

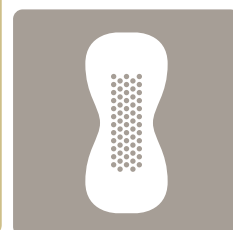


WaterAid/Ranita Roy

Boosting business: why investing in water, sanitation and hygiene pays off

Menstrual health
and hygiene

Learning brief



WaterAid

Context

These learnings and insights have been drawn from the Boosting business research project which is focused on measuring the return on investment (ROI) and other business benefits of improving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and behaviours in the workplace and employees' communities. It spans four countries and ten workplace settings, including factory/ manufacturing, as well as field-based contexts.

The main insights for menstrual health and women's health in this brief have been drawn from tea estates in Darjeeling, India, three ready-made garment (RMG) factories in Bangladesh and three leather tanneries in India.

● Sheela Chettri, a peer educator in WaterAid's programme on menstrual health and hygiene, creates a cloth sanitary pad. Darjeeling district, India. November 2021.



WaterAid/Ranita Roy

1 Women's health in your business

What is menstrual health and hygiene?

Menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) refers to the management of hygiene associated with menstrual health. Globally, around 52% of women and girls (26% of the total population)¹ is of reproductive age. Most of these women and girls will menstruate each month for between two and seven days.

Even though this is a natural process, it is considered taboo in many parts of the world. Women's health and menstruation is often forgotten by businesses, making it difficult for employees to manage their periods at work. This can result in health problems including urinary and reproductive tract infections as well as a wider impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Globally, women make up 51.6% of the workforce, compared to 94.6% of men (24–56 years).² Women need somewhere private, clean and secure to change sanitary cloths or pads; clean water and soap for washing their hands, bodies and reusable cloths; and facilities for safely disposing of used materials.

If using a reusable cloth, there should be the option to clean and store the material, or a discreet way for women to transport used cloths home, such as a waterproof sealed bag.

Why is MHH critical for your business?

Women make up large numbers of workforces across the globe, especially in agricultural and apparel sectors, so it is essential that businesses have water, sanitation and hygiene in place for them to be happy, healthy and productive at work. Without these resources and facilities, businesses are likely to be affected by absenteeism, sickness, lack of productivity, low retention levels, increased stress and low moral both within and towards the workplace.

Without a MHH supportive workplace, a typical working environment may (unintentionally) discriminate against women employees. This would mean:

- limited or no female-friendly toilets;
- lack of safe, effective menstrual materials and/or products;
- lack of awareness about menstrual health hygiene (which impacts women's health);
- lack of appropriate sanitary product disposal methods;
- limited information, awareness and support relating to MHH in the workplace and within management;
- lack of allegiance to the workplace.

1. WaterAid (no date). *Menstrual hygiene matters*. Available at: washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/menstrual-hygiene-matters (accessed 21 Jul 2022).

2. International Labour Organization (no date). *Labour statistics on women*. Available at: ilostat.ilo.org/topics/women/ (accessed 21 Jul 2022).

Women in the field

In agricultural industries, women make up a large part of the workforce. India is the second largest exporter of tea globally and the tea industry employs more than 1.2 million people – 40% of whom are women.³

Specific challenges:

- Field and agriculture work often means there are large acres of land, often over challenging terrain, where access to toilet and hygiene facilities is difficult.
- It is more challenging to enable employees to access information, such as posters, audio queues and a lack of places to gather in support groups.

“Certain myths and superstitions are there, and we have learned about facts about MHH through WaterAid, so it’s our responsibility to deliver it to everyone so that everyone knows and adopts the appropriate behaviour during menstruation, and I am happy doing it.”

Rashmi Tiwari, Tannery employee, India

Women in the factory

Globally, 80% of garment employees are women.⁴ Bangladesh’s RMG sector holds huge economic potential and accounts for 83% of the country’s total export earnings.⁵ Over 3.31 million people work in this sector, and 46.18% are women.⁶

Specific challenges:

- Factory settings are often target-driven, therefore the workplace culture doesn’t facilitate women to feel comfortable enough to leave their stations to use the facilities.
- There is a high turnover of staff in RMG factories, therefore MHH training needs to be routine and frequent.



3. Tea Board India (2020). *66th Annual Report 2019-2020*. Available at: teaboard.gov.in/pdf/ANNUAL_REPORT_FINAL_2019_2020_pdf3759.pdf (accessed 30 May 2022).
4. Clean Clothes Campaign (no date). *Gender: Women workers mistreated*. Available at: cleanclothes.org/issues/gender (accessed 21 Jul 2022).
5. BGMEA (2020). *About Garment Industry of Bangladesh*. Available at: bgmea.com.bd/page/AboutGarmentsIndustry (accessed 21 Jul 2022).
6. Prothom Alo (2019). *Women workforce declining in RMG sector*. Available at: en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/iruo8hfxyb (accessed 21 Jul 2022).

MHH facilities

Facilities are essential for a menstrual health positive workplace. Women, girls and transgender or gender non-binary people who menstruate must have a clean, private and safe place to wash and change their sanitary cloths or pads, to wash and dry them effectively, and a place to dispose of used materials.

Tools for success

Female-friendly toilets

Sex-segregated toilets offer a safe, hygienic and private place for workers to manage their periods with dignity. WASH for Work Hygiene Protocol advises that toilets and urinals must be provided at a rate of two toilet seats and two urinal facilities per 45 male employees, and four toilet seats per 50 female employees. These toilets should include access to toilet paper, handwashing facilities, soap and a sanitary disposal method. It should also include menstrual products via a vending machine or have products to use for free.

Disposal management

Safe management of menstrual waste refers to the disposal and treatment of used menstrual products in a manner that does not cause harm to women, girls and transgender or gender non-binary people who menstruate and/or those who are directly involved in managing menstrual waste; as well as to the environment (in terms of land, air and water sources).

Limited access to safe and acceptable disposal solutions for menstrual products adversely affects women in several ways:

- Extended and unhygienic use of menstrual products (i.e., women use menstrual products for longer than recommended, women may not change their menstrual materials during work hours).

- Anxiety about the stigma associated with menstruation and menstrual blood, staining clothes, changing and discarding menstrual products in work.
- Increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (especially if disposal solutions are not easily accessible).
- Missing work days during menstruation.
- Unsafe disposal practices (e.g., throwing used products in the toilet, in the open or in local water bodies, shallow burial, open burning, unhygienic storage of used pads).

When menstrual waste is not disposed of correctly, it also has a direct impact on the environment. Failing to provide a menstrual waste disposal method results in toilets being blocked or menstrual waste being mixed up with community and land waste, posing environmental and human health risks. It is also important to manage the waste appropriately and separately to other waste in the workplace. Menstrual products should be discarded in waste containers that are lined with an appropriate bag, such as plastic, to avoid people coming into direct contact with them.

MHH workshops with workplace management, cleaners and employees should include awareness of how and why menstrual products need to be disposed of discreetly, safely and sustainably. We recommend businesses reach out to local waste and hygiene organisations and councils to ensure the menstrual waste is removed and treated suitably. The availability of waste management services may affect the preference of sanitary product materials. For example, in the tea estates in Darjeeling, reusable sanitary pads were preferred as a way to overcome the waste disposal challenges.

Sheela Chettri is a peer educator in WaterAid's programme on MHH. Darjeeling district, India. November 2021.



WaterAid/Ranita Roy

MHH facilities in the field

- A lack of toilets in the field environment poses a problem. One way this has been overcome in our pilot projects was the set-up of a neighbourhood toilet network within the community. Now, no matter where women are working in the field, they have a toilet close by that is open to employees.
- The disposal of menstrual waste is another obstacle in a field working environment. Without a disposal method, women don't change their menstrual products as often as needed, which leads to health risks. Or they dispose of menstrual waste in nearby fields, ponds or community compost, which not only impacts the environment, but also causes stress and anxiety for women. One way to overcome this issue is to promote and raise awareness of reusable menstrual products, as they not only benefit the environment but also the health of employees.

Sheela Chettri lives near the tea plantation where many of the men and women in her community work. After taking part in the MHH workshop, Sheela began making reusable pads for women in her community. **"I made inner layers out of old cotton,"** she says. The waterproof layer was a little harder to source.

"I was not able to find any good fabric, so I decided to improvise," she says, showing a well-crafted pad she had recently made. **"I re-used the fabric from an old umbrella instead! Presently, I handle four to five orders a month. Each pad can be reused for at least two years!"**

Sheela Chettri, a peer educator on MHH, tea estate in India

MHH facilities in the factory

- Sex-segregated toilets provide women factory employees with a safe, hygienic and private place to manage their periods.
- Affordable menstrual products in the workplace means women can manage their periods and are less likely to take time off.
- A sustainable menstrual waste disposal system will ensure menstrual waste does not get mixed up with community waste or impact the environment.



"The best support, I would say, is the sanitary pad vending machine. We get sanitary pads at a very reasonable price.

Many of my friends working with me were suffering from menstrual issues.

Now they are doing much better once I advised them to use a sanitary pad. In our training session, we also learned how to maintain menstrual hygiene."

Roksana Khatun, Factory employee, Bangladesh

- Roksana Khatun regularly gets her sanitary pads from an automated machine at her workplace. Narayanganj, Bangladesh. October 2021.

MHH education

Creating a safe space where those who menstruate can speak openly is critical to understanding menstruation, how to take care of bodies during periods, and to tackle the taboos and misconceptions surrounding menstruation. It is important that those attending the sessions can then feel informed to make their own decisions and choices on what materials to use for menstruation based on the context of their lives.

Tools for success:

MHH workshops

MHH workshops raise awareness of the menstrual cycle and how to take care of your body. They also seek to address taboos and stigma around menstruation. These sessions should be repeated regularly to capture new recruits and refresh previous attendees. These workshops should consider the materials commonly used by women and for the employees to feel supported to make an informed choice based on context and preference.

Women should have access to quality materials or products and be provided information on how to use and dispose of them safely, along with the facilities to do so. In the RMG factory, for example, sanitary pads were shown to be the most available MHH material at the factory after the intervention, whereas previously garments and cloths (known as 'jhut') were the most used.

Change agents and peer to peer support

Key members of staff that have gone through the MHH training can become representatives for MHH in the workplace and offer advice to others when needed. These agents should be paid to do this work. Peer to peer support groups are also encouraged to create a space for women to discuss MHH. We have seen this successfully help to promote messages on hygiene and sanitation in our projects. It is important for men to be educated on MHH too, so they are fully aware of the issues surrounding women's health.

MHH promotion in the field

- Tap into existing networks and programmes to help raise awareness of MHH.
- Placing visual and audio cues in the community setting to remind employees and the surrounding community of good hygiene practices.

MHH promotion in the factory

- Audio messages and announcements in the factory remind employees of good hygiene practices. Materials in the factory or on walls mean employees take these learnings back to their communities.
- High staff turnover means MHH sessions should be repeated to keep up with new workforce.



"These sessions helped us decipher some of the regular problems many of us faced, like itchiness during periods.

Lack of hygiene is the most possible cause for vaginal infections and uterine problems.

No absorbent, cloth or sanitary pad, should be used for more than six hours."

Kavita Devi, Production line worker, India

4 Results and success

Implementing MHH in the workplace has resulted in some key successes. The top results based on our pilot projects were as follows:

Reduction in absences

Workplaces saw a reduction in absences from work, as employees had a private and safe place to change, wash and manage their periods.

“We had a toilet made of bamboo, which had a long queue with factory-going men and women. Many of the girls from my factory had the same problem. Then finally we get a toilet in our community, running water and a handwashing station in our factory. We become happy. This is a massive relief for us that we do not have to stand in a queue for hours. Now I do not lose any more money for my absenteeism.”

Moushumi Akter, Textile worker, Bangladesh

Sickness and health

The knowledge of MHH helped reduce WASH-related diseases in the workplace. The frequency of women employees at the RMG factories in Bangladesh changing their sanitary materials within six hours or less improved to 84% compared to 53.7% at baseline, with 98% of employees reporting that they felt comfortable to change MHH materials in the factory toilets. The increased facilities for women as well as an awareness of how often sanitary products should be changed, helps lower health risks.

Wellbeing

A supportive menstrual health environment for women in the workplace helps to reduce the stigma around talking about periods. The facilities enable women to feel a sense of dignity when managing their periods, which creates an underlying of alliance to their workplace and an empowering sense of change for women.

Increased productivity

Having accessible facilities and a sense of being cared for by the workplace saw productivity and quality of work rise amongst employees. In our pilot programme in RMG factories, on average across the three factories, absenteeism decreased by 16% whilst productivity rose 12% and quality of work rose 40%. Not all these results can be directly and solely attributed to MHH, however improvements in productivity can be linked by MHH.



“The support and guidance have helped me to understand the importance of being well. For example, we have never used sanitary pads before. Once WaterAid installed the vending machine, we understood the importance of menstrual hygiene.

Now we get our monthly pad by the touch of our ID card, which is very reasonable. It has saved us at least a thousand takas monthly which we spent on treatment. I also suffered from a urinal infection.

Every month I had to go to the doctor, which cost us a lot of money. Since I started using the pad, I have not felt more confident and do not feel sick.”

Minara Akter, Factory supervisor, Bangladesh

Workplace culture

Implementing MHH infrastructures, such as female-friendly toilets, is a positive step within the workplace. However, this should work alongside awareness, behaviour change campaigns and a culture where employees feel comfortable using these facilities during work hours. The infrastructure must go hand in hand with behavioural change.

For MHH to be a success, it is essential for employees to feel they can visit the toilet when needed. This heightens a sense of workplace dignity and enables employees who are women to gain a sense of alliance to their workplace, which in turn improves retention.

Celebration of key dates

Recognise key dates, such as Menstrual Hygiene Day and International Women's Day, with posters and events to increase awareness and boost morale in the workplace.

● A celebration of Menstrual Hygiene Day at an RMG factory in Bangladesh. October 2021.



WaterAid/Md. Nazmul Islam

6 Community effect

The impact of MHH training reaches beyond the workplace and is also felt across the wider community. The trainings improve knowledge of MHH, which can be put into practice by households.

"I am sending my son to a local school and providing for his better education. The money I had to spend for medical reasons is now going to my son's education. This has happened as we have water supply and sanitation."

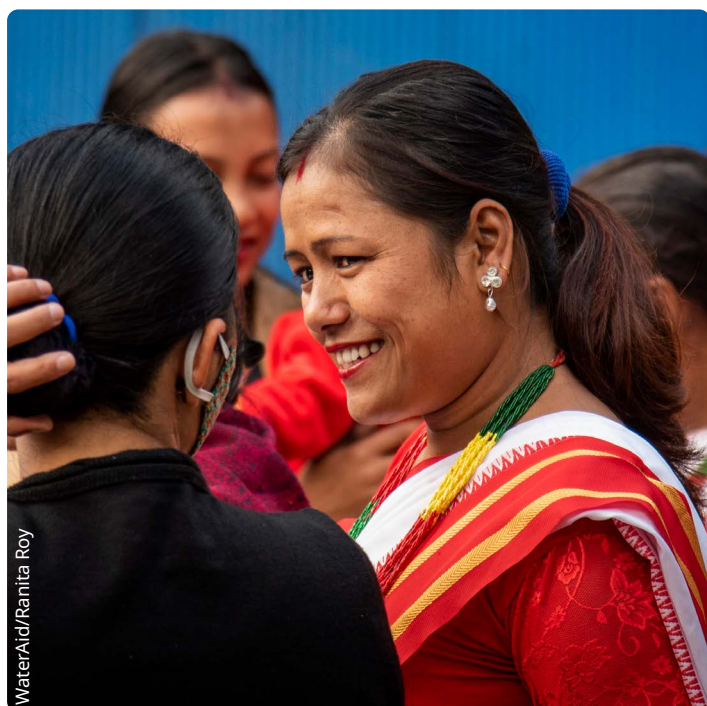
Moushumi Akter, Factory employee, Bangladesh

"Now, I talk about anything with anyone, I don't feel embarrassed at all!"

Mamta Biswa, a peer educator on menstrual hygiene in her village. West Bengal, India. November 2021.



WaterAid/Eabeha Monir



WaterAid/Ranita Roy

Mamta Biswa works at a tea estate in West Bengal and also attended hygiene sessions to learn about managing her periods.

Mamta is now a peer educator on menstrual hygiene in her village, **"I feel my biggest job has been to normalise talking about menstruation and reproductive health problems in my community!"** she says.

"I talk to all my neighbours about sustainable menstrual health management practices. And they often come to me for advice. I have personally learnt so much from these trainings!"

Mamta she says that once she had broken the silence, as well as the taboos associated with menstruation, she began to feel freer than ever before.



Front cover image: Kareena Tamang and Anamika Chettri talk with Mamta and her daughters, Smriti and Kriti, about environmentally sustainable cloth sanitary pads. West Bengal, India. November 2021.

WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.

Zakia Sultana and her family are happy that the new WASH facilities have transformed life in their community. Narayanganj, Bangladesh. October 2021.

Everyone, everywhere has a human right to water, sanitation and hygiene – at home, in the community and at work.

Acknowledgements

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