



**SEND
GHANA**

**MAY 2024
POLICY BRIEF**

Ending Adolescent Period Stigma in Ghana:

WASH Facilities and Menstrual Education in Schools Matter



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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the availability of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and menstrual education programs in schools. It highlights the disproportionate impact of inadequate clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene facilities, as well as limited menstrual education on adolescent girls. The lack of these facilities leads to increased absenteeism, reduced academic performance, and heightened vulnerability to health issues. Moreover, the stigma and misinformation surrounding menstruation exacerbate these challenges, further marginalizing girls and hindering their educational opportunities.

To address these issues, the brief recommends prioritizing the improvement

of WASH facilities and implementing targeted interventions, including robust menstrual education programs in schools. Investing in WASH facilities and menstrual education not only improves the immediate well-being of adolescent girls but also contributes to broader societal benefits, including enhanced gender equality, improved health outcomes, and increased educational attainment.

Therefore, policymakers and stake holders are urged to prioritize and invest in these critical interventions to create a supportive and inclusive environment where every adolescent girl can thrive and realize her full potential.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities is crucial for managing periods, especially for adolescent girls in schools. Clean water enables menstruating girls to clean themselves properly, thereby reducing the risk of infections and discomfort during their monthly cycle. Safe and dignified facilities such as separate toilets for boys and girls with proper disposal systems and changing rooms offer girls a private space to manage their periods without shame or embarrassment. Good hygiene practices, such as handwashing with soap before and after changing sanitary products, help prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

In schools, where girls often face stigma and discrimination due to deep-seated menstrual taboos and misconceptions, WASH infrastructure is essential to empower girls and ensure they can attend classes regularly and participate fully in school life. Additionally, providing menstrual information and education promotes understanding, reduces stigma, and empowers girls.

The Ghana Education Service's School Health Education Programme (GESS-SHEP) is mandated to promote integrated

health education and services, including menstrual hygiene management, to complement formal education. This includes promoting a healthy, friendly, and conducive learning environment, good hygiene, and sanitation practices.

However, evidence shows that many public basic schools in Ghana lack adequate WASH facilities. A study by the Ghana Water and Sanitation Project revealed that over 40% of basic schools in Ghana do not have toilet facilities, and in cases where they exist, they are often in a deplorable state. Despite efforts to address these issues, such as improving access to WASH facilities and increasing hygienic awareness, more work needs to be done.

This brief assessed the availability of WASH facilities in public schools in Ghana, highlighting the gaps in WASH infrastructure and providing actionable policy recommendations for consideration by policymakers. Addressing these gaps will not only improve the health and well-being of girls but also be a significant step towards reducing gender inequality and promoting inclusive development.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on research conducted by young people, which assessed the effect of period poverty on the education and psychosocial well-being of adolescent girls and young women in Ghana. The study utilized a three-pronged approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. Firstly, 1183 adolescents and young people, including girls and boys between the ages of 10-24, were randomly selected from six districts in Ghana for quantitative data collection. The selected districts were Ashaiman (Greater Accra), Awutu Senya East, and Cape Coast Municipal (Central region), Sagnarigu and Savelugu Municipal (Northern region), and West Mamprusi (North East

region). Secondly, 54 key informant interviews were conducted, including 24 teachers from junior and senior high schools, 24 parents with wards in junior and senior high schools, and six health facilities across the study districts. Teachers, parents, and health facilities were selected purposively. Thirdly, four focus group discussions were held separately for boys and girls, with an average of 10-12 participants per group in the Ashaiman and Sagnarigu municipalities of the Greater Accra and Northern regions. Additionally, an extensive literature review was conducted, and relevant analysis was carried out.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS

Below are the key findings from the analysis of the data gathered.

1. Many public schools do not have adequate WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities and supportive environments for girls to menstruate freely. According to the findings, only 33% of the respondents reported the availability of separate washrooms and changing rooms for girls, while essential supplies like water, soap, and proper disposable bins are mostly lacking.

2. Although 98% of respondents reported practicing handwashing, some female students bemoaned inconsistent provision of water and detergents for a safe and dignified period in school.

3. Over 90% of respondents recognized the significance of having access to information and education on menstrual hygiene. Out of all the adolescent girls surveyed, 77% reported having knowledge about menstruation before experiencing their first menstrual cycle. However, it was found that having access to this information did not necessarily guarantee

a comprehensive understanding of menstruation, menstrual misconceptions and taboos, and menstrual hygiene management.

4. 39% of the respondents first got information about menstruation and Menstrual Hygiene Management from their teachers, followed by mothers (33%), friends, and peers (8.5%). Fathers

were among the least (0.1%) sources of menstrual information for adolescent girls.

5. Many respondents hold misconceptions about menstruation. For instance, 46% of respondents believe that menstruation is shameful and dirty, 80.1% consider it a women's issue only and 50.7% think it should not be discussed publicly.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Addressing adolescent period stigma requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates improved WASH facilities with comprehensive menstrual education. The lack of access to clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene facilities significantly impacts girls' attendance and academic engagement. Additionally, the absence of comprehensive menstrual education exacerbates the stigma and challenges surrounding menstruation, perpetuating a cycle of shame and exclusion. However, amidst these challenges, there are opportunities for transformative change. Prioritizing the

provision of adequate WASH facilities and implementing comprehensive menstrual education programs can create a conducive learning environment that empowers girls to thrive academically and socially. By doing so, we not only alleviate the immediate challenges faced by girls but also take a major step towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) **3** - Health and well-being for all, **4** - Quality Education, **5** - Gender Equality, and **6** - Clean water and sanitation.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by policymakers.

1. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, and Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies should enhance water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools. Every school must have separate washrooms and toilet facilities for boys and girls, as well as for male and female teachers. It is also necessary to provide changing rooms equipped with sufficient water for hand washing with soap and proper bins for collecting and disposing of menstrual waste. These measures will enable girls to have a safe and dignified period without any social stigma, enhance their school attendance, promote effective learning, and reduce the risk of infectious diseases.

2. The Ministry of Education should implement comprehensive menstrual health education programs in schools and increase public awareness and sensitization. This education will play an essential role in combating menstrual misconceptions and reducing discrimination and stigma surrounding menstruation in schools and the wider community. Furthermore, such education will be critical in fostering open

conversations about menstruation, promoting empathy, and creating a mutually supportive environment to enable girls to manage their menstrual cycles with dignity.

3. Civil Society and the media have an important role to play in ensuring that schools have adequate WASH facilities. They should collaborate to monitor schools and identify any WASH infrastructure deficits, and then use the data to advocate for improvements. By presenting accurate and reliable information, both civil society and the media can hold education stakeholders accountable and encourage them to prioritize the provision of WASH facilities in schools.

4. Civil society and the media should work together to promote education and awareness about reproductive health. This effort should focus on the role of families in providing menstrual hygiene management training to both male and female children. Targeted community programs and initiatives should involve parents, opinion leaders, boys and girls, and other relevant stakeholders. By increasing awareness, we can help to deepen understanding, eliminate stigmas and discriminatory practices, and encourage open conversations about menstruation.

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VISION

A Ghana where people's right and well-being are guaranteed.

MISSION

We work to promote good governance and equality of women and men in Ghana.

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