



Together for a #PeriodFriendlyWorld

Menstrual Health and Hygiene

Background

Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) – often referred to as Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) – is an essential area that needs attention, integrated programming and various levels of investment. Historically, menstruation was addressed within long-term development programs as a means to keep girls in school. Menstruation can lead to girls missing school, not participating in class, or avoiding sports and other activities. Cultural traditions or taboos can also create unrealistic expectations or limitations for girls and women during menstruation. Importantly, menstruation does not cease during humanitarian emergencies. Both development and humanitarian response programs must consider and address the needs of menstruators. Ensuring that menstrual health is integrated into all programs is essential for promoting gender equality, improving health outcomes, and supporting the overall well-being and participation of women and girls.¹

Improving Education

Adolescent girls often do not understand what is happening when they start their periods. Many girls miss school due to lack of access to materials or infrastructure, such as soap, water or toilets, for MHH. Additionally, a lack of understanding of the biology of menstruation can create a difficult environment for menstruating girls. Many of CARE's programs, including education², WASH³,

Measured impact: The re-use of single-use pads (a practice that poses an increased risk of infections) fell amongst AGES participants: from 28% to 11% despite worsening economic conditions and a historic drought in Somalia.

¹ In this brief the terms “women and girls,” are used, recognizing, however, that menstruators may not identify as female.

² [Strengthening Opportunities for Adolescent Resilience \(SOAR\) - CARE](#)

³ [RANO WASH Final Report](#)

gender⁴ and adolescent programming, prioritize culturally-sensitive menstrual education for adolescent boys and girls, parents and teachers. One recent program in Somalia⁵ supported Gender Focal Points from the Ministry of Education to lead and facilitate the trainings on menstruation for school clubs. Another program in Somalia, AGES,⁶ expanded knowledge on MHH in schools and connected girls to community health workers for further resources and support. In Madagascar, comprehensive menstrual hygiene education engaged the entire community in awareness campaigns to not only shift social norms and expand understanding and empathy, but also highlight the significance and need for products like showers and sanitary pads.⁷

From 2021-2023 CARE conducted an action research study in schools in Madagascar, implementing sanitary facilities, distributing reusable sanitary pads, and training teachers on MHH. The program led to an improvement in girls' academic performance, with learning gains equivalent to 0.15 standard deviations, comparable to highly effective education-focused programs in low and middle-income countries. These improvements were attributed to a better psychosocial environment, as evidenced by lower stress levels and a more positive social dynamic in schools, enabling girls to concentrate better and achieve higher grades.⁸

Reducing Menstrual Taboos

In many cultures, menstruation is linked to stigma and social exclusion, limiting what girls and women can do and where they can go – when menstruating. A study done by CARE in [Malawi and Ghana with women farmers](#) found that up to **30% of women were unable to perform their daily activities** when menstruating – either due to taboos (such as entering fields with flowering plants) or due to a lack of a comfortable item to use for absorption of menstrual blood.

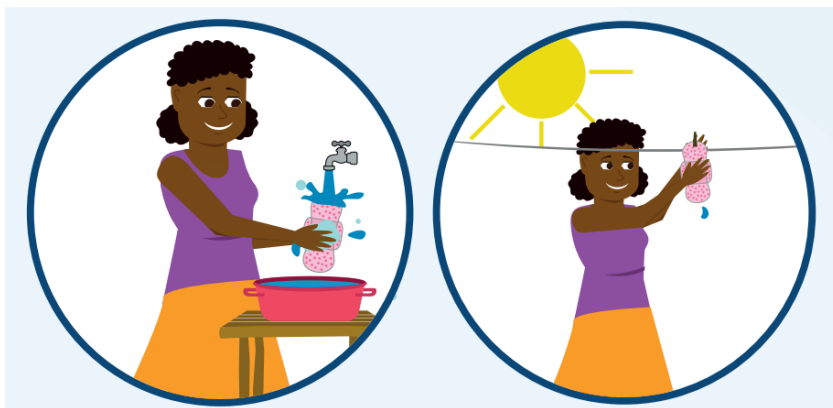


Figure 1. *Poster from the RANO WASH program of washing and drying a reusable pad.*

Reducing taboos can be addressed in various ways – from having specific infrastructure for girls at school, to drying pads on the line without shame, to demystifying menstruation in general. In many of our programs, CARE holds dialogue sessions with men and boys as well as women and girls, to clarify information about menstruation and discuss the needs of people when menstruating. In Ethiopia, a Menstrual Health and Hygiene Project⁹ works with Pro Pride to increase access to menstrual hygiene products through investments in WASH infrastructure and product development. Additionally, the project promotes private MHH rooms at schools, allowing girls a place to rest, or to access pain relief, materials for absorption, reference books and soap and water. In Nepal, CARE's **Haushala** project (2015-2022)¹⁰ provided accelerated education to girls and parents to address misunderstandings and promote healthier practices and comfort attending school when menstruating. At the end of the project, parents report talking more openly with their children about menstruation and Haushala's adolescent girls' clubs successfully advocated with the local government to ensure continued provision of sanitary pads in schools.¹¹

⁴ [Tipping Point - Identifying causes of child and early marriage - CARE](#)

⁵ FCDO/USAID-funded Somali Girls' Education Promotion Programme – Transition (SOMGEP-T, 2017-2022)

⁶ Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (AGES, 2018-2024)

⁷ [RANO WASH Final Report](https://care.mg/ranowash/); <https://care.mg/ranowash/>

⁸ Please email Marina Ogier ogier@carefrance.org or Aro Andriamahenina Aro.Andriamahenina@care.org for more information

⁹ Menstrual Health and Hygiene Development Impact Bond (2022-2024), funded by AFD.

¹⁰ Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative-funded

¹¹ [Haushala endline report](#)

Increasing Access to Menstrual Products

Women and girls can face significant difficulty accessing their desired menstrual hygiene products. There is no gold-standard menstrual product – instead access to choice and understanding of healthy practices during menstruation – are essential. In Zimbabwe¹², and South Sudan¹³, women’s groups were trained to make reusable sanitary pads. In Madagascar’s RANO WASH program tailors were taught to sew sanitary pads, making them affordable and accessible in the community. These tailors, incorporating user feedback, created innovative designs like panties with built-in sanitary pads and pads of varying sizes. In Uganda, a pilot with Ruby Cups in Imvepi Refugee Settlement, demonstrated that the menstrual cups were a feasible solution for women and girls to manage their menstruation.¹⁴ Many assume that insertion is too taboo for the use of menstrual cups, but studies in Nepal, Ghana and Kenya have not found this to be a barrier to use.

“Since the project started I now feel comfortable because when I use the cup, instead of thinking where I’m going to get money to buy pads, I am using the cup and the cup is really helping me.”
- Female from Imvepi Settlement

Appropriate Infrastructure

As part of emergency programming in Somalia, CARE asked groups of women and girls their thoughts on latrine placement and design preferences in order to promote use. Women and girls wanted the doors to swing inward, so they could hold the door if they felt unsafe, and to face their dwellings, away from public view. In Malawi, after damaging cyclones, CARE built washrooms alongside latrines, so that women and girls could bathe, wash and dry clothes and menstrual items in private.

Gender Equality

Increased access to water and soap and privacy is essential for menstrual hygiene and dignity. Many schools improve latrine, handwashing and water infrastructure to better support girls in schools. Each time a barrier is reduced for girls managing their menstruation at school – there is more equal opportunity for boy and girl learners. Discussing menstruation with men and boys in the community is also important for promoting equality. Sharing examples of the support men and boys can provide to women and girls when menstruating, whether through water collection, promoting rest, purchasing pain reliever or menstrual products, or simply being a voice to reduce taboos, can move us toward a more equitable world. CARE’s holistic approach promotes gender equality by working with government officials to raise awareness on the importance of destigmatizing and investing in menstrual hygiene – in supply chains, subsidies and schools. Through transforming social norms programs enable girls’ full participation in education, expand employment opportunities for women, and address specific challenges to those with disabilities or who have experienced female genital cutting, often making menstruation more difficult, painful and even dangerous.

Conclusion

CARE promotes and supports a world where adolescent girls, women, and anyone who menstruates, can thrive and safeguard their own health without feeling stress, shame, or unnecessary barriers to information or materials for menstruation. Ensuring hygiene needs are met enables human rights, dignity, and increases educational and income-generating opportunities and sexual and reproductive health. All programs that work need to consider how to address and support menstruation – through education, reducing stigma, increased WASH infrastructure and access to a choice of menstrual products - so that together we can create a **#PeriodFriendlyWorld**.

¹² FCDO-funded Improving Girls’ Access Through Transforming Education (IGATE, 2013-2017)

¹³ USAID-funded Afia WASH program

¹⁴ [Report on Ruby Cups in Uganda Imvepi Refugee Settlement](#)