

A Cinderella issue ? Promoting school menstrual health management awareness in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka Water Partnership and NetWwater (Network of Women Water Professionals), a partner of Global Water Partnership, have been at the forefront of gender and water advocacy in Sri Lanka. They have been working in school awareness programs through “SisuJalaHamuwa” for more than fifteen years and have also played a lead role in taking Sri Lankan issues to SACOSAN programs and World Water Day activities. They have advocated that sustainable sanitation goes beyond the mere provision of facilities, and called for a change in the sanitation culture where hygiene awareness, maintenance and regular cleansing systems are put in place along with the new or upgraded facilities.

Unfortunately, the current culture of silence regarding the teaching of reproductive health has led to the MHM issue being long sidelined by most school authorities. Due to prevailing conservative norms, lessons on reproductive health are rarely taught in detail in class, especially in mixed schools. Even in girls-only schools, there is a tendency to gloss over the detailed functioning of the reproductive system. This critical gap in knowledge transfer and the resultant lack of menstrual and gynecological awareness can also indirectly affect the incidence of UTI, teen pregnancies and the high rate of abortions. Recently, the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) document highlights the following - maternal deaths in Sri Lanka have risen to 40 : 100,000 live births; pregnancies among adolescents have decreased to 4.6% : 10-13% of deaths of mothers were due to illegal abortions and 35% of married women do not use contraception.

With the support of partners such as the National Development Bank PLC (NDB) and Central Province education authorities, SLWP/NetWwater commenced a MHM program in 2014 with the dual objective of improving school girls' health and access to education. Rehabilitation of school sanitation in selected sites was carried out following a Central Province- wide study of school sanitation. These studies and the subsequent evidence- based advocacy activities have highlighted the need for a focused menstrual hygiene management program. Poor menstrual hygiene management (MHM) practices and incorrect napkin disposal was seen as a major cause for blockages and failures in school sanitation systems, thereby depriving children of access to sanitation crucially during menstruation.



MHM Programme in Katugastota

Girls with no access to sanitation tend to stay at home during menstruation, losing up to 4 school days per month. An MHM program was needed to reduce absenteeism during menstruation among adolescent girls as well as improve the health for girl children.

As a pilot activity was essential to draw attention to the " Cinderella issue," it was decided to focus on the Denuwara school zone in the Central Province mainly due to the interest and support of Provincial and Zonal school education authorities.

The MHM advocacy activity was first supported by NDB with a sponsorship for a TOT workshop teacher counselors held in Giragama Teacher Training center, Kandy, to commemorate MHM Day 2014. In the first MHM TOT, thirty male student counselor invitees walked out of the hall because they felt that as men, this is not an appropriate activity to be involved in. This underlines the need for more awareness creation in the education sector and the need to sensitize both men and women on MHM issues.

The support of the Education Ministry in the Central Province was crucial to the successful continuation of MHM at school level. The MHM wheel developed by Geneva-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) was used as a prototype; student counselors, teachers and school prefects were taught to make the MHM wheel for dissemination to schools. A MHM brochure



developed in the national language by SLWP was distributed to the participants as part of the activity. Follow-up pilot activities were carried out in the Denuwara schools, the Digane Teacher training college, and in selected girls' schools in areas outside the Denuwara zone - Katugastota, Gampola and Galagedera. International MHM day 2018 was celebrated and this

activity was also supported by the YWCA, the oldest women's organization in Sri Lanka. Provincial Resource persons attended a Regional TOT conducted by WSSCC and the Ministry of City Planning and Water Supply held in Sri Lanka.

It was hoped to expand the activity to the adjoining Matale district to mark MHM Day 2019 on May 23rd by carrying out an initial activity in Sujatha Girls School, Kumbiyangoda, Matale with the support of the Provincial Dept. of Education and the Regional Dept. of Health Services, Central Province. However, the tensions following the Easter Sunday attack on April 21st led to many school security related concerns; the program date was changed four times before being finally held on 5th July 2019. The program was conducted by Ms. Kusum Athukorala, Snr. Advisor, SLWP, with Dr. Gamini Jayakody /RDHS and Ms. Manel Pushpalatha /SLES acting as resource persons. The program was attended by 23 teachers and 423 girls as well as Provincial and Zonal education officers. The group included a large number of pre menstrual girls.

The students were given the opportunity to send written questions after each session and responses were given by the resource persons. Health-related issues raised included involuntary urination, use of pain killers during menstruation, selection of napkin types, infections due to prolonged use of

napkins, frequency of napkin changes, type of napkin, dealing with excessively heavy periods, maintaining cleanliness during menstruation, food types to be avoided during menstruation, reasons for irregular menstruation, connection between irregular menstruation and the future possibility of a loss of fertility. A number of issues were related to traditional norms, rituals and food practices connected with puberty and the onset of menarche.



Why is it important to open up a discourse on the hitherto hidden Cinderella issue, namely, menstruation? One major reason is the need to improve access to education by increasing the school attendance rate of girl children. But there are other factors as well. Cervical cancer is the second most frequent cancer identified in women in Sri Lanka. The same hide bound conservatism which impedes open

discussion of menstruation and related issues in youth can also be the reason for the high incidence of delayed treatment of cervical cancer since many older patients fight shy of seeking medical assistance in time.

The access to education is closely linked to girls with access to sanitation and menstrual hygiene. Lack of sustainable sanitation facilities and systematic maintenance of is a major issue for many schools. The sanitation system in the Matale school was observed to be well maintained with adequate water for cleansing and therefore only 10% reported that they were not attending school during menstruation. This is not always the case encountered in smaller poorly endowed schools especially within the marginalized estate sector. There is a need for the development of more girl- friendly school toilets with changing facilities, water supply for cleansing and napkin disposal systems.

It is important to break the culture of silence related to MHM and the teaching of reproductive health, and treat this as a natural part of the school health program. Many of the queries raised by the Matale schoolgirls could be dealt with by a systematic reproductive health education program held within the school system and conducted by trained teachers or student counselors. Therefore, it is proposed that all future SLWP sanitation sensitization programs in girls' schools should be developed with a MHM component.



It is also noted that some students interviewed could not afford commercial products and were using menstrual rags.

Despite recent activism, there is still a tax on sanitary napkins in Sri Lanka, which is in effect a tax on women's health and a limitation of girls' access to education.

The MHM program activity was a groundbreaking activity for schools health programs in the Central Province. Following this, the SLWP and NetWwater have consistently worked in close cooperation with the Central Province education authorities to build a profile for MHM awareness. The Central Provincial education authorities have requested a series of district level TOTs to disseminate MHM programs to all schools. Such a program would be costly and calls for the development of teaching aids in national languages on the lines of the MHM wheel developed by the WSSCC. But this is an essential investment for a country in which women outnumber their male counterparts .

Cinderella must find a coach to take her to the ball!

Kusum Athukorala

July 2019