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Lowland Water, Sanitation and Hygiene WASH Activity

BRIEFING NOTE, OCTOBER 2020

Assessing Menstrual Health Management in Girls of Pastoralist Communities in Ethiopia's Remote Southern Nations Nationalities and People Regions



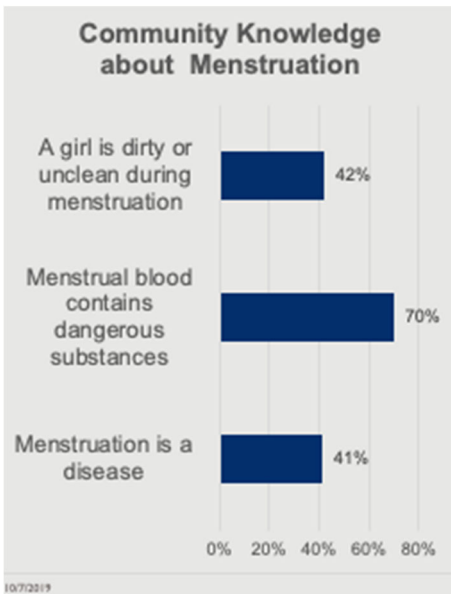
Pastoralist communities in South Omo dealing with water access challenges exacerbated by climate change also face hardships with access to supply chains for sanitation and MHM products.

South Omo Zone, SNNPR: Arid, Remote and Mobile

The Southern Nations Nationalities and People Regions (SNNPR) is one of the largest regions in Ethiopia, accounting for more than 10 percent of the country's land area and almost a fifth of the country's population. SNNPR also remains Ethiopia's most rural region, with approximately 89% of people in the region categorized as rural inhabitants. South Omo is located in the south western part of the country, populated by sixteen ethnic groups; the inhabitants of this zone are mainly known for their pastoral life. Pastoralists in South Omo are known to move herds of livestock in search of fresh water and pasture sources, depending on the time of year, making supply chains and health and educational support often requiring more permanent structures a challenge. Increasing drought periods and more frequent extreme climate shocks add a layer of desperation to the water and sanitation needs of these communities, with governments and aid organizations scrambling to address these unique needs and develop innovative solutions for access to these remote peoples.

KEY POINTS

- While there have been several studies conducted in recent years on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in Ethiopia, limited research remains for girls in the pastoral context of the country.
- Anecdotal and informal information suggests that menstrual management is a challenge for women and girls in these marginalized and unreached pastoral communities, furthering existing barriers to education, employment and income generation, among others.
- The USAID Lowland Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Activity conducted the "MHM Assessment and Market Analysis in Pastoral Context" to formalize the understandings about MHM and undertake formative research to support better understanding of the conditions for women and girls in these pastoralist communities.
- Key findings from the assessment among school aged girls support the understanding that cultural attitudes and beliefs in pastoralist communities negatively influence girls' ability to management menstrual hygiene, and that lack of access to MHM supplies and WASH facilities, especially in the school setting often led to poor menstrual hygiene practices.
- The MHM market assessment also showed that despite a clear preference for disposable sanitary products over cloth by women and girls, because MHM product supply chains, as well as awareness of availability and understanding of MHM products among the community are low, demand for and access to these products also remained low.
- This note complements the USAID Lowland WASH Activity "MHM Assessment and Market Analysis in Pastoral Context" Report, published in August 2019.



Primary schoolgirls in South Omo who have reached puberty suffer during their monthly menstrual cycle from lack of water, appropriate toilet facilities, and suitable sanitary wear, and receive limited guidance from schoolteachers or parents. Cultural taboos and secrecy limit the ability of adolescent girls to discuss issues of menstruation in public without fear of judgment. And with access to education already a challenge in this remote region, the assessment found that menstruation affects girls' participation and attendance at school.

Cultural Norms and WASH Infrastructure in Schools: Linked Barriers for Pastoralist Girls

As established by recent studies, including the 2017 UNICEF Baseline Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice (KAP) Survey on MHM; the 2014 MHM Baseline Survey supported by SNV; and PSI's 2018 MHM Market Analysis; the Lowland WASH Activity's MHM Assessment found that cultural norms and attitudes towards menstruation in general created challenges for girls to practice safe and effective MHM. Girls reported fear of a smell associated with menstruation being noticed by classmates, fear of being seen as "dirty", and fear of being teased and ostracized by their community because of their periods. These negative effects of these attitudes, pervasive and perpetuated by both men and women, including parents and teachers in South Omo, are compounded when coupled with the lack of safe, private sanitation facilities within school buildings. With nowhere to change menstrual pads or wash throughout the day, girls are faced with limited options, and frequently resort to skipping classes or school days altogether, rather than endure harassment and embarrassment, as well as the physical discomfort of this monthly challenge.

While the majority of schools visited in South Omo had separate latrines for girl students, (only two of 12 schools were equipped with just one facility for all student), more than half of these latrines were in poor condition and non-functional. Moreover, the lack of privacy was also a considerable concern for all students, but especially girls dealing with menstrual hygiene needs. 10 of the 12 schools had no lockable doors. Open defecation was practiced in nine of the 12 schools observed. Feces were observed in the surroundings and on the floor of nine of the 12 schools, and there was bad smell and flies hovering in 11 of 12 latrines. This implies that the poor condition of latrines coupled with unavailability of water and separate rooms for changing MH materials might discourage girls from changing sanitary pads at school because of concerns about hygiene. With basic sanitation needs already

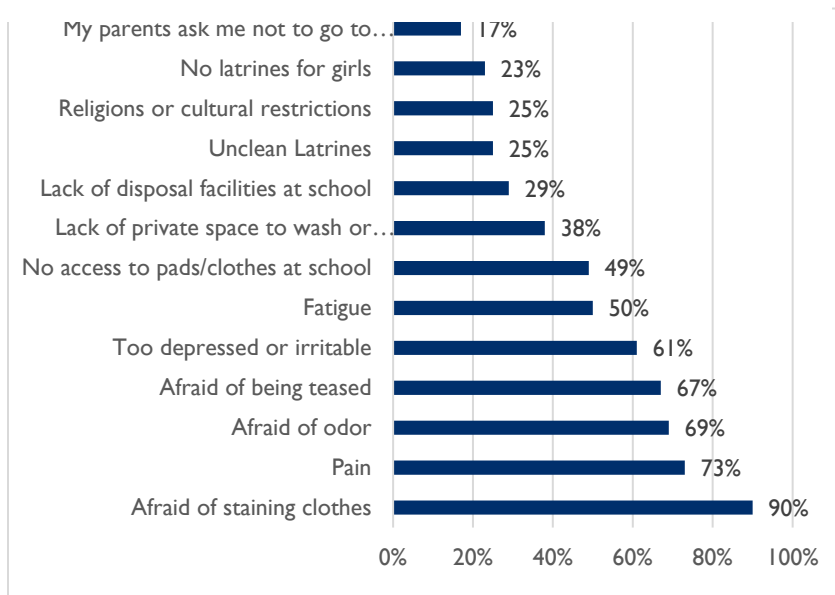
largely unmet, it is no surprise that few schools if any addressed MHM specific needs, like bins for disposing of commercial pads, wash stations located within or near the latrines, or provision of sanitary products.

While resource constraints, both in financial terms and in access to clean water, certainly affect WASH facilities and latrines in schools in South Omo, negative perceptions of menstruation contribute to the lack of prioritization of MHM specific needs as well. Facilities with private and clean latrines, changing rooms for girls, nearby handwashing stations, and sanitary pad disposal methods, among others, will continue to remain under resourced and neglected while beliefs that girls are dirty or ready to be married off prevail. Investment in inclusive WASH infrastructure must be coupled with attitude and behavior change in pastoralist communities in order to advance access to education for girls in places like South Omo.

SCHOOLS IN SOUTH OMO

- **34%** of girls ever missed school because of menstruation
- These girls **miss 2.4 school days** on average
- **10 of 12** school latrines observed had no door or lock
- **5 of 12 schools** had changing rooms for girls available
- **1 of 12 schools** had basins or buckets available for sanitary pad disposal

TABLE I: REASONS FOR MISSED SCHOOL FOR GIRLS



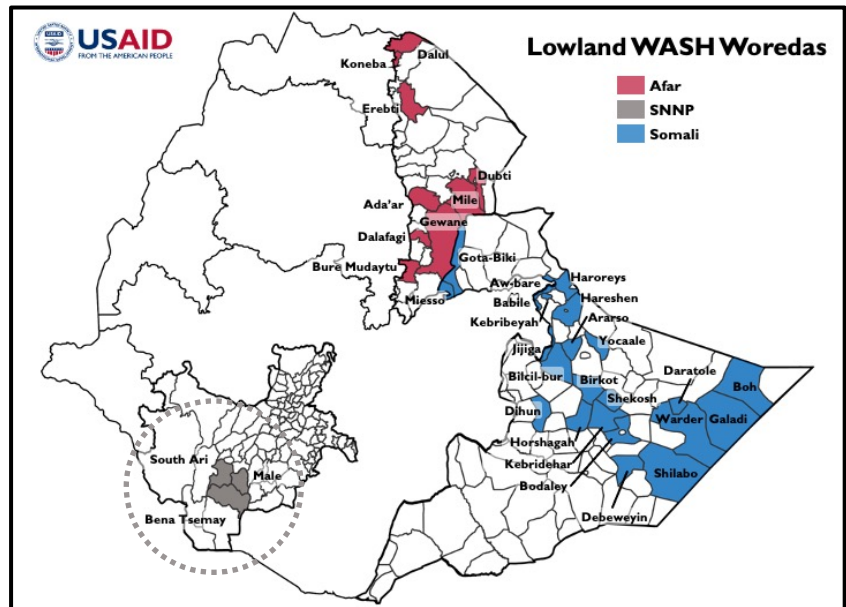
MHM Product Supply Chains: Driving Demand When Access and Awareness is Low

Reaffirming findings from studies conducted by SNV, UNICEF, and PS, Lowland Wash's MHM Market Analysis found that while many programs are pushing reusable sanitary pads, girls in remote areas like South Omo currently prefer commercially produced disposable pads over the rags or pieces of cloth currently being used as "reusable" supplies. More investment and research is needed in remote areas among pastoral women and girls to determine preference or demand for better quality reusable pads, ones with better absorbency, stickiness, etc. versus commercial products.

Despite this desire, awareness, financial, and availability challenges prevent access to disposable pads in this region. The market analysis also indicated that very low level of MHM business initiatives available and unsustainable supply chains of MHM products

were among the main barriers affecting proper MHM in South Omo. Distance might also lead to significant supply chain gaps for many product suppliers to vendors/kiosks located in the three towns. Business owners (vendors/kiosks owners) might not be motivated to bring MHM materials from town when it requires travelling such a long distance. Another factor could be the lack of motivation due to the low profit margins gained from the sale of MHM products as compared to the other commodities.

The market analysis also showed that the in-store demand for MHM commodities is low, resulting in low total sale of MHM products among local retailers relative to the sale of other commodities. Low demand often prevents shopkeepers from carrying products in the few stores accessible to these communities. Yet, the market analysis observed a clear preference by women and girls for commercial pads. In this case low demand could be correlated with low awareness of the commercial pad availability- in that you cannot create demand for a product if the consumers are unaware that it is available. Demand could be perceived as low because of the distances women have to travel to access the shops, which in turn discourages shopkeepers from carrying the products, further limiting the supply and potentially increasing the distance women have to travel if fewer shops will carry them.



“My shop is at the center and close to the main road. Very few people knew that there is an MHM product called Eve... Only a handful of women not schoolgirls came to buy this commodity, because only few women knew that I have this commodity in my shop... schoolgirls do not know at all...as the result there are times that even only two or three women in a month might come to buy the commodity.”

- Benatsemay town, Kiosk owner

Cost was also shown to be a barrier for women and especially school-aged girls to purchase MHM products linked to cultural attitudes. For example, in one instance, a sixth-grade student reported that she knew about different types of MHM products and wanted to buy them, but never did because she does not have money. Although she knows that she might get money from her mother or father, she does not ask them out of fear. The fear and discomfort of family and community communication surrounding menstruation could be preventing many women and girls from accessing the funds needed to purchase commercial supplies. In addition, with many families experiencing constraints on financial resources, MHM supplies remain a low priority for household expenditures in South Omo.

Beliefs and Attitudes Affect MHM Product Use, Availability

Due to limited availability of MHM products in the local market and the unaffordability of available products, as well as the distance women and girls need to travel to access the few shops that carry products, most women and girls use homemade cloth as a menstrual pad as opposed to commercial sanitary products. But another, less obvious barrier for women and girls to access sanitary supplies is the impact of the cultural taboo on the actual purchasing of the products itself. Embarrassment from purchasing sanitary products from male shopkeepers and cultural taboos that force women to hide that they are on their period could prevent women and girls from purchasing MHM products, contributing to the perceived low demand reported by shopkeepers.



Fear of embarrassment or harassment from males in their communities can

Looking Forward

While the findings of the Lowland WASH Activity's MHM Assessment and Market Analysis in Pastoralist Communities largely mirror country-wide trends, we should not discount the unique challenges pastoralist communities face in the context of these broader needs. The fact that pastoralist communities are experiencing the same challenges as peri-urban and urban communities in regard to MHM speaks to the need for broader MHM focused interventions, inclusive of both supply and demand side, and , context specific. Specific results and recommendations from our report include:

1. MHM education and health promotion to increase healthy MHM practices:

- Awareness should be raised in order to **break the existing communication barrier/taboo** about menstruation, and this education should be provided in the presence of both families and girls. Target key political figures, sector offices, school administration, parents, and community leaders for advocacy campaigns on the effects and coping mechanisms around MHM.
- Implement age-appropriate activities that will help to **educate all students about puberty** (grounded in biology), including MHM curricula and establishing school student club which will have role to reach to all school community.
- Schools, in collaboration with other government and NGO stakeholders implementing MHM interventions, should develop a strategy to reach out to those pastoral community members to educate on menstruation and its management through venues such as parent-teacher conferences. Provide trainings to teachers in order to **improve the level of knowledge on menstruation and MHM related issues** and **promote gender-sensitive teaching practices** among teachers.

2. Increased access to MHM friendly WASH facilities and products, particularly in schools:

- When focusing in on supply of MHM products, inadequate WASH facilities remain a clear factor in absenteeism in menstruating girls. WASH funding should be sure to **incorporate MHM-friendly facility design in programming** going forward to address the logistical and sanitary challenges girls face. Private, sex-segregated, sanitary facilities could allow more girls to stay in school throughout their cycle and reduce the number of missed days, lowering the drop-out rate resulting high academic score.
- Invest in and facilitate **feasible ways to ensure manufacturing and marketing** of low-cost sanitary pads in rural areas.
- Invest in **social marketing** as a means to increase access MHM educational materials and supplies in rural areas.
- **Awareness raising to increase demand** for MHM products should consider incorporating messaging that addresses the reluctance among family members (especially fathers) to purchase MHM products for their daughters. Improving access to credit and facilitating more flexible pricing terms, incentivized by donors, is also likely to increase consumption of commercial MHM products.



Benna Tsemay near the school toilets.

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ABOUT

The USAID Lowland Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (Lowland WASH) Activity: USAID/Ethiopia's flagship WASH activity delivers technical assistance, develops small-scale infrastructure, and builds the capacity of national and regional governments and stakeholders in the lowland Somali, Afar and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions. In support of the Government of Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan and One WASH National Program, it aims at (1) increasing access to improved drinking water supply sources on a sustainable basis; (2) increasing adoption of key hygiene behaviors and increased access to improved, sustainable sanitation; (3) improving efficiency and sustainability of food production from irrigated and rain-fed agricultural systems; and (4) improving water governance and data management. For more information, contact Petros Birhane, Chief of Party, at pbirhane@lowash.com.

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