



Pivotal not peripheral:

Ending period poverty by prioritising menstrual health and hygiene in WASH

Learning Brief / May '21



Working Towards
Transformation in
Inclusive WASH



This learning brief will cover:

- Why **period poverty** needs to end
- The **benefits** of improved **menstrual health and hygiene**
- Why **MHH in WASH**
- Periods in a **pandemic**
- Water for Women **MHH initiatives**
- Key **lessons learnt**
- MHH **checklist** for **WASH practitioners**

Menstrual health

noun

men·stru·al helth | \ 'men(t)-strü-el həlth

: of or relating to menstruation

1. "A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle."
2. "Achieving menstrual health requires access to information about the menstrual cycle and self-care, materials, water and sanitation facilities and services to care for the body during menstruation, access to timely diagnosis, care and treatment for menstrual discomforts and disorders, a positive and respectful environment free from stigma, and the freedom to participate in all spheres of life throughout the menstrual cycle."

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters¹

WASH: Water, sanitation and hygiene
MHH: Menstrual health and hygiene

800 MILLION

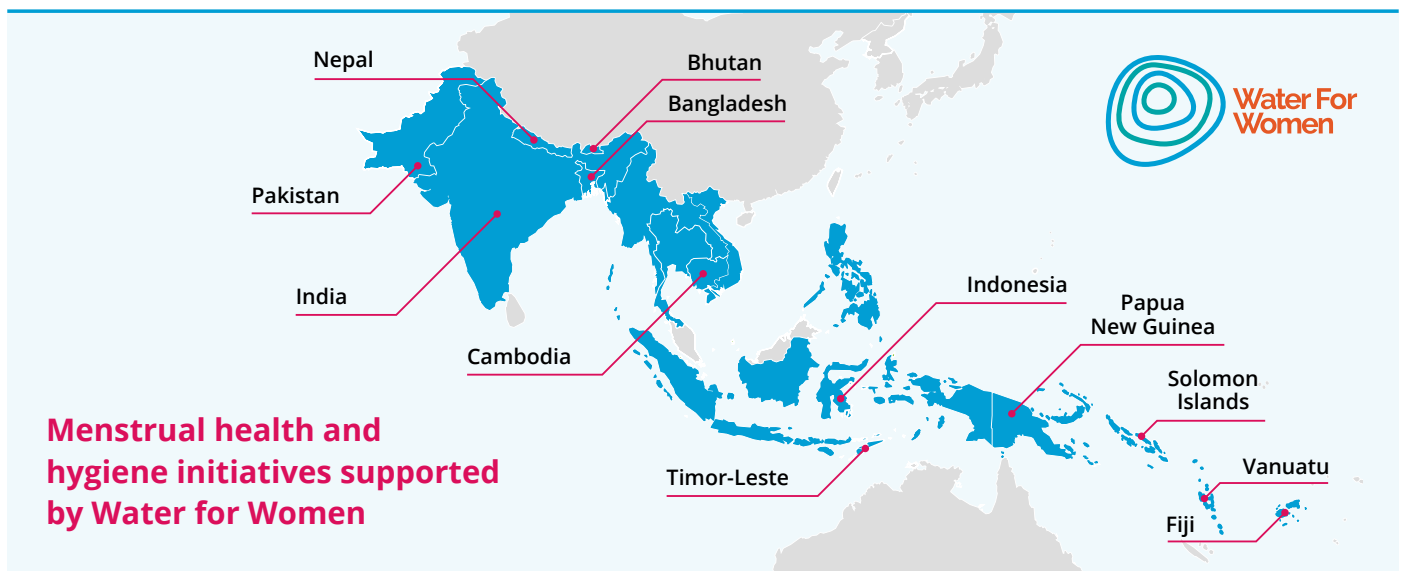
the estimated number of women, girls and gender non-binary people who are menstruating on any given day²

2.3 BILLION

the number of people across the globe who lack access to basic sanitation³

1.8 BILLION

the estimated number of menstruating women, girls and gender non-binary people in the world⁴



Contributing partners



Achieving menstrual health and hygiene requires access to WASH facilities and services, as well as access to appropriate sanitary products, and relevant information about self-care and the menstrual cycle. It also requires a respectful environment that is free from stigma – and allows girls, women and gender non-binary people the freedom to participate in all aspects of life, no matter what time of the month.

What is period poverty?

The lack of resources for safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management is known as ‘period poverty’. Typically, those who lack access to basic sanitation facilities also lack access to sanitary products to manage their periods. This everyday challenge is compounded by debilitating stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation that exist in different cultures, which result in women, girls and gender non-binary people lacking privacy or dignity during menstruation. For those with disabilities, these issues are amplified.



MJ Enterprise in Solomon Islands is passionate about supporting women and girl's menstrual health and hygiene through their reusable pad business. / Photo credit: Water for Women

What does it look like?

Without access to basic sanitation facilities and products – and without the support of their family and community – there are serious health, welfare and economic consequences for women, girls and gender non-binary people. For example, there is a higher risk of developing a urinary tract infection if a woman is not able to regularly change her sanitary products during her period. Mothers are often unable to earn an income to feed their children if they have to stay home and adolescent girls are less likely to attend school during menstruation.

What does MHH have to do with WASH?

Achieving the SDG target 6.2, “Access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all ... paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations” can only be achieved if MHH is effectively integrated into WASH programming.

The WASH sector increasingly recognises the role of safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management for realising the human rights, well-being and health of women, girls and vulnerable people, and their access to education, livelihoods and workforce participation.

Furthermore, safe disposal of sanitary products has clear implications for the environmental and technological sustainability of sanitation interventions.

Safe and Dignified Menstruation is...

“Women and adolescent girls using clean menstrual management materials to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.”⁵



Sometimes I would force my daughters to go to school but they would cry and say they couldn't go because they were on their periods. They were scared being laughed at by fellow students if they stained their clothes. Listening to them, I would get so emotional and breakdown.

Isabel Kevei, mother in Daru, Western Province, PNG (World Vision Papua New Guinea)



Photo credit: World Vision Papua New Guinea

5 ways women and girls benefit from improved MHH:

- 1 The ability to consistently go to work to earn an income for themselves and their families
- 2 Going to and staying at school to maximise positive educational outcomes
- 3 Improved physical health with a better understanding of sexual and reproductive health, bodies and menstrual-related disorders
- 4 Freedom to participate in community events and recreation activities
- 5 Greater self-confidence and freedom in their day-to-day lives.

Periods in a pandemic: How has COVID-19 impacted MHH?

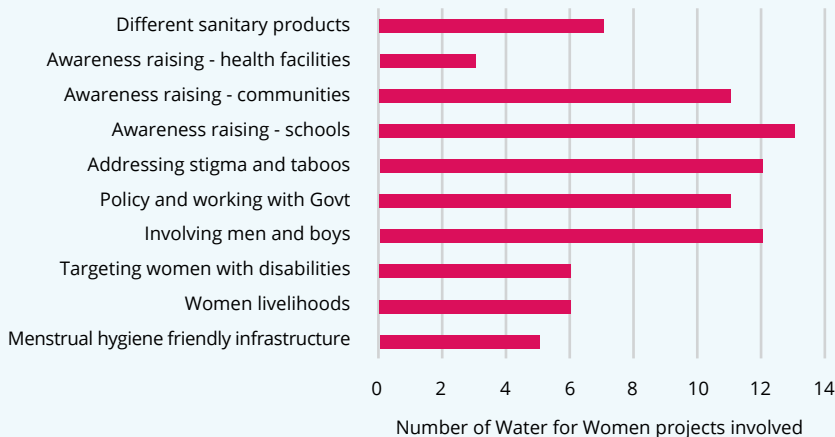
Periods don't stop in a pandemic. COVID-19 has created even more challenges for women and girls who are trapped in period poverty:

- Access to WASH facilities has become more difficult for many because of self-isolation and lockdowns
- Buying affordable menstrual hygiene materials has become harder due to mandatory isolation measures, panic buying, stock shortages, price surges, disruptions in the supply chain and increased family financial stress
- Taboos and stigmas have been exacerbated because of disruptions to the usual information and awareness channels (due to school closures and funding being diverted away from women's health services).

Water for Women: Menstrual health and hygiene initiatives

Towards the end of 2020, Water for Women undertook a review of MHH initiatives to collate information from partners working within a broad range of contexts, and to draw out lessons for good practice in inclusive MHH programming within the WASH sector.

MHH approaches



Featured projects

Habitat for Humanity
Fiji

The Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR)
India

World Vision
Papua New Guinea (PNG), Bangladesh and Vanuatu

The International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Pakistan

Plan International Australia
Indonesia, PNG and Solomon Islands

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV)
Bhutan and Nepal

WaterAid Australia
Timor-Leste and PNG

Thrive Networks
Cambodia



Hamida Begum is travelling from village to village to sell sanitary pads and promote MHH / Photo credit: World Vision / Prodip Kumar Sarker

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Projects

What did we learn?

Contextualising approaches

MHH interventions need to be grounded in the local context, not just in terms of addressing cultural sensitivities, but also tailoring interventions that are appropriate to the climate, availability and source of water supply, as well as different physical settings (schools, and communities and households).

Timor-Leste: WASH in schools (WaterAid)

Menstrual health is key to girls' human rights and achieving gender equality, however in Timor-Leste, there is limited education on menstrual health and negative social norms that limit girls' and women's choices and opportunities. Underpinned by a 'do no harm' approach, WaterAid integrates menstrual health and hygiene into their WASH in schools programming, which includes state and religious schools in Manufahi and Liquica, through WASH hygiene behaviours, and partner organisations facilitating education sessions with school leadership, staff, and students. WASH in schools supports a whole-of-school approach, ensuring teachers are empowered to support students with menstrual health in and out of the classroom, and challenge negative menstrual health and social norms.

Solomon Islands: Getting people thinking (Plan International)

As part of Plan International's menstrual health campaign, 'Teach her that it's healthy and important', a large billboard was erected in a prominent roadside location on the Western side of Honiara town. The eye-catching billboard, along with posters in 10 communities were designed as a 'primer' to get people thinking and talking about menstruation ahead of workshops with Plan International's women's social enterprise partner MJ Enterprise to pilot their facilitator's guide for conducting MHH workshops.



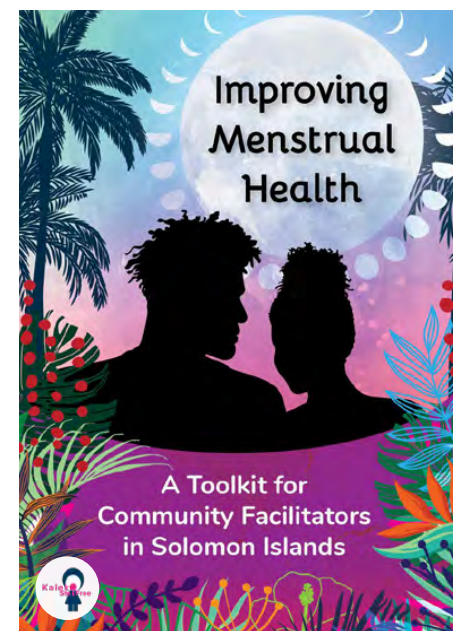
Do no harm

The 'do no harm' approach, which is central to all Water for Women projects, is about making a conscious and pro-active effort to ensure that no negative consequences or harm occurs to anyone – including consequences which are unintended – because of actions taken.



The bathroom is really good, before ... we didn't have separate bathrooms for boys and girls. Girls would realise they were menstruating in the middle of class and they would go home because of their menstruation. Many girls live far from the school so they would not return to class.

Teacher, Timor-Leste (WaterAid)



Access this resource:
[Improving Menstrual Health](#)



Solutions are context specific, but standards are universal.

CFAR India



Girls and boys are learning about MHH in schools in Solomon Islands / Photo credit: Plan International and Live & Learn

Tackling taboos with sensitivity

Awareness of local stigmas, attitudes and beliefs is critical to the effectiveness of interventions and 'doing no harm'. This awareness is not enough though. Taboos that cultivate shame and stigma, such as the idea that menstruation makes women dirty, need to be sensitively addressed to overcome period poverty.

PNG: Busting period myths (World Vision)

There are all sorts of beliefs that exist in various parts of the world about periods, such as menstruating women are impure and therefore should not cook or clean for their family. Another myth is that if a man sees a woman's used sanitary product it will cause fertility issues for the woman. World Vision PNG is successfully engaging with school children through health clubs, working with both boys and girls to break down these existing stigmas through education and open discussions.

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This work is attempting to change entrenched norms and stigmas that are believed and have been promoted at all levels of the community. A one-off training or pad product distribution is not enough.

World Vision Vanuatu

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The confidence and compulsion for women, men, boys and girls in rural Solomon Islands to discuss menstrual health with each other has improved, overcoming strong social and cultural stigmas that have developed and perpetuated harmful myths, restricted women's movements, and restricted levels of understanding on sexual reproductive health and menstrual health.

Plan International Solomon Islands

Engaging with rights-holder organisations (RHOs)

Critical to the 'do no harm' approach is engaging with RHOs, which are organisations that represent the rights and needs of women, people with disabilities, and people from sexual, ethnic and gender minorities. Working with RHOs ensures approaches undertaken are well informed by expertise and lived experience. Direct engagement between RHOs and WASH government stakeholders should also be encouraged, in order to strengthen and transform WASH policy, systems and processes in the long term.



Mokaro (left) is making reusable pads at home which not only helps women and girls to manage their periods safely, but also provides a way for Mokaro to support herself. She is a member of a local DPO sewing group that partners with World Vision / Photo credit: World Vision Papua New Guinea / Nancy Wobo

Bhutan: Red dots raising awareness (SNV)

To ensure an inclusive approach to their advocacy efforts, SNV has been collaborating with the Disabled Persons' Association of Bhutan (DPAB), the Ability Bhutan Society (ABS), other local disabled peoples' organisations (DPOs), UNICEF, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health. This is resulting in people with disabilities playing a much more active and visible role in MHH outreach, including an impactful Red Dot campaign (led by the Ministry of Education) [this video](#) that features a young woman who is visually impaired. SNV's work is increasing the general population's understanding of the importance of addressing the specific menstruation needs of women and girls with disabilities.



SNV Bhutan team participates in the 'Red Dobchu' campaign to raise awareness about menstrual health and hygiene / Photo credit: SNV Bhutan

Empowering local leaders

Targeted training on MHH sensitisation and management is a powerful way to address stigmas and get information out to those who really need it. By holding workshops with local women leaders, interventions have the potential to empower them to educate other women and girls in their communities.

PNG: Targeting training for women representatives (World Vision)

A total of 644 women representatives from 242 villages across 11 Lower Level Government areas were invited to participate in training sessions held by World Vision. The sessions had an extremely strong turnout, despite some women having to travel long distances to attend. This was seen as an indication that participants valued the training and were keen to take knowledge back to their communities to share with others.

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The [Water for Women] Fund's attention on MHM has further pushed us to consider how to alleviate MHM-related challenges in the workplace. We have developed a women-led working group that has introduced policies including free hygiene products available in all program offices with small informational stickers on hygienic use and disposal in bathrooms.

iDE Cambodia

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It is really important that the men and boys are there in the conversations, so they provide the necessary support. If a girl needs pads to go to school, the mother may not have the money to provide this, but if the father knows and understands this, then he will be able to provide.

World Vision PNG

Involving men and boys

Engaging men and boys is an integral part of ending period poverty. Male leaders are in the majority in most local contexts and institutions, so their involvement increases the likelihood of greater investment and prioritisation at government, policy and community levels. However, at the community level and in schools, it is important to recognise which type of training should include men and boys and which should be provided to women and girls separately, such as the provision of information relating to managing menstrual hygiene.



“I want to be the male champion for MHM for my school” says Mr Matia. As Headmaster of his school, he has become an enthusiastic champion for MHH since learning more about it through engagement with Plan International and Live & Learn / Photo credit: Plan International Australia and Live & Learn

Cambodia: Educating decision-makers on MHH (Thrive Networks)

Male leaders are being included in Thrive Network's MHH training in Cambodia to help them understand the importance of the topic and the need to support women. As a result, these leaders have been allocating funding from their own budgets to train more women and girls in their communities about MHH.



MHH educational workshops run by Thrive Networks / Photo credit: Thrive Networks

Indonesia: Engaging girls and boys in the 'right space' (Plan International)

Plan International's 'Champion of Change' program is being delivered in 20 schools in target areas. It is designed to support girls and boys to build the confidence to become gender and social inclusion champions. The program was identified as an excellent entry point for WASH and MHH education, which has been incorporated in new modules and is currently being trialled in schools. With the disruption of COVID-19, Plan has worked with stakeholders to adapt to online workshops so they can continue to reach children while schools remain closed.



Resource developed by Yayasan Plan International Indonesia for use in Indonesian schools: 'Menstruation is not taboo,' the girl holds a sign that says 'Let's keep menstruation hygienic' and the boy holds a sign that says 'Menstruation is normal for women' / Credit: Plan International

Including women and girls with disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities are underrepresented in the already underrepresented area of MHH. They face additional challenges and stigmas due to their disabilities. Awareness of their specific hygiene needs is important to ensure they are not left behind in overcoming period poverty. Along with this awareness is the need to actively consult and co-design with women and girls with disabilities – as well as DPOs. This ensures menstrual hygiene facilities are designed so that they are accessible to all.

Pakistan: Individual sessions changing lives (IRC)

Twenty-three-year-old Rifat lives in a village in Peshawar and has difficulty managing her period due to an intellectual disability. Her widowed mother struggles to care for her and requested support from IRC after attending a MHH workshop. IRC staff provided an individual training session with Rifat and her mother. They also gave practical demonstrations and advice on menstrual health and hygiene management which was tailored to Rifat's special needs. She is now confidently handling her own menstrual hygiene.

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It is crucial to talk about the additional challenges faced by our women and girls with disabilities so that they are also able to manage their menstruation in hygienic and dignified ways.

SNV Bhutan



Abeda sells sanitary products to a woman in her community / Photo credit: World Vision Bangladesh

Thinking beyond the project life cycle

By encouraging policy and system changes, initiatives can ensure MHH is incorporated into WASH planning and discussions in the long term. Working with government and DPOs to ensure MHH is part of WASH plans and budgets leads to more sustainable results.

Educating younger generations is one way to 'think beyond' the project life cycle, however this is not always easy when teachers in many cultures feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation.



We talk about independent life [for people with disabilities], so it is very important to dispose of sanitary items themselves without the help of their caregivers.

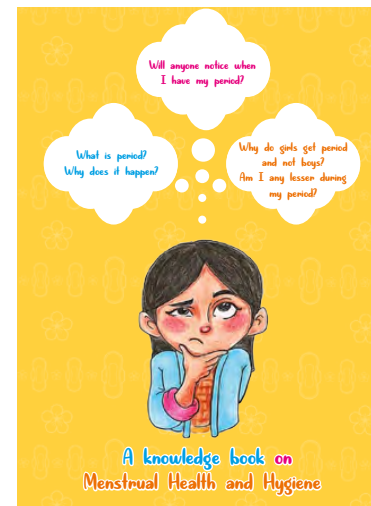
IRC Pakistan

Bhutan: Including MHH in the curriculum (SNV)

In partnership with School Health and Nutrition Division and the Ministry of Education, SNV Bhutan is assisting with updating the Physical Health and Education curriculum to include elements of WASH, as well as a specific module on MHH. By working with relevant stakeholders and teachers, they have been able to implement changes to the curriculum that are practical and feasible, within a 'do no harm' context.



Illustration from 'A knowledge book on menstrual health and hygiene' (right) to complement other interventions developed to address the MHH knowledge gaps that girls and nuns face in Bhutan / Photo credit: SNV Bhutan



Access this resource: [**A knowledge book on Menstrual Health and Hygiene**](#)



WASH projects can influence government policy decision-making by providing solid data on the MHH needs of women and girls in communities, which in turn provides justification for greater funding allocation.

Habitat for Humanity Fiji

Nepal: Including MHH in annual planning (SNV)

The project, in collaboration with local partner and local Rural Municipality (RM) level DPO self-help groups, worked with rural municipality chairpersons, presenting MHH-related gaps in their plans, and the need to strengthen their MHH response within these plans as part of the municipality's commitment to Nepal's 'Total Sanitation' program. As a result, several RM chairpersons expressed their commitment to allocate budgets for MHH in their annual plans.



People with disabilities are at greater risk of practising poor hygiene and contracting health-related infections and diseases. These risks are heightened for women with disabilities, especially when they are menstruating / Photo credit: SNV Nepal

Prioritising periods in pandemics

COVID-19 has highlighted how world events can exacerbate period poverty. Assessing how the consequences of the pandemic can be addressed or mitigated is critical to good health outcomes. Supporting women's self-help groups and enterprises to produce sanitary pads and protective face masks has been one way of bridging the gap, while at the same time addressing another – the disproportionate loss of livelihoods of women and other marginalised groups because of the pandemic.

COVID-19 also presents an important opportunity for the WASH sector, not only focusing on MHH through hygiene initiatives, but also using MHH as an entry point to support women's economic empowerment, including women with disabilities.



While making our annual plan, we generally prioritise budget for people with disability. But we never understood the MHH-related problems of women with (severe) disabilities. Working with the SNV team taught us the importance of MHH and we will consider this a priority in our rural municipality.

Elected RM Chairperson in Ramnagar, Nepal (SNV)

India: Pad Banks and sustainable products (CFAR)

CFAR has set up Pad Banks in India where locals are donating products for those who are unable to afford them. The program is managed by women and girls in the community, with the support of men and local representatives. CFAR also established an eco-friendly napkin manufacturing facility during COVID-19, providing sustainable products and income generation for women.



In response to the threat of COVID-19, the MJ Enterprise team in Solomon Islands expanded their reusable pad business to include reusable masks, with support from Plan International and Live & Learn / Photo credit: MJ Enterprise



Abeda sells sanitary products to a woman in her community / Photo credit: World Vision Bangladesh

Bangladesh: From a life in the shadows to a role model in her community (World Vision)

Today, Abeda Begum is an MHH entrepreneur, selling sanitary products from her house and throughout her community, educating women and girls about safe management of their period, proper disposal of pads, raising awareness on the importance of disability-friendly toilets and more recently, COVID-19 prevention. It wasn't always this way, due to her disability, Abeda struggled with daily activities such as cleaning, cooking and going to the toilet.

With support from World Vision Bangladesh and DPO partner, Centre for Disability Development, a Self-Help Group (SHG) for people with disabilities was formed in her community and Abeda was encouraged to join. Through meetings, mentoring and engaging with her family, Abeda learned about leadership and rights of people with disabilities and was also given a wheelchair. Being a member of her SHG has not only transformed her mobility and independence, but her place within her family and community.

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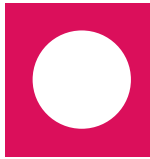


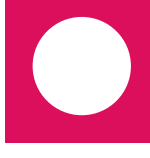


I [could not] go anywhere even if I wanted to. Who will take me? I am stuck at home & burden to family.”

Abeda Begum (World Vision Bangladesh)

India: Making MHH everybody's business (CFAR)

Engagement with marginalised groups badly impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns in India led to a locally-driven campaign that not only promoted MHH awareness, but also helped provide a sense of purpose and productivity for those who had found themselves disenfranchised by COVID-19. Adolescent Forums or 'Kishori March' including girls, boys and people with disabilities drove an energetic nine-month campaign to bring MHH from being an issue rarely discussed, to a central part of community wellbeing. Slum development committees, men and boys, elderly, front line workers and shopkeepers were all engaged, building community-wide support for 'no more whispering' when it comes to MHH.

MHH checklist for WASH practitioners

1	Ensure MHH is pivotal by appropriately integrating it into inclusive WASH programming through the most relevant entry point (e.g. accessible infrastructure, pad disposal education, information and sensitisation, supply chains, livelihoods generation)	
2	Consider and address, with sensitivity, the harmful beliefs, norms and practices associated with MHH	
3	Always apply the 'do no harm' approach, and ensure it is tailored to local contexts	
4	Consult with marginalised groups such as women and girls with disabilities, gender non-binary people and trans men to ensure their needs and rights are met	
5	Include men and boys in the process but at the 'right time' and in the 'right space'	
6	Engage with local community leaders (male and female), governments and institutions to strengthen prospects for systemic, sustainable change	
7	Engage with rights-holder organisations to understand the lived experience of women and marginalised groups and to ensure solutions are appropriate and 'do no harm'	
8	Coordinate and share learnings across sectors and organisations to strengthen MHH best practice	

Endnotes

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Water for Women is the Australian Government's flagship water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program supporting improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable WASH and research projects. Water for Women is delivering 20 WASH projects in 15 countries together with 12 research projects over five years (2018-2022). Water for Women supports regular knowledge and learning initiatives with our partners to facilitate the cross-fertilisation of ideas, approaches and best practice.



Find out more at
waterforwomenfund.org



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Find out more at waterforwomenfund.org

