

Menstrual Hygiene - A Neglected Target

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Of late, debates have centred on the importance and necessity of addressing adolescent girls' menstrual hygiene management related needs in school settings in developing countries. With the limited resources at both the national and global levels for effective education and health-related interventions, social and fiscal policies must rely on the best evidence to date to direct country-level programming.

However too little attention has been given to the structural and environmental context of pubescent girls' school-going experiences, including the combined impact of absent and/or inadequate water and sanitary facilities, male-dominated administration and staffing, and insufficient girl-focused guidance on the pragmatics of managing pubertal (and menstrual) body changes in a co-ed school environment.

These challenges may be particularly acute for economically disadvantaged girls across low-income countries, who, due to poverty, may attend the least girl-friendly school environments, lack sufficient sanitary materials to manage their menses en route to and in school, and come from families who perceive the onset of menstruation as an appropriate age at which to withdraw a girl from school for reasons of early marriage, household care-taking, and/or income-generating activities.

Capturing girls' voiced experiences of this transition through puberty and menstrual onset through the use of participatory methods, coupled with demographic and quantitative data that enable the generalization of findings to national education and adolescent health policy, is critical and long overdue.

To understand the problems that the girls face concerning menstruation, it has become necessary to undertake a 'comprehensive sexual education' about health issues in general and reproductive and sexual health in particular, including menstrual hygiene in the schools of Nagaland.

The Capacity and Communication Development Unit (CCDU) under the Public Health Engineering Department, Government of Nagaland, in collaboration with Sulabh International, New Delhi, has launched an integrated scheme to address the need of girls and boys about hygiene management. Increased emphasis in this programme was laid on menstrual hygiene and life skill

education. Several schools in Kohima, Dimapur, and Mokokchung were imparted comprehensive and elaborate exercises on menstrual hygiene and poor reproductive and sexual outcomes among young students. About 300 boys and girls and 30 schools teachers participated in this training. The stakeholders had the opportunity to learn more about managing their menstruation in school and male stakeholders had an increased understanding about the determinants of sexual activity among the youth.

The State Public Health Engineering Minister, Dr. Ngangshi K. Ao, formally inaugurated the workshop on October 27, 2010 and also launched a napkin vending machine at a function held at Mount Sinai School, Kohima, in the presence of Mrs. Anita Jha, Senior Vice-President, Sulabh International Social Service Organization (SISSO), New Delhi, and other department officials, teachers and students of recipient schools.

The Minister said that health education should be approachable to everyone, which is also the objective of the government and stressed the need to improve the health of the community. "A sick person is a liability to the community but a healthy person is an asset to the society and the nation," he asserted. In his address, Dr. Ngangshi K. Ao said, the napkin vending machine was a new and unique experiment and urged upon each school to take responsibility in making them functional and sustainable. With the launching of the machine, girl students from selected schools in the State can now easily avail of health and hygiene facilities in a better way at an affordable price.

Mrs. Anita Jha, Senior Vice-President of SISSO, while delivering the keynote address on the occasion said, "Social taboos and breaking the silence is crucial for having a successful menstrual hygiene management programme in India. Encouraging menstrual hygiene in a country like India must also be accompanied with calculated waste management strategies as menstrual hygiene also has an environmental impact, in the form of a growing waste problem".

Moreover, it is important to have sufficient clean, private (separate) and safe sanitation facilities with accessible running water and effective waste management, which are not at an isolated location, she added.

Mr. Kevisekho Kruse, Executive Director, CCDU, said, "the prime objective of the initiative of introducing the sanitary napkin vending machine was to initiate girls to sanitary napkins, who relied on traditional method or had to

compromise their privacy in buying napkins from local stores. The comprehensive training that has been facilitated by the Sulabh School Sanitation Club, New Delhi will help the Nagamese school students to understand their perception on issues relating to hygiene and sex education”.

Mr. Zaveyi Nyekha, District Education Officer, Kohima, in his address said, “adolescence is a critical developmental period when many young people begin to define and clarify their sexual values and needs.” He thanked the Sulabh School Sanitation Club, for taking up this issue and bringing training right into the villages of Nagaland. Mr. Langshung Anal, Principal, Mt. Sinai School, praised the efforts of Sulabh International and the Government of Nagaland for selecting his school for this unique event. Mr. Agwaseng Kent, executive engineer CCDU, thanked Sulabh International, New Delhi, for its gesture in ensuring a ‘Ninnal Nagaland’ by the year 2011.

Meanwhile, the Nagaland Minister formally released a booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management, published by the Sulabh School Sanitation Club. The book is the first of its kind to be launched in the North-East and was made available to about 500 students of Nagaland. Easy to read booklet has been prepared to help girls and women in providing basic factual information about menstruation and hygienic menstruation management and will clarify some of the myths and taboos centred around this issue. Mrs. Anita Jha, Sr. Vice-President, said, “the booklet serves as a self-reference for adolescent girls and will help them to prepare for the physical changes in their bodies and practise safe and hygienic ways of dealing with menstruation”.

After the Inaugural function, a ‘Meet the Press’ programme was organized by the PHE Department of Nagaland in honour of Mrs Anita Jha at Hotel Japfu, Kohima. About 30 representatives from the print and electronic media and NGO functionaries were present. A 30-minute documentary on the Sulabh Sanitation Movement was screened for the media personnel. Mr. Kevisekho Kruse briefed the media about the proposed activities of CCDU and Sulabh International in three districts of Nagaland and the installation of sanitary napkin vending machines in five schools-GHS Seikhazou, Grey’s School, Children Christian School, Mount Sinai School and Grace School –of Kohima district.

Mrs. Anita Jha also had an interactive session with the media and NGO leaders on issues ranging from urban sanitation to waste management. People from the media and social circles wanted to know if Sulabh International could help

them in solving the inadequate sanitation facilities, sewerage systems, drainage and solid waste management in cities like Kohima and Dimapur. Mr. Kruse said, “the PHE Department was mulling over the idea of constructing community toilets in these two cities with the help of Sulabh by next year.”