

Investigating the Perceptions and Barriers to Menstrual Hygiene Management in Zambia

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Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is a major issue affecting the health and educational achievement of women and girls of reproductive age. This exploratory study seeks to understand the barriers and perceptions of MHM throughout Zambia to address the health and sanitation needs of women and girls. The findings of this study will be applied to World Vision Zambia's (WV Zambia) inclusion of MHM in future water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) activities.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in southern (Choma), northern (Kasama) and central (Chongwe) regions in Zambia. Female students (older than age 12 who have reached puberty); male students (grades eight and nine); teachers; and sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition coordinators were interviewed, as well as parents and community hygiene promoters. A qualitative analysis identified key themes related to knowledge; practices; beliefs; and challenges related to MHM, and WV Zambia's WASH program activities were reviewed.

A total of 306 people were interviewed. Findings demonstrated a need for resources, including emergency supplies for management of menstruation; bathing facilities in schools; and an overall desire to educate girls and women in the community about MHM. Initial findings identified a discrepancy between the knowledge base of girls and the information reportedly taught in schools by teachers. The lack of knowledge about MHM; community support; and supplies contributes to school absenteeism; unhealthy MHM practices; and uncomfortable feelings among school girls.

To improve the ability of women and girls to practise safe and sanitary MHM, WV Zambia's WASH activities should include sensitising community women to MHM, increasing gender-specific discussions within schools and creating mentoring groups for school girls to ensure that MHM skills and accurate knowledge are being taught. Emergency supplies should be made available to school girls and secure, private bathing facilities should be constructed near toilets to allow for safe, hygienic MHM practices while at school.