

Menstrual Hygiene Management

in Kiribati schools

Kiribati Education
Improvement
Program Phase III



The Ministry of Education supports the improvement of Menstrual Hygiene Management in schools as it promotes inclusive education and gender equality. A recent study undertaken in Kiribati demonstrated the challenges girls face when managing their menstruation at school¹. This snapshot highlights the current situation and the impacts this has on girls' learning experiences. It also provides important suggestions on how to improve this situation in your school.

Finding

Girls in Kiribati lack knowledge about menstruation and reproductive health as they transition into adolescence and adulthood.

Only 8.5% of survey respondents knew that women are most fertile during ovulation phase, which is halfway through the menstrual cycle.

"Menstruation is a sin from Eve who disobeyed God."

Girl, Survey Respondent

Poor water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) contributes to girls being unable to manage their menstruation in Kiribati schools.

"I feel uncomfortable and ashamed as the toilet is set up in the bush nearby on the ocean side which is too far to visit and I am afraid of ghosts." *Girl, Abaiang*

It is often considered taboo for men and boys to talk about menstruation or interact with menstruating girls and women.

90% of survey respondents stated that menstruation should be kept a secret from men and boys.

Strong beliefs about menstruation in Kiribati culture can have a very positive effect on girls. However, some behavioural restrictions have potentially harmful outcomes.

85% of survey respondents believe it is unhealthy to go swimming during menstruation.

"Menstruating girls shouldn't cook for the family, otherwise those eating the food will be cursed" *Boy, South Tarawa*

Implication

Girls are unprepared for menstruation and ill-equipped to manage their sexual and reproductive health. They lack basic knowledge like how to track their menstrual cycle. This can result in girls bleeding onto their uniform, unable to manage pain and subsequently missing school.

"I just sat there and didn't move. Sometimes I can sit on my bag so I can protect the chair from being stained."

Girl, Abaiang

This can lead to girls missing school during menstruation as they feel uncomfortable in the school environment. Poor WASH facilities undermine the schools learning environment.

"Every month we can have some girls missing school because we don't provide them with materials in the school and we don't have safe places for them to change. Not only that, but we also don't have a bin that they can use to dump their pads or diapers. That's why some of the girls prefer to return or stay home when they have their period." *Teacher, Abaiang*

Stigma, silence and lack of education amongst boys and men lead to teasing and bullying of female students. Bullying has a significant effect on young people's mental health, emotional well-being, and identity. Boys targeting, threatening, or harassing girls reinforces gender violence in Kiribati society.

"Once before I ran after one girl and took off her skirt to see whether she's menstruating or not...I always want to know whether they are menstruating or not otherwise they are lying to me. I would bring a stick and smack her as I played." *Boy, Abaiang*

Behavioural restrictions affect girls in different ways and depend on the extent to which they are practised by the individual and their family. Some potential impacts include harmful effects to a girls' nutritional status and social isolation, further promoting shame.

"The disadvantage is that it makes me uncomfortable and it creates a barrier between me and those people that are disgusted with the blood" *Girl, Abaiang*

¹ Data for this snapshot was compiled using a mixed method approach. The qualitative aspect included 92 participants (including girls, boys, teachers and mothers) using focus groups and in-depth interviews. 73 girls took part in the quantitative survey, 34 schools facilities were inspected and 35 girls took part in a reusable sanitary pad trial. This study was conducted in South Tarawa, Abaiang, Abemama and North Tarawa in November-December 2017 by MoE staff and UNICEF.



Finding

Girls in Kiribati schools find it difficult to manage their menstrual pain.

“... I felt so awkward to hang around as I have a stomach ache and I felt really uncomfortable.” *Girl, Abemama*

Key members of the school leadership community also lack knowledge about menstrual health and hygiene, most notably parents and teachers.

“Let me explain, I don’t understand why the blood should go from a woman’s body!” *Mother, Abemama*

Implication

Girls being unable to manage menstrual pain makes it difficult for them to concentrate in class, leading to poor class participation and absenteeism.

When parents and teachers lack knowledge about menstrual health and hygiene, they are unable to support girls effectively as they go through puberty. In the classroom, this means that this topic can be taught insufficiently or avoided completely by teachers. Male teachers, in particular, have a lack of knowledge.

“Male teachers know nothing about girls’ issues in regards to menstruation.” *Girl, South Tarawa*

What you can do to make your school better for girls

School Leaders

Ensure the school toilets are safe, secure, private and hygienic:

- Repair any holes in the toilet walls so girls have privacy.
- Build toilet facilities close to the school grounds, away from secluded bushes, so that girls feel safe and secure while walking to the bathroom.
- Install locks on the doors.
- Include disposal options for sanitary materials, this can be as simple as the green bag.
- Keep toilets clean and odourless.
- Establish sex-segregated toilets, there should be one toilet per 40 girls.
- Provide water and soap at the toilet facility and in a private space for girls to utilise.

Encourage teachers to talk about menstruation and female health with students

- Educate your male teachers in the facts about MHM.
- Talk about MHM at staff meetings.
- Host a special sessions with girls where they can ask questions, raise concerns and become educated.
- Incorporate a respectful discussion of MHM issues in physical education classes.
- Teach and model respectful relationships between sexes.

Act as role models

- Encourage female teachers and other school staff to act as role model and provide support for young girls.
- Encourage all teachers and school staff to role model behaviour that engages boys and girls equally, challenging gendered stereotypes such as girls being passive only caregivers, weaker, less active or unable to lead.

- Make it easy for girls to complete their work at home or catch up on school work when they need to miss class because of menstrual pain.

Ensure easy access for girls to sanitary pads and pain relief:

- Keep a supply of emergency sanitary pads at your school. This will prevent girls from having to return home and miss class when they get their period unexpectedly.
- Consider making painkillers available at schools such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.
- Speak to some local female vendors about the issues at the school and encourage them to have a ready supply of sanitary pads and pain relief.

Discipline bad behaviours:

- Make your school a bullying-free zone.
- Be clear that name calling, and comments are not accepted in your school environment. Take time to work with your students about what type of words or comments towards girls by boys are particularly hurtful. This could include comments related to menstruation.
- Encourage children to report bad behaviour and act on this information.

Start a conversation about behavioural restrictions for menstruating girls

Start a conversation in your school with teachers, students, families and the community about the possible negative effects that behavioural restrictions related to menstruation can have on girls.



Australian Government



Australian
Aid 

coffey 
A TETRA TECH COMPANY