

## Policy Brief

### Title: Empowering Hygiene through Action Practices

#### Background

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan. Unfortunately, around 60-70 per cent children in Balochistan the primary and secondary age group are reported to be out of school. According to UNICEF report more girls than boys are out of school: 78 and 63 per cent respectively. Adolescent girls and young girls are facing several health and hygiene issues in Balochistan.

**“Kachhi District, Balochistan - February 2018:** “I stopped going to school last year as there was no washroom, water or electricity in the one I used to attend,” says Sumaira (12), a fourth-grade student at Government Girls Community Model School in the village of Rind Ali. “Made up of only two rooms, the school building was not good at all. As a result, I stayed at home for a full one year.”

The main factor affecting the mental well-being and performance due to poor Menstrual Hygiene Management. Poor Menstrual Hygiene Management Out of the population of Pakistan, about 22% or 42 million are girls in the school-going age bracket of 10-19 years implying that most of them have started menstruating. However out of these, according to a research by Afshan Bhatti presented at the South Asian Conference for Sanitation, 79% do not have access to the required facilities to manage their menstrual cycle hygienically whether it is access to proper products, or access to proper sanitation and disposal facilities. This means that approximately an astonishing 33 million girls in Pakistan struggle every month to manage a biological process that if not handled properly can have important implications for their sexual and reproductive health as well as their self-esteem and body image.

A study on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in Balochistan highlights several key findings and issues faced by adolescent girls. This research was part of a broader initiative by the Real Medicine Foundation and UNICEF, aimed at understanding and improving menstrual health and hygiene practices among school-aged girls. The study found that a significant portion of girls in Balochistan lacked proper education and resources for managing menstruation. Many girls reported not receiving any formal education on menstruation at school, with mothers and sisters often being the primary sources of information, though their knowledge was sometimes inadequate. Common issues identified included insufficient access to sanitary products, inadequate sanitation facilities at schools, and prevalent cultural taboos surrounding menstruation. These challenges often led to girls missing school during their periods, which affected their overall educational experience and retention rates.

Even if girls attend school, lack of comfortable material can affect their participation including hesitance when answering questions, fear of being teased by their classmates for staining their clothes or smelling. The ever-present brown paper bag, perfectly positioned in all grocery store aisles alongside sanitary products, seeks to reinforce this taboo, even making the associated products seem like something “dirty” or “shameful”. Even if girls try to break out of this stigma, the society never fails to police them and more often than not it is fellow women who show these reactions confirming the deep rooted internalised

1 <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/stories/unicef-eu-supported-balochistan-basic-education-program-brings-girls-back-school>

2 [https://realmedicinefoundation.org/initiative\\_report/pages-initiative-reports-pakistan-new-menstrual-health-management-study-launched-in-balochistan/](https://realmedicinefoundation.org/initiative_report/pages-initiative-reports-pakistan-new-menstrual-health-management-study-launched-in-balochistan/)

3 <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxooof256/files/menstrual-hygiene-management-snapshot---pakistan.pdf>

misogyny present in our society. Apart from this their psychosocial wellbeing is affected with 69% of girls reporting feelings of shame, embarrassment and insecurity during their cycle according to a study conducted on effects of poor menstrual hygiene management on school girls in rural Uganda. Presence of negative effects on psycho-social wellbeing such as lack of confidence were also confirmed in a study by Hannagan and Montgomery on MHM in low income countries.

Inadequate Materials and Facilities Only 17% of Pakistani girls have access to sanitary napkins, with 66% using cloth, 49% of whom rewash and reuse this cloth according to a study by WaterAid UNICEF on schoolgirls in South Asia. This is because of the high price of commercially available products (minimum Rs.100 for 8 pads) and lack of awareness regarding their importance due to which they are considered luxury items.

Despite it being a normal biological process, menstruation is considered a taboo topic in most countries around the world. This taboo is especially pronounced in some countries like Pakistan due to the strong patriarchal culture, religious implications as the Quran addresses it as a state of impurity with women required to abstain from activities like fasting and praying as well as beliefs adopted from the Hindu culture where a menstruating woman is considered extremely impure and required to stay away from the kitchen, temples and plants during her cycle or in some extreme cases even admonished to a separate quarter. Hence, these matters are not brought to the limelight because women are not comfortable bringing up these issues with their closest family members let alone articulating them in the public domain. Hence it is difficult for policy makers and researchers to uncover the extent of period poverty and discover the issues that plague millions of women every month.

Because of this taboo surrounding menstruation, there are a number of popular myths and a lack of knowledge amongst these young girls regarding very basic aspects of MHM. This includes information regarding the duration after which they should replace their products or how to clean and dispose these properly, with the myth that they should not bathe during their cycle being the most common. For 98% of girls the only avenue of information are their mothers according to a study by Ali et al. These mothers themselves lack adequate information and may rush through the topic due to the shame associated. Therefore when girls face issues related to their periods such as abnormal bleeding they have no official avenue available to seek help.

## **Call to Actions**

### **Foster Awareness Programs and Community Engagement:**

- Launch awareness campaigns focused on health and hygiene, targeting adolescents, parents, and educators.
- Encourage community engagement to break cultural taboos and promote open discussions around reproductive health (MHM).
- Announce government campaigns on MHM in public/private schools
- Engagement of teachers in awareness raising

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