



PATH/Satvir Malhotra

Menstrual Hygiene Management Messaging Framework



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Workshop participants discuss messages in small groups.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

Menstruation is a basic biological process for girls and women. Yet many girls and women in India face challenges with managing menstruation, largely due to taboos and restrictions, including the availability and affordability of menstrual hygiene products and systems for safe disposal.

With several water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) partners in the country working on menstrual hygiene management (MHM), it has become necessary to develop a unified voice to advocate for change through stakeholders that can have impact at scale. PATH, in partnership with WaterAid, organized an MHM message development workshop in New Delhi on April 21, 2017, to develop common messages to influence policies and markets that reflect sustainable and scalable solutions for menstrual hygiene management. The workshop brought together technical experts, social enterprise representatives, donors, MHM practitioners, and advocates working in the field of girls' and women's health and WASH. Participating organizations included UNICEF, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Goonj, Dasra, Devsolutions, Research Triangle Institute, Zariya, Centre for Environment Communication, Aaakar Innovations, and Wash United.

Through the daylong workshop, key thematic areas and priority stakeholders were identified. Three themes were explored: normalizing taboos, menstrual hygiene products (access, affordability, appropriateness), and disposal systems and access to infrastructure. The group outlined gaps, potential solutions, and required evidence for advocating for these solutions. The group also charted out calls to action for priority stakeholders that will provide the groundwork for evidence-based advocacy for MHM in India. The group's input was packaged into the below key messages as well as targeted messages for priority stakeholders.

KEY MESSAGES

These key messages provide overarching themes and talking points on MHM for most audiences. They put spokespersons and advocates on common ground so individuals and groups can echo and reinforce each other through their advocacy and outreach efforts.

Menstruation is a basic part of life for girls and women around the world.

- Menstruation is a normal biological process. Nearly all women of reproductive age experience and manage menstruation.

- Girls and women should be able to go about their normal lives while menstruating.

Millions of girls and women in India face challenges managing menstruation, largely due to taboos and restrictions.

- Lack of awareness or understanding of menstruation is common among girls. Many young girls do not know about menstruation before their first menstrual cycle, and often times girls receive limited or inaccurate information from mothers, teachers, and peers, leaving them unequipped to manage menstruation. For example:

- ◇ Research on MHM in India suggests that nearly half of girls (48 percent) are aware of menstruation before menarche.¹
- ◇ Just over half of girls (54 percent) state that mothers are their main source of information on menstruation. However, a majority of mothers (70 percent) consider menstruation ‘dirty,’ which further perpetuates a culture of silence and shame.²
- Disposable sanitary napkins are the only category of menstrual management options widely available in the commercial market. Sanitary napkins may not be accessible or affordable to girls and women or environmentally friendly. Most commercially available products present disposal challenges. For example:
 - ◇ Innovative reusable and compostable products exist but remain out of reach for many girls and women because they are not manufactured in large quantities or are costly.
 - ◇ Most products available at scale are not biodegradable, causing negative impact on sanitation systems and the environment.
- There are not enough safe, private, and clean places for girls and women to manage their menstruation. These include toilets and hand-washing facilities in schools, workplaces, and other public facilities.

When girls and women cannot manage menstruation effectively, no one wins.

- Girls’ and women’s lives can be dramatically affected when they do not have the information, products, WASH facilities and support to manage menstruation. For example:
 - ◇ Inability to easily manage menstruation can affect the participation, concentration, confidence, and performance of girls in the classroom and women in the workplace.
- Menstrual product manufacturers and businesses lose out on market opportunities. For example:
 - ◇ Of 336 million girls and women experiencing menstruation in India, approximately 121 million currently use locally or commercially produced disposable sanitary napkins.¹
 - ◇ There is a large, untapped market opportunity for sanitary napkins, with only 15 percent penetration of the organized sanitary pad market.^{2,3}
- Inappropriate management of menstrual waste can have significant environmental implications. For example:
 - ◇ Common ways of dealing with menstrual waste include throwing it in open spaces, such as water bodies, fields, and roadsides; burying it; and (open) burning. In urban areas, most menstrual waste makes its way to landfills where it does not decompose. In rural areas, menstrual waste is discarded to fields and water bodies. Current estimates suggest 40 million tons of sanitary napkins are inappropriately disposed in these locations.
 - ◇ Low-quality and low-temperature incinerators in schools and communities are a popular way to manage menstrual waste, but this practice is costly and releases toxins into the air.

There are solutions at hand to improve MHM in India, and we all have a role to play. We must:

- Normalize menstruation among girls and women, boys and male influencers in the household, and community influencers such as social, political, religious leaders; teachers; health workers; and medical practitioners.
- Provide girls and women with comprehensive information, tools, and skills to raise awareness and address negative and harmful social norms on menstruation.
- Develop performance and quality standards for the entire category of menstrual hygiene products: disposable, reusable, and compostable.
- Expand the reach of menstrual hygiene products that meet product quality standards and create universal access through public and private channels.
- Evaluate and recommend disposal costs for all MHM products (disposable, reusable, compostable).
- Consider full life-cycle costs when procuring MHM products for government and other subsidized programs.
- Develop indicators and evaluate impacts of government subsidy of MHM products.
- Identify and include key indicators for MHM in national surveys.
- Catalyze adoption of environmentally sustainable products at scale.
- Match products with appropriate disposal and waste systems to minimize environmental impact.

1 van Eijk AM, Sivakami M, Thakkar MB, et al. Menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in India: a systematic review and metaanalysis. *BMJ Open* 2016;6:e010290. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2015-010290

2 van Eijk AM, Sivakami M, Thakkar MB, et al. Menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in India: a systematic review and metaanalysis. *BMJ Open* 2016;6:e010290. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2015-010290

3 Deloitte 2015

ADDITIONAL MESSAGES BY PRIORITY STAKEHOLDER AUDIENCE

Priority audiences identified by the workshop participants include government, donors and research funding agencies, industry, and media. Following are target messages for each priority audience that can be integrated with the overarching key messages.

GOVERNMENT

Government entities, from ministries to state governments, have new opportunities to coordinate and comprehensively address MHM.

- Government has a number of roles and responsibilities when it comes to MHM, and must address the needs of many stakeholders including girls and women; household influencers including men, boys, and older women; and community influencers such as socio-political and religious leaders, educators, health workers, and businesses.
- While it is encouraging that many ministries have policies on MHM, these policies often do not contain the same technical information, are not well aligned, or are not applied consistently across states. For example:
 - ◊ Some states have mandatory, free availability of sanitary napkins in schools while other states do not.
- State governments have new and increasingly important ways to demonstrate leadership on MHM. For example:
 - ◊ State governments are responsible for fully implementing guidelines and have been recently mandated to handle budgeting for and procurement of sanitary napkins.

Government entities can use their roles as policymakers, implementers, budget holders, and market actors to make a positive difference in MHM. Government can:

- Help ensure girls and boys receive proper education on puberty, including menstruation.
- Ensure that girls and women, including those living with disabilities, have safe and private spaces to manage menstruation at home and in public places.

- Factor in disposal infrastructure and environmental impact in addition to cost in their procurement processes.
- Make budgetary provisions for subsidizing environmentally friendly products to match costs of non-compostable products produced at scale.
- Ministries and state governments can work together to ensure universal availability of safe menstrual care products across a range of public and private settings.
- Taxing products to manage menstruation is punitive and taxes should be removed.

Recommended actions: Use your power to improve MHM and work toward a healthier, more productive India.

- Form an inter-ministerial group on MHM to improve coordination among ministries, reconcile divergent policies and implementation strategies, and have a coordinated approach to MHM-related issues.
- Ensure that existing information, education, and communication materials on MHM are disseminated to their target audiences, including girls and boys, and corresponding budgets are fully and appropriately spent.
- Pursue pan-India directives for universal availability of safe and hygienic menstrual care products in places such as government and private schools, health facilities, public toilets, and through Accredited Social Health Activists. In addition, explore alternative models for distributing acceptable MHM products to adolescent girls, including vending machines, health vans, and Anganwadi workers.
- Require (or encourage) the Bureau of Indian Standards to create product quality standards for menstrual hygiene products.
- Provide sex-segregated toilets in all public places, as well as water, soap, and safe disposal options for MHM products.
- Allocate resources and establish systems and responsibilities for the regular operation, maintenance, and upkeep of toilets, including solid waste collection.
- Develop key indicators for measuring MHM across sectors and include in national data collection surveys.



Menstrual cup options.

DONORS AND RESEARCH FUNDING AGENCIES

There continue to be gaps in evidence on the impacts of poor MHM in India.

- More research is needed on the potential market for innovative MHM products, including those that are environmentally safe.
- Concrete evidence needs to be generated on the biological, psychological, and social impacts of inadequate MHM on girls and women.
- Even as the government of India invests in a national sanitary pad distribution scheme, the success of the scheme on girls' school attendance and other indicators, such as the environmental impacts of existing MHM products and appropriateness for existing disposal and waste management mechanisms, are not well understood.

Investing in research to address unanswered questions on MHM products and disposal and waste management options will inform smarter policies and programs and build stronger markets.

Recommended actions: Prioritize research on MHM in India as part of a funding portfolio.

- Support evidence generation on the consumer demand for the full range of MHM products, including for environmentally safe options (e.g. menstrual cups, reusable cloth pads, compostable pads).
- Invest in strengthening the evidence base on the link between poor menstrual hygiene and adverse health outcomes, such as reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and mental health outcomes.
- Invest in eco-friendly product options and contribute to the research base around the environmental impacts of different MHM products.

Biodegradable sanitary pads.



INDUSTRY

MHM is an issue where the interests of both the private and public sectors meet.

- There is a large market for MHM products among girls and women in India, representing an untapped commercial opportunity.
- Increased awareness of and access to a wider range of menstrual care products is urgently needed, especially those that are affordable and environmentally friendly.

Industry bodies have a critical role to play in promoting MHM product choice at prices that poor girls and women can afford.

- Industry platforms present opportunities for innovation, including increasing production of environmentally friendly MHM products and lowering costs.
- Industry bodies can play a critical role in the revision of product standards to include all types of MHM products, taking into account user preferences, life-cycle costs, and environmental impact.

Recommended actions: Use your influence and convening power with businesses to grow market opportunities for MHM, while also contributing to India's public health goals.

- Create a forum for manufacturers of all sizes to discuss common MHM challenges, including the need for more biodegradable product options.
- Encourage large and small MHM product manufacturers to find ways to increase production and bring down the costs of biodegradable products. For example, through potential licensing of small-scale product innovations by large companies.
- Revise and develop user-focused and evidence-based standards on product manufacturing, packaging, and marketing.
- Develop waste management standards and disposal options for compostable and non-compostable products.
- Harmonize the guidelines regarding the need to treat menstrual waste prior to its disposal while also considering the potential risks and costs.

MHM Messaging Workshop participants, joined by Neeraj Jain, PATH Country Program Leader.



MEDIA

Menstrual health remains a taboo topic that is rarely discussed in public forums.

- Menstruation is often treated as a “woman’s issue” and is not addressed in the mainstream media.
- Stigma, misconceptions, and misinformation surrounding menstruation continue to exist.

Media is an important channel for making MHM a public priority and for conveying information about menstruation that is both balanced and accurate.

Media platforms can help provide accurate information to support efforts to normalize menstruation.

Recommended actions: Include and elevate issues related to MHM in media reporting and programming.

- Use mainstream and digital media, including television shows, soap operas, social media, and websites, to address the taboos surrounding menstruation.
- Increase reporting on MHM and ensure that stories position MHM in a positive and unbiased way, highlighting stories of change.
- Engage boys and men in MHM messaging to build supportive community environments and frame menstruation as more than a “woman’s issue.”
- Engage celebrities in normalizing menstruation.
- Include up-to-date data and evidence on MHM issues in media reporting.
 - ◇ For example, see: <http://menstrualhygieneday.org/resources-mhm/>

Reusable sanitary pad options.





www.path.org

PATH is the leader in global health innovation. An international nonprofit organization, we save lives and improve health, especially among women and children. We accelerate innovation across five platforms—vaccines, drugs, diagnostics, devices, and system and service innovations—that harness our entrepreneurial insight, scientific and public health expertise, and passion for health equity. By mobilizing partners around the world, we take innovation to scale, working alongside countries primarily in Africa and Asia to tackle their greatest health needs. Together, we deliver measurable results that disrupt the cycle of poor health. Learn more at www.path.org.

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