

# Bangladesh

## Tackling menstrual hygiene taboos

By Kathryn Seymour

In Char Bramagacha village, northern Bangladesh, monthly periods are secret and shameful things. Old menstrual cloths are buried in the ground for fear that evil spirits will be attracted to the blood. During their periods, women and girls sneak off to the tubewell before dawn to wash themselves before anyone else is up. In between, they hide their cloths so that their fathers and brothers never chance to see them.

utensils or the kitchen gardens.’ Monira, 17, adds: ‘And we can’t go to the temple or the mosque. ‘Hindu girls can’t touch cows or even the cow-shed because cows are holy.’

Such beliefs are common across Bangladesh. Some women do not leave their homes for seven days each month. Others observe dietary restrictions or refrain from reading the Koran. While many of these practices are not harmful, the widespread beliefs that menstrual blood is polluting and dangerous, and that the menstruating body is weak and shameful, lead to behaviours that expose women to health risks.

As part of a new hygiene promotion initiative under the SHEWAB (Sanitation, Hygiene Education and Water Supply in Bangladesh) programme, community workers have been trained to address these issues. Amina Khatun is the community hygiene promoter for Char Bramagacha. Amina meets regularly with Shopna, Monira and girls in local schools to speak to them about hygiene, especially menstrual hygiene.



*Amina discussion menstrual hygiene with a group of adolescent girls in Char Bramagacha*

© UNICEF Bangladesh/2008

Other taboos and superstitions surround menstruation. ‘We are taught that things will be spoiled if we touch them during our periods,’ says 14-year-old Shopna from Char Bramagacha. ‘We can’t touch food, cooking

### Poor hygiene leads to increased health problems

Mothers almost never speak to their daughters about menstruation, so a girl’s first period can be a frightening experience. Monira recalls: ‘I was too scared to speak with my mother. I was lucky to have my sister-in-law to talk to when it happened.’

Most Bangladeshi families are too poor to buy sanitary pads, and instead use rags torn from old saris and other clothing. Like



others, Monira used to rinse her rags in water from the well without using soap, and hide them behind beams in the house or in the roof thatch where they grew mould. 'I put the rags in any crack where no-one would see them. They were always wet.' Using rags that were wet and not very clean caused Monira severe itching and infections.

UNICEF, a key supporter of SHEWAB, recently conducted a survey about how Bangladeshi women manage menstruation, and found that at least one third hide their rags in dirty places. One in three girls fail to change their cloths frequently or wash them with soap after use. Only just over half of the women dried their rags outside and in full sun – the conditions required to kill bacteria. Low standards of menstrual hygiene lead to widespread vaginal and urinary infections.



Amina's approach has triggered a process of change on menstrual hygiene and cultural taboos

© UNICEF Bangladesh/2008

To make matters worse, women and girls in poor families tend not to seek medical help, even for serious infections. The 2004 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey found that over half of women follow their husband's say on whether to seek medical treatment. Even if the man decides that his wife or daughter needs medical care, one third of women cannot travel alone to a hospital or health centre. On top of this is a reluctance

to discuss reproductive health issues. So women suffering from vaginal infection rarely receive treatment. This makes the prevention of such infections by education particularly important, especially among those in poorer and less educated families where all taboos and inhibitions are at their strongest.

### Promoting hygiene at school and in the community

Amina Khatum began working with the girls at the Char Bramagacha school a few months ago. Hoping to set up hygiene education groups, she approached women in the community about conducting courtyard sessions; she talked to men about setting up planning discussions at their tea stalls; and she approached Ms Farida Parvin, the teacher of an NGO-funded non-formal school about starting hygiene education classes with her students. These all dropped out of formal education or were never enrolled in the first place. All are in their early to late teens and most girls have started their periods.

'Amina comes to visit our school once or twice a month to talk about the proper use of latrines, hand-washing and hygiene,' says Ms Parvin. 'Before Amina came, I knew about these because they were in the school curriculum already, but menstrual hygiene was very new for me. At the beginning the girls were very shy and felt ashamed, but they've started learning now and are asking questions. It helps me too, to have learnt so many new things from Amina.'

Amina describes what she does. 'We explain that menstruation is a natural thing, but that it must be looked after properly for girls to become healthy mothers. Then I tell a story from our training module about a girl who died because of poor menstrual hygiene. I also explain that there will be bad smells from bacteria if they don't listen to what we say. That makes a strong impression.'

One module of the SHEWAB curriculum shows the sanitary napkin as the best choice of menstrual cloth, but that is unthinkable in the villages. So Amina doesn't mention the napkins. 'Instead, I try to see what is available, and how to keep that clean and hygienic. If I spoke about pads, the people would be frustrated,' says Amina.

The girls now have a wealth of knowledge about good menstrual hygiene. 'Earlier we would use



Case Study #10

## Drying menstrual rags in the rainy season

Shilpi, a promoter in Narsingdi village had great success in convincing all the members of her adolescent girls' hygiene group to dry their menstrual cloths in the sun. However, once the rainy season arrived, the girls returned to using damp cloths. There was just not enough sunlight each day to fully dry the rags.

Shilpi devised a solution. She encouraged all the girls to borrow their mother's kacha – large cane baskets used to carry vegetables from the field and to the market – and place them upside down over cooling cooking fires. 'After cooking, there is still a lot of heat in the embers and clay of the ovens,' says Shilpi. The girls now use clean and dry cloths all the time, and find that itching no longer troubles them.

whatever rags we could find, but now we are more careful to make sure they are clean,' says Shopna. Kumari aged 12, adds: 'I know now that I should dry my cloths over the bamboo clothes-lines in the sunlight. At first, my parents didn't like it. My mother said: "Oh, you've become so modern." But then Amina came and spoke to our parents and explained. Now our mothers have also changed their behaviour.'

'We all share knowledge with sisters and friends about this now,' says Navoni aged 12. Not only are such ideas spread by the girls in their families, but Amina also works with the entire community. She has run menstrual hygiene sessions with 14 different groups, each attended by around 20 women and girls. 'People feel less shy after the sessions so it's a good start,' she says.

## Building latrines to encourage better hygiene

Although Amina has been able to get people talking about the issue, she still has a long way to go in ensuring that the women and girls in Char Bramagacha have decent toilet facilities and privacy to carry out the practices she promotes. 'I'm encouraging people to install better latrines. Currently there are only 22 hygienic ones in the village. Everyone else goes in the 308 unhygienic latrines or out in the fields.' The unhygienic latrines are mostly built of bamboo and cloth sacking and are not discrete enough for women to use in daytime. This makes it difficult to change menstrual cloths regularly.

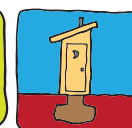
The students at Parvin's school say that lack of toilet facilities remains their main problem. 'Before, I used to miss school for four days each month,' says Shopna. 'Even now attendance is still a problem because there is no good place to change our cloths at school. If there were such a place, and somewhere to dump them it would save time.' Currently most of the girls return home during the day if they need to change their cloths, which means they miss at least one hour of school.

But persuading people to build latrines in Char Bramagacha is difficult. It is in an area which floods heavily every year when the rivers rise throughout Bangladesh. The village becomes an island only accessible by boat, or by wading through deep water. 'Last year all the houses were six feet under water for 14 days,' says the Union (local council) Chairman, Mr Anisur Rahman. 'Many houses used to have latrines, but the flood damaged them. This is what led to our low level of sanitation.' To spend scarce money on building a proper toilet when it may easily be washed away is not a popular idea. Yet Amina persists and is currently lobbying the council to use 20 per cent of a government development grant on improved sanitation.



*A cloth-washing-with-soap demonstration is part of the training module*

© UNICEF Bangladesh/2008



Finding a water source where they can bathe in privacy is another problem for girls and women in Char Bramagacha 'There is no screen around our well, so I go down early in the morning before anybody else is there,' says Kumari.

### The wider SHEWAB programme

Education on menstrual hygiene is only one of Amina's activities under the SHEWAB programme. The promotion of sanitation and hygiene practices in schools generally, and her neighbourhood meetings, also affect standards of women's health.

More than ten thousand community hygiene promoters like Amina are working in villages under SHEWAB to promote better hygiene practices and the importance of safe sanitation and water, as well as tackle taboo issues such as menstrual hygiene. Funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK and supported by UNICEF, SHEWAB aims to reach



Community Hygiene promoter Nurul Islam speaks about menstrual hygiene with his female colleague

© UNICEF Bangladesh/2008

30 million people over the next four years. The programme is working in 68 upazilas (districts) in low-lying areas and the Chittagong Hill Tracts to assist the installation of drinking water and sanitation facilities, and ensure that knowledge of good hygiene enables people to safeguard their families' health.

The largest intensive sanitation, hygiene and water improvement programme ever attempted in a developing country, SHEWAB aims to improve the living conditions and health of families across Bangladesh. If its promise can be fulfilled, SHEWAB will assist Bangladesh to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) seven, and halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Improving access for women and girls to water and sanitation and encouraging better menstrual hygiene also contributes to another MDG: to promote gender equality and empower women.

### Involving men in women's business

Many Bangladeshis believe that if a man walks past menstrual rags or sees menstrual blood, misfortune will befall him. Consequently, community hygiene promoter Nurul Islam was uncomfortable discussing menstruation hygiene, although it was a part of his role to educate the women and girls in his village about the dangers of using dirty rags.

Nurul shared his problem with fellow promoters during their weekly meeting. With their advice, he came up with a plan. 'After our meeting, I invited Amina Khatum from Char Bramagacha to come to my village to speak about menstrual hygiene. I introduced her to everyone and we worked on the issue together. Because Amina is from a village that is very close to ours, some of the women knew her. This made it easier for her to work with them.'

After Amina's first session with the women in Nurul's group, they were less shy. Having Nurul participate in the discussion was also helpful as it showed the women that they didn't need to be embarrassed about the issue in front of men.

Amina tries to involve men and boys in her menstrual hygiene sessions whenever possible. At school sessions in her own village, she includes the boys in some of the menstrual hygiene discussions. 'I don't just include the girls because it is important for everyone to know about the proper practices,' says Amina. 'Boys and men can encourage their mothers, sisters and wives.'

Contact: UNICEF  
3 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017 USA  
[www.unicef.org/wes](http://www.unicef.org/wes)



Case Study #10