

BREAKING SILENCE IN MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT IN BLANTYRE AND CHIKWAWA DISTRICT

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Introduction

As an African Central Region country, Malawi has had a silent voice on some topics it regards as sensitive, but this can be harmful in nature directly or indirectly. Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in Malawi has long been an issue that has been under the table, as it was regarded for matured women only. Real issues concerning this topic have not been openly tackled, and, even in closed circles, it is regarded as a shameful thing to talk about. This is one of many reasons why we have complications and ailments affecting women, like fistula and fibroids, that could be prevented with proper MHM.

This paper aims to unveil the findings on reactions and responses in breaking the silence of MHM in Chikwawa District and also share some experiences from Blantyre District.

Background

Water For People Malawi implements the Everyone Forever model toward the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 6. Within this model, Everyone means every community, school, clinic, and household in a district has access to high-quality water and sanitation services while Forever ensures the sustainability of the WASH infrastructure and institutions. Water For People Malawi has three Everyone Forever districts which are Blantyre, Chikwawa, and Chiradzulu where investments are made so people are have access to improved Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services.

Malawi government has made an effort to address MHM by creating a conducive environment and setting up instruments and institutions to tackle MHM in depth. The Water Supply Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) is an institution which is facilitating MHM and organizing national trainings of trainers (TOT) in Malawi. Water For People, a WASH non-governmental organization (NGO) participated in the TOT organized in 2018. In 2018, Water For People began implementing MHM in 3 schools in Chikwawa District and added 2 more in 2019. In Blantyre, Water For People has implemented school WASH and MHM initiatives in 42 schools in Low Income Areas (LIA).

Water For People Contributions to MHM

For each school where Water For People works, a WASH package of software and hardware is provided for the students and their teachers. Realising the challenges adolescent girls face related to hardware, Water For People has constructed inclusive school latrines which provide change rooms for adolescent girls and a latrine for disabled pupils. For software activities, Water For People has trained schools in School Led Total Sanitation (SLTS), MHM, and a game-based hygiene promotion package for pupils. As Water For People believes that these programmes cannot go alone without water, boreholes are also part of the WASH package for these schools. These programmes are targeting the incorporation of the girl child so that she remains in school at all times, even during menstruation.

These programmes have targeted the girl child, and along the way, the boy child has been looped in. Water For People has established sanitation clubs comprised of both girls and boys. These pupils work with Patrons and Supervisors from the schools and the District Education Manager's School Health and Nutrition (SHN) Coordinators to improve the sanitation status of the schools and transform hygiene behaviours of the pupils.

Water For People also supported the schools in organizing mother groups who make reusable sanitary pads for girls. The adolescent girls access the pads for free during their menstruation periods when the school session is on.

Breaking the Silence in MHM in Blantyre Schools

Water For People discovered that the school WASH programmes in Blantyre have involved the peri urban school children who seem to be well conversant with MHM issues. The students in towns are exposed to modern menstrual instruments like sanitary pads in shops and hawkers. They are also exposed to audio visual commercial ads on television on modern menstrual management methods such that breaking silence in Blantyre was not a big challenge.

Breaking the Silence in MHM in Chikwawa Schools

Chikwawa District is deeply rooted in culture and traditional beliefs and systems which negatively impact the girl child. Issues related to MHM are regarded as a taboo and cannot be discussed openly. Girl children are exposed to harmful cultural practices like initiation ceremonies when they reach puberty. Water For People is implementing school WASH activities in the district through the provision of sanitation infrastructure and software programmes like SLTS and MHM.

Water For People partnered with the District Education Manager's team, including the SHN Coordinators, Primary Education Advisors, and the District Coordinating Team (DCT), in coming up with a programme for training pupils and mother groups.

Through the sanitation clubs, SLTS and MHM trainings, girl children were encouraged to feel proud and safe to manage menstruation hygienically. Boys were asked to denote their first experience with menstruation. At first, breaking the silence in Chikwawa was so difficult to get the group on track as it is regarded as a taboo to even mention menstruation before a group of boys. When the facilitators gave their own first experiences, the group was relieved and started participating.

As Water For People introduced the MHM programme to the schools, there were strange reactions by the students and even teachers. Breaking the silence was a big achievement as the targets were able to interact and talk freely about MHM.

This was also extended to mothers who participated in the mother groups. These people are rooted in Sena Mang'anja culture with its taboos and myths. The group was able to identify myths associated with menstruation and the society. Even the gender issues were isolated and discussed extensively. It was exciting as the students could cite myths associated with menstruation and no longer as traditional practices after the transforming MHM sessions were over.

Discoveries during the MHM Sessions in Chikwawa

Water For People interacted with sanitation clubs in the three schools who had never undergone an MHM orientation, and we broke the silence by giving a chance to every pupil to explain their

experience and understanding of menstruation. Breaking the silence was hard as the students could not be free to talk about menstruation. But with much facilitation and examples, girls started coming forward, and even boys had their own understanding and perceptions of menstruation.

We found out that the girl child is very sensitive to her environment. She needs proper care and privacy that may promote her participation in social activities. She needs support from the boy child by accepting her and giving her a chance in society. She needs a place and a voice in class and that instils her freedom to participate and mix up with boys even during her time of menses.

For the boy child, we discovered there is need to openly discuss these issues so that right away he knows how to support the girl child. As the boy child grows, he will later take up roles that will support his wife in the future and his family and siblings. It was exciting to note that the boy child could mention the type of support he will give to his family in the future by establishing hygienic safe disposal options of menstrual products.

Comparisons of Rural and Town Pupil Reactions to MHM

Water For People discovered that there are huge differences in reactions and responses to breaking the silence in MHM for rural students and students from towns. The town pupils had no big negative reactions toward menstruation as compared to rural students. At first, the rural students could not talk about menstruation freely, and they felt shy and ashamed when the sessions were introduced.

Impact of Breaking Silence in Rural Chikwawa

One big learning among students was the change in mindset about menstruation and everything associated with it. Going through the orientation, the students were able to learn and visualize the changes the body takes on as it grows from childhood to adulthood. The learning materials helped them to feel comfortable about the body's changing outward appearance. As we talked about the menstrual wheel, it helped them better understand the menstrual cycle, the pain associated with it, the psycho-social aspects, and the needs to support a girl child. The discussions also provided a link to talk about conception and maternal health.

When the pupils were going through the trainings, the reactions showed that there was progress in breaking the silence. They could mention taboos and traditional beliefs associated with MHM, such as the belief that a menstruating woman should not put salt in the relish.

The incorporation of mother groups affected a large mass of mothers and parents in the district to regard menstruation as a normal body process. This resulted in change in mindsets about myths associated with menstruation. Mother groups are very active and keep wrappers in case a girl starts to menstruate in school. They provide counselling to the learners and are actively engaged in pad sewing.

Another positive impact is reduced absenteeism by adolescent girls. The girls are now able to take good care of themselves. They talk about boys, and they no longer make fun of girls when they mess up. Chimpambana school has 861 learners and all of them have been sensitized. In January before the trainings, enrollment was 376; after the trainings, it rose to 404 because girls attend school even when they are in their monthly periods.

Currently, school sanitation clubs take the role in teaching other learners. They have come up with plans to buy buckets for handwashing, they have a duty roster for every class, and they contribute toward payment of a watchman for the school.

Way Forward

After breaking the silence, the students were free to mention what they needed, and the resulting recommendation was to create a programme for pad making so that girls could access them and use them when needed. For the boys, they were able to cite the need of providing good materials for pad making and disposal options for the used menstrual products.

Water For People dreams of a day when a menstrual lab will be created for the students to learn and associate menstruation as one of the body processes and not a taboo.

Conclusion

It is possible to break harmful cultures when a formalized facilitation is done. This is done with strategies that are focused on a particular audience and their characteristics.