

Menstruation Matters!



This brief aims to support policy and decision makers to take adequate steps to ensure all women and girls have the right to manage their periods safely and in a dignified way. It unpacks the socio-economic implications of menstruation and acknowledges progress made so far in addressing challenges to menstrual hygiene management in Nepal. It makes policy recommendations with the objective of lessening on-going gaps in policies and practices governing menstrual hygiene management and calls for a comprehensive national policy on safe and dignified menstruation with a framework guided by a human rights approach.

Every woman and girl deserves the right to manage their period in a safe and dignified way.



Context

Menstruation matters not only to girls and women but also to society and economy at large. Indications across the world reveal multiple and diverse barriers faced by adolescent girls and women while managing their menstrual cycle. These barriers have implications on the physical, emotional and psychological well-being, education, employment, livelihoods and participation of adolescent girls and women in the economy thus making significant impact on a country's development. The socio cultural practices that govern communities have implications on individuals' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards menstruation. Taboos and stigma associated with menstruation poses as a hindrance to the adolescent girls and women and can result in the denial of their human rights.

Access to basic facilities for menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is critically important for women's health, safety and dignity. Several essential elements are required, including clean materials to absorb or collect menstrual blood, a private place to change these materials as often as necessary, soap and water for washing the body as required, and access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used materials. Further, women and girls need access to basic information about menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.

Limited access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities further make MHM challenging for girls and women. These challenges vary depending on the differences among girls and women due to their age, culture, religion, geographical location, disability and economic situation. Addressing MHM may be a starting point for tackling other dimensions of inequality.

In Nepal, despite some progress on MHM in particular, cultural practices further increase the burden for girls and women during menstruation. For example, *Chhaupadi* is an ancient Hindu practice that evicts women from home during menstruation and after childbirth. Traditionally, practiced particularly in the western part of Nepal, women are kept out of the house and have to live in cattle shed or a makeshift hut.

Uprooting menstrual myths, taboos and stigma demands a 'WASH and beyond' policy followed by sustainable and transformative plan of action. Improving management of menstruation overall will also contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as it is a cross-sectorial issue that cuts across WASH, health, education, environment, business and labour.



Women observing the ritual to wash away any sins committed during menstruation at the annual Rishi Panchami festival in Kathmandu, Nepal.



Progress so far

There has been some progress on menstrual hygiene management through development programs focusing on education, health and WASH sectors. In 2016, the WASH Development Partnersⁱ in Nepal submitted a letter to the Government applauding the progress made towards this endeavor. They further raised the urgency to address *Chhaupadi* practice and suggested that complementing Open Defecation Free (ODF) movement with *Chhaupadi* related eradication would go hand in hand. In the letter, development partners expressed their willingness to discuss on concrete initiatives such as the 'legitimization of the ODF status in Nepal's otherwise successful sanitation social movement by allowing women and girls to use their family toilets during menstruation.'

The year 2017 marked several initiatives that spurred on-going momentum to address menstrual hygiene management. The Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation coordinated a policy dialogue followed by the formation of a taskforce to draft a national policy on menstruation. On 9th August 2017 the Legislature-Parliament enacted a new law criminalising the centuries-old *Chaupadi* custom. As per this law, which will come into effect soon, anyone forcing a woman to *Chaupadi* will be liable to a three-month jail sentence or NPR 3,000 fine or both.ⁱⁱ Earlier in 2005 the Supreme Court of Nepal outlawed *Chhaupadi* and, in 2008 the *Chhaupadi* eradication guidelines (*Chhaupadi Pratha Unmulan Nirdesika in Nepali*) was promulgated by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, but the tradition continued despite these initiatives.

SURKHET, NEPAL
A woman washing her clothes in a separate water source, where all women are forced to bathe during menstruation.



WaterAid/ Poulomi Basu

The 2017 scoping review and preliminary mapping on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in Nepalⁱⁱⁱ encapsulates government policies and development work related to the issue. MHM has been covered to some extent under the Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation's WASH plans and strategic documents related to education and health. For example, the Total Sanitation Guideline (2016)^{iv} captures extensive public awareness and advocacy on the management of menstruation including use and disposal of sanitary products in schools and communities. The School Sector Development Plan (2016-2022)^v targets improvement on WASH behaviour and infrastructure and the active involvement of WASH focal (female) teachers in schools. In addition the WASH in School guidelines (2017)^{vi} aims to use four categorises of stars to represent the different standards of MHM in all schools.

Significant shifts include the development of a training package on Integrating MHM

into School Health Program 2015,^{vii} some draft policy documents such as National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy (2015)^{viii} and the Nepal Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Sector Development Plan (2016-2030)^x that have MHM related policy statements. These achievements are instrumental in ensuring the rights of adolescent girls and women in relation to menstrual management.

However, Harmonisation and implementation of government policies, plans and strategies related to menstruation remains lacking. The Nepal Health Sector Strategy (2015-2020)^x that includes school health program on sexual health needs to be revisited and specific MHM interventions incorporated.^{xi} The National Policy and Plan of Action on Disability (2006)^{xii}, the second draft of the disability related Ten Year National Policy and Plan of Action (2073-2082 B.S.)^{xiii} and the recently endorsed Disability Rights Act (2017)^{xiv} remain silent on menstruation related challenges faced by disabled women. With regards to disposal of sanitary materials, two policy documents - Solid



Waste Management Act 2011 and Solid Waste Management Rules 2013 do not include any information on disposal of sanitary materials used to manage menstruation.^{xv} Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Policy 2004^{xvi} as well as National Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Policy 2009^{xvii} have not considered any aspects of menstrual hygiene management. While the draft proposed umbrella water and sanitation act has only focused on gender friendly sanitation services it has not explicitly mentioned strategies to be adopted for menstrual hygiene management.

There is little coordination among those working in health, education, WASH and gender and women's rights in government, development agencies including non-government and civil society organisations in order to foster a holistic approach to menstrual hygiene management. Of late an informal MHH Practitioners' Alliance has been set up mainly with I/NGOs and development partners engaged in MHH interventions.

Some areas that are still at a nascent stage include appropriate standards and guidelines on menstrual management facilities, supply chains for affordable and environmental friendly sanitary products, key messaging on MHH and disability barriers in particular.

What is still missing is an economic lens to MHH and research on the costs of discriminatory practices that hinder the full potential participation of girls and women in the economy. There has been no study or account of the economic loss to women, to the industry and to the nation due to menstrual challenges. The role of private sector as employers, producers of menstrual materials, service providers (e.g. disposal services/contractors that build facilities) and donors on menstrual management need to be further explored and tapped.





The way forward

There is urgent need for every country including Nepal to ensure that every woman and girl has the right to manage her periods in a safe and dignified way, and enable policies, strategies, and action-plans for the same. Doing so also allows countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 'leaving no one behind.'

Based on the experience of girls, women and communities in managing menstruation and the learning and reflection from various agencies working in this area so far, following recommendations are proposed to be included in the menstruation policy being drafted by the Government of Nepal.

Adopt a human rights based approach for the empowerment of girls and women as the guiding framework.

Addressing menstruation through a human rights framework helps to uproot discrimination and inequality in the long run and achieve substantive gender equality and adopt safe and dignified menstrual hygiene practices.^{xviii} Empowerment for girls and women could mean being able to make informed choices^{xix} in the use of menstrual hygiene facilities, sanitary products and decisions relating to daily life activities particularly during menstruation.

It is essential to **acknowledge the diversity of girls and women** across various age groups, caste, class, religions, geographical location, and those with physical and mental disability. There should be efforts to **ensure that the voices of girls and women are central** to all policy dialogues, program interventions and awareness and advocacy campaigns on menstrual management.

Ensure the harmonisation of government policy initiatives related to menstrual management.

Revise, develop, implement and monitor policies at various levels i.e. federal, provincial

and municipal alongside promoting awareness on them. There should be a formal cross-sectorial integration mechanism to generate synergetic outcomes of interventions made by all actors working on menstrual management. Programmatic interventions on menstrual management must be embedded in the respective sectorial budgets, programmes and monitoring systems with clear roles and responsibilities among all actors.

Develop and implement holistic and context specific programmatic interventions and also modify and upscale the investment and outreach of existing programs and projects on menstrual management. There should be correct information and context specific based approaches that are pragmatic, accessible, age appropriate, disability friendly and context appropriate.

In the changed political context, municipalities are mainly responsible for designing interventions on WASH, gender equality, health and education. These interventions should be based on research and evidences therefore it is pivotal to invest in research and innovative initiatives to better understand and unlock menstruation related obstacles among the diverse groups of adolescent

girls and women in different environments (workplaces, communities, conflict and disaster affected etc.) in order to benefit from their full participation in the society and economy.

Media monitoring on MHM engagement should be performed to contribute in context analyses. It will support in documentation of best practices for its replicating and scaling up.

These interventions should contribute in promoting access to menstrual management facilities and sanitary products for all adolescent girls and women.

Encourage the active role of the private sector and donor agencies and wider engagement to boost their engagement in the construction of menstrual management facilities and supply chains for low-cost, practical and bio-degradable and environment friendly sanitary products.

There should be engagement with wider stakeholders with adolescent boys and men, family members, religious leaders, champions in various sectors and the private sector to work on menstrual management.



WaterAid/Mani Karmacharya

Policy Action Matrix on Safe and Dignified Menstruation

Theme	Action	Responsible agencies
Policy initiatives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review the policy documents, incorporate specific interventions on menstrual management, finalise, endorse and implement with adequate budget provisions 2. Ensure the enforcement of new law criminalising the centuries-old Chaupadi custom with well-resourced plan of action 3. Finalise, endorse and implement the following draft documents with adequate budget provisions e.g. Nepal Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Sector Development Plan 2016-2030; Water and Sanitation Act (proposed draft); WASH in School Operational Guideline 2018 and Local development plans 4. Prepare and endorse context specific menstrual management policies and guidelines mainly at local levels 	Government (3 tiers: Federal, Provincial and municipal)
Awareness, Advocacy and capacity building	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue to promote awareness on government policies, strategies, plans and budgets that include menstruation related information and advocate for the effective implementation of such policies. 2. Continue to expand and upscale awareness, advocacy and campaigns on menstruation engaging diverse stakeholders like celebrities, sports personnel, students, etc. and ensure consistent messaging with accurate information. Develop communication tools accordingly acknowledging the diversity of girls and women across age, caste, class, religion, geographical location, disability and different contexts of conflict or disaster. 3. Promote awareness on the usage and disposal of sanitary products. Stimulate wider choices for girls and women on menstrual management supplies and information. 4. Initiate, develop and promote a public private partnership model like MITNI initiative along with increased investment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to promote awareness and advocacy on safe and dignified menstruation. 5. Build the capacity of adolescent girls and women, adolescent boys and men, schoolteachers, community leaders, those working on healthcare services, media personnel, leaders of the private sector and government officials by providing training on menstruation and its management. 	Government (all three tiers), development agencies, media
Access to menstrual management facilities and sanitary products	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce import tax of 15% on sanitary pads and make available affordable sanitary products and subsidise the cost of sanitary napkins in schools, health posts, hospitals, public toilets and workplaces depending on the socio-economic situation of girls and women. 2. Promote the modification and construction of menstrual facilities including allocation of separate toilets for men, women and third gender where applicable in all formal and informal workplaces, community shared facilities and public places and ensure the provision for clean water to wash, privacy when changing and disposing sanitary products. 3. Increase the production, variety and availability of low cost sanitary products that are also biodegradable and environment friendly. Develop, encourage and promote development of innovative ways of menstrual waste disposal in coordination with the local communities and the development of more biodegradable and environment friendly options. 	Government, development agencies and private sector, social entrepreneurs

Theme	Action	Responsible agencies
Research	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote an economic lens to menstruation and research on the economic loss to women, to the industry and to the country as a consequence of unsafe and undignified menstruation. 2. Conduct research studies on problems and challenges faced by girls and women across various age groups, caste, class, religions, geographical location, and those with physical and mental disability that are in different environments (workplaces, schools etc.). 3. Study the progress on menstrual management and measure the empowerment of girls and women as a result of better menstrual management every two years. Ensure systematic approaches of media monitoring to support context analysis and documentation of best practices. 	Government, Research institutes, Academia , media
Holistic Programmatic approach including promoting MHM in WASH services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revisit all on-going programmatic inventions and develop new ones where necessary in a comprehensive and context-specific manner. Ensure programmatic inventions are adequately resourced in the budgets of respective sectoral agencies. Follow up with robust monitoring system. 2. Advocate, promote and integrate behavioural change in programs and projects in particular such that discussion on menstruation is normalized. Work with adolescent boys and men, religious leaders and champions across various sectors. Integrate awareness on menstrual cycle (from menarche to menopause and beyond), menstrual management (both physical and mental) and the abolishment of myths, taboos and stigma around menstruation in all social and economic development programmes and projects. 3. Encourage and promote the integration of safe and dignified menstruation of girls and women into programs and projects on emergency and disaster preparedness, response and reconstruction and on addressing disability related challenges. 4. Mainly at municipal level, develop and formalise guidelines on WASH in communities, WASH in public places and WASH in work places incorporating access to inclusive menstruation facilities and sanitary products well as the appropriate waste disposal. 	Government and development agencies
Monitoring and evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutionalise a robust implementation, monitoring and evaluation system for all policies and programs. For example, establish and monitor MHM indicators in Education Management Information System (EMIS), Health Management Information System (HMIS), National Management Information Project (NMIP) of Department of Water Supply and Sanitation. 2. Formalise and institutionalise the MHM coordination platforms to better integrate and upscale menstrual management initiatives and deliver high impact with dignity of girls and women at the core of all interventions. 	Government in collaboration with relevant stakeholders

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Endnotes

- i WASH Development Partners include four bilateral donors, Asian Development Bank, World Bank and three UN Organisations and largest International Non Governmental Organisations working on WASH sector in Nepal.
- ii See <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-08-10/new-law-criminalises-Chhaupadi-custom.html>.
- iii Karki, Khem B., Poudel, Purna Chandra., Rothchild, Jennifer., Pope, Natalie., Bobin, Natacha C., Gurung, Yadav., Basnet, Machhindra., Poudel, Mahesh., Sherpa, Lhamo Yangchen, Menstrual health and Hygiene management in Nepal, 2017 Scoping review and preliminary mapping, Maverick Collective and Population Services International Nepal.
- iv Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation (2016a), Total Sanitation Guideline 2016 (Draft), National Water and Sanitation Coordination Committee, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- v Ministry of Education (2016), School Sector Development Plan 2016-2022 (Draft), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- vi Ministry of Education (2017), WASH in School Guidelines 2017, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- vii Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education (2015), Integrating Menstrual Hygiene Management into School Health Programs (Draft), Family Health Division, Kathmandu Nepal.
- viii Ministry of Health (2015b), National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy 2015 (Draft), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- ix Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation (2016b), Nepal Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Sector Development Plan 2016-2030 (Draft), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- x Ministry of Health (2015a), Nepal Health Sector Strategy (2015-2022), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xi Also see Karki et.al. (2017)
- xii Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (2006), National Policy and Plan of Action on Disability 2006, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xiii Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (2073-2082 B.S), Disability related Ten Year National Policy and Action Plan, 2073-2082 B.S (Draft), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xiv Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (2017), Disability Rights Act 2017, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xv See <http://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/?s=waste> for both documents.
- xvi Ministry of Physical Planning and Works (2004), Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Policy 2004, Water Supply and Sanitation Division, Ministry of Physical Planning and Works (MoPPW), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xvii Ministry of Physical Planning and Works (2009), National Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Policy 2009, Ministry of Physical Planning and Works (MoPPW), Kathmandu, Nepal.
- xviii Also see House et. al. (2012).
- xix See Kabeer, Naila (2001), 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', in Anne Sisask (ed.), *Discussing Women's Empowerment – Theory and Practice*, Sida Studies No. 3, Stockholm: Swedish International Development Agency, pp: 17-59.