

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: EASTERN PROVINCE, ZAMBIA

SPLASH's comprehensive WASH in Schools program includes a strong menstrual hygiene management (MHM) component. Having the confidence to attend school at all times can make the difference between succeeding and dropping out for many adolescent girls.

SPLASH, a USAID/ Zambia-funded WASHplus activity, supports the Ministry of Education to bring clean drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene education to primary schools in Zambia's Eastern Province.



SPLASH Encourages a Community Approach to Menstrual Hygiene Management

Grace's Story

My name is Grace. I am 16 years old and I live in Lundazi District. I was in grade 5 when I reached puberty. Before that, I never cared whether or not the school had proper toilets, but after puberty, I faced a lot of difficulties especially when I needed space to clean up and change. I observed with sadness that I could no longer stay in school whenever I had my periods. I stayed at home; and you can imagine how much school work I missed in a term. I was absent from school for five days each month.*

My situation made me wonder whether people know how girls my age attending rural schools manage during their periods without access to toilets. Period time can be stressful, and the discomfort of being unsure whether you have messed up your skirt is worsened by the fear of boys laughing at you. All of this affected my classroom performance throughout the days of my period.

Then in 2013 SPLASH [Schools Promoting Learning Achievement through Sanitation and Hygiene] installed 20 beautiful toilets and now our school looks like a real school, like I used to see only in pictures. At last I can stay at school and not miss any classes throughout the whole term! I have also learned a lot through my teacher, who is also the WASH Club coordinator. She has taught all the older girls in the school about menstrual management and hygiene, and all of the WASH Club members about the importance of washing our hands with soap each time we finish using the toilet.

SPLASH Addresses Menstrual Hygiene Management

Grace's story is but a glimpse of the challenges girls faced in communities in Zambia's Eastern Province before USAID's SPLASH project made an effort to spotlight menstrual hygiene management and its link to student attendance and performance. It is part of the SPLASH approach—confronting critical but often overlooked factors that affect student performance—whether children's basic physical needs are being met, including access

**Name changed to protect privacy.*



SPLASH has adopted this motto to encourage dialogue around a once-taboo topic.



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Girls from Kamuna Primary School examine reusable pads produced by a public-private partnership between SPLASH and YASH Pharmaceutical. The pads were developed to last for five years, or more than 65 washes.

to adequate, safe drinking water and accessible, child-friendly toilets. When these facilities are inadequate or absent, children are more susceptible to illness, and their attention and learning capacity is compromised. When girls reach puberty, they may simply stop coming to school altogether.

SPLASH is addressing these challenges through a comprehensive WASH program in schools with a strong MHM component—creating an environment for girls that is conducive to learning while ensuring adequate water, sanitation facilities, and hygiene products, along with education, training, and support for school personnel so that girls can manage their menstrual periods while in school.

Lack of menstrual hygiene facilities and products is a major reason why girls stay home during their periods. As a result, they lose up to five days of school per month, resulting in a negative impact on school performance. They fall behind in school work and may drop out. In schools without MHM facilities, adolescent girls face challenges, including fear of staining their skirts, bullying and teasing from boys, a sense of shame and fear of people finding out that they are “on their menses,” lack of accurate information and fear about what is happening to them, health problems related to inability to change their pads regularly, and the existing taboos on what they can and cannot do and where they can and cannot be during their menses. Lack of support and understanding from the adults in their lives—parents, families, and teachers who feel uncomfortable or

feel that it is taboo to talk about menstruation—also has a negative effect.

Keeping Girls in School

SPLASH operates under the principle that access to MHM increases a girl’s confidence, sense of value, and self-worth. MHM is the key strategy for keeping girls in school and increasing the numbers of educated girls in the country. SPLASH supports the construction and rehabilitation of girl-friendly facilities (separate toilets for boys and girls), washrooms for girls with water and soap, access to sanitary pads or other products for absorbing the menstrual flow, as well as proper disposal facilities for used menstrual products.

SPLASH provides MHM training to teachers who integrate this once taboo topic into lessons for both girls and boys, and booklets and other materials for pupils, teachers, and PTAs to use in running WASH Clubs.

Innovations – Reusable Menstrual Pads and Getting Boys Involved

One of the innovations helping girls meet their MHM needs is the reusable pad. This helps girls who cannot afford to buy regular pads from the store. In her position as Chipata District Resource Center Coordinator, Margaret Mapata strongly advocated for the introduction and use of reusable pads in schools. Together with her team, Ms. Mapata compiled booklets (see cover, right) that explain and illustrate step-by-step procedures involved in making a reusable pad and panty pocket using cotton fabrics from old towels, sheets, pyjamas, t-shirts, etc. Schools can use these booklets to address the challenges that adolescent girls face in schools and at home during their periods. Ms.

How to Make a Reusable Pad!



Mapata is among many educators working with SPLASH who have visited schools and communities to show students and teachers how to make, use, and thoroughly clean the pad to make it safe for reuse. “The good thing about the reusable pad is that it is made from materials that can be easily accessed in the home,” she says.

SPLASH’s efforts in managing menstrual hygiene in schools

My situation made me wonder whether people know how girls my age attending rural schools manage during their periods without access to toilets.

—Grace

A Tailor and Father Pitches in to Provision a Local School with Reusable Pads



In Zambia's Lundazi District, Mcheleka Primary School hired a local tailor, James Mtonga, to sew reusable menstrual pads for the girls at school.

Mr. Mtonga is a married man with five children, two of whom are girls. "I am glad I am able to sew the reusable pads for the girls. I know some people will find it shameful, but I have nothing to be ashamed of. Sewing these pads for me is as normal as going into a shop to buy pants. The experience I am getting from sewing these pads will enable me to make some for my wife and my daughters when they come of age," says Mr. Mtonga.

The introduction of the reusable pad will keep more girls in school. Not only has SPLASH improved the lives of the girls, but community members have been able to learn about good hygiene practices such as washing hands with soap and water after using the toilet, keeping food covered to prevent germs, and keeping their surroundings clean at all times. Mr. Mtonga adds, "I am a beneficiary of the borehole at Mcheleka Primary School and my family is contributing towards maintenance. Thank you USAID/SPLASH for making a difference within my community."

and communities has created an enabling environment in which communities, once silent about menstruation matters, now talk openly and have come together to find better and more affordable ways of helping adolescent girls feel comfortable and supported during such times.

Febby Siankulu Busiku, former regional director for SPLASH explains, "SPLASH did not just look at the girl child when addressing menstrual hygiene management. We made sure that the boys were fully engaged. They come from homes where there are girls and they attend schools where there are girls. We included the boys because we wanted them to also understand how special a girl child is and what exactly she goes through due to her biological make-up. The boys are now able to understand and they love that they have been included in MHM education! They now go home and tell their parents and sisters about the reusable pads."

Parents, Teachers, and School Administrators Involved

Through the Ministry of Education, SPLASH is working closely with schools and communities to involve parents in activities for their school-aged children. SPLASH is also working with the Chipata teachers college to train teachers (both male and female) to make the reusable pads so these innovations will be sustained when the SPLASH project ends. The project also encourages



Providing improved sanitation and washrooms for girls and female teachers is one way SPLASH is mainstreaming MHM into the Zambia Ministry of Education.

school administrators to implement policies and practices that ensure girls' specific needs are met so their academic participation does not suffer.

Matrinal M'shanga, head of Nthombimbi Primary School in Chipata, said that his school has established initiatives to raise funds for purchasing toilet tissue and pads. Together with his staff, Deputy Head of Daiwala Primary School Amrode Zulu has developed mechanisms to pay for the school's supplies of pads and soap, including an addition to the school fees and a community fee for using the school's water facilities. "This move has ensured that the school always has a supply of pads and tissues especially for girls who are menstruating. Now, they will not have to stay at home for fear of being ridiculed at school," says Mr. Zulu.



Having a designated girls' corner stocked with MHM supplies such as pads sends a strong message to girls that they do not need to miss school when they have their periods.

Results

Bridget Kakuwa Kasongamulilo, SPLASH knowledge management and communications advisor, notes, "The impact of the innovations set up by SPLASH is very visible in these communities."

By actively involving schools and communities in implementing these innovations, USAID, together with its partners, has instilled a sense of ownership in the communities and ensured sustainability of these

developments once the project comes to an end. As Dr. Henry Loongo, SPLASH national WASH advisor says, "Innovations from SPLASH are made with simplicity, durability, appropriateness, and affordability."

Thanks to Margaret Mapata, MESVTEE/DRCC, Chipata, Anna Simutowe, CARE/Zambia intern with SPLASH, and Bridget Kakuwa Kasongamulilo, SPLASH knowledge management and communications advisor, who all contributed to this story.

About WASHplus

The WASHplus project supports healthy households and communities by creating and delivering interventions that lead to improvements in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and household air pollution (HAP). This multi-year project (2010-2016) was made possible with support from the American people delivered through the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Global Health and led by FHI 360 in partnership with CARE and Winrock International. The project uses at-scale programming approaches to reduce diarrheal diseases and acute respiratory infections, the two top killers of children under age 5 globally.

For more information contact:

WASHplus

FHI 360
1825 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington, DC 20009
202.884.8000
www.WASHplus.org
contact@washplus.org