



Helping girls
overcome barriers
to education.

A World Vision Ireland Report

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Summary

There are many challenges that affect girls' attendance at school,

and this paper explores the most significant factor in schooldays lost, namely girls having to manage their menstrual hygiene without access to appropriate resources, facilities and knowledge. The voices and experiences of girls in handling this issue are highlighted, and the case studies show that with a strong gender-sensitive focus, educational interventions can achieve much towards improving education outcomes for girls. The presence of female latrines, access to sanitary pads and the reduction of hygiene-related stigma when girls are menstruating can decrease rates of absence and improve their educational performance. Addressing simple human and infrastructural issues has the potential to increase enrolment and decrease dropouts, even in very challenging contexts. As part of the World Vision Ireland's Buiding the Resilience of Women and Children through Enhanced Education and Protection programme, the following actions have been identified as the most impactful.

- In South Sudan, training and engaging teachers so that girls felt comfortable discussing their menstrual hygiene with them significantly boosted the girls' confidence. Teachers provided practical advice on how to use sanitary towels and maintain optimum hygiene and cleanliness, and they even shared their own stories to put the girls at ease, encouraging them to keep coming to class.
- In Sudan, girls' clubs revealed the power of supporting children's voices and participation as well as how this can break down taboos around gender-sensitive topics affecting girls' education such as menstruation and early marriage.
- In Somalia, girls reported decreased levels of embarrassment, fear and discomfort around menstruation due to access to sanitary towels. They reported feeling safe and comfortable attending school even when they are menstruating, which notably affected their attendance rates.
- Across all programmes areas where schools now have sex-segregated latrines, girls reported being significantly more comfortable now that they could privately change and wash as needed. Girls who reported previously staying at home are now attending school without interruption.

Girls in Education:

The challenge of menstrual hygiene management

Sustainable Development Goal #4 commits the global community to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Higher rates of education not only benefit boys and girls, but also the whole economy and future generations. UNICEF describes how girls' education in particular has a 'multiplier effect'. Educated girls are more likely marry at a later age and have fewer children, and their children are better nourished, have higher survival rates and are better educated. Educated women are more productive at home, better paid in the workplace and able to participate in social, economic and political decision-making!

However, 34% of girls globally still do not regularly attend school, compared to 29% of boys.²In addition to the educational barriers that affect both boys and girls, there are gender-specific factors that contribute to the lower enrolment and attendance rates for girls, as well as the higher dropout and repeat rates. These include menstruation, parental attitudes, limited resources, pregnancy and early marriage. The main geographic areas where the World Vision Ireland's Education and Protection programme is implemented face the additional challenge of high rates of population movement, either through displacement as IDPs or as a feature of the communities' traditional nomadic lifestyle.

For example, among pastoralists in Somalia, the heightened state of emergency caused by concurrent droughts denies girls access to education, which acts as a protective mechanism from sexual abuse, exploitation and early marriage.³As is seen in some of the stories recounted in the case studies, it is not unusual for girls in these communities to experience long gaps in their schooling due to displacement, resulting in many of them still being at the primary school level well into their teens.

Many girls in these communities are also prevented from accessing education due to a lack of girl-friendly conditions, such as female sanitation facilities, easy-to-access water sources and the presence of female teachers. For the girls who overcome these barriers and

attend school, these factors tend to cause higher dropout rates compared to their male peers, thereby affecting the gender balance in schools.⁴

A significant challenge affecting girls' attendance is the lack of guidance, facilities and materials to manage their menstruation. Growing evidence suggests the gender-specific impact of inadequate WASH facilities on girls' participation in education. Girls experience feeling shame and embarrassment as they are unable to manage their periods comfortably because of the lack of water, soap and privacy. These factors also affect female teachers, and if they seek employment elsewhere for this reason, this leads to fewer female teachers being available for girls to confide in.⁵

Whilst support for menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in schools is clearly an important aspect of the basic human rights and dignity of girls,⁶ menarche (the time when a girl begins menstruation) has been described as an underrecognised but important public health issue.⁷Evidence from many countries shows that girls start their menstruation uninformed, unprepared and unsupported in managing their monthly periods. Girls report hiding it and missing school because of the fear of an embarrassing leak and that they don't understand what is happening or what it has to do with fertility. When a girl's first experience of menstruation is associated with fear and ignorance, this affects her self-confidence and contributes to higher school absences.⁸

Currently, best practices in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia suggest that the provision of girl-friendly sanitation facilities improves school attendance rates for girls. Research in Somalia suggests that schools with girl-friendly interventions have higher enrolment rates and lower dropout rates for girls. In addition, the provision of such facilities is prioritised in Somalia's and Sudan's Humanitarian Response Plans, with potentially significant positive impacts. In South Sudan,¹¹ humanitarian groups are continuing to work with education programmes to encourage and increase the recruitment of female teachers.¹²

1 UNICEF 2016, complete this ref <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/overview/> 2 UNESCO 3 World Vision Ireland paper on nomadic education 4 World Vision Ireland paper on nomadic education 5 PLOS paper 6 PLOS paper 7 Sommer 8 Sommer, s 9 Nomad paper - save the children research 10 Somalia's plan, UNOCHA, 2017a 11 UNOCHA, 2017c, these are refs listed in the Nomad paper. 12 Wv Ireland Nomadic paper

World Vision Ireland's Respon sion esponse

World Vision Ireland implemented a 2-year programme entitled Building the Resilience of Women and Children through Enhanced Education and Protection in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Syria. The programme's education intervention facilitated construction and rehabilitation of school structures, teacher training and community awareness, with a particular focus on improving access to quality education for boys and girls.

The programme also recognised the barriers to girls' education and set out to create a 'girl-friendly' environment at the targeted schools so that girls would be comfortable and confident attending school at all times. This was done through a collection of activities, including training of teachers in MHM to support female students, providing reusable sanitary towels, providing training and support for girls' clubs where girls can provide peer support and share teacher guidance and installing girl-friendly latrines and water facilities. Teams also worked to raise awareness in the community, addressing other factors such as early marriage that can affect the education of girls.

The following case studies from Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan capture the experiences and opinions of girls in schools supported by the programme, demonstrating how addressing simple human and infrastructural issues can ease the discomfort felt by girls and increase levels of school attendance.



Increasing Girls' Enrolment and Attendance in Puntland, Somalia

Case Study

World Vision Ireland's Education and Protection programme supported eight schools in the Eyl and Godobjiran districts in Puntland, Somalia, and three 'open schools', which are makeshift structures serving nomadic populations. One of the schools was in Mareeya in the Eyl district, where World Vision constructed three classrooms and separate latrines for girls and boys and installed a 5,000-litre water tank in the compound. They also facilitated teacher training and engaged in community-level sensitisation and capacity building.

Additional activities for improving menstrual hygiene management were also initiated, such as making reusable sanitary towels available to girls and providing education on how to use them and how to make their own. Teachers were also trained in approaches to support girls in managing their menstruation.

At the end of the two-year phase, the programme engaged a local female journalist to interview girls and teachers in the target areas to capture their feedback and personal experiences. Since the project began, enrolment and attendance of girls have significantly increased, with girls now comprising just over half of the students. Attendance has been made easier for girls as they now have sex-segregated latrines and access to sanitary items, allowing them to attend school without interruption. Thirteen-year-old Fatuma, one of 233 students (117 girls and 116 boys) at this small rural school, was delighted with the changes that have taken place due to the efforts of the community and the increased access to girl-friendly facilities.

“Education is good because I will get a good job and earn income; I am working really hard, putting all my effort into my lessons. I keep telling my friends education is key to their future. I am happy that a number of them decided to join me in school”.

– Fatuma

Abshiro, a sixteen-year-old student, described how she would use “tattered clothes” and stay home to wash “to avoid infection and keep myself clean.” In this very rural area of Puntland, sanitary towels are simply not available in the shops. Even in larger centres they are not likely to be stocked and are exorbitantly priced, such as being five times more expensive than in neighbouring Kenya.

“I used to miss classes every month, and this showed in the poor results ... because I didn’t have sanitary towels, I couldn’t attend school regularly. I missed many classes. There were times when almost all girls would be absent from class because of their situation ... I believe every girl in my class has gone through such stress. The fear of staining your uniform will always force you out of school for a week. I can talk to my peers and I am not ashamed about it. Actually, I become very relieved when I share my story with others during the period days”.

– Abshiro

Teachers were trained on supporting MHM in the school setting, and now they are better able to support girls in dealing with the practicalities of menstruation as well as on other topics that have an impact on their education, such as gender-based violence. The teachers themselves have noticed the changes. The Puntland government has been extremely interested in the ‘girl-friendly’ interventions. Abdirahman Abdullahi, GBV Technical Adviser at the Ministry of Women’s Development and Family Affairs, noted that changes have taken place at the targeted schools with the availability of the sanitary towels and as a result of community-level information campaigns on gender issues.

“Girls used to stay at home during menstruation, but that issue is now resolved. Some girls left school because of stigma – when teachers inquired about their absenteeism, it became obvious that they were menstruating”.

– Mohamed Haji Muse Isse, the Eyl District Education Officer

Impact:

42% Girl-friendly environments contributed to a 42% increase in girls’ attendance at the eleven target schools, and the level of drop-out has decreased from 40% to 18% since 2017.

69% The percentage of girls expressing their level of confidence in managing their menstruation in schools improved from ‘low’ (less than 50%) at baseline to ‘high’ (69%) at evaluation two years later.

70% 70% of girls expressed that they are now able to make reusable sanitary towels.

Lessons Learned:

- The simple but strong focus on having an increased girl-friendly environment can lead to tangible results in girls’ school enrolment and attendance.
- The provision of sanitary towels has an immediate impact on girls’ well-being and dignity, especially when coupled with the space and support for girls to share and confide in their teachers and peers.
- Trained teachers can play a very important role in increasing the level of comfort experienced by female students regarding their menstrual hygiene management as well as encouraging their attendance in school.
- Such interventions can easily garner the support of local government officials, which in this case was the GBV Technical Adviser at the Ministry of Women’s Development and Family Affairs and the District Education Officer, who understood and appreciated the value of the whole project, particularly the rapid improvement in girls’ school attendance due to appropriate access to sanitary towels.



Zahra

“Before, girls would not come to school when menstruating but now they are able to attend thanks to the sanitary kits. The retention levels have gone up drastically. Before, negative practices were high like FGM and giving younger girls to older men, but now this has reduced after sensitization on GBV, FGM and child protection

- Zahra Osman Diriye, Head Teacher at Mareeya



Role of girls' clubs in Sudan

In the Blue Nile region in Sudan, World Vision Ireland worked with communities in the Damazine and Wad al Mahi localities, supporting them in addressing their barriers to education: limited facilities, low attendance of girls and the displacement of families leading to missed years of schooling.

In addition to the construction and rehabilitation of classrooms and sex-segregated latrines, the training of teachers and the capacity building of parent teacher groups, the project also facilitated the establishment of six girls' clubs in schools, enrolling at least 2,190 girls. These clubs were designed to provide girls with an avenue to openly discuss issues that affected their lives and to encourage development of their problem-solving skills. Members gained essential life skills and became champions responsible for communicating what they learned to the rest of the girls in their school and community.

Case Study

02

Fifteen-year-old Hala, who lives with her grandmother and five siblings in Damazin, the capital of Sudan's Blue Nile state, has experienced the reality of displacement. Seven years ago, when South Sudan separated from Sudan, Hala travelled back with her grandmother to live in South Sudan. However, conflict and violence would later force the family to flee back to Sudan.

With encouragement and support from her grandmother, Hala returned to school, and since 2017 she has been a girls' club champion, encouraging and participating in valuable conversations around issues that affect girls.

“I was blown away by the way [Hala] articulated herself and the way she presented what she wanted to say was captivating, you had no choice, but take notice”.

– Osman Mawada, , Deputy School Principal

Open discussions, drawings, songs, posters, drama and games were some of the tools used in the initial training and facilitation sessions to help girls engage actively when they launched the clubs. During their initial training sessions, the girls began to talk openly about the many issues they faced, such as physical violence, lack of opportunities, peer pressure, the shame and despair endured during menstrual periods and not being able to afford to sanitary towels. As the clubs grew, they organised regular sessions to reach more girls and provided a safe space for girls to ask trained teachers for advice and support.

When Hala moved on to secondary school, she missed the girls' club and the forum for raising girls' issues. In July 2018, during a school activity attended by all the girls and their teachers, Hala stepped up to talk about girls having the right to be involved in decisions on issues that affect them such as when to get married.

“Before joining the club, I always thought it was inappropriate to speak about challenges we as children, especially girls, face. After joining the club, I have come to learn that discussing with people who share with you the same problem is the first step toward solving any problem”.

- Ghizlan, Hala's friend and a member of the club

Impact:

30 The programme reached 30 schools with 8,531 students (3,165 boys and 5,366 girls) with basic materials.

3 Three schools now have improved facilities for girls with sex-segregated latrines, and six girls' clubs have been trained and supported.

Lessons Learned:

- With the right support and encouragement, girls can become active participants in the issues affecting them. Through the clubs, girls are openly discussing issues and gaining life skills, such as managing their menstruation in school and knowing how to protect themselves against violence.
- There can be an informative and valuable exchange between students and teachers, where girls have the capacity to raise and discuss 'taboo' issues and teachers have the capacity to listen to them and allow them a platform to speak.
- Displacement is a real issue in this and other contexts. When girls miss out on months or even years of their schooling, it can affect their self-confidence about returning. For girls in their teens who are facing challenges around MHM and possible early marriage, it is difficult for them to reenter the education system. Knowing that there are appropriate facilities and that they can have a voice on issues that affect them can help with the transition back into education.



Hala

“Under the guidance of our teachers and trainers, we learnt how to identify problems we face as well as come up with solutions. Before joining the club, I felt hopeless, girls face many risks such as that of being married early, and where I live, I have seen girls being made to leave school to get married, and few girls go to secondary school when they finish their basic education”.

- Hala



South Sudan: The important role of female teachers in creating a girl-friendly environment

South Sudan has one of the lowest levels of primary school enrolment in the world. In 2016, 72% of boys and 77% of girls were out of school.¹³ The Upper Nile State in South Sudan is no exception, with limited infrastructure, a lack of trained teachers and a population that has been affected by displacement since the outbreak of conflict in 2013. World Vision Ireland's Education intervention supported schools in both IDP camps and host communities through the construction of latrines, the rehabilitation and construction of classrooms, teacher training and the support of community education committees. In order to encourage the attendance of girls, specific actions were undertaken to create girl-friendly environments, including establishing girls' clubs; constructing female latrines; providing reusable sanitary towels, soap and water; and training teachers to be able to support girls in managing their menstruation.

Case Study

03

“It makes me feel safe when we have separate latrines from boys because I am comfortable that a boy may not see me. Previously we had been using open latrines, and this made me feel unsafe”.

– Abeny

In-depth interviews with the girls at the end of the project, both individually and in focus groups at their schools, gave them a platform to describe how these actions had led to it being easier for them to attend school.

Abeny, in the fifth class at the Dingtoma primary school, first went to school in Baliet, but her education was interrupted by the conflict in 2013 and the ensuing displacement of her family. She resumed school in 2017, having missed out on many years of education, and she had concerns about managing her period and her general privacy and safety.

At all schools where there is a new female latrine block, the girls in the focus groups expressed that this has helped them to handle their menstruation better; reporting less fear about being seen and feeling comfortable to be in schools on those days. They are much more at ease now about changing their pads, and they report helping each other out in the washrooms when the need arises, which would have been impossible before when they shared a latrine with the boys. Two thousand girls were provided with sanitary towels, making a significant difference in their lives.

This was also a very positive experience for the teachers. They received practical training on MHM and are now very comfortable supporting the girls by facilitating discussion sessions, distributing and demonstrating usage of sanitary towels, overseeing the activities of girls' clubs and facilitating activities on environmental cleanliness and hygiene. One hundred and twenty-eight teachers in total were trained to support the girls needing to manage their menstrual hygiene; however, despite the girls improved levels of comfort, two-thirds of girls are still affected to some degree by the attitudes of boys (teasing, laughing, and bullying) and over one-third indicated that this was a very difficult problem for them to deal with.

“The training helped us to encourage the girls to come to school, and this helped the teachers to support the girls on how to manage their menstrual periods and advise them on the importance of coming to school since periods are normal and cannot make them miss school”.

– A Teacher

Impact:

70% 70% of girls reported not missing any school days due to menstruation; at baseline in early 2017, this number was 13%

53% Girls' enrolment in the supported schools has increased by 53%.

2/3 Two-thirds of girls in the project area said their situation has improved due to the presence of separate latrines.

90% The proportion of girls who reported that they feel confident expressing themselves has increased from 17% to 90%.

Lessons Learned:

- Teachers can play a pivotal role in the well-being of female students. If they are supported and trained, they have the capacity to take on the role of engaging with the girls on sensitive issues, facilitating open discussions and, in doing so, reducing the embarrassment felt by girls.
- Due to conflict and displacement, many of the girls in primary school are well into their teens, increasing their need for support on menstrual hygiene management and other topics of discussion that can affect this age group.
- Boys' attitudes are an important issue that affects girls, as the unintended consequence of their teasing can be a cause of girls staying at home when they are menstruating.



Jitta

"Before it was hard for me to attend school. But when World Vision came and distributed Afro pads it became easier for us to manage menstrual periods".

- Jitta



Top: Hala, Sudan.

Middle, Top: Hala leads activities of the girls club at her school, Sudan.

Middle, Bottom: The photo with school girls learning about MHM was taken from a World Vision supported School in Dingtoma camp school, South Sudan.

Bottom: Possibly Abshiro, Somalia.

Recommendations for Ongoing and Future Programming:



- Access to sanitary towels has a very positive contribution to girls' health, well-being and educational attendance and performance and should be integrated where possible into education programmes. This is a relatively low-cost intervention that has a notable impact on girls within a short period. Reusable sanitary towels that girls can learn to make themselves should be emphasized, alongside working with local manufacturers and suppliers to ensure a steady supply for schools.

- Educational programmes should train and engage female teachers to support girls in their menstrual hygiene management. The skills that teachers have shown in intergenerational dialogue could also be further optimised in the schools and broader community.

- Girl-friendly education programming should support schools and teachers to engage with boys for the purpose of increasing their understanding of menstruation and other issues of puberty. Girls are still impacted by the attitude of boys. In South Sudan, up to 25% reported experiencing 'great difficulty' in this regard. Training of male teachers to engage with and mentor boys on sensitive topics could be piloted.

- Integrating protection within education activities and trainings with teachers, PTAS, local leaders, and Government officials ensures public discussion on sensitive protection issues.

- Sex-segregated latrines, affording privacy for girls, should be prioritised at schools, along with the availability of water and soap and consideration of environmental cleanliness.

- Engaging relevant district authorities such as the Department of Education is important, as their direct experience of the impact on girls' well-being and attendance will enhance their support and potentially inform policy and resource allocation towards similar approaches.

