

Ensuring Education for the Girl Child: Best Practices in Menstrual Hygiene Management

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Body-School Collision

For thousands of girls in underserved areas of sub-Saharan Africa, the onset of menstruation makes schooling very difficult. In many cultures, it is a social taboo to discuss menstruation, and it is held as 'dirty' or 'a curse.' Upon entering womanhood, girls are often victimized by menstrual taboos, and some might be married off, as menstruation signifies the ability to bear a child.

Due to the widespread lack of access to menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities, harmful cultural attitudes towards menstruation and the missing contextual knowledge required to manage menstruation properly, girls often find that their womanhood clashes with their education—a concept known as the “body-school collision” (Sommer, 2010). Many schools in developing countries do not have proper facilities, and often times, do not have access to clean water. Furthermore, in classrooms, reproductive health topics including menstruation are often skipped over, robbing children of the necessary knowledge of proper menstrual care and reproductive health. MHM is a human rights issue—poor menstrual facilities fail to meet the needs of pubescent school girls and deprive them of education, hence, violating their human rights.



Young women in Makoko, Lagos-Nigeria attend a menstrual hygiene informational session and brainstorm further solutions to MHM issues in their community. Photo by Nneoma Nwankwo.

EFFECTIVE MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT ELIMINATES MENSTRUATION AS A STUMBLING BLOCK IN THE EDUCATION AND LONG TERM SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF THE GIRL CHILD.

access to accurate information and break the shame and silence associated with periods. It will also break down harmful socio-cultural or religious norms. Local leaders should review schools' curricula and survey students at the end of terms to ensure that this mandate is met.

The I-3 Approach to MHM

The I-3 approach—impart, invest and implement—should be taken by leaders at all levels to greatly alleviate this issue. Figure 1 depicts this comprehensive approach.

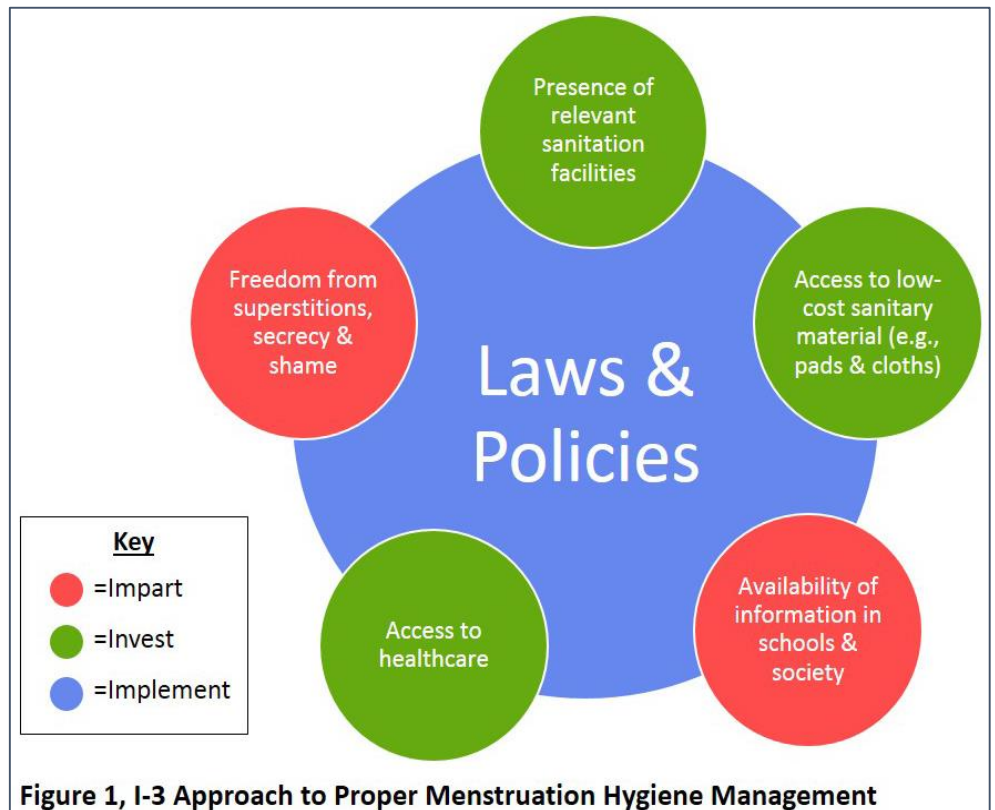
Impart: Local and national leaders must mandate that reproductive health and menstrual hygiene topics be taught in schools. Teachers must be thoroughly trained to ensure that they provide the best information to pupils. This will ensure

Invest: Leaders should invest in social businesses that produce low-cost menstrual pads using biodegradable material like banana fiber. This investment will make pads more affordable for many girls in rural areas, while ensuring environmental sustainability. Also, this supports the economy by employing and empowering local women who make the pads—hence achieving a double bottom line. Furthermore, resources should be allocated to build sanitation infrastructure such as toilets, which will ensure privacy and sanitary amenities for girls. Finally, investments should be made to increase access to health care facilities, medicines, and trained health workers.

Implement: Laws and policies that establish MHM as a top priority in water and sanitation issues must be implemented. This is exemplarily reflected in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which earmark access to equitable and adequate sanitation for women and girls in particular in Goal 6, Target 6.2—by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.

Domino Effects of the I-3 Approach to MHM

Proper MHM sensitization leads to knowledge of hygienic practices. This knowledge combined with availability of low-cost sanitary pads and provision of effective MHM facilities means that girls are less exposed to infections and diseases. In addition to the provision of sanitary pads, the provision of what are low-cost, over-the-counter pain relievers in developed countries to girls experiencing cramping or other menstrual pains allows girls to attend school, thus reducing the frequency of menstrual-related absenteeism. The elimination of menstrual-related absenteeism means that girls do not miss lessons, skills practice, or exams, and thus are capable of performing as well as, or even better than, their male counterparts. By breaking down harmful socio-cultural norms about menstruation, girls are also less likely to be pulled out of school to be married. Therefore, they can complete school and gain the necessary qualifications for employment. When girls are qualified enough to either gain employment or own a business, they are more socially and economically empowered. The I-3 approach creates an environment where schools do not collide with girls’ bodies. Effective MHM eliminates menstruation as a stumbling block in the education and long term socio-economic empowerment of the girl child.



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