

Save the Children: Puberty Education and Menstrual Hygiene Management

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There are 1.8 billion young people in the world today, half of whom are very young adolescents (VYA), ages 10 to 14. Girls and boys in this age range are at the threshold of young adulthood. This transition may be the most important journey in their lives, especially for girls.

Supporting Adolescent Girls

Save the Children's experience and research have consistently demonstrated that if VYA girls are supported by teachers, schools, peers, families and communities, they stay in school, delay marriage and childbirth, acquire strong life and livelihood skills, and improve their prospects for better health and well-being.

But if girls receive little or no support, their life options narrow. Doors to opportunity close, and many of them drop out of school, which can lead to early marriage and pregnancy, unsafe childbirth, poor health and often perpetual poverty.

Save the Children's Approach

As a global leader in world-class development programming, Save the Children aims to reach VYA girls with the support they need in school, from their families and from their communities.

Our strategy, which is based on our best practices in VYA girls' education and sexual and reproductive health, centers on interventions that address critical challenges girls encounter during the onset of puberty. We also engage boys and adults to build supportive community environments, and increase the impact and sustainability of our work.



In Kenya, young adolescent girls hold the toilet stall door closed for their classmate to give her privacy, as the bathroom stalls at their school do not have locks.

Photo: Jacquelyn Haver/Save the Children

Our integrated approach focuses on the needs of VYA girls and is designed to ensure their **health, education and safety** — and ultimately their futures.

The Challenges

Evidence suggests that girls in low-resource settings face many challenges as they transition into young adulthood, including managing menstruation in school. These challenges have numerous causes and often include:

- **inadequate facilities and limited access to effective, hygienic menstrual management materials;**
- **inaccurate information about menstruation and fertility awareness and;**
- **harmful social norms.**

In many contexts, girls do not have the social and emotional support they need during this critical transition time.

When they experience menstruation but lack the facilities, information or materials to manage it in school, they are often distracted and confused. They stop participating in class, experience social exclusion, and in some cases skip school altogether to avoid embarrassment.

Inadequate Facilities and Supplies

A lack of separate toilets or latrines and proper sanitary protection materials impact many VYA girls' school experience.

According to UNICEF, one in 10 school-age African girls do not attend school during menstruation, or drop out at puberty because of the lack of clean and private sanitation facilities. In the Philippines, one study found that there are an average of 330 girls for every partially-functional school latrine. Qualitative studies and interviews conducted by Save the Children and partners in Bolivia, Mali and the Philippines align with these statistics.

Additionally, it is often difficult for VYA girls to acquire appropriate sanitary materials, forcing them to resort to using potentially unhygienic options, such as old clothing, cloth, textbook pages or tissue paper pads, which can lead to infection. Without proper disposal facilities, many girls bury the menstruation materials outside, throw them in the river or flush them down the toilet, which can damage the sanitation system.

Gaps in Information

Inadequate and often inaccurate information leaves girls ill-equipped to manage menses and puberty. Some studies indicate that more than 50 percent of young girls know nothing about menstruation until they start their menses, making it a negative, confusing and traumatic experience. The information they do receive is

often selective, and surrounded by myths and taboos.

Restrictive Norms and Beliefs

The issue of menstrual hygiene is further complicated by the fact that it is a sensitive topic that is often stigmatized due to the link between menstruation and sexual and reproductive health. Stigmatizing adolescent girls and women through age-old cultural practices and misguided beliefs contributes to gender inequality and undermines basic rights.

Save the Children's Response

Save the Children's holistic approach to VYA girls' education seeks to help them overcome critical barriers at the individual, school and community levels. Our initiative entails:

- **removing obstacles to girls' full participation in school;**
- **ensuring they are treated with respect and are safe when they are there; and**
- **ensuring they learn the academic and life skills to be successful.**

Clean, Private Sanitation Facilities

Save the Children works with schools to build and improve separate girl-friendly latrines and facilities for the disposal of sanitary products. We also provide girls with appropriate, sustainable menstrual hygiene products and tools. These are crucial components to the framework of Save the Children's comprehensive, multi-faceted initiative, Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM).

Menstrual Hygiene Management

MHM sets out to ensure that women and adolescent girls use clean menstrual materials that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary. It also includes using soap and water for washing the body and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.

In 2014, Save the Children developed and piloted the MHM Operational Guidelines to provide a step-by-step framework for implementing and monitoring MHM in schools, and to advance the sexual and reproductive health of VYA girls. Save the Children initially piloted MHM programs in Bangladesh, Bolivia, China, El Salvador and the Philippines.

In 2015, Save the Children refined the MHM Operational Guidelines based on feedback from the pilot program, an action learning seminar and research partners — who helped us identify multi-year protocol to examine the effectiveness of our existing MHM programs. We continue to do ongoing assessments and are building a robust body of evidence that demonstrates the close relationship between MHM and self-efficacy, stress and school participation.

Gender Norms Package

VYA girls bear the heaviest burden of harmful gender norms, traditions and cultural beliefs and are subject to social, economic and political exclusion. Save the Children created a gender norms package to address these issues and to create a safe and supportive environment for girls — and boys — going through puberty transitions.

In 2009, Save the Children developed the *Choices* curriculum in Nepal to target VYA girls and boys and help them discover alternative views of conventional gender roles and behaviors. The curriculum includes eight developmentally appropriate participatory activities designed to stimulate discussion and reflection about gender equity, social norms and empowerment. Findings from our evaluations show statistically significant differences in gender attitudes and behaviors between control and experimental groups after participation in *Choices*.

The *Choices* curriculum is designed to be complemented by two other programs, *Voices* and *Promises*, which target gender norms at the family and community levels. Adapted curriculums are currently being used in Bolivia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Malawi and Zambia.

Comprehensive Puberty & Sexuality Education

The poor quality of education is another challenge for VYA girls. In many communities, teachers are poorly trained or have biased teaching practices, are unable to teach large classes effectively and have outdated curricula.



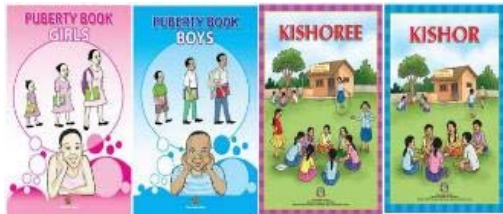
Kenyan schoolchildren participate in a role-playing activity in which they act out a solution to social stigmas around the topic of menstruation.

To combat gender bias in the classroom, Save the Children trains teachers and community groups, and advocates for the inclusion of age-appropriate puberty education in primary schools. We have been an active advocate for the inclusion of a comprehensive puberty education curriculum in primary schools in Nigeria, Uganda and Ethiopia. In Nepal, we trained health-care workers to provide adolescent girls with reproductive and sexual health information and services.

This initiative is part of the comprehensive sexuality education programs we have introduced in primary and secondary schools in Ethiopia, Uganda and Southern Africa. The programs include sessions on puberty and menstruation, and the importance of developing positive gender norms.

Puberty Workbooks

Save the Children has also produced puberty workbooks to address the needs of VYA girls and boys. The workbooks were adapted from research conducted by Columbia University's Dr. Marni Sommer, who worked with girls in Tanzania through the Grow and Know organization. We translated Sommer's Ethiopian book into a second local language, Oromiffa, and collaborated to have the books evaluated.



Save the Children's workbooks address puberty, MHM and gender norms.

Photo: Save the Children

Our workbooks draw on the information from our *Choices* curriculum to help girls and boys reflect on gender norms in their communities and how to achieve greater gender equity. The interactive, take-home workbooks were first introduced in Nepal, with Bolivia, Uganda and Malawi quickly introducing them into their programs to address needs in culturally sensitive ways. The workbooks are unique because they target both girls and boys. There are currently very few resources for boys, and it is crucial for them to have information communicated in a way that is tailored to their growth and societal roles.

In an effort to encourage future adaptations of the books, Save the Children created a

guide on how to adapt them to make them culturally relevant to local communities.

Protecting Futures Program

Another program, *Protecting Futures*, targets girls in primary school at the onset of menstruation by providing puberty education, building latrines for girls at schools and providing hygiene materials to prevent girls from missing class or dropping out of school. Through this program, which is funded by Procter & Gamble, Save the Children has provided more than 10,000 girls in South Africa and Ethiopia with puberty and menstrual hygiene education, sanitary pads, and girl-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. For more information about our *Protecting Futures* program, visit: www.savethechildren.org/protecting-futures.

In Ethiopia, we encouraged mothers, teachers, community leaders and girls to talk about puberty and menstruation to help break down taboos preventing these discussions. Once communities recognized that menstruation was not initiated by sex and that girls needed assistance, parents helped build private latrines for girls. Subsequently, Save the Children developed a school-based sexual education program to teach adolescent girls about puberty, menstruation and menstrual hygiene.

Looking Toward the Future

Save the Children has developed effective, scalable programs targeting VYA girls, which help them achieve happier, healthier and more equitable futures.

Over the next five years, we will scale up our MHM programming in nearly 20 countries. To support our robust programming platform, we must create new content. The more knowledgeable we are, the faster we can create a safe, healthy world for VYA girls and boys everywhere. For additional information, contact ASRH@savechildren.org.