Improving Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in Emergency Response

A research project of the International Rescue Committee and Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health.

Displaced women and girls face additional problems during menstruation

Conflict and natural disasters across the world continue to force people to leave their homes and seek sanctuary in unfamiliar environments. People often end up living in refugee camps, abandoned buildings or renting housing in unfamiliar towns and cities. Having left possessions and work behind, displaced people face many hardships.

Women and girls face a particular set of challenges in emergency situations and displacement. One challenge that is seldom mentioned and seldom addressed by relief organizations lies in managing monthly menstruation hygiene needs. While this may be routine at home, in their new circumstances women and girls often live in crowded environments and lack access to materials, disposal, washing areas and privacy. These challenges are compounded by societal taboos around menstruation, with women and girls needing to hide their menses or risk embarrassment, ridicule or even violence. These conditions increase girls’ and women’s vulnerability as they seek appropriate materials and private places to wash and dry or dispose of used materials. It may also inhibit their abilities to practice activities of daily living, such as collecting food and water, engaging in income generating activities, engaging with social support networks, and caring for family.

Menstrual Hygiene Management in schools

Girls in schools, especially those getting their period for the first time, also must find ways to manage, often in the face of poor or no sanitation facilities. Where this is difficult, many girls stay away from school, or drop out of education altogether.

Long a neglected issue, relief agencies are now paying more attention to menstrual needs, but they still face challenges in responding effectively. Menstruation is not something that people feel comfortable talking about, yet there are many cultural, religious and social barriers that
have to be navigated, and women handle their menstruation in a variety of ways, often deeply rooted in local culture. Even where materials are being provided, it is difficult to measure whether the right people are getting access to the quantities that they need, and are using them appropriately.

**Evidence based programming in emergencies**

The International Rescue Committee is collaborating with Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health to investigate the challenges and solutions to menstrual hygiene management in regions of humanitarian crisis, and to develop improved guidelines for relief agencies to respond.

With field research in Myanmar, Lebanon and Mali, as well as drawing upon expert guidance from leaders across the world, the research team will develop tools and guidelines that will help agencies to rapidly identify key needs; provide needed materials, facilities and support; and monitor effectiveness of the program so that gaps can be identified and filled. The research will particularly investigate how best to involve women and girls into program decision-making and monitoring, respecting the privacy of menstruation management but not allowing this to excuse ineffective, non-inclusive response.

For more information contact:

David Clatworthy
Technical Advisor Environmental Health
**International Rescue Committee**
122 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10168-1289
david/clatworthy@rescue.org