

OUR JOURNEY TOWARDS MAKING MENSTRUATION A NORMAL FACT OF LIFE



EQUALITY, INCLUSIVITY, EMPOWERMENT, THE THREE TENETS OF GREAT CHANGE

A reflection on where we are and where we need to go from the lens of WaterAid Bangladesh

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Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) has gained global recognition as a public health and gender equality issue, with stakeholders working together to address the stigma and lack of services, surrounding menstruation, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Twenty years ago, MHM was a neglected issue, but over the years, organizations like WaterAid, UNICEF and others started incorporating menstrual hygiene in their interventions, particularly in school settings. However, in Bangladesh as with most countries, **MHM was not adequately addressed holistically.**

MHM and Global Goals

MHM is associated with several development goals, including ensuring healthy lives, quality education, gender equality, and access to water and sanitation. Despite its importance, MHM has not been sufficiently addressed in educational institutions and the health sector, which could hinder the achievement of sustainable development goals and national priorities. The government of Bangladesh prioritised gender equality in education from 1994 with Female Secondary Stipend and Assistance Program (FSSAP) and later recognised the need for proper sanitation facilities in schools, supported by the National Education Policy. As MHM was addressed mostly under the umbrella of WASH sector in Bangladesh, MHM components were

duly established under the school-based adolescent health and nutrition program (SBAHP). WaterAid played a pivotal role in supporting the SBAHP, which is an initiative of the GoB's Fourth Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Program (HNPP), supported by World Bank's Health Sector Support Project (HSSP).

Birth of the MHM Platform

Despite efforts to mainstream MHM in educational institutes, there have been challenges in addressing MHM holistically. It became essential to blend the silos such as MHM friendly infrastructure development, 'Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)' initiatives and private sector engagement - working in different streams. The Bangladesh MHM Platform was established, bringing together organisations working on WASH, gender, and SRHR issues to coordinate efforts and advocate for MHM. This platform has played a significant role in bringing MHM issues to the forefront and facilitating the formulation of an inter-ministerial national strategy on MHM by the government of Bangladesh approved in 2021.

TIMELINE OF CHANGE

2000s / WASH and MHM

WaterAid, along with other organisations such as BRAC, UNICEF, NGO-Forum, **pioneered the integration of MHM into the WASH sector** in Bangladesh.

2003 / Programmatic integration

WaterAid **integrated MHM into the then DFID-funded WASH programme**, focusing on awareness and sensitisation, MHM friendly water and sanitation facilities, and affordable menstrual hygiene products together with 20 National/ Local NGO partners.

2006 / Policy-level focus achieved

WaterAid and UNICEF's joint paper at SACOSAN-2 brought the **MHM agenda into focus at the policy level** and was the first exposure to the issue for the Government and development partners.

2011 / Integration in National Standard of WASH in Schools

UNICEF facilitated the standardisation of school toilet designs with representatives from WASH organisations and concerned departments. This led to the approval of the National Standard of WASH in Schools, which **recognised the need for facilities for menstrual hygiene management for promoting gender equality.**

2015 / National Hygiene Survey + provisions in schools

The Policy Support Unit of LGD, with WaterAid and icddr,b, conducted the **first National Hygiene Baseline Survey**, which revealed that 40% of girls missed 03 days of school during menstruation due to inadequate facilities. This prompted strong advocacy led by WaterAid and WASH sector actors, resulting in Ministry of Education directives to **ensure separate toilets, make sanitary napkins available for purchase at schools, and assign female teachers to educate girls on menstruation hygiene management.**

2017 / Creation of the MHM Platform

WaterAid developed the **WASH in Schools programme** which showcased an inclusive approach that encompassed comprehensive menstrual hygiene support in schools.

Bangladesh **MHM Platform was established** to coordinate efforts among WASH, gender, and SRHR organisations with support from the Netherland Embassy.

2018 / Attendance improved in schools

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) with support from WaterAid and UNICEF mainstreamed the National Hygiene Survey by conducting a follow up one. This survey revealed **an improvement in school attendance during menstruation** which stands around 30% schoolgirls miss an average 2.5 days a month.

2019 / Towards making pads more affordable

WaterAid together with sector actors drove an advocacy initiative from the 'Rights' perspective **challenging sanitary pad being considered as a luxury item.**

The **National budget declared VAT and SD exemption in imported raw materials used for producing sanitary pads and diapers.**

2021 / National Strategy of MHM approved

WaterAid continued '**VAT exemption campaign**' through **MHM platform and Clío TV** since earlier decision of VAT and SD exemption in imported raw materials used for producing sanitary pads wasn't enough.

The government declared **VAT exemption for local locally produced sanitary napkins and continued the earlier decision of VAT and SD exemption on imported raw materials** for producing pads, reflecting a commitment to affordability and women's rights.

Approval of National Strategy of MHM developed through a consultative process led by Government, supported by Unicef and contributed significantly by all sector actors with active engagement of the MHM Platform.



WHAT LIES AHEAD

It is crucial to continue prioritising Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) to progress further towards ensuring gender equality. WaterAid Bangladesh, under the newly developed five-year Country Programme Strategy, plans to expand its work on MHM with a focus on gender transformative and climate resilient WASH, private sector engagement, and evidence-based influencing. This includes contributing to the rollout of the MHM strategy nationwide, providing support to educational institutes including madrasas, climate-affected areas, and marginalised communities including people with disabilities. Research and development on several issues user-friendly menstrual hygiene products for persons with disabilities, environmentally friendly disposal of pads etc. WaterAid is doing a research in collaboration with Burnet Institute, Australia to build evidence on the impact of unmet menstrual needs of adolescent girls which will further generate advocacy agenda. Further, the MHM Platform, a trusted face of advocacy that receives acknowledgement from both government and non-government agencies is currently being chaired by WaterAid Bangladesh

WaterAid aims to **promote women and girls' rights to make informed choices about their menstrual hygiene** practices and menstrual hygiene products.

WaterAid will continue exploring innovative solutions to create a greater variety of safe, effective, and sustainable **menstrual hygiene products, technologies and practices. Sensitising male counterparts**, including adolescent boys, and normalising menstruation in everyday life is an important aspect that WaterAid intends to address. Being the chair of MHM platform and a devoted organisation in WASH arena, WaterAid will continue its passionate work on MHM promotion together with Government, allies, development partners and private sector.

With the experience earned and lessons learned over two decades and the new strategy in place, WaterAid Bangladesh is at a significant turning point. With a multi-pronged approach, WaterAid aims to make further progress in MHM in Bangladesh in the next era.