Going Global:
A Systematic Approach for Investigating Girls’ Experiences of Menstruation Across a Range of Contexts

Bethany Caruso, MPH
Matthew Freeman, PhD, MPH
Jeanne Long, MPH
Jacquelyn Haver, MSc
Sarah Yerian, MPH
Alexandra Fehr, MPH
Anna Ellis, MDP
Gauthami Penakalapati, MPH
Karen Andes, PhD

Center for Global Safe Water, Emory University

Photo: Alexandra Fehr, 2012
Primary Objective of the Collaboration:

To investigate and understand the challenges faced by school girls during menstruation—and the determinants of those challenges—across a range of settings and cultural contexts.
Menstruation and School WASH: Background

Settings

Bolivia  Sierra Leone  Rwanda  Philippines
Societal Factors $\rightarrow$ Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms

Environmental Factors $\rightarrow$ School Water, Sanitation, Resources

Interpersonal Factors $\rightarrow$ Influence of Family, Teachers, Peers

Personal Factors $\rightarrow$ Girl’s Knowledge, Skills, Beliefs

Biological Factors $\rightarrow$ Age, Intensity

Multiple levels of influence investigated in order to understand challenges, determinants and identify potential points of intervention
Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

**Societal Factors** → *Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms*

→ **Desk review:**
  - School, Gender, WASH Policies
  - Curriculum, Teacher training standards
  - Country-Specific reports

→ **Key Informant Interviews**
  - National and community level government officials, UNICEF/NGO staff

→ **Discussions / Interviews with Girls, Teachers, Moms, Boys:**
  - Perceptions, myths, norms, beliefs
Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

Societal Factors → Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms

Example from the tools: FGD with Girls

Key Activity – 3. Scenario: Imagining the life of a typical girl

Menstruation-related experiences and challenges

Activity aim and description: This activity is aimed at understanding what a ‘typical’ girl in the school may experience during menstruation. The activity sets up a scenario where a fictional girl or a friend at the school gets her period while in class. The participants are asked to describe what the girl may experience, feel and do. The facilitators are trained to solicit ideas from all of the girls and let them know that it is OK if they have different opinions. The questions and probes are provided to help the facilitator cover certain topics. If girls are open and vocal, they may be discussed without prompting.

- Transitional script to introduce activity (to be revised as appropriate with local field team, including name of the fictional girl): We are going to start talking about a girl’s experience of menstruation. Imagine a girl in school named Rosita. Rosita is 12 years old and in class. She has just realized that she has begun to menstruate. Think about your friends’ or your own experiences to put yourself in her shoes. Think about how she would deal with the situation.
Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

Societal Factors → Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms

Environmental Factors →
School Water, Sanitation, & Resource Availability

→ Observations in Schools/Communities Selected:
  WASH conditions
  Availability of sanitary napkins & costs

→ Interviews with Teachers:
  School conditions & availability of resources
  Government assistance
  Role of teachers related to MHM, puberty, WASH Issues

→ Discussions with Girls:
  Perceptions about their school environment
Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

Environmental Factors → *School Water, Sanitation, Resources*

Example from the tools: *FGD with Girls*

![Photo: © Sarah Yerian, 2012](image1)

![Photo: © Jeanne L. Long, 2012](image2)

**Key Activity – 1. Ideal latrine**

*Characteristics of current and ideal school facilities*

**Activity aim and description:** This activity is aimed at understanding what an ideal latrine or bathroom at school would be like for girls. Girls are provided with materials to collaboratively or independently draw their ideal school latrines. The facilitator then follows up with questions about current facilities, what is missing, and what is needed.

Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

**Societal Factors** ➔ *Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms*

**Environmental Factors** ➔ *School Water, Sanitation, & Resource Availability*

**Interpersonal Factors** ➔ *Influence of Family, Teachers, Peers*

➔ *Discussions with Girls, Teachers, Moms, Boys:*
  - Roles post-menarche
  - Relationships with family, peers, teachers
  - Support
### Menstruation and School WASH:
Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

#### Interpersonal Factors ➔ *Influence of Family, Teachers, Peers*

**Example from the tools: FGD with Boys**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Questions – 2. Boys’ behaviour towards girls who are menstruating</th>
<th>Probes/follow-ups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>12. How are girls treated differently once they start menstruation?</strong></td>
<td>How are girls treated differently by teachers? By family? By men in the community? By boys at school? Why are they treated differently? Do they gain respect?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>13. Can you tell me how your behaviour towards girls changes? Why?</strong></td>
<td>What if a boy’s sister or cousin started her menstruation, how would he treat her? Would he change his behaviour? How? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14. Can you tell me how boys are expected to act around menstruating girls?</strong></td>
<td>How did you learn this behaviour? From observation? teachers? family? peers? How are boys expected to act in school? Does this behaviour change as boys / girls get older?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15. Sometimes boys tease girls when they have their period, can you tell me about a time that may have happened at this school?</strong></td>
<td>What do they say? Why did they do it? Can you tell me a story of a girl who was once teased; don’t mention her name? How do teachers react if they see boys teasing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Menstruation and School WASH:
Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

Societal Factors → Policy, Tradition, Cultural Beliefs, Social Norms

Environmental Factors →
School Water, Sanitation, & Resource Availability

Interpersonal Factors →
Influence of Family, Teachers, Peers

Personal Factors → Girl’s Knowledge, Skills, Beliefs
→ Interviews and discussions with Girls:
Current knowledge, Coping mechanisms, Needs

Biological Factors → Pain, Intensity, Age
→ Individual interviews with Girls:
Biological experience (pain, flow, fatigue)
**Key Questions – 2. Personal experience with menstruation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Probes/follow-ups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First period</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 18. Can you tell me the story of the first time you got your period? | **Context:**  
How old were you?  
Did you know what to do?  
Was there an accident?  

**Attitudes/emotions:**  
What was your immediate reaction or feeling?  

**Knowledge:**  
Did you know what it was when you got it? How?  

**Resources/management/practices:**  
What did you use (pads, cloth, tissues, etc.)?  
Who/where did you get materials from?  
Where did you go to manage your period (latrine, separate room, outside, etc.)?  

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*Example from the tools: Interview with Girl Student*
Menstruation and School WASH: Theoretical Approach and Research Activities

Data Collection

• Overall study activities adapted to each context
• Study teams trained in each location for data collection
• All participation voluntary (informed consent)
• Over 550 participants engaged
• Analysis done by country prior to comparison
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

Challenges: Experiences girls have at school during or related to menstruation that make their time in school more difficult than usual.
## Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

### Challenges

**Challenges**: Experiences girls have at school during /related to menstruation that make school time more difficult than usual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Rwanda</th>
<th>Sierra Leone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty managing flow</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaks, stains</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing, shame, embarrassment, fear</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menstrual Pain</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odor</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support/guidance</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of preparedness</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

**Difficulty Managing Menstrual Flow**

**Interviewer:** And if she has used cloth here at school, how do you think she should get changed?

**Participant 2:** I think that she should keep it on because she can’t find where to clean it and to dry it.

**Participant 4:** For me I think that she doesn’t have any other option apart from going home to get changed. *(FGD, Rwanda)*

**Teasing**

I placed the pad in my pocket, so I could go and change, but the restroom was closed so I just went back downstairs. ...a male classmate of mine was beside me so he got to see the brand of my pad peeping from my pocket. ...he laughed out so loud and he told our classmates. I was so embarrassed.” *(IDI, Philippines)*
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

**Determinants**: Factors that contribute to girls' experiences and challenges at school related to menstruation.

- WASH Facilities
- Knowledge & skills
- Management Materials
- Support
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

### Determinants:
Factors that contribute to girls experiences and challenges at school related to menstruation.

### Challenges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinants</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Rwanda</th>
<th>Sierra Leone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate sanitation facilities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of places to wash and change</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of disposal</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of consistent water access</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of soap</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Determinants: Factors that contribute to girls experiences and challenges at school related to menstruation.
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

Inadequate Sanitation

There is no bathroom, we usually go far over there, under the bushes. That is the reason we’re late sometimes, the teachers lock the door on us.

*(FGD, Bolivia)*
Menstruation and School WASH: Findings: Challenges and Determinants

Lack of water & soap access

“When I am in school I change once, because there is no soap and not enough water unless you buy some, but if at home I change several times and I bathe several times” (IDI, Sierra Leone).

Lack of disposal

Participant 1: We go to one woman over there, because the toilet is locked, we make as if we are going to ease ourselves, when we enter, we dispose of it inside the toilet...she has pit latrine that is where we throw our cloth. (FGD, Sierra Leone)
Menstruation and School WASH: Lessons Learned

1. A systematic, theoretically-based approach to qualitative data collection across multiple settings allowed for comparisons of findings and identification of common challenges and determinants related to girls’ menstruation-related experiences in school.

2. Several common challenges related to menstruation exist across contexts.

3. WASH Facilities are a key determinant across all contexts, but not the only determinant. Other factors need concurrent consideration.

4. Program improvements need to be informed by women and girls and rigorously evaluated with attention to broader outcomes.

“What is known by her parents is that she is studying well, but this is not the truth, because of what is happening to her when she has her period at school.”

(Girl, FGD, Philippines)
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Seung Lee
Reggie Aquino
Amado Parawan

Research Team
Blanche Mayor
Janelyn Capili
Audrey Clores
Jose Marie Nieva
Jessica Denette-Ramos-Hernandez
Justin Jeremy Jose

UNICEF Bolivia
Jeanne Long, Emory-UNICEF
Diego Lopez
Koenraad Vancraeynest
Guillermo Cardozo

UNICEF Bolivia

Fundacion Sodis
Elsa Sanchez

UNICEF Bolivia

Research Team
Gladys Camacho Rios
Lizet Carbajal Mamani
Maribel Mamani Maldonado
Maria Luisa Chavez Mollo

Bolivia

UNICEF Bolivia

Sierra Leone
Alexandra Fehr, Emory-UNICEF

UNICEF Sierra Leone
Kazumi Inden
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Rwanda
Sarah Yerian, Emory-UNICEF
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Dr. Fidele Ngabo
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Research Team
Jean D’Amour Buzima
Yvan Butera
Betty Ingabire
Chantal Nikuze
Chantal Umuhzo
Olive Umutoni