



Rural Water Supply and Sanitation
Project in Western Nepal Phase II
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Menstruation, WASH and RWSSP-WN Position Paper RWSSP-WN BRIEF 2-2018

WHY WASH PROJECTS NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO MENSTRUATION?

Menstruation is a monthly reality and a biological fact for 2 billion women and girls worldwide. Yet, in too many countries, women and girls face serious challenges which may result in them being denied basic human rights. Menstruation has an impact on development as whole. It has implications on the life of girls and women in terms of health, education, work, mobility and security, as well as overall quality of life and dignity.

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Western Nepal Phase II (RWSSP-WN II) is a bilateral water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) project. We take a rights-based approach into our work.

RWSSP-WN II is committed to create an environment in which all community members, including the socially excluded, disadvantaged castes, ethnic and religious minorities, have equitable opportunities to pursue their right to water and sanitation, **whether menstruating or not!**



"Almost every woman and girl will menstruate on average every 28 days for about 5 days—a completely normal biological process. Just as normal as the fact that many men will grow a beard. Yet menstruation is steeped in silence, myths, taboos and even stigma. Women and girls the world over face numerous challenges in managing their menstruation. They may not have the means to do so, or face discriminatory cultural norms or practices that make it difficult to maintain good hygiene. Together, these challenges may result in women and girls being denied basic human rights and can turn a simple biological fact into a barrier to gender equality." (*WASH United/Human Rights Watch, 2017:1*)

MENSTRUATION, WASH & RWSSP-WN II:

RWSSP-WN II Vision:

'The right to access to water, sanitation and hygiene for all **means all**, including menstruating women and girls'

RWSSP-WN II Mission:

"RWSSP-WN is committed to address the social beliefs and stigmas surrounding menstruation while making water, sanitation and hygiene accessible and available for all, including menstruating women and girls. Working together with local governments, schools and community groups, we believe in action that shows tangible results"

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WHY MENSTRUATION MATTERS?

- ◆ **Education:** Girls and female teachers may not attend school when menstruating. This is particularly evident in schools with inadequate WASH facilities.
- ◆ **Health related risks:** Unsafe and unhygienic sanitation facilities for taking care of menstrual hygiene, and unhygienic materials to absorb menstrual blood can lead to vaginal infections, with possible long-term effects on reproductive health.
- ◆ **Dignity & Psycho-social effects:** Menstruation is often associated with shame and disgust, resulting in negative attitudes. Restrictive socio-cultural practices surrounding menstruation are a barrier to gender equality.
- ◆ **Productive work time:** Women may be constrained to pursue and maintain employment when they are not able to manage their menstruation hygienically and in privacy at work. For instance, female teachers will miss working days during their period if forbidden to enter the school compound or restricted from using toilets.
- ◆ **Environment:** With lack of or limited waste management, non-reusable items are often disposed into the environment, adding to plastic waste.
- ◆ **Safety:** If women are forced to defecate outside during menstruation they face dangers of sexual violence or wild animals.

Reference: Sida, 2016. Modified for Nepal & WASH by RWSSP-WN II

Menstruation & the human right to water and sanitation

RWSSP-WN takes a rights-based approach to water, sanitation, and hygiene. Menstruation should not impede a woman's rights. Menstruation links to the following rights (modified from Human Rights Watch, 2017):

- ◆ Human right to water and sanitation (access to both water supply & toilets, and with these, hygiene): Water and sanitation services that comply with human rights obligations must meet the following criteria: be available, affordable, accessible, safe and acceptable for everyone, at all times. This means that also women and girls, whether menstruating or not, have access to water and sanitation, at all times.
- ◆ Everyone has the right to live in a clean environment.
- ◆ Right to non-discrimination and gender equality: As long as women and girls need to sleep outside their homes, are forbidden to touch water taps and use toilets during their periods and/or after child birth, for instance, there is no gender equality.
- ◆ Human right to education: No female teacher or a girl student should miss school days simply because they are menstruating! Education is a foundation for women empowerment and gender equality, and associated with a wide range of development benefits.
- ◆ Human right to health: Right to health is compromised by being forced to go for open defecation, forbidden to use the water taps or to sleep outside of home, and generally being left to practice poor menstrual hygiene management. These can have serious health impacts, even death.

The menstruation-related challenges undermine RWSSP-WN's core thrust: access to water and sanitation for all. In too many cases also in the Western Development Region of Nepal, women and girls are forbidden to use their water and/or sanitation facilities even if they exist (see below).

What we know already... Use of toilets during menstruation is an issue also in Western Nepal

Earlier it was assumed that the more severe manifestations of taboos regarding menstruation were in far and mid-west Nepal. However, we are encountering problems also in western Nepal.

RWSSP-WN is conducting a survey on the use of toilets. As of January 4, the sample has 515 respondents from 5 districts of Western development region of Nepal (Baglung, Gulmi, Parbat, Rupandehi, Syangja). Out of these, 44% replied that they have not defecated in the open over the past 7 days. This means that more than half (56%) are still practicing Open Defecation even if these locations have been declared Open Defecation Free.

One of the questions asked was whether there are specific days when the respondent or his/her family members do not use the toilet. A total of 124 (24%) replied that yes, they or their family members are not using the toilet during menstruation. Out of these 124, there were 42 respondents who said that even if they had said that they didn't defecate in the open over the past seven days, they would still do so during menstruation.

This increases the number of those who would not use the toilets from 56% to 64%. This is a significant finding considering the large sample size. *The full study is expected to be available by Mid-March 2018 to guide the workplans already this year.*



Photo: Women in Rolpa discussing the water scheme layout. Location of the tap stands, even within the premises, counts! All, also menstruating women, must be able to use the taps!

IMMEDIATE ACTION

This Position paper acknowledges that RWSSP-WN Phase II has only 1.5 years remaining. This means that we need to:

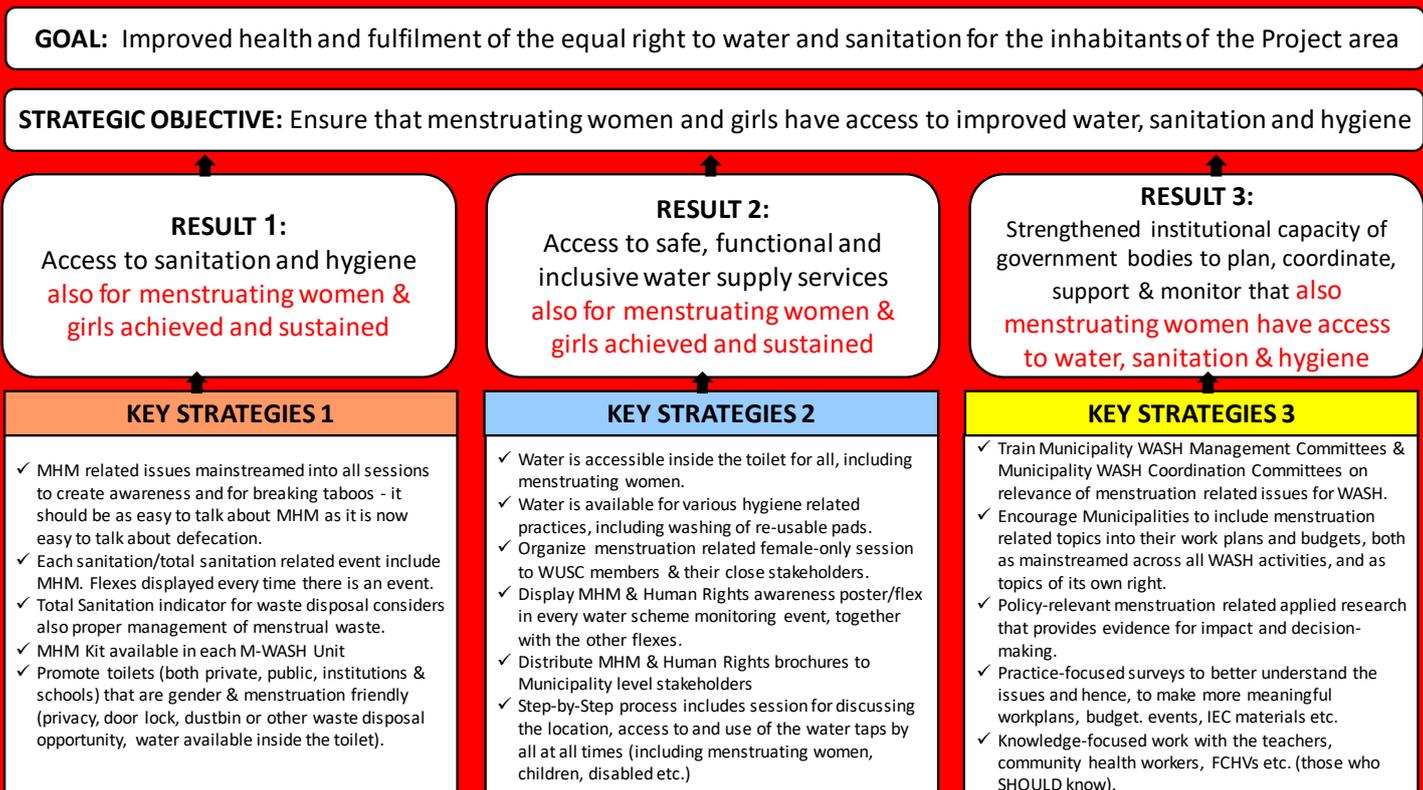
- 🔥 **Integrate** results-oriented actions into existing framework & strategies, workplans & budgets immediately.
- 🔥 **Apply** Menstruation issues to all aspects of WASH - it is more than MHM for us.
- 🔥 **Produce** evidence-based knowledge products to have targeted actions, and that can directly contribute to the national policies & frameworks.
- 🔥 **Identify** strategic partnerships that can carry on after the Project has phased out.

Integrating menstruation issues into existing framework

Menstruating women have the right to use the toilet and not have to face the discomfort and dangers of Open Defecation. Open defecation is also a problem for the health of the whole community. Therefore, it is extremely important to create awareness and to get the facts right regarding menstruation, and to encourage women and girls to practice appropriate MHM. All this can be done within the existing project setup.

The following framework takes the RWSSP-WN II existing Goal and Purpose as they are, and re-words the existing three key results to show how menstruation fits in.

This Brief proposes some key Strategies (below and in the next pages). In practice, all this is work in progress when rolling out programs and activities at the municipality-level as ultimately it is the Municipality WASH Management Committees that will decide on their own programmes and work plans.



ENTRY POINTS FOR RWSSP-WN II

- ◆ **Break taboos** by getting the facts right & making it as easy to talk about menstruation as it is to talk about defecation, diarrhoea and water quality.
- ◆ **Integrate menstruation related issues into existing project framework**, mainstreaming it through small doable actions immediately in existing workplans & budgets, with a strong focus on showing actual results & impacts rather than just vaguely 'raising awareness'.
- ◆ **Support municipality-level programmes** that provide menstruation-related education & awareness to girls, boys & teachers in schools, Female Community Health Volunteers, health staff, religious leaders & Youth Clubs.
- ◆ **Understand the issues better** by continued applied research that provides evidence for work planning, and continued development of the approaches & contents.
- ◆ **Contribute real-life experience & research outcomes to (multi)-sectorial policy dialogues** to develop national/regional/municipality-level strategies, policies, materials & programmes. We acknowledge that these findings are also relevant beyond WASH, including health, education, women & youth focused development sectors.
- ◆ **Support production & sales of reusable sanitary pads** at local level.

Breaking taboos & getting facts right

Taboos surround menstruation. While these can run deep, some taboos are simply based on not understanding the basics. In too many schools the reproductive health-related topics are simply skipped. Lack of knowledge around menstruation may increase anxiety or psychosocial stress, in particular for adolescent girls. It also leaves boys ignorant of the facts.

Breaking taboos and with it, reducing stigma and getting the facts right, are the first entry points for RWSSP-WN. We believe that the better the people understand menstruation as a completely normal biological process, and the better they realize how and why it works, at least some of the taboos can be reduced. With the basic biological facts, including reasons for such symptoms as cramps, tiredness or menstrual disorders, we can also offer practical solutions on menstrual hygiene management (MHM). This enables women and girls to manage their menstruation adequately, safely, and with dignity. This can ensure also that girls and women can both feel and be healthy.

How to break taboos?

- ◆ **Make it visible!** Menstruation-related flexes & posters are displayed at all occasions, in the same way as we raise Total Sanitation related issues.
- ◆ **Make it easy to talk about!** By raising the subject in various meetings, orientations, presentations, inaugural speeches, and during the monitoring visits can make it as easy to talk about menstruation as it is to talk about such as diarrhoea or defecation.
- ◆ **Get the facts right.** We and our close stakeholders, such as Female Community Health Volunteers, should correct some basic facts when interacting with our community stakeholders. Fact-by-fact, one message at the time, without over-loading, we should eagerly share what we know. And what we know, should also be biologically correct!

Understanding issues better: research for policy & practice

RWSSP-WN acknowledges that it needs to understand better the many faces of menstruation to make meaningful programmes. The socio-cultural diversity in Nepal adds a layer of complexity, and we expect to see a lot of diversity within our working area. While there is a growing body of research particularly around adolescent girls, knowledge, attitudes and practices, we still need to understand the behavioural factors and taboos better.

Given the limited time we have, the following research will be conducted within the RWSSP-WN Phase II's remaining 1.5 years:

- ◆ Toilet use—targeting all age groups and genders, linking with the hand-washing survey and observations related to these facilities.
- ◆ Menstrual hygiene management-focused survey targeting adult women and their behavioural factors (RANAS approach).
- ◆ Knowledge of those who should know—including Female Community Health Volunteers, teachers (both male and female), project affiliated staff and Municipality WASH Coordination Committee & Management Committee members (many of which are men).
- ◆ Knowledge of students (male & female), and knowledge & MHM practices of students ref school sanitation and hygiene (girls).

Integrating menstruation into existing workplans & budgets

The following table shows as an example some entries from a typical municipality's annual RWSSP-WN workplan. These items have a code and related budget already this year in the Government of Nepal's local governments' budget system:

| LMBIS code | Title | How menstruation could be included |
|--|---|---|
| Budget heading: Capacity Building (22512) | | |
| 2.15.1.145 | Step-By-Step (SBS) trainings* *for Water Users and Sanitation Committees (WUSCs) | SBS Paper 9 Layout: discuss the water tap location (both public and private connections), raising the question about access to this tap when menstruating. All women need to be able to use the tap at any time. SBS Paper 4 GESI orientation: raise discussion on menstruation and how it affects women (and female WUSC members themselves!) together with the other gender equality & social inclusion issues. Display MHM-related flex during each water supply and sanitation scheme monitoring visit together with the other posters & flexes as already practiced now. |
| 2.15.1.242 | Municipality and scheme level Post-Construction workshop/s | Raise the question whether the menstruating women and girls have any problems in using their (private or public) taps and toilets, and if yes, how to improve this. Post-construction phase can be used to improve the structures if that is needed (such as change the location of the tap or drainage). Include a session on facts & taboos related to menstruation, and how this affects access to water, and what is the role of participants in breaking taboos & in getting the facts right. |
| 2.15.1.67 | O&M & WSP++ trainings | Raise discussion on taboos related to menstruation, and whether this has an impact on how women have access water (private & public taps). Does this impact female Village Maintenance Workers? Clarify the fact that menstruation does not have an impact on water quality (only in case if the women have to go to water intake to take the bath or to wash their pads!). |
| Budget heading: Program cost - sanitation & hygiene (22522) | | |
| 2.15.25.11 | Celebration of different days related to WASH | Menstruation Day (May 28); include MHM in National Sanitation Week, discuss use of toilet by menstruating women during the Toilet Day; raise question about access to water also by menstruating women during World Water Day; have a reusable pad design & sewing competition during International Women Days, highlight the rights-aspect of menstruation during Human Rights Day. |
| Several codes | Total Sanitation-related | Numerous opportunities for targeted and mainstreamed actions: the more we talk about this, the easier it gets. |
| 2.15.25.30 | Stickers, hoarding board, banner, wall print etc. | Arrange a creative session with local artists/youth club/school to develop locally relevant brochure/poster/wall painting/slogan. Wall painting showing different reusable pad designs. Banner for breaking the taboos (to be shown during any rallies/campaigns/events/celebrations/inaugurations). |

THE WAY FORWARD?

The following items are hereby identified for immediate action:

- ◆ Integrate menstruation issues into existing workplans;
- ◆ Raise menstruation issue in each commentary made in various events, inaugurations, monitoring visits & trainings, and report the reactions in the related Field/Event/ Training Reports;
- ◆ Develop meaningful content & programme together with the Municipality WASH Units for the Menstrual Hygiene Day, for the World Water Day and for the National Sanitation Week. Report these in the Event/Training Reports;
- ◆ Prepare Menstruation-related awareness brochure, and distribute this widely
- ◆ Menstruation-related flex/poster to be displayed in all events together with the Total Sanitation and Step-By-Step flexes.
- ◆ Go-ahead with studies as identified in this Brief.
- ◆ Identify supply options for good quality reusable sanitary pads.
- ◆ Stencil project-supported taps with the message— "Everyone has the right to use this tap, and the responsibility to look after it"

The above will guide the work planning for our final year (07/2018-06/2019).

DEFINITIONS

BCC: Behaviour Change Communications

IEC: Information, Education and Communications

MHM: Menstruation Hygiene Management focuses on practical strategies for coping with monthly periods. MHM refers to ways women keep clean and healthy during menstruation and how they acquire, use and dispose of blood-absorbing materials.

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We display a lot of information during our water supply schemes monitoring visits and in various training events. During these meetings and events, all participants have a lot of time to study these posters and their messages.

Those facilitating the meeting or event can also refer to these during their own presentation, and encourage participants to make questions and comments.

The more we talk about the menstruation, the more easier it gets to talk about it, and with this, it will get easier to change harmful practices.

RESULTS INDICATORS FOR RWSSP-WN II

This position paper relates to the RWSSP-WN II Overall objective: Improved health and fulfilment of the equal right to water and sanitation for the inhabitants of the Project area.

All result areas:

Result 1: Access to sanitation and hygiene for **all** achieved and sustained in the project working municipalities.

Result 2: Access to safe, functional and inclusive water supply services for **all** achieved and sustained in the project working Municipalities

Result 3: Strengthened institutional capacity of government bodies to plan, coordinate, support and monitor



FCG

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Western Nepal Phase II is a bilateral development cooperation project funded by the governments of Nepal and Finland, and implemented through local governments and users' groups under the Department of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR), Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. RWSSP-WN II works in 14 districts in two Provinces of Western and Mid-Western development regions in Nepal, through municipality-based programmes.

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