



WATER
RESEARCH
COMMISSION

DIALOGUE: MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

Supporting the Sanitary Dignity Campaign for Women and Girls

Dialogue Report April 2011



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In partnership with

The Department for Women, Children and People with Disabilities, Stockholm Environment Institute and the Water Information Network South Africa



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i. Abbreviations and Acronyms

DWCPD	Department for Women, Children, People with Disability
EcoSanRes	Ecological Sanitation Research
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MHM	Menstrual Health Management
SEI	Stockholm Environment Institute
WIN-SA	Water Information Network South Africa
WRC	Water Research Commission



1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE DIALOGUE

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the Menstrual Health Management Dialogue (MHM) and to report on proceedings and recommendations of the dialogue within the context of the joint role and responsibility of the Water Research Commission (WRC), the Department for Women, Children and People with Disability (DWCPD) and the other stakeholders in advancing women's empowerment and gender equality in the area of Menstrual Health Management in South Africa.

The dialogue was convened on 19 April 2011 and took place at the St George's Hotel and Conference Centre, Pretoria. The theme '*Menstrual Health Management*' within the context of water and sanitation underpinned the discussions that took place. A secondary theme running through the dialogue was '*Supporting the Sanitary Dignity Campaign*', linked the key stakeholders who play a role in supporting the need to understand the broader societal responsibility for addressing MHM as a gender equality commitment.

The dialogue was attended by sixty (60) delegates who represented national and provincial departments, donor and development agencies, academic institutions, trade unions, civil society organisations and the private sector. (see Appendix A for the list of participants)

The dialogue objectives were designed:

- To 'break the silence on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)' by (i) creating awareness on the topic and the impact it has on women and girls, (ii) exploring and sharing lessons of the management aspects, (iii) promoting integration of MHM in health and hygiene/life orientation strategies.
- To discuss ways of Supporting the Sanitary Dignity Campaign for Women and Girls, including (i) ways of increasing women's access throughout their life cycle to appropriate, descent, affordable and quality health care, information and related services, (ii)



strengthening preventive programmes that promote women's sanitary health, (iii) undertaking gender sensitive initiatives that address women rights and empowerment issues, increase resources and monitor follow up on MHM.

Presentations made at the dialogue are available on the website of the Southern Africa Knowledge Node on Sustainable Sanitation www.afrisan.org

1.2 Background and Context

“The literature on gender mainstreaming in the Water & Sanitation sector, is silent on Menstrual Management adequacy of water for washing and bathing, availability of hygienic materials and solid waste management of disposables. Initiatives in this area are restricted to very small pilots, with poor follow-up and poor dissemination of results. Although poor sanitation is correlated with absenteeism and drop-out of girls in developing countries, efforts in school sanitation to address this issue have ignored menstrual management in latrine design and construction. Wider aspects of the issue such as privacy, water availability and awareness-raising amongst boys and men remain largely unexplored by development initiatives.

Hygiene promotion efforts have recently initiated a focus on this area but mainly on the software aspects i.e. telling girls and women about correct practices. These efforts do not currently target men and adolescent boys, nor do they systematically inform infrastructure design. Minimal effort has gone into production and social marketing of low-cost napkins, reusable materials, research into bio-degradables, etc. Research and development efforts have been limited to commercial ventures that even today are unable to market products that are affordable for the poorest of the poor.

The issue of washing of soiled materials and environmentally friendly disposal of napkins is absent from waste management training, infrastructure design and impact evaluation. In short, Menstrual Management is missing from the literature whether it is manuals to sensitize



engineers to gender needs or technical manuals on latrine designs, sanitation for secondary schools, solid waste issues composting, bio-degradable materials or even simple training modules for health and sanitary workers.¹

From the South African perspective, national research and surveys undertaken suggests that approximately 30% of girls do not attend school during menstruation; these girls are in the main from poorer communities where access to sanitary resources is difficult. For many of these poverty stricken families, the purchase of sanitary pads are simply too expensive, and thus receives less priority when compared to other household needs such as food. The resultant absenteeism during menstruation leads to a critical loss of learning time. On average, about 4 days per month can be lost, which can add up to 528 days of schooling across the years that a girl should be in school.

According to research, 60% of women and girls in South Africa do not have access to traditional sanitary ware (pads and tampons). And as an "alternative" to pads and tampons, they have no option but to use rags, toilet paper, newspaper, leaves, "recycled" tampons / pads and disposable nappies. This raises concern regarding the experiences of women and girls in terms of health and hygiene, productivity, as well as dignity and confidence to be active members of a society.

During ongoing discussion among role-players, the issue of the distribution of sanitary towels to women and girls, featured strongly, which is a clear indication of the extent of the problem. With the high level unemployment and poverty being experienced in many communities, the issue of MHM is not merely an economic issue, but should also be considered from the social, health and productivity perspectives. There is a need to understand the broader societal responsibility in addressing MHM, as well as to consider ways in which women and girls can be assisted with MHM.

¹ Menstrual Hygiene and Management in Developing Countries: Taking Stock, November 2004 By Sowmyaa Bharadwaj and Archana Patkar



2. DIALOGUE PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Session One

The CEO of the WRC, **Dr Rivkar Kfir**, welcomed the dialogue delegates. In her opening remarks she emphasised that MHM should be addressed in an holistic manner as it involves and borders on many other aspects like health, gender and technical considerations. She also stressed that the dialogue discussions would help achieve a knowledge based approach to MHM in the future and identify new areas of research as there is currently limited research on the subject.

In the opening address, **Ms Ranji Reddy**, Director of the DWCPD Women's Branch, delivered a speech on behalf of Ms Lulu Xingwana, Minister for Women, Children and People with Disability. The speech highlighted a number of key issues summarised below:

- Though South Africa has made significant progress towards universal access to education, in line with the MDGs, access to sanitary towels for girls is a challenge as without these the girls are forced to miss some days of schooling every month.
- The issue of sanitary health has been taken up by government; President Jacob Zuma, during the State of the Nation Address, committed government to the provision of sanitary pads to indigent women and girls.
- Government is therefore in the process of mobilising support from partners including the private sector and development agencies.
- Dialogue is a perfect example of gender mainstreaming, as it encourages discussion and raising awareness of issues which can then be resolved through planning and budgeting. The success of the dialogue will be determined by the extent to which dignity is brought to women and girls.

The opening address provided a platform from which presenters could contextualize the MHM issues from perspectives of gender equality, health, water and sanitation, and how these impact on women and girls.



Ms Ethne Davey, former chairperson and current member of the Gender and Water Alliance, applauded the DWCPD for recognising sanitary towels as a necessity for the disadvantaged women and girls. She asked dialogue delegates to consider a number of issues, that include:

- The need for sanitary towel accessibility for learners to become a key issue within the water and sanitation agenda;
- MHM should be discussed within the broad context of water and sanitation, with associated issues of waste management, health, hygiene education, etc;
- An enabling environment has to be created to provide school girls with an hygienic and private space to manage their menstrual health;
- The issue of girls dropping out of school because of the inability to manage menstrual issues, requires an integrated approach;
- In South Africa we have to find a way of coupling the lack of sanitary towels with sanitation problems; this will ensure that South Africa does not continue contributing to million plus school girls that drop out every year in the developing world and who are being deprived of a basic education.

Ms Madeleine Fogde, Programme Director for the EcosanRES programme, Stockholm Environment Institute, brought an international perspective to the proceedings by asking crucial questions that link MHM and water and sanitation. She stressed the importance of:

- An agreed definition of sustainable sanitation and the holistic approach required in meeting the sustainable sanitation;
- A continued focus on the interrelations between sanitation and MHM; with a clear focus on the degree to which MHM is considered in planning sustainable sanitation for the unserved and the underserved.
- Some key work is being planned and implemented by a research consortium where SEI and the eThekweni Metro are participation , funded by the Bill Gates Foundation.
- The presentation further highlighted statistics from Ghana that detailed the impact of inadequate MHM on daily activities of school girls. This includes missing school and



learning opportunities, being unable to play with other children, shame and lack of confidence during menstruation.

Ms Nicky Naidoo, an independent consultant from the Nema Consulting, shared research information in the area of water and sanitation from the perspectives of both an engineers and women. Even though some of her current research did not have a particular focus on sanitary health of women, the findings have huge implications for MHM.

Research findings show that; (i) Menstruating women use more water, yet there was not necessarily more access for this use; and (ii) Menstruating women in informal settlements are requested not to use communal toilets and water, for fear of spreading HIV/AIDS. She stressed the importance of awareness raising and education of communities, with a focus on:

- Health and hygiene education beyond merely hand washing, but should also include MHM;
- MHM means the availability of water for personal hygiene and for washing re-usable sanitary towels;
- In rural areas, where it is known that some girls take herbs to stop menstruation, because of lack adequate toilet facilities in schools, MHM means better planning of infrastructure.

Following on the practical approach to MHM that had been raised during the previous presentations, **Mr Neil Macleod**, Head of Water and Sanitation, City of eThekweni, reminded delegates that MHM at the local government level had practical implications that required planning and budgeting within broader municipal decision making processes . He shared the MHM initiatives that are currently being undertaken by the City of eThekweni which is being funded by the Bill Gates Foundation to conduct research on MHM. This will include the impact of the use of menstrual cups and re-usable sanitary towels.



Summary of Discussion on Presentations

The presentations raised a number of issues; these are summarised in the following section.

Planning and Budgeting

- The Department of Human Settlements is currently revising the sanitation policy; yet MHM has not been included. The department has noted the issue and it would be taken forward to the team handling the sanitation policy revision.
- A sustainability plan is required for any programme that focuses on sanitary towel distribution.
- MHM is an important issue in all provinces e.g. blocked sewers at schools, thus how can engineering and design address this? Population growth has put pressure on reticulation systems. Where there are shared reticulation systems, it takes one household flushing the wrong items, to block everyone else's systems.



- Regarding backyard dwellers, municipalities need to find a way of providing services to these people.
- There remains too much of working in silos; sanitation cannot be dealt with in totality if there is no integration of efforts between all partners and stakeholders.

Awareness Raising, Advocacy and Implementation

- There is a need to look at a gender and empowerment perspective when addressing water and sanitation issues.
- Regarding MHM in rural schools, could one encourage the use of re-washable cloths, which was done in the past before disposables were utilised.
- Teach kids from an early age that MHM is important, through such programs such as WASH United. Learn from other programmes e.g. WASH United Lesotho.
- Mother/father/parents-to-child talk on MHM is critical to the success of dealing with the issues. Continued dialogue will not only address issues of MHM, but also address issues such as sex and sexuality, HIV/AIDS etc.

Research and Development

- There is need to research lessons on MHM.
- Current research in SA links absenteeism of girls from school, with to lack of sanitation facilities.

2.2 Session Two

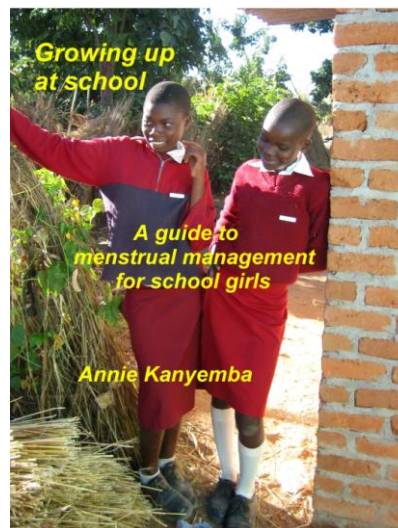
Panel Discussion:

The session entitled, '*Why MHM Matters and Supporting MHM Initiatives*', helped deepen the level of engagement by asking delegates to focus on an holistic approach towards addressing the challenges, emerging issues, as well as global, regional and national level initiatives. The following panelists shared information on current initiatives aimed at effective and sustainable MHM.



Ms Annie Shangwa, representative of Aquarmor, Zimbabwe, highlighted the plight of school girls in Zimbabwe and shared with delegates research based on practical ways of dealing with MHM, which included:

- Aquarmor has produced a guide to menstrual management for school girls. The booklet is based on the previous work by Marni Sommer of Columbia University (USA). Sommer has produced a simple booklet to help school girls in Tanzania to understand and manage their menstrual management problems.
- The Zimbabwean version of the booklet covers real stories by girl children on how they manage their menses.
- The booklet will be translated into Shona and will continue to be tested with the target audience .
- The booklet can be made available to a South African market; the WRC will follow up on this possibility.



MHM booklet by Annie Kanyemaba

Ms Glenda Tutt, MPOWER cup owner, Cape Town SA and the Founder of the Karabo initiative, shared with dialogue delegates a vision to supply sustainable sanitary ware to the mass market of women who do not have access to commercially available products because of economic constraints.



- The project aims to provide women, who do not have access to traditional sanitary ware in a way that is accessible and cost effective;
- The MPOWER Cup is a sustainable solution in terms of accessibility, cost and waste management;
- The solution requires that women are able to move away from the traditional approach of sanitary pads and tampons towards a single product that can be used for many years; and
- The goal is to provide more than one million women with a sustainable sanitary ware solution by 2015.



MPOWER cup

Dr Paul Cromhout, representing the Small Foundation Projects, Eastern Cape Province, shared a practical approach that is currently being undertaken by the organisation in dealing with MHM at the school level.

- The Eastern Cape project is being implemented in partnership with Procter and Gamble and is known as the Protecting Futures Programme. The project is looking at ways of keeping the girl child in school.
- The programme thus seeks to empower young girls to secure their futures by providing them with appropriate knowledge on puberty and sexual reproductive health, thereby inspiring them to make informed decisions and to develop a healthy self esteem.



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- Girls are encouraged to stay in school by providing them with information that gives a meaningful context for them to understand their bodies and helps them deal comfortably with menstruation related challenges.
 - The good lessons of the programme is being shared with interested stakeholders who might want to look at how the programme can be extended beyond the province.

Ms Winnie Ndebele, programme director, Red Cross, South Africa, shared perspectives that focused on the situation of women and girls in dealing with MHM in South Africa and the Southern African region by raising a number of issues, including:

- The importance of proper infrastructure including working toilets, access to water and waste management disposal facilities when dealing with MHM; an holistic approach is required.
- An economic approach needs to be undertaken that will ensure access to and affordability of sanitary towels for all women.
- There are a number of challenges to dealing with MHM influenced by factors such as culture, religion, access to education and poverty. These issues must be addressed simultaneously.
- Urged the DWCPD to come up with a holistic approach in view of the fact that MHM is a basic need. MHM is relevant to the MDGs as it touches on 7 MDGs.
- The use of media in positioning MHM and lobbying for regulation (i.e. zero VAT) and political will should be considered.

Dr Lindiwe Ringane, Ngwedi Manufacturer of synthetic and re-usable sanitary pads in South Africa, discussed the use of sanitary ware from the perspective of health, economics and waste management.

- The management of health and hygiene should contribute to the empowerment of women through entrepreneurship. Women need to be in a position to make choices; but this will only happen through knowledge and economic empowerment.
- It is vital that when one considers the scaling up plan, that products that are made available are part of a sustainable approach.



- The programme currently has three factories in Limpopo, Free State and Gauteng provinces that focus on economic development and the empowerment of women. This links with the need to build communities that are able to solve their own problems
- Sanitary towels (the use of, disposal of, etc) could be integrated as part of the school curriculum; ongoing awareness raising is a vital part of MHM.



Example of products produced by Ngwedi

Ms Noma Nesen, Director at the Institute of Water and Sanitation, Zimbabwe, highlighted key challenges that are faced by the African girl child with regard to MHM.

- Solutions require an holistic approach that should address issues such as technology, choice, design and implementation, environmental degradation, safety, privacy and dignity of women and children.
- Currently there are a number of knowledge gaps among the female and male teachers who are equally unclear about MHM.
- There are real challenges of sanitary cost and accessibility in many communities. In some communities/schools the girls use mealie cobs, leaves, blankets and old rags to manage their periods and this has implications for their general reproductive health.



- There is a need to rethink sanitation and introducing the girl friendly latrines. To date the most important lesson learnt is the need for an integrated approach to the management of menstruation, as it has a clear linkages with the MDG targets on reproductive health, gender equality, sustainable environment and poverty eradication.



Summary of Discussion on Panel Presentations

The presentations raised a number of issues; these are summarised in the following section.

Awareness Raising, Advocacy and Implementation

- MHM is also a psychological issue, the free supply of sanitary towels is only one way of dealing with MHM. There is a need to educate children about clean environment and self love. Infrastructure setup should enable respect for oneself and the facilities provided. It is important for women and girls to know and understand their own bodies.
- Proposal by the Department of Human Settlement to celebrate menstruation day as part of the WASH campaign.



- More information is required on the use of the menstrual cup, (i) the appropriate age for using the cup, (ii) what happens in case of rape? (iii) How does one go about inserting and handling the cup when removing? .
- Stakeholders must consider to start a lobbying campaign to bring down the cost of sanitary towels, including (i) How can the group pressurise government to regulate the sector, (ii) Ensure the transfer of knowledge from schools to the household
- Proposal to lobby government to make sanitary towels available in the same manner that condoms are available at clinics
- The delegates also expressed that when dealing with MHM, it is vital for such campaigns to integrate all stakeholders e.g. (i) Current initiatives have not yet managed to bring the boy child on board and this will continue to perpetuate the gender and menstrual management stereotypes. (ii) The DWCPD and other key role players must also explore the issue of MHM from the perspective of Child Headed Households.
- South Africans should move from the self entitlement mentality of expecting government to provide everything including cleaning and maintaining our environments. Donating does results in people not valuing whatever it is given to them.



3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

3.1 Dialogue Recommendations

The following recommendations have been put forward by dialogue delegates.

Research and Development

1. Comprehensive research in South Africa should be conducted concerning the effect of MHM on women and girls.
2. Data needs to be collected and shared on the distribution of sanitary towels, ensuring that the most needy women and girls are adequately assisted.

Monitoring and Compliance

3. Improved oversight and compliance of implementation of policies, in particular hygiene, to ensure that OSHE standards are adhered to. There should be punitive measures for transgressors.
4. An MOU should be drawn up and signed by DG's/CEOs to ensure commitment.

Raising Awareness and Partnerships

5. The MHM dialogue should continue with clear milestones and deliverables linked to implementation.
6. Partnerships with other stakeholders should be developed e.g. the media for positive messaging.
7. Religious and traditional leaders and other relevant stakeholders should be brought into the dialogue on MHM.
8. There should be another level of dialogue that includes groups who are not represented in this dialogue. Consider taking the dialogue to the provincial level.
9. The promotion of and inclusion of MHM as part of health and hygiene curriculum should be advanced in the sanitation sector



Implementation

10. Draw up clear guidelines on municipalities' readiness to respond to the president's call on MHM, especially in rural areas.
11. Sanitation as a dignity issue rather than just a campaign should be promoted, this will support governments integrated approach through collaboration with other departments.
12. Accessibility and affordability of sanitary pads to women and girls, especially in the rural areas.
13. Resources: money is needed to carry this task forward. DWCPD as a champion has to ensure that relevant stakeholders participate in a comprehensive dialogue and plan and budget for interventions.
14. Ensure women empowerment, socially and economically, through the dialogue, taking into consideration the issue of sustainability.

3.2 Conclusion And The Way Forward

1. Another meeting with relevant stakeholders, to be planned soon to incorporate other departments and stakeholders not present. ACTION: DWCPD
2. The Water Information Network assist with pulling together a task team / reference group to help take the dialogue forward. ACTION: WIN
3. A MHM task team should work with DHS and DWCPD (being an overarching body). ACTION: DWCPD and DHS
4. Within 3 months the task team recommended above must have acquired the capacity to take the campaign forward with the ability to engage stakeholders. ACTION: WRC and DWCPD
5. A task team to look at the whole range of issues within the MHM; including education, health, economics, sustainability, etc. Research and environmental issues should form part of future intervention. The task team must have clear objectives. ACTION: WRC and DWCPD



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6. Existing committees to be coordinated to incorporate MHM issues. Production, supply and distribution of sanitary pads can be integrated within the resuscitation of existing committees.



Appendix A: Attendances Register

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