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An agency of the Aga Khan Development Network



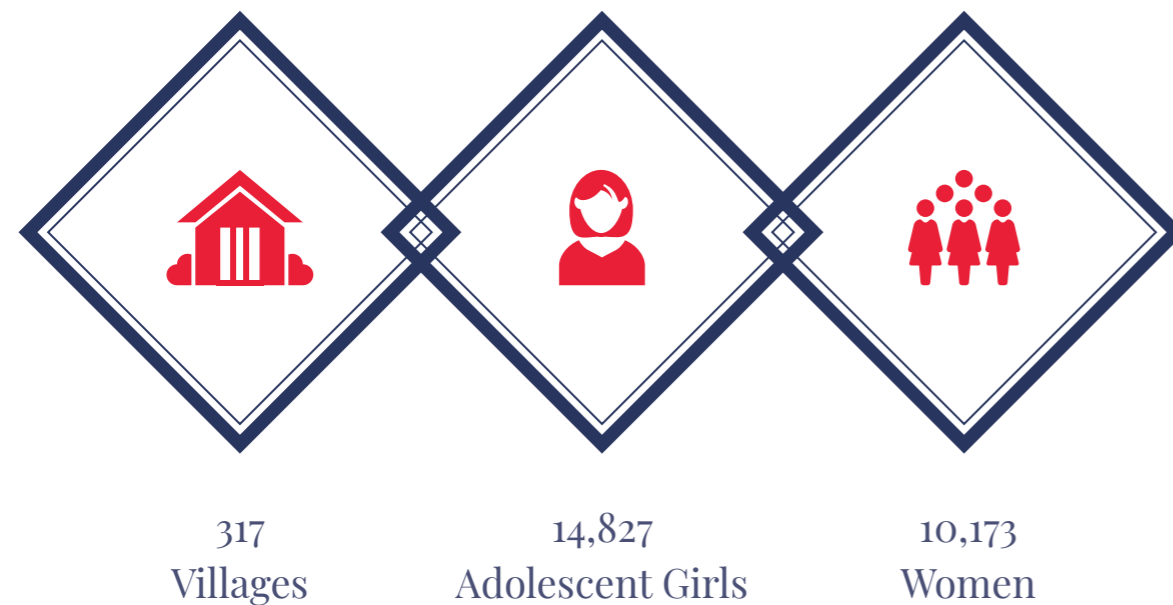
Menstrual Hygiene Management Programme

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS
TO IMPROVE THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE
THROUGH MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

A Background

In several parts of India, menstruation is a taboo subject; this ever-pervasive stigma is a product of the cultural myths and long-standing traditions in these regions. Many believe that a period is a sign of impurity or an omen of bad luck, which has led to a monthly pattern of secrecy and shame amongst women and girls. Women and girls are faced with restrictions at home and may not be allowed to partake in various activities at school, leading to increased isolation and low self esteem. The high level of stigmatization has produced an immense gap in knowledge about menstruation and the associated hygienic practices, which in turn has led to an ongoing cycle of increased health risks, absence from school and work, and loss of dignity.

In 2015, in response to the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan ("Clean India Mission"), The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) launched the Comprehensive Sanitation Initiative. The Initiative is a five-year programme aimed at facilitating access to improved sanitation and hygiene for over 700,000 people in six states in India. Its implementation is a collaboration of several AKDN agencies: the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH) and the Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS). A key component of this initiative is strengthening knowledge and practice of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) for women and girls in these states.



Objectives

Equip girls and women with the self confidence and self efficacy needed to address harmful socio cultural norms, manage their menstruation hygienically, and bring improvements in existing cultural norms and practices.

- Engage communities in making informed choices regarding menstrual absorbents, and facilitate access to these products
- Encourage community support to create an enabling environment around MHM and to address harmful socio-cultural norms
- Empower women and girls to discuss menstruation freely and to practice safe MHM without cultural or restrictive social and cultural practices
- Collaborate with governments and other stakeholders for better service and product delivery



Key Stakeholders



Adolescent girls and mothers

Those among whom change is intended

Objective: Understand why menstruation happens; and recognize the importance of maintaining hygiene. The aim is to enable them to talk freely without embarrassment and to have the confidence and agency to prioritize their health and well-being.



Teachers, Frontline workers, SHG members, and men

Those who influence the primary participants to adopt change

Objective: Are positively disposed to discuss MHM at home and in institutions and enable the creation of a supportive social environment. The aim is to ensure that they lead the change and help women and girls to address the social and systemic barriers.



Government Line Department

Those who create a conducive environment for change

Objective: The aim is to create a conducive environment and shared vision to prioritize MHM planning and budgeting. By facilitating linkages with government line departments, also ensure access to entitlements through various government schemes on health and nutrition.

BREAKING THE TABOO WITH

Practical Solutions

Addressing social/cultural practices and beliefs

Creating an enabling environment and empowering women and girls with agency and confidence to negotiate social barriers.

Enhancing product access

Fostering partnerships with local manufacturers, establishing linkages with SHG groups, and WCD to ensure product availability

Prioritizing Adolescent Health and Nutrition

Engaging closely with Health Department, and through the platform of Village Health Nutrition Days, and Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics

Addressing Waste Management

Promoting reusables to minimize waste generation, while also ensuring a menu of options. Addressing waste challenges in communities

Ensuring last mile reach on MHM

Capacitating front line health care workers to streamline MHM messaging in communities.

Prioritizing MHM Secure Schools

Creating MHM secure schools with access to emergency supply of products, trained nodal teachers, and access to soap and water in schools

Reaching in-school adolescent girls

Reaching out to in-school adolescent girls through the Meena Manch Platform to foster learning, and leadership skills

Context specific social and behavior change tools

Development of innovative participatory engagement tools, and field facilitators tool-kit to enable information dissemination

Engaging men in the conversation on Menstruation

Through door to door sensitization, engage with one on one discussions with men to seek their support towards women's health

Alternate financing for MHM

Enable SHG groups, and women's federations to use inter-loaning for product access and establish connect with local manufacturers.

Creating an enabling supportive environment

The programme focuses on creating a supportive social environment in the communities it works. This is done through a community-led integrated approach of menstrual hygiene promotion where age-appropriate messaging is imparted through the platform of women's self-help groups and adolescent girls' groups. These groups provide an environment of peer support, where beneficiaries can comfortably receive MHM training. Awareness sessions conducted in these groups provide an environment in which discussions can take place freely and problems can be addressed regularly with a trained facilitator. Topics discussed in these groups cover all aspects of the MHM value chain, including education on the natural process of menstruation, how to manage menstruation hygienically, the importance of tracking one's cycle, myths and taboos, types of hygienic absorbents, and proper disposal of menstrual waste.

As a part of the series of innovative approaches AKDN has implemented to disseminate MHM information to a wide range of audiences and age groups, they have created an interactive Menstrual Hygiene Management toolkit to provide facilitators with hands-on training materials and engaging tools to communicate with women and girls. The kit contains a flipbook that facilitators use as part of a 15 session course intended to spread awareness and facilitate discussions around the core themes of MHM in a sensitive and comfortable manner. The toolkit also contains interactive games, posters and menstrual product samples to deliver information through an engaging and hands-on method.

25,000 Women and Adolescent Girls Empowered to strengthen knowledge and practice on MHM



Capacity building of Government frontline health workers to deliver MHM messaging

Led by a request from the Government, Frontline health workers such as the Anganwadi and Asha workers undergo capacity building training on facilitating group discussions with women and girls. The frontline workforce cadre are trained on effective and sensitive facilitation skills, technical knowledge on Menstrual Hygiene Management. AKDN's MHM toolkits were developed in response to the need to further strengthen facilitators' knowledge and capacity to effectively disseminate MHM-related messaging.

1,854 Front line workers empowered to deliver MHM messaging in communities.

Creating MHM secure schools to reach out to In-School adolescent girls

In schools, AKDN is regularizing MHM hygiene promotion, and empowering student committees and adolescent girls' groups to drive these changes forward amongst their peers. In addition to strengthening the platform of adolescent girl groups, AKDN is also sensitizing teachers to be able to deliver routine awareness sessions for young girls in these schools. AKDN is also working to develop MHM secure schools by ensuring access to emergency supply of products in schools, trained nodal teachers, empowered adolescent girl groups and access to soap and water.

Over 4,586 Teachers supported to prioritize MHM sessions in schools



Facilitating informed product choice and providing a menu of options to women and girls

AKDN agencies have conducted assessments in various geographies to understand local preferences and other factors affecting menstrual product choice including cultural, socioeconomic and environmental considerations. A few pilot initiatives are in progress to determine which products are most beneficial for a particular area and how access to these products can be facilitated. A series of interviews held in Wankaner, Gujarat and Samastipur, Bihar showed a clear preference in both locations for reusable cloth pads as the main menstrual management product. The vast majority of the girls surveyed did not know what menstruation was prior to their menarche, and those who were informed about it usually were taught by their mothers.

Due to the wide variety of factors affecting hygienic management, women and girls are educated on a range of menstrual products available and how to use them. Conscious of economic constraints when purchasing menstrual products and the environmental impact of non-compostable, disposable sanitary napkins, facilitators are trained to provide sufficient information on affordable products, safe and hygienic disposal methods, and the environmental benefits of using reusable or compostable sanitary products.

AKDN agencies have formed partnerships with organisations such as Eco-femme, Wonder Wings, Unipads, and others and are today cumulatively ensuring access to reusable products for over 6500 women and girls.

AKF supported Women's federations in Gujarat are also leading the charge on MHM in their neighboring villages.

Convergence with existing government initiatives to facilitate access to products and foster linkages with adolescent health and nutrition

As part of the MHM initiative, project teams are also in close liaison with government departments such as the ICDS department, Department of School Education and Literacy and with the functionaries of the health department to facilitate access to products at the Anganwadi and schools. Women and girls supported by AKF in Madhya Pradesh, are today demanding for product access in public hearings, leading to the revival of 'Udita Corners' in Angandwadi centers in Madhya Pradesh.

In Gujarat and Bihar, AKF is also forging close linkages with Health Department, and are working to revive adolescent health friendly clinics to facilitate access for young girls to gain access to Iron supplementation and other health and nutrition related services.

AKDN efforts have ensured revival of MHM absorbents at Udita Corners in select Anganwadi Centres in Madhya Pradesh. AKF has also been successful in streamlining availability in select Anganwadi Centres in Mangrol and Wankaner Blocks of Gujarat.

In Gujarat, and Bihar, AKF is also working with the Health Department to revive Arogya Swasthya Clinics for adolescent girls.



Community led volunteerism model emerging to sustain gains made through MHM

A model of community volunteerism is now emerging in programme geographies of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, wherein younger adolescent girls, and empowered SHG women members (known as Sachet Didi in MP, and Swachata Sakhi in Gujarat) are taking forward MHM work on their own and neighboring villages, having realized the importance of these sessions and the difference it has made in their lives.

35 Sachet Didis in Madhya Pradesh and 40 Swachata Sakhi's are active in Gujarat, leading the work on MHM on their own in their villages as community change agents.

Engaging men and boys in the conversation to address social and systemic barriers

Men can contribute towards changing cultural norms and challenging the taboos around menstruation, and are involved in decisions relating to women's menstrual hygiene needs. Mindful of this, as part of the MHM initiative, AKDN teams are also conducting door to door sensitization, and are proactively engaging in one on one discussions with men to seek their support towards women's health.

Efforts have resulted in greater prioritization of monthly expenses towards women's health, a lessening of restrictions placed at home during this time, and greater support towards young women for continuing their school education.

Today men, either as school headmasters, Panchayat leaders, or as husbands and fathers are creating a supportive environment for women and girls to practice their menstruation with dignity, privacy and safety.

Using alternate financing to strengthen product access

Mindful of several challenges with accessing products at village level, AKF has also supported several entrepreneurial led models, training SHG women to be involved manufacturing of menstrual absorbents, using locally available resources. Several of these groups have pooled together their resources and are today directly purchasing absorbents from local manufacturers, and re-selling them in their communities at affordable prices.

7 Self help group federations across Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are driving MHM work on the ground, and ensuring product access in their communities, having fostered key partnerships with local vendors.



Key Results



The Aga Khan Foundation brings together human, financial and technical resources to some of the poorest and most marginalised communities with an emphasis on women and girls, investing in human potential, expanding opportunity and improving quality of life.