

Module eight

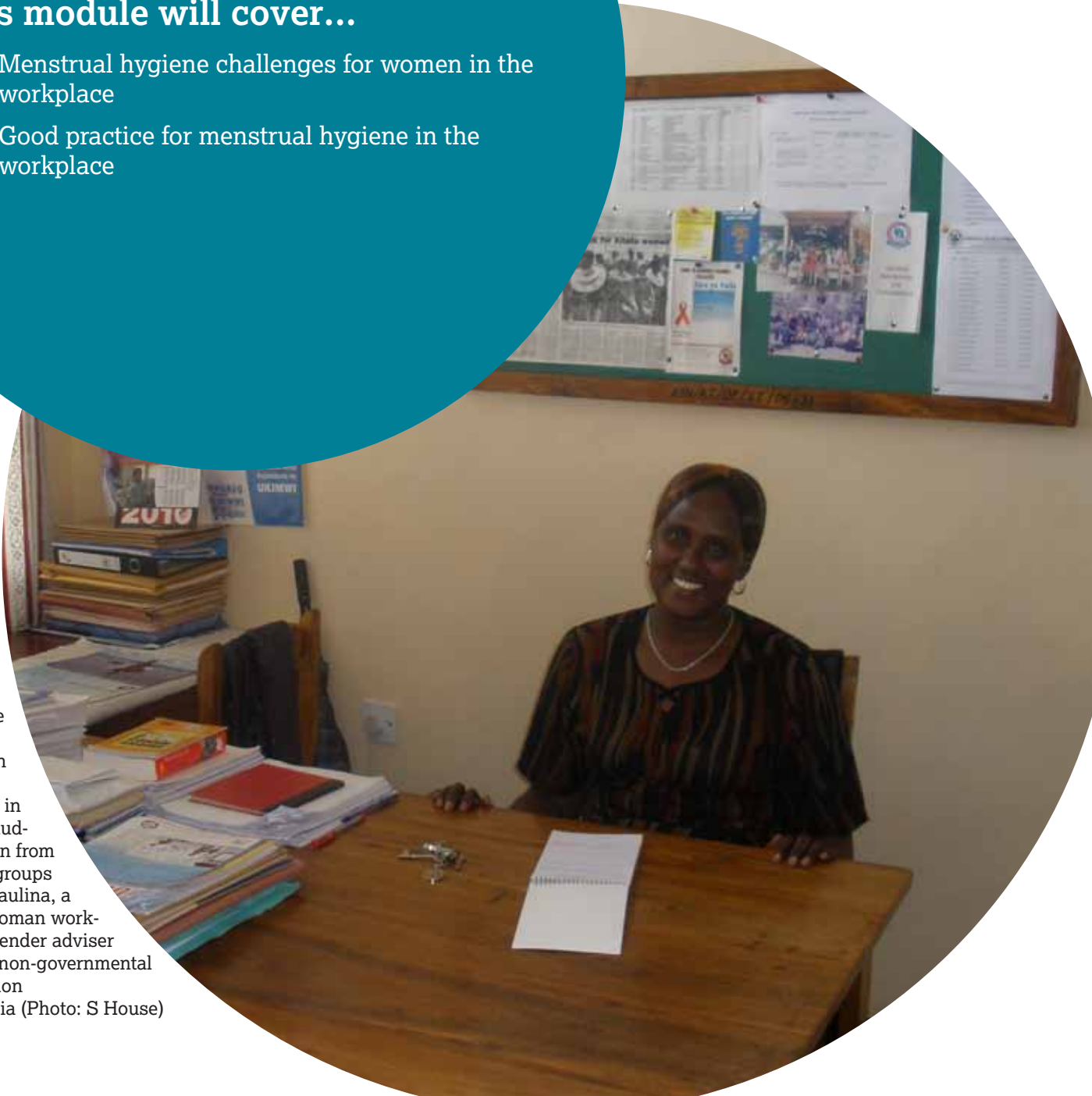
Menstrual hygiene in the workplace

Part of *Menstrual hygiene matters; A resource for improving menstrual hygiene around the world*, written by Sarah House, Thérèse Mahon and Sue Cavill (2012). The full version can be downloaded from www.wateraid.org/mhm.

This module will cover...

- 8.1 Menstrual hygiene challenges for women in the workplace
- 8.2 Good practice for menstrual hygiene in the workplace

Making the workplace suitable for women can help them stay in work, including women from minority groups such as Paulina, a Maasai woman working as a gender adviser at a local non-governmental organisation in Tanzania (Photo: S House)



Module eight

Menstrual hygiene in the workplace

8.1 Menstrual hygiene challenges for women in the workplace

Below are some of the challenges women and girls can face in managing their menstruation in the workplace.

The following example from Tehran reveals the fact that suffering from menstrual cramps can lead to women being absent from work.

Menstrual hygiene challenges in the workplace include:

- Inadequate toilet facilities.
- Lack of facilities for washing or drying menstrual cloths.
- Lack of facilities for disposing of sanitary pads or menstrual cloths.
- Difficulty raising menstrual hygiene issues with male managers.
- Managers often don't understand the need for women and girls to be able to take additional time in the toilet or washroom to manage menstruation.
- Difficulty concentrating on work due to menstrual cramps.
- Lack of medicines or sanitary materials.
- Cultural restrictions (such as menstruating women not being able to leave the house, wash their bodies, eat certain foods, cook or attend religious functions) have an impact on personal hygiene or the ability to engage in work-related activities.
- Lack of opportunities or facilities to change, wash or clean sanitary cloths if travelling with work.
- Male staff members sometimes have to leave work early to assist wives with cooking (where women are not permitted to cook when menstruating).

Menstrual cramping and work absence rates in Tehran, Iran¹

Most women experience some degree of pain when menstruating (dysmenorrhoea), which may be accompanied by other symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches, weakness and/or fainting. This can impact on their daily activities, and affect their productivity at home or at their workplace.

Dysmenorrhoea is experienced by at least 50% of women during their reproductive years. Results of studies in Tehran showed that nearly 10% of females with dysmenorrhoea experienced an absence rate of one to three days per month from work or were unable to perform their regular/daily tasks due to severe pain. Dysmenorrhoea is reported to be the most common reason for women to visit a doctor in gynaecology centres and is considered the main cause of absence from school among young female students.

The office environment often lacks the facilities to enable women to manage their menstruation. Remedying this problem through menstrual hygiene-friendly design can however be relatively simple.

Women or girls who have to travel with their work can face additional challenges, particularly when their travel involves long journeys or in areas with limited water, sanitation and hygiene services.

The importance of designing offices and guest houses to be gender- and menstrual hygiene-friendly²

An international non-governmental organisation in a remote province of Afghanistan has one provincial and two district field offices. In the province only 3% of women are literate and there are many restrictions on women, including them being unable to travel unless they are given permission by the male members of their family and are accompanied by a male relative. It is therefore difficult to recruit female staff members for professional posts.

In 2011, all the staff working at the provincial office were men, although the organisation had three women hygiene promoters employed along with male relatives as 'hygiene promotion couples'. While the male staff of the provincial office (both an office and a guest house) made women visitors feel welcome, the design and layout of the office/guest house was not women-friendly. Firstly, the room given to the women guests to sleep in had no lock on the door, the window blinds did not fully close and there was only one toilet/shower room, which opened onto the main corridor. Groups of men regularly sat just outside the door. The staff

undertaking the cooking, cleaning and other support tasks were very helpful but were all men. There were no private areas for women to relax and remove their hijab, nowhere private to wash and dry underwear or other private items such as sanitary cloths, and nowhere to dispose of sanitary products. It was very difficult to see how a woman visiting the provincial office/guest house could manage their menstrual hygiene in such a situation.

Ways that the situation could be improved:

- The female staff could undertake an assessment of the offices from gender and menstrual hygiene perspectives.
- A small female-only room could be constructed outside the back of the office for women to rest and sleep. This should have thick curtains and a lock on the door.
- A toilet and shower room could be built at the back of the women's room with a small walled compound, with a burning unit (mini incinerator or facility to have a small fire) and private drying line.

Menstrual hygiene and travelling

Women and girls who have to travel as part of their work face various challenges in relation to their menstrual hygiene:

- Sitting for a long time in a vehicle or a plane can lead to discomfort (skin irritation or rashes) if using sanitary pads or tampons as well as anxiety about leaking.
- When travelling in rural areas it can be difficult to find latrines suitable for changing sanitary materials and cleaning oneself, particularly if there is limited or no water for hand-washing.
- When using latrines with no lights, it is difficult to manage menstruation in the dark.
- Disposing of used sanitary pads or tampons can also be difficult, particularly where there are no formal waste collection systems.

Module eight

Menstrual hygiene in the workplace

The case study below highlights a common problem faced by women – urinary incontinence – which is not related specifically to the biological function of menstruation, but often leads to the women concerned using sanitary protection materials.

The following example highlights the experiences of women in the military. While users of this resource are unlikely to be supporting women in the military, the case study highlights a range of issues related to heat and limited water, sanitation and hygiene facilities that can be useful for other contexts.

Managing incontinence in the work environment³

“I am one of the many women who have suffered from stress incontinence. This is where when you sneeze, laugh, or cough, you release urine involuntarily. I have suffered from this condition since I was young. To manage this condition, I have almost permanently worn sanitary protection. This includes the thinner panty liners when I do not have a cough or am not working in a cold climate or dusty environment, and much thicker pads when I am working in an environment that is likely to make me cough on a regular basis.

“As an aid worker, my work involves a significant amount of travelling. The stress incontinence has caused many problems during my travels for work, and in particular when I have worked in cold climates where I regularly get bad coughs. Trying to manage an almost constant flow of urine when having a bad cough, in environments with very poor plumbing, limited water supply and toilet paper which falls to pieces in your hands, is challenging and distracting. After two cold climate contracts where I found it difficult to manage this problem, I decided that I could no longer take on contracts in such climates.

“However, I found out that it was possible to have a relatively simple operation for this condition. I had the operation and it has made my working life so much easier. The money I spend on sanitary protection has also reduced. I think about women from Africa, Asia or elsewhere who suffer from this condition and the difficulties they must face at home and in the workplace; most of them very unlikely to ever have the opportunity to resolve this problem as I was lucky enough to be able to do. I wonder how they manage.”

WASH sector professional (2010)

Military women’s experiences of managing menstruation⁴

It’s hard to take care of yourself during your period: Heat, dirt, and port-a-potties

Characteristics of the deployed environment that were problematic for menstrual hygiene included sand, dirt, heat and sweat. Heat was a major problem causing general discomfort during menstruation and problems with the use of menstrual products. One soldier said, “...the pads, they don’t stick well in your underwear when it’s hot... you’re sweating so much.” The type of latrine facilities that women had access to affected hygiene practices. Most women had to use port-a-potties during the day, which presented challenges like those that this soldier identified, “Because the port-a-potties are just not sanitary, and it’s hard when you’re in a little space and you’re trying to... change your pad, or... clean yourself and so — it’s a real big inconvenience — not having a regular restroom to go to.” Women described the difficulties in maintaining both personal and menstrual hygiene in the deployed environment. This soldier explained her efforts, “You manage but you’re always dirty.”

From Trego L L (2007)

The following case study shows how women try to ‘make sure’ and minimise potential problems to limit the impacts of menstruation on their daily work.

Making sure: Integrating menstrual care practices into daily living⁵

In order to manage the menstrual flow and continue to participate in daily life, women have created a self-care process, which is termed ‘making sure’. Practices for ‘making sure’ will vary according to culture and context but essentially relate to ensuring that sanitary protection is effective so that menstruating women can continue their daily activities without having to worry about menstrual hygiene.

A lawyer expressed her concern about ‘making sure’: “Now court, this is a very limiting thing. And it causes consternation. You can be sure I wouldn’t wear a white skirt then, because that would be the last thing I would want to worry about. If I am in the courtroom, and I’m going in at nine, I may not start until ten-thirty, and I may be striking a jury until eleven, and I’ve been talking to people all that time, and I have not had time to think about me. And then I’m standing there in the middle of the courtroom, and all of a sudden I do. From that moment on, I’ve got half my mind on the case, ‘cause the other half is thinking, ‘Well, I’m gonna start flooding all over the courtroom.’”

From Patterson ET and Hale ES (1985)

The following two examples highlight the challenges that can arise when many of the managers in the workplace are men.

Male managers and the difficulty of raising menstrual hygiene issues⁶

The higher proportion of male staff that work on water and sanitation programmes may mean it is difficult for their female colleagues to share their difficult experiences of menstruation management in their own workplaces and while in the field for more than seven to eight hours.

From Fernandes M (2010)

Inappropriate behaviour from employers in relation to women’s need to use the toilet⁷

A factory boss who ordered women workers to wear a red sign around their necks when they wanted to use the toilet is facing legal action. The male manager in south-east Spain ‘made the 400 women wear the sign with the word toilet on it in a bid to humiliate them into taking less breaks’. The male employees were not told to wear the same sign.

A boss in Norway was fined last year for ordering staff to wear red bracelets during their periods – to explain why they were using the toilet more often.

From Taylor J (2011)

Module eight

Menstrual hygiene in the workplace

8.2 Good practice for menstrual hygiene in the workplace

Good practice for the employer:

- Provide separate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities for women and men.
- Ensure that the facilities are kept clean at all times.
- Provide facilities for the disposal of cloths and pads.
- Ensure locks are fitted inside the toilet doors, and there is a light and water inside the toilets.
- Have a discrete supply of sanitary pads and clean cloths available in an emergency for women or girls at work.
- In larger work environments, employ a trained health professional who can be approached for pain relief or sanitary products when needed.
- Include menstrual hygiene in staff employment policies, with an understanding that women and girls may need additional days of sickness to deal with menstrual hygiene complications.
- Provide awareness-raising sessions on menstrual hygiene for all female staff by a health professional.

Good practice for female employees:

- Prepare well for time at work, taking in emergency cloths or sanitary pads and pain relief, in case menstruation starts unexpectedly.
- Be supportive of other female colleagues who may need to spend more time visiting the bathroom, suffer from pre-menstrual syndrome, or have to take sickness days due to their menstrual cycles.
- If a woman or girl stains her clothes, let her know.
- Help your employer understand what would improve the working environment for women and girls in managing their menstruation.

Good practice for male employees:

- Be supportive of female colleagues who may need to spend more time visiting the bathroom, suffer from pre-menstrual syndrome, or have to take sickness days due to their menstrual cycles.
- If a woman or girl stains her clothes, politely and discretely let her know – or ask another woman to do so.

Further research and information is still needed on:

- Labour law; workers' rights in relation to menstruation and sanitation.
- Good practice related to menstrual hygiene in the workplace in low-income countries.

Endnotes

¹ Poureslami M and Osati-Ashtiani F (2005) Attitudes of female adolescents about dysmenorrhoea and menstrual hygiene in Tehran suburbs, *Archives of Iranian medicine*, vol 5, no 4, pp 219-224.

² Sarah House (Nov 2010) Personal communication.

³ WASH sector professional (Nov 2010) Personal communication.

⁴ Trego L L (2007) *Military women's menstrual experiences and interest in menstrual suppression during deployment*. AWONN, the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses.

⁵ Patterson ET and Hale ES (1985) Making sure: Integrating menstrual care practices into activities of daily living, *Advances in Nursing Science*.

⁶ Fernandes M (2010) *Freedom of mobility: Experiences from villages in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, India*. South Asia Hygiene Practitioners' Workshop, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁷ Taylor J (2011) Women workers forced to wear 'I need to pee' sign, *Metro*, Friday 7 Oct 2011.