

TIP SHEET: Top Tips for Integrating Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Activities for Women and Girls into Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS)

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What is MHM and why does it matter?

Millions of women and girls are unable to manage their menstrual cycle in a dignified, healthy way. The onset of menstruation (or periods as they can be known) is a new phase and can bring with it new risks to the lives of adolescent girls. Many girls face stigma, harassment and social exclusion during menstruation. Gender inequality, discrimination, social norms, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services like toilets and sanitary products can all cause menstrual health and hygiene needs to go unmet. When this happens it restricts women and girls' mobility and personal choices. It affects attendance in school and participation in community life. It also compromises their safety, causing additional stress and anxiety. These challenges are particularly acute in humanitarian crises.

Period poverty is the lack of access to menstrual hygiene information, products, and toilets- forcing women and girls to risk their health, and miss out on education and employment opportunities. Severe period poverty has spread and grown dramatically throughout the world as a result of several crises: the COVID-19¹ pandemic and global economic crisis² resulting in inflation pushing up the cost of period products in many locations. The World Bank estimates at least 500 million women and girls globally lack access to the facilities they need to manage their periods.³

What are Women and Girls' Safe Spaces (WGSS)?

WGSS are physical or mobile spaces where women and adolescent girls can be free from harm and can gain knowledge and skills; access GBV response services or other available services; and foster opportunities for mutual support and collective action in their community. WGSS can and must be cultivated since they are a safe and useful environment within which to strengthen supportive menstrual health management for women and girls through processes of empowerment.



Encouraging women and girls to seek, share, and obtain information; access services, express themselves, enhance psychosocial wellbeing, and more fully realize their rights including their reproductive and sexual health rights are key objectives of WGSS activities. Consult the [Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings](#) (IMC and IRC, 2019⁴) for further information as it provides instruction and guidance on how to apply feminist principles, approaches and strategies for WGSS programming.

¹ Plan International, (2020). Period in a Pandemic https://plan-international.org/uploads/2021/12/mhm_report.pdf

²Global Citizen Blog Article. (19 August 2022). *The Price of Period Pads is Soaring & Pushing Girls Across Africa out of School.* <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-pad-prices-inflation-girls-missing-school/>

³ World Bank, (25 May 2018), *Menstrual Hygiene Management Enables Women and Girls to reach Their Full Potential* feature story. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/05/25/menstrual-hygiene-management>

⁴ International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee (2019). *Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings.* <https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/IRC-WGSS-English-2020.pdf>

Essential Components of a Menstrual Hygiene Management Response

The aim of MHM programming is to improve the safety, privacy and dignity of women and girls. Three essential components to be effective in MHM programming:

1. **MHM Material and Supplies** e.g., Sanitary towels, underwear, soap etc.
2. **MHM Supportive Facilities** e.g., WGSS space should provide access to toilet and facilities with water for washing and changing.
3. **MHM Information and Education** e.g., Provide basic menstrual hygiene promotion and education sessions in WGSS.

MHM Information and Education

MHM information sessions can be hosted in the WGSS. Women and girls can learn about menstrual management techniques, sexual and reproductive health, and know more about the GBV risks associated with social norms around menstruation.

Prior to this a GBV assessment should be conducted to collect and analyse data relevant to the community and women and girls in the location where the WGSS will be/is established. The GBV assessment should be tailored to your context and seek to gather information on menstrual practices, attitudes and beliefs. Also assess needs and gaps in information, Sexual and Reproductive Health services and MHM supplies. The [Menstrual Practices Questionnaire⁵](#) provides a set of questions to capture menstrual hygiene practice and experiences from a population. Ensure women and girls are given a space to suggest interventions that could best meet their menstrual hygiene needs including the designing of the information sessions and supplies distributed.

WGSS staff should be trained on MHM. A brief training should be conducted to sensitise all program staff on MHM and to provide guidance on how to appropriately discuss it with women and girls, and colleagues.

Training and Awareness Resources on MHM for WGSS Staff:

- [Just the Facts: Understanding Menstruation](#) (IRC, Columbia University, ELRHA, 2017).
- [MHM Staff Training Materials](#) (Ibid.)

Adolescent Girls MHM programming

If the safe spaces are accessible to girls, additional efforts should be made to address the specific needs of adolescent girls. Adolescent girls may experience puberty including the onset of their periods amidst a conflict, disaster or crisis. They may lack adequate access to MHM supplies and information as a result.

In some cultures, menstruation is associated with readiness for marriage and sex, and with the average age for menarche (first period) occurring at 12 years of age⁶, this could lead to early marriage and maternal health complications.



Figure 1: Example of a UNFPA supported Dignity Kit, which includes menstrual hygiene products and information materials.

Information sessions should be designed to empower girls to stay healthy while learning how their body functions and to dispel myths associated with menstruation. You may find it helpful to consult the [Girl Shine Lifeskills Curriculum for Girls](#) developed

⁵ Hennegan, J., Nansubuga, A., Akullo, A., Smith, C., & Schwab, K.J., (2020). The Menstrual Practices Questionnaire (MPQ): Development, elaboration, and implications for future research. *Global Health Action*, 13(1), 1829402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2020.1829402>

⁶ Balaji Ramraj, V. Meenakshi Subramanian, Vijayakrishnan G, Study on age of menarche between generations and the factors associated with it. *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health*, Volume 11, 2021 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213398421000622>

by the International Rescue Committee⁷ which includes content on health and hygiene including specific sessions on menstrual hygiene management. These sessions can be delivered to girls in emergency settings. (See pages 154-257 for session content details).

MHM Material and Supplies

An assessment is needed to inform the procurement and distribution of materials and supplies and continuous routine updates of household demographic should be conducted to account for newly menstruating girls to be included in future distributions. Women and girls should be consulted to ensure the range of supplies meet their preferences and life cycle of usage (i.e., wearing, washing, drying, disposal and waste management). Samples of the product should be checked before large-scale distribution to ensure the quality and acceptability of products to women and girls (i.e., colour of the reusable pads, absorbency and texture).

Women and girls use diverse ranges of sanitary materials, WGSS program teams should consider the following when selecting menstrual material and supplies: comfort, speed of drying, and absorbency (likelihood of leakage?); how much or many menstrual materials are needed for each menstrual period? What are the available disposal options? And which specific items need monthly re-supply? (E.g., soap, disposable sanitary pads).

Essential MHM supplies are included in various kits distributed in humanitarian settings, for example dignity kits, menstrual hygiene kits and core relief items. While it is important to keep an emergency stock of menstrual material at the WGSS, the use of WGSS as avenue for distributing MHM supplies needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and distribution based on the specificities of the context, so as not to create only material incentives for women/girls to visit the WGSS, and to also support safety of WGSS staff and volunteers.

The distribution of MHM materials and supplies should be accompanied with the provision of

necessary information on the characteristics of each product, use and care instructions and if/when relevant possible health impacts in at least two different formats (e.g., audio/braille/sign language/simplified words and pictures). [The Dignity Kit Guidance Note](#) created by the GBV sub-cluster in Turkey (Cross-border Syria)⁸ provides guidance on best practice in the distribution of dignity kits.



Figure 2: Post Distribution Monitoring Report for Dignity Kits and Salama Kits UNFPA, 2020.

Information leaflets accompanying kits designed to providing life saving GBV services and reproductive health information to women, girls, and Pregnant and Lactating Women (PLW)

MHM Supportive Facilities

When designing, setting up or modifying a WGSS it is important to consider private, safe, dignified and inclusive latrines and bathing facilities for women and girls within the facility/compound, which provides them with enough space to change their menstrual materials and a means of discreetly disposing of menstrual waste. GBV specialists may find it beneficial to consult with WASH sector/cluster or colleagues on the construction of WASH facilities within the WGSS to ensure that proper waste management infrastructure is put in place. It is important to ensure that the on-site latrines/bathing facilities are stocked and regularly re-stocked with soap, hand sanitizer and menstrual hygiene supplies.

⁷ International Rescue Committee (2018) *Girl Shine Lifeskills Curriculum for Girls*. <https://gbvresponders.org/adolescent-girls/girl-shine/#GirlShineLifeSkillsCurriculum>

⁸ UNFPA Turkey (2015) *Dignity Kits Guidance Note*. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/dignity_kits_guidance_note_en.pdf

Examples of key actions for incorporating MHM into WGSS activities throughout the project cycle:

Stage	Example action
Assessment, Analysis and Planning	Investigate community norms and practices related to MHM that may increase the risk of GBV and have negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of women and girls. See the MHM In Emergencies Toolkit for how to conduct an MHM assessment (Page 17 and chapter six specifically discuss this topic).
Resource Mobilisation	Identify and preposition age-, gender-, and culturally sensitive supplies where necessary and appropriate. Ensure quality of the product can be maintained in storage, that storage locations are in secure locations to ensure safeguarding of supplies, and that there is regular stock management. Together with supplies, pre-position GBV-SRH-MHM related information material. Consult MHM Informed Product Choice and Disposal ⁹
Programming	Involve women and adolescent girls as staff and leaders in the women and girls' safe spaces to facilitating MHM information sessions and distributions. Consult the IMC/IRC WGSS Toolkit for approaches to increase women and girls' leadership .
Policies	Advocate for the funding and integration of MHM programming into the Humanitarian infrastructure and allocation of funding/resources for sustainability. An example of an advocacy statement on MHM . ¹⁰
Coordination	Maintain MHM as a regular agenda item in GBV sub-cluster/sector and SRH sub-working group meetings and integrate MHM considerations in GBV sub-cluster/sector Standard Operating Procedures and strategies.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Identify, collect and analyse a core set of indicators to provide information about the scope and quality of MHM activities implemented. Consult the Monitoring MHM Programming in Emergency Rapid Tool to assist in evaluating the status and reach of MHM programming within an ongoing humanitarian emergency.

⁹ WaterAid, India (2019) *Menstrual Hygiene Management: Informed Product Choice and Disposal*. https://www.wateraid.org/in/sites/g/files/jkxooof336/files/informed-product-choice-and-disposal_1.pdf

¹⁰ WaterAid et.al. (2019). *The Global Menstrual Health and Hygiene Collective Statement on the occasion of the 64th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women*. <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxooof256/files/global-menstrual-health-and-hygiene-collectives-statement-for-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women.pdf>

Resources

MHM Guidance and Tools

[A Toolkit for Integrating Menstrual Hygiene Management \(MHM\) into Humanitarian Response.](#) (2017). Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health and International Rescue Committee, New York.

[Key Components of a Female-Friendly Toilet.](#) (2017) Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health and International Rescue Committee, New York.

[UNFPA Menstrual Hygiene Management in Emergencies: Perspective and Practices from the Arab Region.](#) (2020), UNFPA.

[UNFPA Menstrual Hygiene Management in Emergencies: Guidance Notes for Integrated Programming in the Arab Region.](#) (2022), UNFPA.

[UNICEF Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene.](#) (2019), UNICEF.

[Save the Children Menstrual Hygiene Management Operational Guidelines](#) (n.d.) Save the Children.

WGSS Tools

[International Medical Corps & International Rescue Committee, Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A toolkit for Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings.](#) (2019), IMC & IRC.

GBV Guidelines and Tools

[IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action](#) (2015), IASC.

[Interagency Minimum Standards for Gender Based Violence in Emergencies Programming](#) (2019), GBV AoR.

Information and Awareness Packages

[Girl Shine- A program Model and Resource Package](#) that seeks to support, protect and empower adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. (2018 and updated 2021), International Rescue Committee.

[Adolescent Girls Toolkit for Iraq](#) (2017), UNICEF, UNFPA and Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[My Safety, My Wellbeing: Equipping Adolescent Girls](#) (2019), International Rescue Committee.

[International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An Evidence Informed Approach](#) (Revised Edition, 2018), UNESCO et. al.

Research

Schmitt, M. L., Clatworthy, D., Ratnayake, R., Klaesener-Metzner, N., Roesch, E., Wheeler, E., & Sommer, M. (2017). "Understanding the menstrual hygiene management challenges facing displaced girls and women: findings from qualitative assessments in Myanmar and Lebanon." *Conflict and Health*, 11(1), 19.

Sommer, M., Schmitt, M., Ogello, T., Mathenge, P., Mark, M., Clatworthy, D., Khandakji, S., Ratnayake, R. (2018). "Pilot testing and evaluation of a toolkit for menstrual hygiene management in emergencies in three refugee camps in Northwest Tanzania." *Journal for International Humanitarian Action*, 3(1), 6.

Sommer, M., Schmitt, M. L., Clatworthy, D., Bramucci, G., Wheeler, E., & Ratnayake, R. (2016). "What is the scope for addressing menstrual hygiene management in complex humanitarian emergencies? A global review." *Waterlines*, 35(3), 245-264.

The GBV AoR Helpdesk

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