



WASH Field Note FN/26/2024

Empowering Adolescent Girls: UNICEF and BeGirl's Initiative for Enhanced Menstrual Hygiene Management at school level in Mozambique

Learning from a small-scale initiative to ensure stronger future programming

Accelerating Sanitation and Water for All (ASWA) Programme

SUMMARY

In Mozambique, the education sector faces various challenges, notably marked by high dropout rates. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2021), only 30.6% of students successfully complete primary education. The situation is particularly dire for girls, with over half dropping out before reaching grade five. Amid numerous socio-economic factors contributing to girls' dropout rates, one often overlooked, yet crucial aspect, is inadequate Menstrual Hygiene management (MHM).

The "Initiative for Enhanced Menstrual Hygiene Management at school level" in the context of the implementation of "Accelerating Sanitation and Water for All (ASWA) programme" in Mozambique sought to transform perceptions on menstruation and address associated taboos through a variety of awareness-raising activities coupled with the distribution of menstrual management kits to girls. The main goal was to enhance girls' menstrual hygiene practices while, simultaneously, improve school attendance.

Implemented over a six-month period, the project targeted six schools in the Murrupula district of the Nampula Province. A total of 3,052 girls benefitted from awareness-raising educational talks, with 1,300 of them receiving menstrual hygiene management kits. In parallel, 3,057 boys participated in informative talks on menstrual management and hygiene, with 2,500 receiving educational leaflets.

This field note summarizes activities implemented through this initiative that has been pivotal in shaping recommendations for future effective MHM interventions at school level in Mozambique and beyond such as:

- Strategic Partnership with Expert Organizations: Leverage organizations like Be Girl for informed design and implementation of MHM programs through mutually beneficial partnerships.
- Integrated MHM Program with Awareness Raising and Distribution: Develop comprehensive MHM programs integrating education, sensitization, and product distribution to ensure immediate relief and long-term sustainability.
- Eco-Friendly MHM Solutions: Promote adoption of environmentally sustainable MHM products through collaboration with private sector entities, aligned with UNICEF's climate approach.
- Community-Led Social Enterprises: Support the establishment of local, community-led social
 enterprises for MHM product production and distribution, fostering economic empowerment and
 sustainability.
- Enhanced Menstrual Education: Integrate comprehensive MHM content into school curricula, aligning with UNICEF WASH in Schools programs.
- Inclusive Awareness Raising Programs: Expand MHM sensitization efforts to include boys as allies, empowering them through advocacy and peer education roles.

Background

Despite Mozambique's 'Education for All' policy, school enrollment and attendance rates for girls remain low. Over 50% of girls in Mozambique discontinue their schooling by the fifth grade, with only 1% progressing to university. Additionally, illiteracy rates among women are twice as high as those for men. The challenges girls face in staying in and succeeding at school include low cultural value placed on girls' education, sexual and physical violence at school, inadequate feminine hygiene products and services, and harmful traditional practices.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) remains a critical but emerging topic within Mozambique's Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education portfolios, which still lack clearly defined roles and responsibilities. In 2019, a critical step was taken with the development, approval, and rollout of the National Curriculum for Menstrual Health, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Human Development, and the Multisectoral Group on Water and Sanitation (GAS). This initiative was led by Be Girl, a social enterprise that creates menstrual hygiene products, educational materials, and messaging

to ensure all adolescent girls and boys can better understand and manage menstruation.

As part of the Accelerating Sanitation and Water for All (ASWA) program, funded by the Government of the Netherlands and implemented by UNICEF in coordination with the Government of Mozambique, UNICEF partnered with Be Girl Mozambique for the implementation of the 'Empowering Adolescent Girls Initiative for Enhanced Menstrual Hygiene Management at the school level in Mozambique' project. The project aimed to promote Menstrual Hygiene Management in six schools in the Murrupula district, Nampula Province.

Guided by the overarching UNICEF Global Priorities outlined in the UNICEF's Strategy for WASH 2016-2030, the Strategic Plan 2018-2021, the UNICEF Guidance on menstrual health and hygiene (2019) and the Gender Action Plan 2018-2021, this project differed from conventional MHM interventions previously conducted by UNICEF Mozambique which typically involve small-scale private actors, the so-called Community Participation and Education (PEC), conducting awareness campaigns on sanitation and hygiene at community and by extension at school level.

However, these actors often lack specialized expertise in MHM and allocate minimal time to this crucial matter. In addition, the supply side, particularly in providing menstrual hygiene products, is consistently overlooked.

For this particular project, the implementing partner was fully specialized in MHM, bringing a unique set of knowledge and skills, and offered services encompassing educational messaging dedicated to both girls and boys, along with specific and reusable MHM supplies.

This project delivered a unique combination of services at school level including:

- Provision of Sustainable Menstrual hygiene Products: Be Girl's PeriodPanty™ is a single product that combines underwear with built-in menstrual protection using a mesh pocket that holds holds a washable towel to absorb menstrual flow. This design is intended to be easy to wash and dry. Each schoolgirl already having its menstruation received two pairs of this menstrual underwear.
- Education services anchored on the National Menstrual Health Curriculum, with a targeted approach that included not only girls' students but also boys, along with parents and teachers.

Figure 1: Learning package developed by Be Girl



1, Project Overview

1.1 Project objectives and activities

The project was implemented for a period of six months in six primary schools of the Nampula province in Murrupula district. The targeted age groups were 10-19 years for girls and 11-17 years for boys.

Specific objectives of the project

Train 30 facilitators from the six selected schools with the National Management and Menstrual Hygiene Package.

Equip the six selected schools with the National Menstrual Hygiene Management Package. The learning package includes a giant-sized, highly graphic and engaging illustrated handbook, an educational game designed to identify and deconstruct myths and taboos related to MHM, and various educational leaflets.

Reach 2.500 boys and 1.300 girls through awareness raising activities.

Provide 1.300 menstrual kits **made of 2** reusable menstrual panties, 1 bag to safely manage them as well as one educational leaflet to girls to manage menstruation safely and comfortably, removing barriers to participation in school and other daily activities.

Conduct a basic baseline and endline survey to track the evolution of girls' understanding of MHM, as well as the uptake of reusable MHM products. Results are discussed in section 2.

The selected schools were provided access to water and sanitation via the ASWA Programme, thereby establishing favorable conditions for promoting MHM among schoolgirls.



Figure 2: Examples of educational sheets contained in the learning package

Main activities carried out

Training of Trainers in MHM. The objective of this training initiative was to empower participants with technical skills and comprehensive materials on MHM and to enable trainees to effectively convey positive messages on MHM and advocating for good MHM practices at school level.

Educational and awareness-raising sessions on MHM. Engaging talks were conducted to educate both girls and boys on menstruation and menstrual hygiene. The overarching purpose was to promote menstrual education, foster an understanding of the significance of maintaining positive attitudes towards menstruation, and challenge prevailing myths and taboos surrounding menstruation.

Celebration of the Hygiene and Menstrual Management Day. On May 28th, the International Day of Menstrual Hygiene was celebrated across the six selected schools. This celebration aimed at raising awareness on menstrual hygiene.

Distribution of menstrual kits and educational leaflets. This activity was designed to provide essential support to girls through the distribution of menstrual kits and informative leaflets and ensure that girls have access to necessary menstrual hygiene materials, ultimately preventing regular absences from school or dropout due to menstruation. This aligned with the broader goal of promoting educational continuity and gender equality.

Figure 3: Girls celebrating the MHM Day



1.2 Results achieved.

All project results were achieved with 30 facilitators trained, more than 3,052 girls reached with educational talks, of which 1,300 were provided with menstrual hygiene kits, representing 100% of the expected target. In addition, 3,057 boys received informative talks on menstrual management and hygiene, representing an achievement of 122% of the expected target, of which 2,500 benefited from educational leaflets. In total, the project reached 6,109 beneficiaries.

2. Insights from the light Baseline/Endline Surveys

While not aiming at being statistically representative and not structured as an in-depth research project, the project prioritized the generation of empirical evidence and insights throughout its execution.

Baseline and endline surveys were designed and conducted to understand the level of knowledge and awareness about the menstrual cycle and menstrual hygiene practices in the target schools. The surveys, both at baseline and endline, were administered to a total of 100 girls and 100 boys. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions,

female enumerators were predominantly chosen. Additionally, respondents were interviewed individually to further ensure their comfort.

The results presented below highlight the primary changes in girls' and boys' perceptions and knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene, which can be attributed to the project, as identified through baseline and endline surveys conducted.

Figure 4: Girls receiving reusable panties.

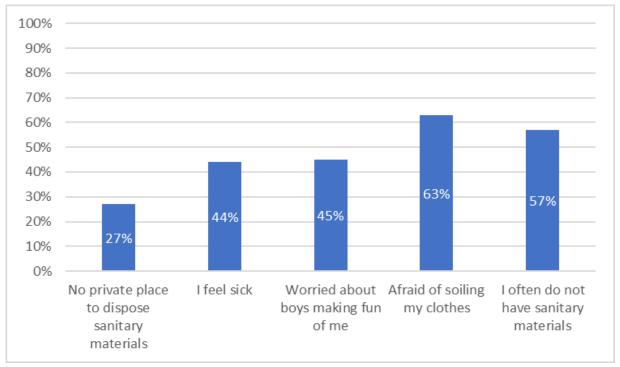


2.1 Evolution of MHM-related concerns

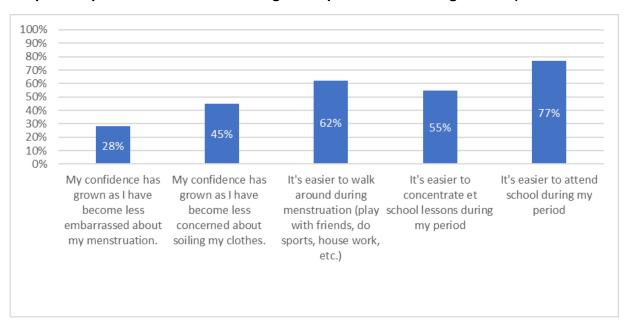
Prior to the initiation of the project, girls encountered challenges in attending school, primarily stemming from the apprehension of soiling their clothes, a concern shared by 63% of the girls (Graph 1). The second most prevalent challenge, affecting 57% of girls, was the scarcity of sanitary materials, such as sanitary pads.

Post-intervention, the girls experienced a notable reduction in apprehension about attending school during their menstrual periods. After the distribution of PeriodPanties, 77% of the girls reported enhanced ease in attending school, walking around, and engaging in various activities (62%) (Graph 2). Furthermore, 55% expressed improved concentration during classes, and 45% indicated a diminished concern about the risk of soiling their clothes.

Graph 1: Girls' concerns during menstruation (Pre-intervention)



Graph 2: Impact of Period Panties on girls' experience attending school (Post-Intervention)



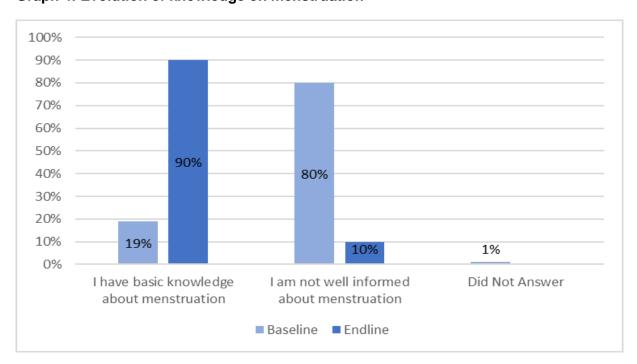
Following project implementation, there was a notable increase in schoolgirls' confidence in discussing menstruation, with 51% expressing comfort after intervention compared to just 24% prior (Graph 3).

100% 90% 80% 70% 51% 60% 24% 50% 40% 30% 20% 10% 0% Baseline Endline ■ Not confortable ■ Shy or ashamed Confortable

Graph 3 - Evolution of Comfort Regarding Menstruation

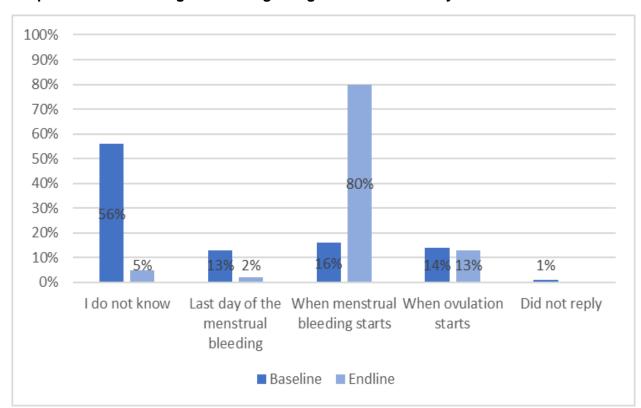
2.2 Evolution of Girls Knowledge on Menstruation

There was a significant increase following the implementation of the project, with 90% of girls reporting that they had acquired knowledge about menstruation through the project (Graph 4). Girls shared that they gained new understanding regarding the menstrual cycle, along with adopting improved practices for MHM.



Graph 4: Evolution of knowledge on menstruation

More specifically, girls displayed limited knowledge of the menstrual cycle in the baseline survey, with 56% lacking prior understanding. After the project, 80% of the girls correctly identified the onset of menstrual bleeding as a signal of menstruation, a significant increase from the baseline where only 16% provided the correct answer (Graph 5).



Graph 5: Girls' knowledge on the beginning of the menstrual cycle

Figure 5: Girls' awareness raising session.



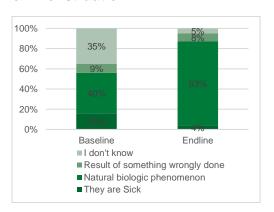
2.3 Boys Knowledge on Menstruation

Boys' comprehension of the reasons behind women's menstruation also experienced substantial enhancement. Initially, only 40% of boys understood menstruation is a natural phenomenon against 83% post-project implementation (Graph 6). This shift underscores the positive impact of the project in dispelling misconceptions and fostering a more informed perspective among boys regarding menstruation.

Image 6: Boys' awareness raising session.



Graph 6 - Evolution of boys' knowledge on menstruation



Lessons Learned & Recommendations

In alignment with UNICEF's Strategy for WASH 2016-2030, UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-2021, UNICEF's Gender Action Plan 2018-2021, and UNICEF Guidance on menstrual health and hygiene (2019), UNICEF Mozambique formulated 6 key lessons learned and recommendations that will be used for its future programming to enhance MHM initiatives at school level. Those recommendations could be contextualized and used by different Country Offices to strengthen MHM Programming.

By integrating these recommendations into the framework of future MHM programs, there is a potential not only to address the immediate needs related to menstrual hygiene but also to contribute to the broader goals of gender equality, environmental sustainability, and community empowerment in Mozambique and beyond.

Strategic Partnership with Expert Organizations

Lesson learned: For this initiative, UNICEF partnered with an organization possessing specific expertise in MHM, enhancing the quality of awareness-raising activities, and significantly bolstering local capacities to advance a robust MHM agenda in the future.

Recommendation: Recognize and leverage the expertise of organizations with specific MHM expertise like Be Girl, acknowledging their knowledge and innovative solutions in MHM. Part of that should include fostering partnerships that are mutually beneficial, ensuring that the expertise of these expert organizations informs the design and implementation of MHM programs.

Encourage Integrated MHM Program with Sensitization Activities and Product Distribution

Lesson learned: The combination of awareness-raising activities and the provision of MHM supplies was found particularly impactful, enhancing the practicality of MHM interactions, specifically with girls.

Recommendation: Develop and implement comprehensive MHM programs that seamlessly integrates educational and sensitization activities with the distribution of menstrual hygiene products. Programs should be designed with a dual focus: to provide immediate relief by offering necessary MHM products, and to ensure long-term sustainability by fostering an informed and supportive school environment.

Develop Eco-Friendly MHM Solutions

Lesson learned: Reusable pads were provided to address environmental concerns, but more action is needed.

Recommendation: Emphasize the adoption of environmentally sustainable MHM products, like the reusable PeriodPanty™. This should be done through the development of partnerships with private sector entities to drive innovation in MHM products and should involve collaborating with companies specializing in sustainable materials to develop eco-friendly, cost-effective menstrual products suited to the needs and preferences of girls and women in Mozambique. This will allow greater alignment with UNICEF's climate approach and will contribute to the broader goals of environmental sustainability and resilience.

Community-Led Social Enterprises for MHM Solutions

Lesson learned: This initiative relied on products manufactured abroad which poses challenges to the sustainability of the initiative and may compromise affordability in the long run. While some reusable MHM products are manufactured in Mozambique, concerns exist regarding their quality and the capacity to produce large quantities.

Recommendation: Foster the establishment of community-led social enterprises that produce and distribute MHM products of high standards locally. This approach will not only ensure the availability of MHM products but will also promote economic empowerment among women and will enhance local ownership and sustainability. Supporting these enterprises through microfinance, training, and market access can catalyze a movement towards sustainable MHM solutions.

Inclusive Awareness Raising Programs to empower Boys as Allies in MHM

Lesson learned: Boys were valuable allies, playing a pivotal role in demystifying and alleviating taboos surrounding MHM. Their involvement fostered a more inclusive and supportive environment for MHM discussions.

Recommendation: Continue MHM sensitization efforts to include boys. This will not only foster a supportive and understanding school environment but will also strengthen awareness, contributing to the dismantling of stigmas associated with menstruation. In addition, MHM programme should continue empowering boys to become allies in MHM by involving them in advocacy and peer education roles. Boys should always be trained to disseminate accurate information about menstruation, combat myths and misconceptions, and advocate for MHM-friendly policies and facilities in schools. This will not only support in normalizing conversations around menstruation but will also help in building a generation of men who are informed, sensitive, and supportive of MHM.

Enhanced Menstrual Education

Lesson learned: The initiative was executed on a small scale. Simultaneously, UNICEF must persist in advocating for the inclusion of MHM in school curricula, strengthening its upstream efforts and advocacy work, utilizing the pilot project as a crucial piece of evidence.

Recommendation: Intensify investments in menstrual education for girls and boys, integrating comprehensive MHM information into the school curriculum. This approach should align with UNICEF WASH in Schools (WinS) interventions, ensuring that menstrual hygiene is treated as a crucial component of the broader agenda on sanitation and hygiene in educational settings.

Conclusion

Learnings from this small-scale intervention emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach to improve MHM in Mozambique, involving community engagement, education, technological innovation, and partnerships. The proposed strategies aim to address not only the practical aspects of MHM but also the cultural and societal factors, ensuring a comprehensive and sustainable impact on the lives of girls and women in Mozambique.

Photo Credits

BeGirl Mozambique and UNICEF Mozambique Country Office, 2023.

About the Authors

This field note was written by Gracio Arnanca, (UNV, UNICEF) and Julie Aubriot (Sanitation and WASH in Schools Manager).

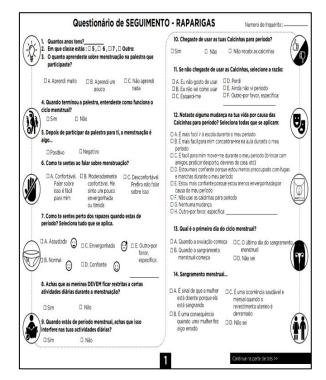
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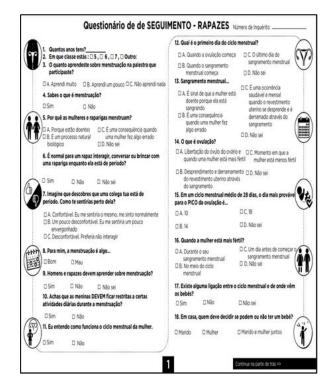
Baseline Survey

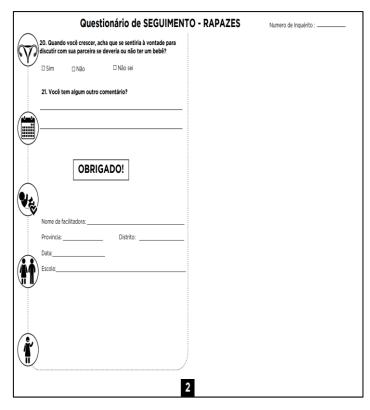


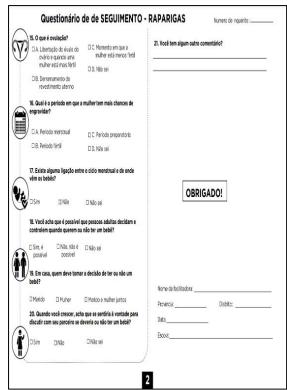


Endline Survey









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.

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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.

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United Nations Children's Fund 3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

For more information, please contact: WASH@unicef.org

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