restrictions that girls face; the importance of listening to girls' needs and priorities; and some key considerations for the production and sale of local menstrual hygiene products.

"Don't tell anyone, keep it a secret... After 5-7 days you will be totally pure." (Adolescent girl research participant)

"I don't go to the rice field – my mum says don't go to the rice field when you have your period... and don't go under a tree because a 'jinn' (evil spirit) could get you." (Adolescent girl research participant)

Menstrual Hygiene Management in Bangladesh

Although menstruation is a natural biological process affecting half of the world's population at reproductive age, it continues to be surrounded by varying degrees of stigma, silence and shame in many contexts and is a barrier to gender equality. The practical challenges of menstrual hygiene, often exacerbated by socio-cultural factors, have an impact on many aspects of women and adolescent girls' lives.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is increasingly recognised as a *"critical health, Water Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) and rights issue"* across the world and in the UK, with a growth in programming and public debate. In Bangladesh there has been an increase in interventions, policy and communication on menstruation. Plan International Bangladesh is strengthening menstrual hygiene activities within its overall WASH activities through hygiene promotion in communities and schools and through the establishment of Sanimarts to produce and sell menstrual hygiene napkins.

How we carried out the research

- **3 themes of analysis:** Understanding the User & Society, the Market and the Wider Landscape.
- **Participatory workshop approaches:** Human Centred Design, Theatre for Development and Participatory Rural Appraisal: visual mapping techniques, ranking, setting criteria for products and prototyping.
- **Research participants:** 105 adolescent girls, boys, women and men, of which 44% were girls who took part in the detailed participatory workshops.
- **2 districts:** Bhola and Kishorganj.

A context of silence, shame and restrictions

The research found that girls and women expressed widespread shame and silence, with menstruation considered something that should be hidden. Knowledge about the biomedical facts of menstruation and how to manage pain was limited. To manage their menstruation girls primarily used rags made up of folded pieces of cloth held close to the body with string or strips of material. Drying of rags was primarily carried out in dark or shady places, rather than in the sun, due to fear of visible evidence of menstruation. This was despite a widespread fear of infection or disease from this form of drying.

The research also found a wide range of menstruation-related restrictions that the girls faced including dietary advice and limitations; physical restrictions; restrictions based on superstition and cultural beliefs.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN BANGLADESH



Plan International UK

What have we learned?

The challenges that girls face

- A context of **silence and shame**, a lack of accurate knowledge, an extensive set of **restrictions** and an unfavourable school environment prevent women and girls from managing their menstruation privately, safely and hygienically
- These factors affect women and girls' well being and prevent them from **realising their rights** and contributing to society
- Women and girls **lack biomedical information** and are largely **informed by social norms** and cultural beliefs
- There are widespread beliefs that rags are dirty and dangerous with fears of serious health implications, despite a lack of evidence on these impacts
- Most adolescent girls talked about period-related **pain** and discomfort before any other issue in the research
- **Teachers** are unwilling to discuss menstruation which perpetuates stigma and lack of awareness on the topic
- There are **multiple barriers at school** including a lack of running water, bins for disposal within the toilets and a lack of emergency supplies of napkins

Menstrual hygiene products and Sanimarts

- The Sanimarts - community-based social enterprises which make and sell menstrual hygiene napkins - are viewed positively by those who run them, work in them (income, skills and empowerment) and the girls who use it
- Girls want improved design, effectiveness, comfort and choice in the locally made napkins. There was also interest from the girls in different types of menstrual hygiene products such as tampons
- There is a lack of knowledge on the environmental impacts and disposal of the locally made napkins
- There is clear market potential for the locally produced napkins, but the current business models face challenges in affordability, awareness of the product, direct sales, design and clarity on financing arrangements

What can we do in the future?

Positive social norms and information

- Support girls to negotiate the delicate balance between hygiene and shame
- Encourage positive social norms in behaviour change communication by addressing myths and misinformation and giving accurate information on menstruation and pain management
- Engage men and boys in the conversation to dispel misconception and increase the support they give
- Support teachers to know how to discuss and teach menstruation. Ensure that schools provide sufficient and separate toilet facilities, water, waste disposal facilities and emergency napkin supplies
- Contribute to the evidence base in Bangladesh by demonstrating the need for increasing government investment in school WASH facilities for girls

Selling menstrual hygiene products

- Address menstrual hygiene napkin awareness and affordability to increase the customer base e.g. loyalty schemes, reducing price or trial of new products
- Invest in user feedback and design processes and increase the choice and size of napkins available
- Test different models of distribution and production and engage girls in this
- Engage girls in more Sanimart processes: research, design, promotion and sales. Include vulnerable and marginalised girls in the Sanimarts



If you are interested in learning more contact cathy.stephen@plan-uk.org Photos credits: Axelle Fidelin, Plan International UK and Creative Social Change