

Knowledge and experience of MANAGING MENSTRUATION



This is the summary of key findings and detailed analysis from the Gender & Social Inclusion Baseline for the New Times, New Targets project to improve sustainable and inclusive access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and facilities with 22 schools, 8 clinics and in 60 rural communities in West Guadalcanal Province in rural Solomon Islands.

Survey Tool	Respondents	AGE			
		Over 50	35 - 50	20 - 35	Below 20
MHM – Women	134 women interviewed	1.5% (2)	25% (33)	58% (77)	15.5% (20)
MHM – Men	73 men were interviewed	8.2% (5)	32.9% (24)	53.4% (38)	5.5% (4)

MHM - School Bottleneck Analysis 19 schools surveyed *Head Teacher, and focus groups with teachers and parents*
222 female students interviewed **202 male students interviewed**

3 KEY FINDINGS:

- ▶ Only 9.3% of women with disabilities, and 12% of non-disabled women surveyed have easy access to safe toilet. Only 21% have easy access to a bathing facility. Therefore, women face access barriers to managing their menstruation hygienically.
- ▶ 52% of women stated that they “still have questions or worries about menstruation.” Some 75% of women and 63% of men have incorrect perceptions on the danger of menstrual blood. Approximately 50% of men consider menstruation as a kind of disease.
- ▶ 48% of women learned about menstruation from their mothers, 45% from aunties or other family members, 26% from friends. 53% only learned about it when they got their first period.
- ▶ Most men learn about menstruation from their wife/girlfriend (56%), their friends (19%) or a health worker (19%).
- ▶ 18% of women felt that can and should do anything they want during menstruation, while other women preferred not to do heavy housework (28%), garden (19%), or play sport or walk long distances (10%). 28% said they should stay home from work, and 28% mentioned they should not go into the taro/yam gardens. 21% of female students surveyed avoided school entirely during menstruation.
- ▶ Some 58% of men felt there were no restrictions on women during menstruation. 26% of men mentioned “Other” restrictions – the most common was not going into the taro/yam gardens.
- ▶ Only 16% women had seen reusable pads. 50% of women prefer commercial sanitary pads, and 50% prefer to use cut-up cloth, even if they have money to purchase commercial pads. 17% preferred to use reusable pads. Four women preferred a menstrual cup. Only 16% women had used or seen reusable pads.

Current capacity to manage menstruation hygienically and with dignity

Globally, women suffer from a lack of adequate and correct knowledge about menstruation, compounded by some restrictive, denigrating traditional beliefs, taboos, a common perception that menstruation needs to be kept secret from men and a lack of supportive infrastructure both in homes and institutions. Of the 134 women surveyed regarding menstrual hygiene management, **only 37% said they had useful knowledge about managing menstruation**, and 25% said they didn't at all. **53% learned about MHM only when experiencing their first period.** Most women learnt about MHM via mothers and other female relatives.

Over 50% of women responded that they wished they knew more about menstruation, with the majority of women expressing worries (32%) between the ages of 20 and 35. **53% of female respondents said they were unprepared for their first period. 56% of men learn about menstruation from wives or girlfriends.** There is therefore much scope for education about MHM, within both communities and especially schools, in order for younger people to be more informed.

Sixty-nine per cent (69%) of women responded that menstruation should not affect their daily lives, but the survey shows that, in fact, menstruation does affect them in a number of ways – in the need for pain management (14% reported experiencing a lot of pain, 78% reported a little bit of pain), and time away from work or school. 73% of women who reported experiencing pain during menstruation don't do anything, rest or use some hot water – with only 17% using pain medicine such as paracetamol.

The survey showed that **many women choose to not do heavy work during their periods. 88% miss one to three days' work because of menstruation. 21% of female students surveyed avoided school entirely during menstruation.** For many, the general lack of access to WASH facilities is a problem for MHM, with women and girls needing to take time off from work or school to manage menstruation. The NTNT baseline survey showed that only one out of the 19 schools surveyed had some form of MHM facilities, and no schools had the means of adequate disposal or sanitary bins for used sanitary products.

88% of women surveyed miss one to three days' work because of menstruation

21% of female students surveyed avoided school entirely during menstruation



Changing knowledge, attitudes and practices of women and men related to MHM

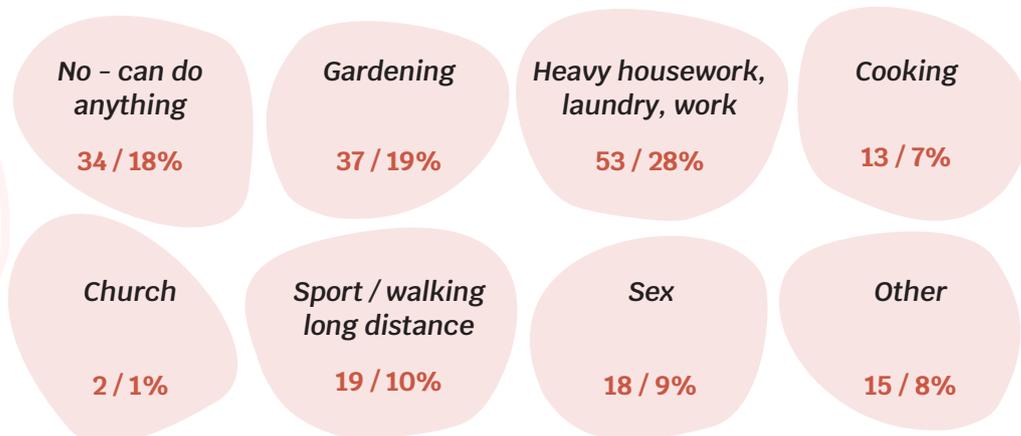
The NTNT baseline survey showed that levels of knowledge about menstrual hygiene management are reasonable but need improvement. It is notable that in the NTNT baseline survey **50% of men agree that menstruation is a kind of sickness**. These results are ambiguous, as men might be responding to the fact that menstruation sometimes makes women feel sick. **Almost 70% of men and women also believe menstrual blood is dirty or dangerous**.

The 2016 study titled *The Last Taboo* study revealed that in Solomon Islands, many taboos and traditional beliefs about MHM result in community members believing menstruation should be kept secret, creating practical problems, such as the need to hide the washing of stained clothing. There is also the belief that menstruating women can bring bad luck, therefore restricting women from community activities, in particular, food gathering. Some religious institutions have also restricted activities/attendance for menstruating women^{#1}. In the NTNT baseline survey, only 26% of men and 28% of women agreed that women should reduce work during menstruation. **Some 88% of the women surveyed preferred to keep their menstruation a secret from other male family members, and 46% of women said they had experienced some teasing by boys or men**.

59% of men said that there should be no restriction on what women can do during menstruation.

Women identified 191 things they preferred not to do during menstruation – the most common were gardening and other heavy work (see below).

Are there things you prefer not to do when you are menstruating?



70% of women said that there were “advantages” to menstruation for girls and women. The advantages listed were all related to reproductive health – with 62% concerning the release of dirty blood from the body, 25% saying menstruation indicated that a woman could have children (with possibility of marriage), and 13% saying menstruation proved they were not pregnant. These responses are not technically “advantages” but triangulates the finding that 70% of women believe that menstrual blood is dirty. They also demonstrate the need for continued education to show that the commencement of menstruation shouldn’t be linked with suitability for pregnancy or marriage.

^{#1} *The Last Taboo: Research on Menstrual Hygiene Management in the Pacific*, International women’s Development Agency, 2016.

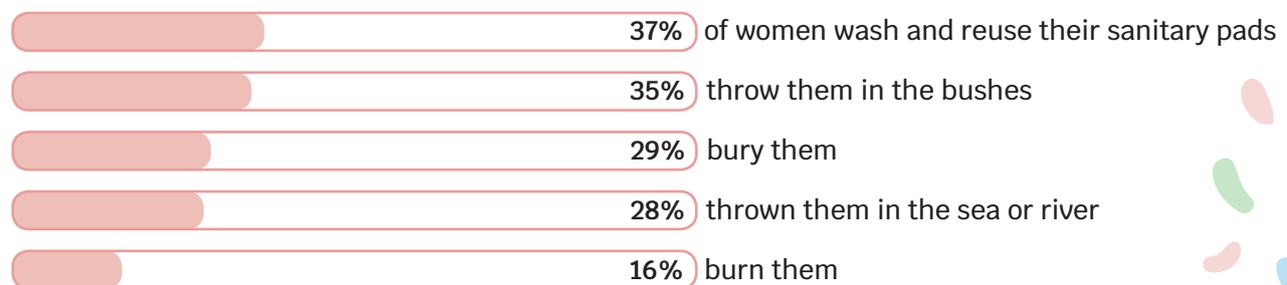
Access to and affordability of sanitary pads

A lack of suitable sanitary materials, primarily sanitary pads, can mean women's withdrawal from work, school, church and other community activities. The NTNT baseline survey results indicate that **just over half (53%) of the women prefer for commercial disposable sanitary pads and 46% prefer re-usable materials like cut-up cloth.**

48% of women bought sanitary pads in past month and 45% said funds or availability of materials are lacking, meaning that much of the time women are using home-made or improvised solutions. Some 59% of the women surveyed had purchased disposable sanitary pads from a shop in the past 6 months, with 64% saying that at times they have wanted to purchase them but been unable to do so. A limited cash flow (and/or poor household budgeting) can hinder women's ability to purchase sanitary pads^{#2}. **Some 63% of women said that they often didn't have enough money to buy disposable pads in a shop.**

A separate WASH Market Analysis commissioned by the project in December 2019, found that "Softex^{#3} was available in virtually every village canteen [visited], as well as retailers and wholesalers." The Market Analysis also states that "Women reported being satisfied with the value-for-money of [Softex], meaning the performance and benefit weighted against cost. Canteen owners, retailers, and wholesalers agreed; some had stocked other brands previously but as they did not sell they discontinued offering them."

Disposal of sanitary material in environmentally appropriate ways is also an issue that needs addressing.



Adequate disposal methods will alleviate pollution of bush and sea, while the provision of sanitary bins and appropriate washing facilities will help with issues of privacy and dignity, especially in schools.

The project is an Australian aid initiative implemented by Plan International Australia in partnership with Live & Learn Environmental Education on behalf of the Australian Government.



^{#2} Do No Harm: Integrating the Elimination of Violence Against Women in Women's Economic Empowerment Programming Briefing Note, International Women's Development Agency, 2018

^{#3} Softex – is the brand of disposable sanitary pads available in the Project area.