



Menstrual Health: A Critical Cornerstone of Community and Climate Resilience

Introduction

Menstrual health (MH) affects nearly half of the global population for up to 40 years of their lives, and is increasingly recognised as an essential element of gender equality and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Nonetheless, MH is under-researched, under-acknowledged and underfunded, and millions of women, adolescent girls, and gender-diverse people who menstruate struggle to achieve it. Effective interventions are needed across contexts to improve MH and the associated outcomes.¹

In Brief

- **MH equity is hindered globally** by lack of awareness, poor product access, inadequate facilities, lack of options for safe disposal, harmful gender norms, gender inequality, and insufficient support.
- **Climate change exacerbates MH challenges** through water scarcity, water pollution, supply chain disruptions, and infrastructure damage.
- **Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is crucial for MH**, but cross-sectoral collaboration and a stronger systems approach are needed to resolve underlying problems.
- **Linking MH to climate resilience can unlock climate finance** for WASH initiatives and improve MH outcomes.

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Abbreviations

CFAR	Centre for Advocacy and Research, India
GHGs	Greenhouse Gas Emissions
HCD	Human-Centred Design
iDE	International Development Enterprises
MH	Menstrual Health
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGM	Sexual and Gender Minorities
SHG	Self-Help Group
SNV	SNV Netherlands Development Organisation
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WfW	Water for Women

A note on language

Water for Women acknowledges that people who menstruate include women, adolescent girls, and gender-diverse people, such as transgender men and non-binary individuals. In this learning brief we have referred to 'women, girls and gender-diverse people' who menstruate for enhanced readability.

Menstrual health – the state of play

The [Global Menstrual Collective](#) describes the barriers to achieving menstrual health (MH) for all as:

- lack of awareness
- constrained access to affordable quality menstrual products of choice
- absent, dysfunctional or gender-blind facilities
- inequitable gender and social norms that fuel stigma and discrimination
- limited social support and enabling environment
- structural barriers, limited specific policies and funds.

Although MH has been steadily gaining greater global recognition in the last decade, these barriers are still very real in most, if not all, cultural contexts. Consequently, this hinders progress towards menstrual equity and achievement of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), notably SDGs [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [8](#), [10](#) and [12](#).

Climate change is threatening the ability of women, girls and other people who menstruate to manage their MH adequately. Climate-specific or climate-affected barriers to MH include too little, too much or too polluted water, and climate-related impacts on supply chains, infrastructure, and disposal mechanisms. Increased investment to overcome these problems is needed very urgently. Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is central to achieving MH, but cross-sectoral investments need to be made to create meaningful change – especially through climate policies, programs and finance.

Linking MH more effectively to climate resilience concerns in the WASH sector is the critical starting point for WASH actors and agencies, and can support WASH and MH advocates to navigate emerging climate agendas and policies. The ultimate aim is to utilise climate finance to facilitate climate resilience and ensure people who menstruate can manage their MH effectively despite environmental and political volatility. Additionally, WASH actors can promote MH-friendly WASH, prioritise MH in WASH systems, policies, and programs, and advocate for MH to be more effectively integrated into broader systems strengthening approaches. As the links between climate and MH continue to grow, the WASH sector can share important lessons about how MH has been mainstreamed into WASH climate policy and agendas.

Over the last seven years, the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund (WfW), which supports WASH implementation and research projects in 16 countries across the Asia Pacific region, has strengthened MH as a key component of WASH projects and programming. It has been an important journey, particularly during the last two years of increased focus on climate resilience, with partners making the case for MH as an integral part of climate-resilient WASH and climate resilience more broadly.

¹ Head et al., 'Systematic review of the effectiveness of menstrual health interventions in low- and middle-income countries in the East Asia and Pacific region', *The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia* 20:100295, January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100295>

Spotlight 1: MH and product disposal in Cambodia's Tonle Sap region

Water for Women partner: International Development Enterprises (iDE), Cambodia

Location: Siem Reap, Cambodia

In 2023, iDE Cambodia conducted an eight-month human-centred design (HCD) project as part of their [Water for Women work](#) to understand menstruation experiences near Tonle Sap in Siem Reap province. Women and girls in this region face barriers to managing menstruation such as minimal access to clean water and private changing areas. The HCD project aimed to explore the interplay between climate change, stress, taboos and menstruation.

During the rainy season, residents of flooded areas face menstrual hygiene management (MHM) difficulties. While disposable pads are commonly used, women in flooded communities also use reusable sarongs to let the blood flow naturally. Women reported storing used menstrual products for up to six months until water levels recede, disposing of them in waterways, by burying, or by burning.

Local women have developed innovative practices to manage used pads, such as storing them in plastic bags next to zinc walls that heat up during the day, drying the pads and reducing odour. This practice essentially pasteurises the pads until they can be disposed of safely.

iDE's research identified two key actions: incorporating MH messaging into sales presentations and household leaflets and integrating menstrual product disposal into [iDE's solid waste management project](#). The solid waste project will empower local service providers to collect household waste weekly, providing women with a safe disposal mechanism.

Understanding and designing for the barriers to MH caused by seasonal flooding and climate vulnerability, while supporting women's agency, is crucial for improving MH and resilience in rural Cambodia. Gender-transformative and integrated programming and partnerships are essential to reduce stress and improve health and livelihoods.



Using HCD research methods, iDE interviewed women and girls in rural Siem Reap to identify, target, and minimise sources of stress around menstruation
Credit: iDE / Fatima Shehata

Bridging menstrual health, climate resilience and inclusive WASH

Globally, connections are increasingly being drawn between climate resilience, WASH and MH. While this is an emerging area of exploration, growing numbers of organisations and actors are seeking to make MH central to the global dialogue around climate change. Climate change is a threat multiplier for women, girls and gender-diverse people.² Therefore, advocacy for a gender-equitable climate change response should include MH as one of several ways to meet women and girls' needs in the design of international and domestic policies and climate intervention financing.

Menstrual health practitioners understand that MH is intrinsically linked to environmental issues, with climate change exacerbating women's and girls' existing vulnerabilities and undermining already inadequate systems and infrastructures.³ There is also increasing understanding among women's rights groups that climate change and climate-related disasters will continue to affect the health of women and girls. This is especially the case in relation to access to essential WASH infrastructure and services, as well as access to health services that are responsive to their sexual and reproductive health needs.

Three key reasons why menstrual health, WASH and climate change are interlinked:

1. **Disposable period products can overwhelm weak waste management systems, causing blockages and environmental degradation.** Incineration of menstrual waste reduces air quality and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs); landfill disposal also generates GHGs.⁴ Improper disposal of non-recyclable and non-biodegradable period products pollutes waterways, increases microplastic pollution, blocks sewerage systems and harms soil quality, problems magnified by climate change.⁵ While reusable period products seem sensible, they depend on reliable and clean water supplies for laundering, as well as infrastructure and norms that support drying in the open. Biodegradable period products are gaining ground, but also depend on safe disposal mechanisms with circular economy approaches.
2. **Displacement, interruptions in supply chains and resulting limited availability reduce access to period products.** Access to period products is (inevitably) low for systemically marginalised populations, exacerbating existing inequalities. Hard-to-reach locations, such as Pacific Islands, are most likely to suffer from weak supply chains and lack of local suppliers.
3. **Increasingly frequent extreme weather events reduce or destroy access to clean water sources and sanitation facilities.** As climate change continues to create severe weather patterns, essential and clean water sources are retreating. Too little water (droughts) or too much and/or polluted water (storms and flooding) can make it more difficult to access clean water and WASH facilities to manage periods hygienically and with dignity.

To meet their MH needs with dignity, women, girls, and gender-diverse people require access to clean water, sanitation facilities, safe disposable methods and appropriate MH products. However, water sources, WASH facilities and supply chains that enable sound MH are being affected and/or disrupted by climate change. Increasing the ability of people who menstruate to manage their menstruation on their own terms will enable them to be more resilient in the face of shocks and stressors. Climate-resilient WASH is a critical enabler of women and girls' ability to achieve MH.

² L Kuhlmann, 'Embracing the Flow: The Right to Menstrual Health as a Response to Climate Change Impacts in South Asia', *Seattle Journal of Technology, Environmental & Innovation Law*, 2023, 14(1):4, <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1056&context=sjteil>

³ E Moore, *The Effects of Climate Change on the Menstrual Health of Women and Girls in Rural Settings within Low-Income Countries*, Colombia University, 2023, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/bqyy-vh75>

⁴ Global Menstrual Collective, *Climate Change & MHH Overview: Climate Change & Menstrual Health & Hygiene are Interlinked*, Global Menstrual Collective [web resource], June 2024, accessed August 2024.

⁵ Water for Women Fund (WfW), *Making the case for MHH and climate resilience*, WfW [website], 27 May 2024, accessed August 2024.

Spotlight 2: From secrecy to sustainability – MH in schools

Water for Women partner: Centre for Advocacy and Research, India (CFAR)

Locations: Jaipur and Bhubaneswar, India

In India, girls often struggle to manage their periods hygienically and with dignity due to stigma and lack of information. However, change is happening in schools, thanks to CFAR.

‘Learning about menstrual health and hygiene in a supportive environment has been useful. School-based education breaks taboos and fosters open conversations’, says Tanu, an adolescent girl working to change perceptions in her school.

UNICEF reports that [71% of adolescent girls in India](#) are unaware of menstruation until they experience it. This lack of knowledge leads to embarrassment, poor hygiene practices, and missed school days. These challenges are compounded by lack of access to sanitary products and adequate sanitation facilities. To overcome these problems, CFAR is implementing comprehensive MH programs in schools in Jaipur and Bhubaneswar as part of their [Water for Women project](#). By educating young girls and empowering them as advocates, CFAR is driving positive change.

CFAR also collaborates with government departments to integrate MH into broader health and education policies. A key focus is sustainable menstrual waste management, which reduces environmental harm while promoting hygiene. A pilot for environmentally sound menstrual waste composting has been initiated in Jaipur, with plans for widespread implementation in all schools in both Jaipur and Bhubaneswar underway.

CFAR also supports the important work of four women-led self-help groups (SHGs) who produce and sell compostable pads through sanitary napkin units - the Shanti and Manisha SHGs who operate a unit in Jaipur, Maa Barahbhuja SHG in Bhubaneswar, and additionally, Lakshmi Maata SHG in Delhi.

CFAR supports the SHGs not only in the manufacture and sale of compostable pads, but also facilitated their empanelment under the National Urban Livelihood Mission – a government poverty alleviation and empowerment program supported at both national and sub-national levels. This process enables the SHGs to scale up marketing and sales.

By breaking down taboos, providing essential information, and advocating for better infrastructure, CFAR is paving the way for all students to enjoy a healthy, dignified and sustainable school life, and empowering SHGs, sanitation entrepreneurs, community and government stakeholders to meet everybody's MH needs.



In Jaipur, young women discuss MH with CFAR team members and community leaders
Credit: CFAR archives / Amarjeet Kumar Singh

Investing in menstrual health is investing in climate resilience

An essential component of climate resilience is community resilience. Women and girls are members of all communities, yet their MH needs are often neglected or ignored. Inability to safely manage MH is a key barrier to their participation in both community life and climate resilience efforts. Building community resilience is not just about the presence of adequate infrastructure and services but about the health, well-being and participation of individuals. Investing in MH is an investment in climate resilience, because reducing MH inequity empowers women, girls and people who menstruate in the following ways.

- **Meaningful participation in education, work, and social activities.** Access to safe and hygienic period products and facilities means women, girls and gender-diverse people are better able to manage menstruation and stay healthy. This leads to improved educational outcomes, increased economic opportunities, and greater participation in social and political life, including the resilience to withstand and adapt to the economic and social impacts of climate change.
- **Improved physical, reproductive and mental health outcomes.** Poor MH can lead to infections, reproductive health complications, and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Access to safe, culturally appropriate, and desirable period products and WASH facilities means that people who menstruate are less likely to experience health problems that increase their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, such as malnutrition and infectious diseases. Climate-related displacement reduces access to menstrual supplies, forcing longer use or overuse of products, increasing the risk of urinary and reproductive tract infections.⁶ Further, safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management (MHM) supports coping strategies to deal with the stress and anxiety associated with climate change-related hazards and disasters.
- **Improved security and safety.** Climate change leads to significant displacement of populations and disruptions to social services that disproportionately affect women and girls, exacerbating their already vulnerable sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Climate change can force populations to migrate and live in shelters or inadequate housing, making managing MH particularly challenging.⁷ During displacement, women and girls are at risk of gender-based violence as they use temporary WASH facilities and/or seek reproductive or MH supplies in volatile contexts.⁸ Safe, accessible and menstrual-friendly WASH facilities that are resilient to climate impacts can reduce these very real risks.
- **Greater gender equity.** When women, girls and gender-diverse people can manage their menstruation safely and with dignity, they are better able to exercise their rights and choices. Choice and bodily autonomy are central to healthy people and resilient communities, and resilience building in communities is an important enabler of managing and adapting to climate hazards and shocks.

⁶ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#), UNFPA [website], 29 May 2023, accessed August 2024.

⁷ UNFPA, [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#).

⁸ UNFPA, [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#).

Spotlight 3: Sewing the seeds of change in Papua New Guinea

Water for Women partner: Plan International PNG

Location: Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB), PNG

Menstrual health remains a deeply stigmatised issue in Papua New Guinea, with traditional norms isolating women and girls during their periods and restricting their participation in community and school activities. To address this problem, Plan International PNG, a member of Water for Women's [PNG WASH Consortium](#), is leading a transformative approach.

By providing comprehensive MH education and empowering communities to produce their own reusable sanitary pads, Plan International PNG is challenging harmful norms and improving women and girls' well-being. This holistic approach includes training teachers, engaging with community members, and collaborating with local leaders in ARoB to create a supportive environment.

Through these efforts, Plan International PNG is not only meeting physical health needs but fostering confidence and independence, and contributing to a healthier and more equitable future for women and girls.



A male teacher cuts material to sew into a reusable sanitary pad during a training session in Buka, ARoB

Credit: Plan International PNG / Ishmael Palipal

Menstrual health in Water for Women

Water for Women implementing partners have adopted a wide variety of approaches to integrate MH-sensitive or focused interventions into their overall program design to foster community and climate resilience. The depth and breadth of these interventions varies across partners and contexts, and can depend on internal expertise and appetite (that is, the extent to which strong gender/MH expertise/interest exists in the organisation), and/or overall program approach and linkages to existing WASH interventions. Partners often adopted one of the following approaches:

- **MH-focused interventions** designed to reduce menstrual inequity and meet the MH needs of women, girls and people who menstruate to generate positive, gender-transformative MH outcomes.
- **MH-sensitive WASH interventions**, in which a menstrual lens was included in other activities or approaches with the intention of creating gender-sensitive programming.

Water for Women partners have proved that **an MH lens is a valuable addition to WASH programs**. Partners approached MH interventions from different perspectives that affected the depth and breadth of interventions seen across the Fund. Some regard an MH lens as an enabler of gender-responsive WASH services and infrastructure, while others pursue MH outcomes as direct objectives.

Many partners focused on applying gender and social inclusion principles into existing project/activity design to create inclusive WASH policies and ensure gender-equitable WASH outcomes. This was most evident when interventions used **advocacy, accountability and budgeting to create gender-sensitive WASH infrastructure and policies** that are financed appropriately at school or government level. Such interventions prioritise the needs of people who menstruate within existing WASH policies and systems to **improve MH education, products and/or services**. This includes:

- creating a supportive environment and ensuring the inclusion of MH priorities and budgeting in national school WASH standards
- advocating for the design of period-friendly facilities in school
- mobilising male community leaders to support budget allocation for training sessions.

Partners who sought to facilitate MH outcomes were more likely to **prioritise the underlying social norms and structural inequities** that lead to poor MH outcomes. While these projects included activities similar to those described above, many are also:

- supporting work designed to change social norms that drive menstrual inequity and/or menstrual stigma and taboos
- seeking to increase the accessibility and affordability of menstrual products through local entrepreneurship or efforts to ensure public purchasing and distribution
- engaging with health service providers and stakeholders to integrate period management into a broader health and well-being agenda.

While all these approaches are proving effective, an important lesson for WfW is that **MH must be situated from the outset as an enabler or desired outcome** in program design. This helps interventions to be better integrated within larger WASH programs and the development of monitoring mechanisms to define and measure MH outcomes.

Spotlight 4: Boys as allies for MH in Indonesia

Water for Women partner: Yayasan Plan International Indonesia (Plan Indonesia)

Locations: Sumbawa and Manggarai, Indonesia

In Indonesia, menstruation has long been a taboo subject. According to UNICEF, [25% of girls](#) lack basic information about their periods, leading to fear, embarrassment and frequent absenteeism. 'I saw female friends crying, avoiding, and running when they were bullied for menstruating', shares Raka, a 14-year-old peer educator.

Yayasan Plan International Indonesia (Plan Indonesia) promotes MHM in schools through regular educational sessions for both girls and boys as part of their [Water for Women project](#). By engaging boys as allies, Plan Indonesia fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment.

A significant intervention in partnership with the Sumbawa Regency government involves the construction of separate, inclusive toilets stocked with essential menstrual supplies. These facilities provide comfort and safety for all students, including those with disabilities. With accessible sanitary napkins, clean towels and proper disposal options, girls no longer need to worry about managing their periods at school.

Through these initiatives, Plan Indonesia ensures that menstruation is seen as a normal part of life, removing barriers to education and enabling all girls to reach their full potential.



A class group listens to a peer-led presentation on MH

Credit: Yayasan Plan International Indonesia

Lessons learnt

At virtual WfW workshops on MH in late 2023 with [Pacific](#) partners and in early 2024 with [Asia](#) partners, project partners shared lessons about implementing MH interventions in their WASH projects. The successes and challenges identified by our Asia and Pacific partners are summarised below.

Successes and enablers

- **Engaging men and boys.** Actively and intentionally engaging men and boys in MH interventions in the home, schools, and at community level is key to creating an enabling environment for women and girls to realise their rights. How men and boys are engaged needs to be well thought through in the early stages of program design.
- **Contextualising MH messages.** Developing appropriate and people-centric messaging on MH that responds to local socio-cultural contexts and beneficiary populations supported WfW partners to more effectively reach their target demographics. The strong gender equality, disability and social inclusion approach adopted across WfW, as well as a nuanced understanding among partners of the diversity of MH needs, contributed to this outcome.
- **Moving beyond 'just periods'.** Partners adopted comprehensive and holistic approaches that move beyond 'just periods' and contextualised the menstrual cycle as central to health and well-being. Projects that move beyond just hygiene messaging have helped to combat the menstrual taboo that periods are dirty,⁹ and reshaped understanding of menstruation as connected to broader health and equity outcomes.
- **Focusing on menstrual waste disposal.** Partners developed and implemented waste disposal and management interventions that make menstrual waste a central component of gender-responsive WASH infrastructure. While an emerging area for partners, this approach aligns with broader WASH programming for creating more climate-resilient WASH services. It also contributes to improved sanitation as a means to reduce methane emissions (as highlighted by the [Climate Resilient Sanitation Coalition](#)).
- **Expanding product choice.** Partners improved the accessibility, affordability and availability of products that enable women and girls to manage their MH needs. Access to affordable and appropriate menstrual products is an important theme for WfW partners. More nuanced approaches to sustainable and/or environmentally friendly products (beyond reusable pads) is critical to give women and girls freedom of choice and reduce harmful menstrual waste and climate change impacts.

Pushing for the adoption of sustainable menstrual products without considering the contextual realities, including the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis ... unfairly burdens menstruating individuals in the Global South. Rather than solely placing responsibility on menstruating individuals in the Global South, global and local policies and practices need to intervene to address the 'production is pollution' paradigm effectively.¹⁰

Jessalina Rana and Alina Pandey

⁹ Thomson et al., 'What's missing in MHM? Moving beyond hygiene in menstrual hygiene management', *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 9 December 2019, 27(1):12–15, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7888089/>

¹⁰ J Rana and A Pandey, *Periods, Climate, and the Politics of Sustainability*, Oxford Human Rights Hub [website], 28 May 2024, accessed August 2024.

Spotlight 5: Shifting menstrual stigma in rural Nepal

Water for Women partner: SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV)

Locations: Sarlahi and Dailekh, Nepal

For centuries, menstruation in Nepal has been shrouded in stigma and isolation, with practices like *chhaupadi* (the confinement of menstruating women) entrenched in society. However, a powerful movement supported by SNV, and through their [Water for Women project](#), is challenging these harmful traditions in Nepal. By working closely with communities, SNV is advancing women's participation in decision-making and leadership, improving access to clean water and sanitation, and fostering a profound shift in attitudes toward menstruation.

Local community leaders are pivotal in driving this change. Their courage and determination have led to the establishment of safer, more inclusive spaces for women during their periods. They have also taken on leadership roles in menstrual health and hygiene self-help groups, fostering open dialogue, breaking down taboos, and engaging men and boys as allies.

Through initiatives like these, SNV is dismantling barriers and paving the way for a more equitable future for women in Nepal.



A local community leader delivers a MHH session for communities in Thantikandh, Nepal

Credit: SNV / Srijana Kathayat Bogati

Challenges

Water for Women partners faced a variety of challenges in implementing MH interventions within constrained contexts. These challenges can be categorised into three areas.

1. **Structural-level challenges** that reflect the socio-political realities of the contexts in which they work. They make non-government organisation (NGO) programming and/or MH interventions particularly difficult to implement. Examples identified by partners include:
 - lack of local MH policies, or lack of resources and budget for their implementation
 - insufficient budget allocated to MH, including from climate finance funds
 - insufficient funding allocated to WASH infrastructure more broadly
 - longstanding cultural taboos and myths conflated with and often reinforced by religion
 - menstrual waste disposal being part of broader waste management services, which may be beyond the reach of WASH programming.
2. **Thematic-level challenges** which are driven by socio-cultural dimensions of menstrual inequity that fundamentally limit organisations' ability to implement MH interventions. Partners identified:
 - menstrual taboos, myths and stigma limiting information sharing, awareness raising and the general ability to promote the issue at community level and highlight links to health outcomes
 - difficulties in engaging men on MH advocacy due to associated cultural taboos, or the perceived inappropriateness of men and boys leading these conversations
 - identifying the most effective methods for involving men in MH in ways that do no harm
 - poverty making sanitary pads a luxury item rather than a basic right and need
 - lack of locally available, accessible and affordable period products
 - poor knowledge about period products and their suitability for users and the local environment.
3. **Program-level challenges** that are particular issues in design, implementation and monitoring. Examples identified by partners include:
 - finding the right timing and sequencing for integrating MH into climate-resilient water safety planning activities
 - menstrual health interventions being tacked on to WASH programs and thus rarely comprehensive enough to tackle the underlying drivers of menstrual inequity (stigma, patriarchal mindset, gender inequity)
 - few best practice learning or materials available on the most effective, appropriate and safest approaches to engaging men on MH
 - insufficient resources, timing and/or systems to appropriately monitor MH interventions
 - competing priorities during field implementation of MH, WASH and/or climate interventions, which can make programming more difficult or reduce effectiveness of messaging.

Spotlight 6: Overcoming invisibility – promoting MH equity for SGM communities

Water for Women partner: CFAR

Location: Jaipur, India

People from sexual and gender minority (SGM) communities often face unique challenges in managing MH. Overlooked and marginalised, their needs have been largely ignored. In Jaipur, India, CFAR is working to rectify this neglect through their [Water for Women project](#).

Yash, a trans man, exemplifies the difficulties faced by his community. 'The challenge for menstruating trans men is very complex because people hardly thought of us', he reflects. 'Now the situation has changed ... we have a say in the matter'. CFAR's approach centres on creating a platform for voices like Yash's to be heard. Through the establishment of a Multistakeholder Forum, leading SGM rights organisations are empowered to express their specific WASH needs, including for MH.

The Forum's advocacy efforts have yielded valuable results. Collaborating with government departments, the Forum pushed successfully for initiatives that benefit SGM communities. These include expanded access to free sanitary napkins and construction of gender-inclusive toilets – crucial infrastructure often lacking in underserved communities.

CFAR's commitment to sustained, inclusive involvement of SGM groups in WASH and MH programs ensures that the SGM communities for whom they work are no longer invisible. SGM communities are included and active participants in shaping policies and programs that affect their lives, as are other community members.



Transgender activist Pushpa addresses the Women's Empowerment Department in Jaipur, urging officials to include SGM communities in MH initiatives
Credit: CFAR archives

Lessons learnt from the MH movement

Many of the lessons learnt from WfW are reflected in the global learnings from the MH sector, as outlined below.

- **Cultural sensitivity and context-specific interventions are critical levers of success.** Social, cultural, religious, economic or political factors may affect MH conditions, so tailoring MH programs to fit their contexts ensures greater acceptance and effectiveness of interventions.
- **Integrated and cross-sectoral approaches work best.** Combining MH with other WASH, health and educational initiatives can enhance overall program effectiveness. For instance, integrating MH education into broader health and life skills education in schools has proven more beneficial than offering standalone MH modules.
- **Engaging multiple stakeholders enhances impact.** Collaboration with governments, local NGOs, community groups and international bodies ensures a multifaceted approach and resource pooling. Strategic partnerships at the sector level, such as the [Global Menstrual Collective](#) or the [African Coalition for Menstrual Health Management](#), are essential to professionalising the sector and amplifying the reach and effectiveness of MH initiatives.
- **Greater investment in evidence-based approaches and outcome monitoring is needed.** Increased data collection and research to inform MH programming design and enable more effective and comparable outcome monitoring is needed. Collecting output data that can link MH interventions to outcome-level change such as reduced absenteeism or improved health outcomes is vital to assessing effectiveness. More robust output and outcome monitoring and evaluations will facilitate investment in upscaling interventions.
- **Product innovation and improved supply chains are essential to meet demand.** Key market barriers, from manufacturing through to importation and distribution, must be overcome to ensure affordable MH products are available to all.¹¹ Unified standards for MH products are an essential precondition for informed choice, product availability and health equity.¹² While there is increased focus on reusable products, environmentally friendly MH products appropriate and desirable in local contexts must be identified. These may include menstrual cups and reusable pads, as well as sustainable disposable options such as flushable biodegradable pads that are now entering the market.¹³
- **Inclusivity and intersectionality are central to menstrual equity.** Recognition of the diverse needs of groups, including people with disabilities, transgender and non-binary individuals, and those in humanitarian crisis settings, is becoming more prevalent across developed and emerging markets. Inclusive approaches ensure no one is left behind and meet the diverse needs of women, girls and gender-diverse people. Intersectional advocacy is also critical to identifying the right entry point and facilitating MH outcomes across other key agendas; MH intersects with issues of poverty, education, gender-based violence, and broader health disparities.

¹¹ Mann Global Health, *Landscaping Supply Side Factors to Menstrual Health Access*, Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition, June 2021. https://www.rhsupplies.org/uploads/tx_rhscpublications/Landscaping_Supply_Side_Factors_to_Menstrual_Health_Access.pdf

¹² N van de Veerdonk et al., *In Standards We Trust: Building the Case for International Standards for Menstrual Products*, Madami by MH Hub [report], February 2022, accessed August 2024. <https://mhhub.org/in-standards-we-trust>

¹³ Women's Environmental Network (WEN), *Menstruation: Empowerment and Sustainability (Mensy)*, WEN [website], n.d., accessed August 2024.

- **Practitioners from WASH and other sectors must shift from a focus on 'bleeding days' to a MH lifecycle approach.** The menstrual cycle is a key component of women, girls and gender-diverse people's well-being; MH advocates are increasingly recognising this and expanding interventions beyond menstruation and bleeding. MH is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in relation to the menstrual cycle.¹⁴ Interventions must consider the whole lifecycle and issues such as premenstrual syndrome, other menstrual-related conditions and disorders, and menopause. Increasingly, MH is being seen as a matter of human rights.¹⁵
- **Sustainable financing for MH-focused work is the biggest challenge for the advancement of MH.** The MH sector remains underfunded and undervalued by public and private investors, stifling ability to design suitable, long-term interventions that can create sustainable and systems-level change. Investments in MH remain sporadic and lack systems-level attention. Many organisations have to integrate or add MH activities into existing interventions without any corresponding support, which results in small-scale activities that lack the resourcing, timing and/or strategic design to be holistic or impactful.¹⁶ There is a pressing need for more strategic and intentional funding for MH integration, as well as more earmarked funding for focused interventions.¹⁷



A Commune Committee for Women and Children representative in Reab Commune, Prey Veng province, facilitates MHM group work
Credit: Thrive Networks / East Meets West Cambodia / Kim Hor

¹⁴ Hennegan et al., 'Menstrual health: a definition for policy, practice, and research', *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29 April 2021, 21(1):1911618, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8098749/>

¹⁵ PSI Europe et al., 2021 "Why Invest?" Report: Making the Case for Investing in MH, Global Menstrual Collective [web resource], January 2021, accessed August 2024. <https://www.globalmenstrualcollective.org>

¹⁶ PSI Europe et al., 2021 "Why Invest?" Report: Making the Case for Investing in MH.

¹⁷ PSI Europe, *The Menstrual Cycle is Essential to Women's Health. So Why isn't it Central to Philanthropy?* PSI [website], 18 January 2022, accessed August 2024.

Spotlight 7: A new era for MH in Bhutan

Water for Women partner: SNV Bhutan

Locations: Dagana, Zhemgang and Trashigang, Bhutan

SNV is leading the charge in challenging MH taboos in Bhutan. SNV has implemented innovative strategies to foster open dialogue and improve access to MH products.

Among its initiatives is [A Knowledge Book for Menstrual Health and Hygiene](#), a booklet designed to improve girls' and nuns' knowledge about MH while fostering a positive perspective on menstruation. To meet the needs of women and girls with disabilities, SNV has worked collaboratively with stakeholders, institutions, and organisations of people with disabilities in [MH Day](#) committees, resulting in a notable increase in inclusive MH messaging. Their social media campaigns, featuring inclusive messages from government officials, celebrities and ordinary Bhutanese, also resonate with the younger generation.

SNV's commitment to dignified MH has led to significant achievements. Their advocacy contributed to the Bhutanese government's declaration of a goal of creating period-friendly schools by 2030. Additionally, in 2020 the former Health Minister declared sanitary pads to be essential commodities, ensuring broader access.

Utilising a blend of education, advocacy and community engagement, SNV is driving meaningful change through their [Water for Women project](#). Their efforts are improving the lives of women and girls while contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.



A health coordinator at the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf in Paro, Bhutan, demonstrates the proper disposal of pads

Credit: Wangsel Institute for the Deaf

Call to action

The WASH sector is entering new territory as climate adaptation and mitigation interventions gather pace in the development sector. It is rightfully seen as critical to working more meaningfully towards the achievement of the SDGs and other global agendas. **Inclusive WASH is a critical foundation for community and climate resilience** and needs to be widely understood as such and embedded into global and national climate policies and funding. This learning brief maps out the why and how of MH in WASH systems, policies and programs, its criticality to leaving no one behind and whole-of-community resilience, as well as how climate change is affecting MH.

By integrating MH and WASH and climate resilience initiatives, sustainable, inclusive and gender-responsive solutions that meet both climate and environmental challenges are achievable. This holistic approach not only improves MH and equity outcomes but contributes to the overall resilience and well-being of communities and their capacity to adapt and respond to climate-related impacts.

To invest in and improve MH in both the WASH and climate sectors effectively, we urgently need to:



— **Include MH in climate financing plans**, with adequate budget and resource allocation to support effective, integrated and contextualised MH programming



— **Invest in menstrual-friendly water and sanitation infrastructure** that is based on human-centred design and designed to be resilient to extreme and slow-onset weather events



— **Encourage the design of WASH facilities and menstrual products** that cater to the needs of **diverse groups**, including people with disabilities and those living in remote or vulnerable areas



— **Strengthen systems** to improve access to and provision of appropriate, affordable and sustainable **MH products and safe disposal mechanisms** that consider diverse personal needs, as well as environmental, climate and circularity concerns



— **Work to proactively shift harmful social norms** that perpetuate stigma and taboo about menstruation, with strong **Do No Harm** approaches integrated into MH and WASH interventions



— **Support people who menstruate with accessible information** to equip them to manage their menstruation safely and with dignity in all circumstances



— **Integrate MH considerations into disaster preparedness and response plans and environmental impact assessments** to identify local risks, develop mitigation plans and implement tailored interventions



— **Invest in monitoring, learning and research** on the intersection of climate change, WASH and MH to inform evidence-based interventions



— **Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration** with strong **multi-stakeholder approaches that are locally led** to ensure that interventions are holistic, effective and contextually appropriate.

References and further reading

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Header photo: Members of the Sakhi Sanitary Napkin Unit operated by Shanti and Manisha Self-Help Groups in Transport Nagar, Jaipur, proudly display their product. Credit: CFAR archives.

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Water for Women supports improved health, gender equality and well-being in Asian and Pacific communities through climate-resilient and socially inclusive WASH projects and research. It is the Australian Government's flagship WASH program, investing AUD159.9 million over seven years. Water for Women is partnering with civil society organisations, research organisations and local partners to deliver 40 projects in 16 countries from 2018 to 2024. Knowledge and learning are central to Water for Women, positioning the Fund as an important contributor to global knowledge development and sharing in climate-resilient, inclusive WASH. Water for Women's [Learning Agenda](#) promotes collaborative learning, knowledge development and sharing to support long-term transformative change to WASH policy and practice globally.

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