



# Breaking the Stereotypes on Menstrual Health and Hygiene in Bolivia

## SUMMARY

This case study highlights a transformative menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) programme in schools in Montero and Cobija, Bolivia, with a particular focus on the inclusion of men, boys and the wider community. Illustrated through qualitative interviews with participants and teachers from the programme the case study demonstrates how the programme challenged gender inequalities, reduced stigma, and promoted open conversations about menstruation and how involving men and boys in MHH programmes helps break taboos, fosters empathy and understanding, and shifts the responsibility for MHH from women and girls to the entire community.

Being a part of the programme brought about positive changes for both boys and girls participants. Interviews conducted with teachers and students highlighted the programmes impact in challenging traditional stereotypes and empowering girls to openly discuss issues of Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH). Students expressed how they felt more confident in discussing MHH topics among family and friends and improved their understanding of menstruation, emphasising the importance of maintaining proper hygiene during periods. Furthermore, the programme successfully dispelled myths and taboos, enabling participants to feel empowered to communicate MHH-related information with their families, including discussions about hormonal changes during puberty. As a result, participants reported increased confidence and a reduced sense of embarrassment when discussing MHH matters.

## Introduction

The transformative approach to WASH and gender recognizes the importance of addressing gender inequalities and acknowledges that gender norms and power dynamics influence access to and control over WASH services and facilities, impacting women and girls disproportionately.

In the context of menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) programmes, the involvement of men, boys, and the community is crucial for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it helps break the stigma and

taboos associated with menstruation by challenging myths and promoting open conversations. Including men and boys fosters a collective effort to normalize menstruation, reducing discrimination and shame that becomes inherent due to prevalent social and cultural norms. Secondly, involving men and boys promotes understanding and empathy towards girls and those who menstruate. It allows men and boys to recognize the challenges faced by women and girls and better support them within their families and the wider community. Thirdly, it encourages shared responsibilities by shifting the onus of managing menstruation from women and girls alone to the entire community. Fourthly,

engaging men and boys in MHH programs contributes to gender equality by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. And lastly, involving the community, including men and boys, enhances the sustainability and impact of MHH interventions. It ensures cultural appropriateness, responsiveness to community needs, and support from key stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of long-term behavior change and continued support for MHH initiatives.

## Background

MHH plays a significant role in the Sustainable Decentralized Urban Program (SDUP) programme in Bolivia that UNICEF is supporting. To address the MHH issues and to empower girls and boys to address the prevalent socio-cultural norms and stereotypes around menstruation, UNICEF started the interventions through schools as an entry point. UNICEF Bolivia CO supported 50 schools in developing Hygiene Plans that encompassed MHH. Alongside these plans, MHH was explained to students, and teachers received training, benefiting over 7,500 children, including boys. Moreover, at LATINOSAN 2022, the largest sanitation event in Latin America, four students (two girls and two boys) participated in debates on WASH services in schools, emphasizing MHH.

To build on the programmes impact, "Rosita's World", a captivating radio show, was broadcasted on local radio stations in Montero and Cobija. (Examples of the radio show can be listened to here). Teachers utilized this radio show as an educational resource, providing students with related questions to consider. The students listened to the radio programme and engaged in classroom discussions the following day. This engaging radio drama aimed to raise awareness, educate students and the community about MHH, addressing challenges, dispelling misconceptions, and highlighting the importance of menstrual health and hygiene.

Some of the key MHH barriers young girls face in Bolivia include:

- MHH is still a taboo in many areas of Bolivia where open discussion is prohibited.
- A high percentage of girls in Bolivia do not know about menstruation when they have their first period; and
- Menstrual hygiene supplies are expensive for the most vulnerable girls, especially in indigenous and rural environments, often leading them to use unhygienic materials.

## What did UNICEF do?

UNICEF's Bolivia's programme addressed the specific needs and challenges related to menstrual health and hygiene in the cities of Montero and Cobija. They

### Box 1:

#### *Transformative Strategy: Being Intentional About Gender transformative strategies.*

*Work with boys and men to embrace gender equality and exercise positive and diverse masculinities. Neglecting boys and men can create backlash and may lessen positive impacts and sustainable change. Boys and men can be agents and champions in gender-transformative approaches and also key participants of programmes, especially where they are particularly vulnerable. At the same time, it is also critical to keep in mind that girls often bear the brunt of multiple vulnerabilities.*

*UNICEF document, p12.*

recognised the challenges and barriers faced by girls and boys in these regions and tailored their approach accordingly. This responsiveness ensured that the interventions were relevant and effective in meeting the needs of both girls and boys. While menstruation primarily affects girls, it is essential to involve boys in discussions and education about menstrual health and hygiene. By engaging boys in these interventions, UNICEF

promoted gender equality, reduced stigma, and fostered empathy and understanding among boys towards menstruation. UNICEF focused on raising awareness and providing comprehensive education about menstrual health and hygiene. They conducted workshops, training sessions, role play and awareness campaigns to ensure that girls and boys had accurate information about menstruation. By addressing misconceptions, taboos, and stigma surrounding menstruation, teachers began to see changes in the confidence of their pupils – making informed choices and take

#### BOX 2:

### *UNICEF Policy: Positive gender socialization*

*UNICEF will expand on its considerable capacity and experience in the work of social norm change by engaging parents, caregivers, community leaders and boys and men as active partners, and allies for gender equality; and by promoting gender -equitable policies and services.*

[UNICEF Gender Policy 2021-2030, p6](#)

care of their menstrual health.

## Results

50 schools that UNICEF supported created Hygiene Plans that included information on MHH. MHH was explained to the students and teachers were trained on the subject, benefiting more than 7,500 children including both boys and girls. You can watch the video of how the awareness raising and discussions happened in the schools [here](#).

Being a part of the SDUP programme brought about some positive changes for both boys and girls' participants. The results were validated through an interview with teachers and students as per the interview guide. Interviews with teachers and students highlight how the

programme not only challenged traditional stereotypes but also empowered girls to feel comfortable to discuss openly issues of MHH (see annex for full interviews). Feedback from students

#### BOX 3:

### *Insights from interviews with programme participants*

*"Being a part of the programme...helped me a lot because I have a sister, and sometimes I didn't know how she felt during these days. Using life experiences and stories makes learning more interactive and gradually reduces the embarrassment". (Male student)*

*"It has made it easier for me to communicate and share information with my family about the menstrual cycle, hormonal changes, and psychological changes during puberty." (Student)*

*"UNICEF's program was of great assistance to the German Bush Becerra educational institution, instilling a sense of responsibility in students to carry sanitary napkins in their backpacks for certain moments and conveying a key message of empathy and understanding to young male students." (Teacher)*

on the benefits of the programme, include:

- Feeling more confident and not feeling uncomfortable discussing issues of MHH amongst family and friends.
- Improved understanding of menstruation and the importance of maintaining good hygiene during menstruation.
- Dispelling myths and taboos by understanding menstruation as a natural biological process and not something to be ashamed of.
- Feeling empowered to communicate and share information with their family about

MHH and hormonal changes during puberty.

- Improved confidence from participants and feeling less embarrassed discussing issues of MHH.

## Next steps

UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Education will scale up the programme to a national level with an aim to improve the MHH curricula that is taught in schools in Bolivia. This will enable the school management, students and teachers to have open and informed discussions to address stereotypes and bottlenecks related to menstrual health and hygiene in Bolivia.

## Conclusion

Involving men, boys, and the community in menstrual health and hygiene programmes, like the programme explored in this case study, is essential for challenging gender norms, promoting gender equality, and creating sustainable change, it recognizes that menstrual health is a shared responsibility. There is a need further to mainstream the knowledge, awareness, supply and demand related to menstruation in policies and practices in the coming days.

## Tools and guidance

Menstruation in a Global Context: addressing Policy and Practice, a free EdX course by Columbia

<https://www.edx.org/course/menstruation-in-a-global-context-addressing-policy-and-practice>

[UNICEF Guidance on menstrual health and hygiene](https://www.unicef.org/media/91341/file/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf)

<https://www.unicef.org/media/91341/file/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>

UNICEF Guide to menstrual hygiene materials

<https://www.unicef.org/media/91346/file/UNICEF-Guide-menstrual-hygiene-materials-2019.pdf>

Guidance for Monitoring Menstrual Health and Hygiene

<https://www.unicef.org/documents/guidance-monitoring-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>

Guidance Note: Menstrual Health and Hygiene for Girls and Woman with Disabilities

<https://www.unicef.org/media/98881/file/MHH-Disabilities-Guidance-Note-ENG.pdf>

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## Annexes

### Stakeholder Interviews

#### SURVEY FOR TEACHERS / PRINCIPALS

##### Male Biology Teacher

1. What were the topics discussed on the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita"?	Menstrual hygiene, managing eco-friendly sanitary napkins, environmental care, and storytelling.
2. How did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" address cultural sensitivities and taboos surrounding menstruation in the community?	It addressed these issues by providing accurate information about the use of sanitary napkins for students of different ages, promoting proper and environmentally-friendly management.
3. What specific strategies or techniques were employed in the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" to capture the attention of girls and boys?	Conducting workshops in different educational units in Montero, staging plays about respecting different genders, participating in international and national conferences on menstrual hygiene, and promoting the use of eco-friendly sanitary napkins for environmental care.
4. Were there noticeable changes or improvements in the knowledge and attitudes of girls and boys regarding menstruation after participating in the program with UNICEF?	Yes, there were very noticeable and productive changes. It was a great support because a significant majority did not understand this topic before it was addressed. For example, there were girls who experienced their first menstruation while at school and didn't know what to do. These discussions were very helpful, guiding them to use commercial sanitary napkins or eco-friendly ones to prevent any bullying from their peers. Additionally, it helped raise awareness among boys about this topic, and they matured in this aspect. UNICEF's program was of great assistance to the German Bush Becerra educational institution, instilling a sense of responsibility in students to carry sanitary napkins in their backpacks for certain moments and conveying a key message of empathy and understanding to young male students.
5. What feedback or reactions did you receive from girls and boys, their parents, or the community regarding the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita"?	Initially, there was some discomfort and embarrassment about discussing this topic, with some considering it private. However, as they continued to listen and learn about the subject, they realized it was a good way to provide help to their children. They also learned about eco-friendly sanitary napkins, which are more cost-effective, thanks to the information provided by the institution and UNICEF. The program clarified many aspects of menstruation and hygiene.
6. Based on your experience, what advice or recommendations do you have for a similar initiative using a radio program to raise awareness and educate girls and boys about menstruation?	a) Conduct regular talks on menstruation and proper hygiene. b) Create talks based on students' experiences, which can be used to create books or magazines for sharing the topic in various educational institutions. c) Encourage students through programs to express themselves without fear when discussing hygiene or other topics.

## INTERVIEWS FOR STUDENTS

**AGE: 17 years**

**Female**

<p>1. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" help you gain a better understanding of menstruation and its significance?</p>	<p>For me, "El Mundo de Rosita" helped me better understand menstruation. Now I know that menstruation is a biological, normal, and natural process that all women go through.</p>
<p>2. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" encourage you to have conversations about menstruation with your classmates or family members?</p>	<p>It motivated me to feel more confident about myself and not feel uncomfortable discussing this process with my family and friends.</p>
<p>3. Has participating in the program with UNICEF changed your perspective on menstruation?</p>	<p>My perspective changed for the better. I now understand that menstruation is something normal, and I shouldn't feel insecure about it.</p>
<p>4. Based on your experience, do you believe it's important for both male and female students to receive education and information about menstruation?</p>	<p>It is important for both girls and boys to know that menstruation is a natural and normal process and not to make fun of girls. For girls, it's important not to feel bad or embarrassed about menstruating. I appreciate UNICEF for providing us with menstrual hygiene programs because they are very beneficial for everyone's understanding. We are surrounded by many myths and taboos that often prevent us from opening our minds.</p>

**AGE: 18 years**

**Male**

<p>1. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" help you gain a better understanding of menstruation and its significance?</p>	<p>Yes, I believe it's information that every child and person entering pre-adolescence needs to know so they can use this information to help their partners or even family members. It helped me a lot because I have a sister, and sometimes I didn't know how she felt during these days. Using life experiences and stories makes learning more interactive and gradually reduces the embarrassment.</p>
<p>2. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" encourage you to have conversations about menstruation with your classmates or family members?</p>	<p>It has made it easier for me to communicate and share information with my family about the menstrual cycle, hormonal changes, and psychological changes during puberty. Thanks to the workshops, I've been able to socialize about menstrual and personal hygiene products. This has also allowed me to have more open conversations with my family.</p>
<p>3. Has participating in the program with UNICEF changed your perspective on menstruation?</p>	<p>Yes, it's true. Thanks to participating in the program, I've become a more confident person with more female friends. I've realized that women need special care and understanding.</p>

<p>4. Based on your experience, do you believe it's important for both male and female students to receive education and information about menstruation?</p>	<p>Yes, it's important because we need to help one another, and for those who have sisters, girlfriends, or female friends, we need to take care of them. Women are important in this life, and without them, I wouldn't be here today. It's important to discuss this topic with males.</p>
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**AGE: 17 years**  
**Female**

<p>1. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" help you gain a better understanding of menstruation and its significance?</p>	<p>Yes, because it's important to have knowledge about our menstruation, to understand why it happens and how long it's normal for it to last. This way, we can also see the positive side and not just the negative aspects of menstruation. The radio program also encourages us to attend talks, reflective readings, and workshops, among other activities.</p>
<p>2. Did the radio program "El Mundo de Rosita" encourage you to have conversations about menstruation with your classmates or family members?</p>	<p>Yes, it motivated me because it helps them understand me better and provide support. When a woman experiences menstrual bleeding, there is often embarrassment, and others may laugh at it. But talking to someone makes you feel better and more at ease, and this is helpful.</p>
<p>3. Has participating in the program with UNICEF changed your perspective on menstruation?</p>	<p>Yes, indeed, this program has helped me a lot. I have come to understand that menstruation in women is something normal. If it happens, we don't need to worry, as it could just be a regular menstruation cycle. It has also taught me the importance of maintaining good personal hygiene during my menstruation.</p>
<p>4. Based on your experience, do you believe it's important for both male and female students to receive education and information about menstruation?</p>	<p>Yes, because a man doesn't know the pain that a woman goes through, and they should have knowledge to avoid making fun of women and to better understand and assist them. The topic of menstruation is not just for women; it also involves men. This will help men develop a spirit of empathy and understanding.</p>

## About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

*Discussion Papers* explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

*Fact Sheets* summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

*Field Notes* share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

*Guidelines* describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

*Reference Guides* present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

*Technical Papers* present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

*WASH Diaries* explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

*WASH Results* show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

*COVID-19 WASH Responses* compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

Readers are encouraged to quote from this publication but UNICEF requests due acknowledgement. You can learn more about UNICEF's work on WASH here:

<https://www.unicef.org/wash/>

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