

8th Virtual Conference on MHM in Schools

1st Round of Pre-Conference Discussion

Synthesis

During the 1st round of pre-conference discussion eight people from seven different countries and three continents shared their experience. The discussion was on the topic of **Innovation in MHM programming: Making interventions context-specific and inclusive.**

Participants discussed a **range of menstrual products** for girls with a focus on reusable pads and menstrual cups. The discussants hoped that reusable products would have a positive impact both in terms of girls' health and reduction of environmental impact, though this was not based on evidence. Daniel from the Global Health Foundation wrote that through their social enterprise, they *"produce and distribute reusable sanitary pads to improve access to affordable and available sanitary to improve menstrual hygiene, reduce prolong use, create a resilient climate change adaptation and reduce the burden of sanitary waste on poor waste management system."*

At the same time, many participants recognized there is often a **barrier to adopting these new products** by girls ranging from an initial hesitation to an outright rejection. The main concerns **include comfort, hygienic use, and safety to use** the products from a health as well as cultural perspective, especially if products are inserted in the vagina like menstrual cups. The discussants clearly recognize to **work closely with girls to address these barriers** and in this conversation identify products that are adequate for them. Susie from Faith in Water describes how the **program responded to girls' feedback**: *"We were providing four pads and our girls complained these were not enough so we have now increased the number to five and are also teaching them to make pads as a school club activity."*

Third, all participants agreed that **providing sanitary products alone is not enough**. Most described programs provide **MHM kits** (including underwear, spare materials, bags, information material, handwashing/ laundry material, etc.) and are embedded into a wider range of activities, including **education about menstruation** and the provision or rehabilitation of **sanitation and handwashing facilities at school**.

Participants connected girls' inability to manage their periods adequately with them missing schools. Daniel goes one step further and highlights that **leakage, stigma, discrimination and teasing** also *"excludes girls from participation in extracurricular and social activities"* in Nigeria. Flora highlighted the different needs of *"women in non-traditional roles"* to manage their periods.

Finally, all participants described some **stigma around periods**. Often this is related to leakages of menstrual blood. Beyond that, Sarah from IGEA Enterprise describes how *"periods pain was [perceived as] a form of punishment that were not normal, girls are [considered] dirty once they had their period"*. Daniel mentioned *"religious belief around menstruation, the long held perception around menstruation"*. In response, his program **involves boys and men as menstruation champions**.

In sum, the first round of discussion clearly outlined the **need for comprehensive MHM programming**. This includes access to **menstrual materials, but also to services and facilities** to manage their periods as well as **psycho-social and community support** to learn about and feel more comfortable with their

period. It also highlights the importance of being **responsive to girls'** needs, wishes, fears and feedback to drive change.

Please continue using this space and the discussion threads to share your experience and connect with like-minded people. We will continue the online discussion next week with a new theme. We will speak about Failures in MHM programming and what we learnt from them facilitated by @WASH Failures and @Virigina from WSSCC.