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My Period, Our Story.

Perspectives from adolescent girls, young women and community members on improving access and utilization of menstrual hygiene and sanitation services in Public Government Schools in Zomba and Kasungu.



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Preface

This storybook has been developed to support the efforts led by government ministries, civil society organizations (CSO) and development agencies working to improve menstrual hygiene and sanitation services in schools. In November 2022, USAID in partnership with IREX and Youth Excel supported HeR Liberty Malawi to conduct research to:

1. Understand how existing menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) education and mentorship toolkits had influenced girls of different social identities at exercising their agency in utilizing menstrual hygiene and sanitation services in schools.
2. Learn how the washroom schedules, and associated sanitation needs (water, soap, change rooms) influence girls of different ages and classes in utilising menstruation services equally.

This storybook contributes to the body of knowledge on MHM in Malawi and is informed by perspectives from adolescent girls and community members from Zomba and Kasungu districts. The experiences shared in the book are aimed to provide insight to key stakeholders to help improve menstrual health management (MHM) service schedule and environment in schools for comfortability and inclusive utilisation among girls of all ages and classes.



Introduction

In 2021, Formidable Joy in partnership with HE/R Liberty installed solar powered water source with taps in Namikhate primary school in Zomba and a girls washroom with flashing pit latrines in Mbongozi Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) in Kasungu to help improve menstrual hygiene and sanitation and girls' retention.

HeR Liberty worked with Formidable Joy and Days for Girls to further raise awareness on menstrual hygiene and sanitation and help distribute reusable menstrual pads to girls aged between 10-24 years of age in the schools.

Despite efforts made to improve menstrual hygiene and sanitation, there had been reports of gender oppression and stigma felt among girls in the schools related to MHH. The school headteachers had further reported still experiencing class absenteeism and poor school performance among girls.

In 2022, HeR Liberty embarked on an implementation research project called "My Period, Our Story," to learn about the experiences felt by adolescent girls in utilising menstrual hygiene services in schools. The project recorded experiences from 135 adolescent girls and young women aged between 10-18 years of age from Namikhate primary school in Mussa Village, Zomba, and 13-24 years of age at Mbongozi CDSS in Ndunga Village, Kasungu. Additionally, perspectives from 14 teachers, 2 villages Headmen and 21 mother group members were captured to better understand the underlying perceptions on MHH. This storybook was therefore created to tell their stories on MHH to inform key stakeholders working in to improve menstrual hygiene and sanitation services in schools in Malawi.

An illustration of a Black female teacher with short black hair, wearing a red dress with yellow circular patterns. She is standing in front of a black chalkboard, holding a pink folder and pointing her index finger to her chin in a thinking pose. Above her head is a thought bubble. On the chalkboard, there is a large white thought bubble containing the text 'Perspectives from Teachers'. The background features a blue pattern of stylized female symbols.

Perspectives from Teachers

Existing facilities have improved MHH

Girls found it difficult to fetch water, they used to stay absent in school because mostly their homes also had very far water sources from them to fetch water and clean themselves before school. But now they have access to water which makes it easy for them when they are taking care of themselves. [Namikhate Primary School]

There was scarcity of water, we had problems of water of which this intervention of water project that was brought here improved the situation. Girls can get water easily and some use it for cleaning themselves during menstruation, so the water and toilet project brought change to our school. [Mbongozi CDSS]

Existing toilets are not safe place

Girls go to the toilets to change their pads, however there is a problem, we do not have a changing room apart from the toilets. As a result, there is no safe place where girls can change their pads and put on their pads.

Also choosing one toilet and installing a tap inside so that when a girl wants to wash a pad, she can just go straight rather carrying water in a basin which makes other people like boys to wonder on what is happening. [Namikhate Primary School]

We do not have a special room called a changing room where girls can be going to assist themselves. This is a challenge that on one part we are blessed with water and toilet system but on the other part we do not have a space that is private. You know toilets can easily be accessed by boys also but changing rooms will only be for girls.

The other challenge we do not have buckets which they can be cleaning themselves, especially when they start menstruation in school. [Namikhate Primary School]

MHH trainings, donation of reusable pads and menstrual selfcare kits

Most learners use old clothes as sanitary napkin, but they are not hygienic. Most learners depend on donations because they cannot afford to purchase for themselves.

When some start menstruating at school and do not have the pads, we allow them to go back home to take care of themselves and come back to attend classes.

Pads should be increased to at least 7, so that when a girl wears one in the morning as she is coming to school, she can take other two so that she uses when she would like to change at school. She will remain with others in class.

Some do not have enough resources for pads. When they are menstruating, they do not have pads, some girls are asked to go home when they are in that situation just because parents have not provided them with pads. We have a challenge that we do not have a sustainable way of providing pads to girls. Some are not comfortable because when the trainings were provided, they were not available, and they don't know to make their own pads now as such it affects how they operate.

Under wears which they were given should be coming in different sizes because these girls are changing every day and having the same size might not use for a long time. I would also like to add on the soap, if possible, to add some will be beneficial maybe 5 tablets that means it will take them along time to use. They can be keeping it special to use during menses and hygienically it's not only for the sanitary pads they can also be used when taking a bath and wash other things they wear inside. I would also like if it was to add cycling's because other girls wear two underwear's depending on the flow of their menses as such having that will help in reserving the other underwear.



Existing facilities have improved MHH

They are no frequent absenteeism and are coming to school in large numbers. They girls can clean themselves well using the water available at the school.

Inclusion of boys to improve utilisation of facilities

To include boys in the discussions. They are the ones whose presence also provide an uncomfortable environment for girls to freely manage menstruation in school. They would rather go home for fear of being laughed at by boys.

Mother groups can support girls on MHH

Adding the washroom and incorporate mother groups in this project so that they can assist the girls.

Buckets are needed for better MHH

The school does not have enough services to use during menstruation like buckets.



Perspectives from Mother group

Existing facilities have improved MHH:

Before installing the water, it was difficult for girls to have access to clean water or they were travelling long distances. Now, they just get out of their classroom fetch water from the tap and go to take care of themselves.

Not enough reusable pads:

It was very difficult for the girls to take care of themselves because they lack sanitary pads, and the washable pads are not enough when they wear are seat in class, they end up staining of their uniforms. If these are enough then they can be taking care for themselves well.

Challenges with utilising girls' washroom:

There is only one changing room, and the girls get crowded there. There are times a bunch of them meet there so a process that would take 5 minutes, they end up spending like 30 minutes there.

The boys are getting concerned because others of ill mindset go there and vandalize the premises because of their jealousy they say, **"Why only for the girls?"**

There were problems before where the boys would be teasing the girls and talking to them in a hurtful manner when they see the girl. Which made us have a discussion with the boys and highlighted to them, and I was accompanied by a male teacher to assist me.

Girls not using facilities because of a cultural belief that their blood will be mixing with the others when they go to the toilets, and they might be some ritual to make them barren. However, after discussions we were able to tell them that the parents would say that so that you throw them away in clean manner, they just wanted cleanliness, so the same as us, with the changing room, we just want the cleanliness, there are no rituals being done, so that when the water goes down the drain, I tell them that who can manage to take the nasty things from down there? It just happens to be beliefs.

Mother groups can support girls with MHH:

In proper disposal of sanitary pads but as mother groups our role is to make sure there is proper management and disposal of pads.

There is a good relationship between me and the girls because they take me as their mother. They say to me **“Mother, we are going to get those sweets, I want some biscuits”** that means they are asking for the pads. So, it is a good relationship between the girls



Perspectives from Adolescent Girls and Young Women

Existing facilities have improved MHH:

Kasungu

Before these came it was hard for a girl to come to school because we were scared that anything can happen there. But for now, you can just wear how you can and come. And water now is an easiest resource, making it easy for us to excuse from a class have a bath and go back to class.

Zomba

No washroom for girls at the school, we go home to change or use teacher 'toilet:

The water is really helpful and if we had a room for changing, we could have been using but since we don't have the facility we use the water for toilet, cleaning classrooms and drinking. Otherwise, we excuse our teachers go home and change then come back here.

In Standard 8, there are teachers who are male teachers only. So when we are requesting for permission we get a bit shy. But when its female teachers who we easily interact with its very easy we just say, **"aah madam I need to excuse myself and go home."** The she easily speaks to our male teachers about it. But if we had an exchange block/building we could have just said, 'aah sir I would like to go into that room.' Then I will take care of myself, wash the cloth then come back. But we really need that facility.

The school does not have changing room so standard one learner just bagged in without considering if there is someone inside or not which becomes very embarrassing.

We both use water which is available at this school and our female teacher allows us to use her bathroom to clean ourselves.

Not many teachers allow us to use their homes but there are few for example. When it happens, we are able to reach out to her and request, 'can we use your bathrooms' they do assist but it's not a lot of teachers.

Feeling embarrassed and being harassed about our period:

Some of the challenge we encounter during menstruation is that when we say we are having stomach period pains and have stained your clothes, some boys take advantage of that and some push or beat you which makes it very difficult for a girl to cope and utilise the services. Sometimes also when standard one learner sees the stained uniform they ask questions like **"why are you wasting blood while your friends are lacking same blood?"** At the end the girl will go home and not attend classes for some days.

I confide in my friend about it. Some friends discuss the same with the boys which affects my privacy, I fail to remain in school and prefer to go back home to avoid such embarrassments. For instance, there was a girl when we were in standard 4 she started her menstruation and stained her clothes, the story was spread all over which made her not to come to school for 5 days.

You carry pads thinking that boys will not see but some naughty boys see them and start telling others about that. There are naughty boys who search girls' bags and once they find them, they laugh. I recommend someone older to sensitize them on what menstruation is all about and how girls manage menstruation.

Misconceptions about our periods:

Period is blood and it is a good this because an individual who does not do that is living with a disability because they are infertile.

For some people the underwear gets tight. But for me they fit properly but for some it wears off. So, provision of soap and underwear for my friends who are lacking these.

I admire my friends who received the pads because they are able to carry them at School and change once they are wet but for us who did not receive let's say the period has started on Monday and we wear a pad made from sack cloth when its wet we learn for a short time and go back home yet our friends continue attending classes because during break time they change yet we miss out.

We were given re-usable sanitary pads but not all girls received and the ones we receive are not enough so if you increase the number, it will be good. The pads could be kept by a female teacher so that it should be easy for girls to request for them.

There is a need to have more of these facilities. Because there are times when you want to have a bath but you realize there is someone else there already.

When someone goes to the bathroom, and she accidentally stain the floor but does not clean it. This makes us not to use the toilet because when we see we feel nauseated.

I think building something here at school and be able to lock it with a door and keys. This will help that when one is helping herself will be able to lock the door and wash herself.

They should meet and revisit the schedule which they set for managing the water. Sometimes they also close the water whilst it's not yet the scheduled time so they should revisit that.



Recommendations made

1. Construct a special changing room for girls that can be locked, which are not accessed by boys.
2. Set up school clubs for girls to meet on making pads
3. Menstrual hygiene requires soap and underwear. Make available menstrual selfcare kits with at least 5 soap bars, 5 underwear in different sizes, 7 reusables pads. These kits should continuously be available to cater for new girls joining the school
4. Menstrual toolkits to have section on how to make reusable pads but also be given materials and training to make them
5. Menstrual toolkits should not be in form of a book but one page so it's easy to refer to. Books on Menstrual to be available in school libraries.
6. Increase the number of toilets to avoid long waiting lines for one or two toilets for all girls at the school
7. Sensitize boys on MHH
8. Mother groups should be provided with information MHH to ensure correct information and guidance is provided to girls at school