The Last Taboo: 
Menstrual hygiene management in the Pacific

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In Nepal, women are still banished to 'menstrual huts' during their periods. It's time to end this dangerous tradition

After seeing the practice of seclusion and the plight of these women, I believe that taboos around periods are not a cultural issue, they are a human rights issue.

Pragyansal Kathmandu | Wednesday 24 May 2017 11:30 BST | 4 comments

Indigenous girls missing school during their periods: the state of hygiene in remote Australia

July 3, 2017 6.09am AEST

Girls from low-income families skipping school during periods because they can't afford sanitary products

Truancy among female pupils who struggle to pay for products in Leeds prompts call for UK-wide research into 'stigmatised' issue
Funded by:

Collaborating partners:

In-country data collection was supported by local and international NGO’s:
What is menstrual hygiene management?

- Access to information
- Clean absorbent materials
- Privacy
- Soap and water
- Safe disposal
- Health services
- Positive social norms
- Advocacy and policy

http://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/why-menstruationmatters/
Why is menstrual hygiene management important?

**Menstruation Can Affect All Aspects of a Girl’s Life:**

**Education**
Girls may miss school during their periods due to lack of facilities or necessary supplies.

**Economics**
Women may miss work if they don’t have access to the supplies or facilities they need.

**Health**
Use of improvised menstrual hygiene materials can lead to infection.

**Dignity**
Girls may suffer from discomfort, endure teasing and shaming, and face exclusion from everyday activities.

**Participation**
Girls may be distracted or less productive during school, work and other activities due to pain, discomfort and fear of leaks.

https://plan-international.org/sexual-health/menstrual-hygiene-management#
Context: Solomon Islands (SI), Fiji & Papua New Guinea

- Significant economic and human development challenges (PNG/SI)
  - PNG 156 and SI 154 out of 188 on Human Development ranking\(^1\) \(^2\)

- Predominantly rural populations (PNG/SI)

- Culturally rich and diverse
  - Fiji – 37% of Indian descent\(^3\)

- Poor WASH indicators\(^4\)
  - Access to improved sanitation:
    - 13% in rural PNG
    - 15% in rural SI
    - 88% in rural Fiji

- High levels of gender inequality\(^5\)
  - Prevalence intimate partner violence 46%-66%
  - Prevalence sexual violence 34%-55%

\(^1\) http://www2.wpro.who.int/internet/files/eha/toolkit.2007/Country %20Profiles/Maps/fiji%20melanesia%20country%20map.jpg

\(^2\) http://www2.wpro.who.int/internet/files/eha/toolkit.2007/Country %20Profiles/Maps/fiji%20melanesia%20country%20map.jpg
Study aims

1. Understand how women and girls manage menstruation
2. Explore the barriers/challenges
3. Determine the impact on participation in education and income generation
4. Identify opportunities to improve women and girls’ ability to manage menstruation effectively and with dignity
What is unique about this research?

- First multi-country MHM research project in the Pacific

- A partnership model which leveraged cross-sectorial expertise

- Extends focus beyond adolescent girls / schools

- Human-centred design – focus on solutions

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**Sexual Reproductive Health & Rights (Burnet)**

**Gender Equality (IWDA)**

**Water Sanitation & Hygiene (WaterAid)**
Methods & limitations

- Ecological framework for MHM
- Qualitative methods (FGDs and KIIs)
- Local research teams
- Purposive/convenience sample
  - Sampling bias
  - Age differences
- One urban & rural site
  - Not representative – cultural diversity
  - Saturation not reached
- Participatory activities
- Inductive thematic analysis
  - Findings verified at stakeholder workshops
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FGD girls in school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGD girls not in school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGD women (formal workplace)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGD women (informal workplace)</td>
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<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGD Men</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDI (vulnerable girls/women)</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KII vendor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KII employer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KII teacher</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KII health worker</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KII leader</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>308</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of WASH facilities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability/cost of sanitary products (# shops)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Study findings

1. Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs

2. Water, sanitation and hygiene facilities

3. Menstrual hygiene products
1. Knowledge, attitudes & beliefs

Challenge

- ↓ basic knowledge of menstrual cycle (PNG and SI)
- Some social norms, attitudes and beliefs → menstruation “dirty”

“Oh they will tease us...and be like, ‘I know what you have in your bag’. And through that they take money. You give me this and I will keep it as a secret. For some girls they find it fun, but some they find it embarrassing and some of them don’t even come back to school for the next day.”

- Fiji: FGD Girls not in school, urban
1. Knowledge, attitudes & beliefs

**Challenge**
- ↓ basic knowledge of menstrual cycle (PNG and SI)
- Some social norms, attitudes and beliefs → menstruation “dirty”

**Impact**
- Unprepared for monthly period
- ↓ understanding of fertile periods once sexually active
- Stigma, secrecy and shame
- Exclusion from religious, social or cultural activities

**Opportunity**
- Utilise education system (Fiji)
- Specific resources/training for teaching
- Social/behaviour change communication has potential to address beliefs/norms
2. WASH facilities
2. WASH facilities

Challenge

- Stigma/cultural beliefs make it difficult for girls/women to change and dispose used materials
- ↓ access to usable toilets, handwashing facilities and safe disposal → barriers to effective MHM

“*The loo itself is not accessible so what I do is I usually double the pads and [when] I come here [workplace] I don’t change, I just go back home [at end of the day] and I change.*”
- PNG: IDI, woman with disability, urban

[A]fter changing [sanitary pads], *we have to take our dirty hands to the tap outside in order to wash them... It’s degrading treatment towards us women*
- Fiji: FGD women, urban, informal employment
2. WASH facilities

**Challenge**
- Stigma/cultural beliefs make it difficult for girls/women to change and dispose used materials
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**Impact**
- Loss of time from school/work
- Discomfort, potential ↑ risk of RTIs
- Disposal practices – negative impact on the environment

**Opportunity**
- Social/behaviour change communication to address beliefs/norms
- Monitoring/standards for institutional WASH facilities - incorporate MHM friendly criteria
3. Menstrual hygiene products

Challenge
• ↓ access to effective materials
• ↓ access to affordable materials - especially in SI; adolescent girls; women with no or little income; rural areas

“If we have money we will pay for Stayfree [generic term for commercial pads] but …[if our parents don’t provide money] there won’t be any other means but to use pieces of cloth”
- SI: FGD School girls; rural

“If … your flow comes very heavy… you will not want to go to school […] You will be scared that, it will stain your clothes, so you will stay home.”
- PNG: FGD Girls out of school; urban
3. Menstrual hygiene products

**Challenge**
- ↓ access to effective materials
- ↓ access to affordable materials - especially in SI; adolescent girls; women with no or little income; rural areas

**Impact**
- Distraction from school, work and day to day activities
- Skin irritation/rashes if reliant on cheap/poor quality products

**Opportunity**
- Re-usable pad designs – potentially more feasible/sustainable
- Stocking of pads in schools

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**WaterAid**

**Burnet Institute**
Recommendations to improve MHM & gender equity

Education & awareness, challenging discriminatory beliefs/taboos
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- ↑ availability, affordability, & access to quality commercial products & locally made alternatives
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- Availability, affordability, & access to quality commercial products & locally made alternatives
- WASH facilities & standards (MHM friendly) – safe disposal options
Recommendations to improve MHM & gender equity

Education & awareness, challenging discriminatory beliefs/taboos

Availability, affordability, & access to quality commercial products & locally made alternatives

WASH facilities & standards (MHM friendly) – safe disposal options

Human rights

Women’s & girls’ voices central to decision making

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Dissemination

The Last Taboo
Research on menstrual hygiene management in the Pacific: Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea
Final report
September 2017
Conclusion

• Women and girls face considerable challenges in managing menstruation – especially in PNG and SI
  – Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs
  – WASH facilities
  – Access to products

• Potential solutions
  – Education
  – Improve WASH facilities
  – Improve access to affordable products

https://www.wateraid.org/au/articles/empowering-women-in-the-solomon-islands
Acknowledgements

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- **Participating communities and individuals**
- All those who read and commented on the individual country reports
References

3. ADB Solomon Islands Country Gender Assessment 2015
4. ADB PNG Country Gender Assessment 2011-12