

Case Study: **India**

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A MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT WORKING COMMITTEE FORMED IN THE ANDHRA PRADESH STATE IN INDIA IS CREATING A MODEL THAT NEEDS TO BE REPLICATED



■ Background

Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) relates to how girls and women manage their monthly menstruation and require access to information about menstruation, clean and safe menstrual absorbents, amenities, and facilities such as toilets and water, and waste management to maintain hygiene. MHM in general is poor in India due to a low level of knowledge and many misconceptions about it. In recent years, MHM is gaining momentum at all levels of society. The central government has been viewing the issue with a lot of importance by inculcating it as an integral part of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and thereby also linking it to the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Several programmes and projects have been devised by the central and state governments to promote menstrual hygiene thereby highlighting the issue and bringing it to the surface.

One such state government which has taken numerous steps to promote menstrual hygiene has been the state of Andhra Pradesh. In the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) MHM comes under different departments

thereby allowing them to have wider coverage in urban as well as rural areas. For the past many years, the state has introduced various schemes – pad distribution as well as awareness schemes – but has always witnessed failure where implementation was concerned. Instead of utilizing the opportunity for wider coverage, the different departments ended up expecting the other departments to intervene and took to fulfilling demands that they considered important and cost-effective. Therefore, this resulted in continuous failure especially in reaching out to a wider section of society.

To achieve the above there is a need to recognize the issue as a cross-sectoral issue which involved the participation of the various stakeholders for its wholistic implementation. Though each line department in states and districts has been given its role in ensuring MHM, this is achievable only when all these departments come together for the purpose. Rather than duplicating the activities and schemes, there was a need to collaborate and expand together. According to the National Family Health Survey (NHFS) 5 (2021), the number of women (age 15 to 24) using sanitary pads in Andhra Pradesh has gone up to 85% as compared to the 67.5% in the previous NHFS 4 (2016).

■ Strategy and implementation

Based on the above observations, it was felt that there was a need for developing a framework to reform the policies. Two strategies were devised by UNICEF and Andhra state:

1. Formation of MHM committee:

A working committee on MHM was formed in the state of Andhra Pradesh under the facilitation and guidance of UNICEF. The MHM working committee has a total of eight major line departments (namely the Panchayat and Rural Development (PR&RD); Rural Water Supply (RWS); State Swachh Bharat Mission (SSBM); Tribal Development Department (TDD); Mission for Elimination of Poverty in Municipal Areas (MEPMA); Health; Women and Child Development Department (WCD); and the Education Department. This Andhra Pradesh state MHM working committee is a distinctive kind as it has all the line departments working on and towards women's health and hygiene. The working committee was formed in 2019 with its first inter-departmental meeting held in February 2019. The key objective of this committee was to ensure the effective implementation of various programmes, policies, and existing guidelines related to MHM by a coordinated effort including all the line departments. The overall aim of this committee was to bring collaboration among all the line departments for implementing MHM programmes in the state in a coordinated way. This MHM working committee was to provide a common platform to elucidate all the work that is being done, to identify gaps and address challenges collectively, to come forward with innovative solutions, share each department's experience and derive learnings from the same. The working committee was to ensure there is no duplication of work and move towards addressing issues within the MHM arena which need special focus.

2. Supporting MHM activities in the state:

On the activity front, pad availability along with incinerators for proper and safe disposal is being ensured to all girls in government schools with a special focus on residential schools by the Education Department.

Most schools have a sanitary vending machine installed on their premises to ensure access to sanitary pads anytime and in privacy. In a few schools where sanitary pad vending machines are not yet installed, monthly carton of sanitary pads is supplied to the school. All the toilets are provided with a running tap water facility and a dustbin in case of non-availability of incinerators in the school.

Numerous efforts are also taken at the community front to ensure effective menstrual hygiene management at the household level as well. The Panchayati Raj Department and the MEPMA play a major role on this front. Each household in the district is given a menstrual wastebin to segregate their menstrual waste which is burnt in the incinerators installed in each of the panchayat sheds created in each panchayat. Knowledge management and capacity building have also been made an essential component of MHM and in this regard, each department under the wing of the working committee has taken measurable steps in trying to ensure the proper implementation of the same within their purview. Peer groups have been formed in schools and colleges and have been imparted training on MHM. Training at large scales has been conducted for all government schoolteachers and students. Out-of-school adolescents are educated on puberty and menstruation. An *Anganwadi*¹ worker is allotted to every Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) residential school to have her address all the adolescent-related queries and problems faced by the girls in the school and offer counselling services wherever required. MHM training is also provided in large batches to the frontline workers to enable them to handle and ensure MHM in the community.

■ Progress and results

Regarding the various activities implemented by the working committee, all the schemes and activities implemented by the various departments are now commonly discussed, deliberated, and finally implemented. Each department now works in its arena and implements its departmental schemes, yet it has been able to garner good response and participation due to the role of the other departments and stakeholders in the schemes and policies as well.

The MHM working committee is a unique model in Andhra Pradesh as it is a platform where the different departments come together for not just discussions and deliberations but they also to debate, get feedback and revise and revisit their strategies, and schemes, IEC materials, implementation strategies, etc.

Recently budget allocation has been included in these discussions which are important for the committee to plan their work together, moving forward. In India, one can see many working committees on WASH (and some on MHM too) which exist but are not very active in functioning and over the period they usually cease to exist (only in name). In many instances, state working committees are more of a rarity due to the complex systems, lack of budgets, policies, and lack of inter-departmental collaborations. In

¹ Anganwadi is a type of rural childcare centre in India, providing basic health care in a village and is a part of Indian public health care system.

villages and districts, these are more of success due to the smaller size of population and simple systems in places.

This working committee is one such rare example of success which has not just been able to establish its identity within the state but has also been able to implement activities and create a pool of resources people and materials about MHM.

The working committee has been able to organize three successful events of Menstrual Hygiene Day from 2019 to 2022 where it has been able to widen its coverage and reach more people and stakeholders each year.

The state government has time and again applauded this initiative and has given them recognition as well. The working committee has also been able to develop numerous IEC materials for various segments of the society within each of its departments. Now the IEC materials are all consolidated, and the working committee has a resource pool of the same which is accessible to all these departments who can use it when required. Similarly, as the working committee has held many capacity and knowledge-building workshops, they now have pools of resource trainers and thereby do not have to rely on any external expertise on the subject.

■ Lessons Learned

The MHM working committee looks like a model structure that can be replicated in other states. Successful implementation through collaboration is a lesson learnt by all within various sectors and the MHM sector bears the same testimony. The MHM working committee still has a long way to go and has just started its initiations but one can see its wave of success from the early stage. Experience sharing and learning from each other's work is the right direction the committee has adopted.

1. Along with activity sharing and planning, budget allocation and sharing to understand each department's pre-planned activities and accordingly change their strategies and fund allocation should also be prioritised under different heads which would lead to less duplication. This would certainly be enhanced with the proper programme and fund planning.
2. Though certain stakeholder departments have taken a leading role, there is a need for all the departments to also understand and assume their roles. Some departments do have a prominent role while others tend to take a back seat. There is a vital need for each department's role to be drawn and specified as this will enable equal active participation by all paving way to equal ownership of the committee, programmes and activities.
3. Additionally, there is a need for more technical assistance and capacity building on the issue with a special focus on peer group learning extensively. Prioritization towards capacity building and knowledge enhancement is extremely necessary. Creating access to products and facilities without proper capacity building might result in total failure therefore thrust should be laid equally if not more on the need to create a resource team and create more peer group members in schools and colleges.

4. There is a need for the nomination of representatives from each department to be consistent. Though the working committee meetings are held regularly and representatives from each department are sent to make and participate in the decision-making process, the representatives (many at times) keep changing for each meeting. This leads to a lack of proper discussions as the representative many times must be made aware of the earlier progress which takes away a considerable amount of time. Similarly, due to lack of participation earlier, they are also not in a position to commit to targets and processes which delays the overall proceedings.
5. One of the major lessons learnt is that it's possible to bring all the working departments together when a common vision and objective are formed. It is a difficult process, but it is achieved when everyone sees their role, effort and ownership in an initiative and that helps in bringing everyone together with a focus on bringing about a change where everyone shares the credit.

■ Way Forward

1. The working committee has now adopted a block and is now making it into a model block which will be completely menstrual hygiene friendly and would have all the menstrual hygiene friendly components which will ensure that girls and women are able to manage their menstruation in a safe and dignified manner.
2. The working committee is also now progressing on working toward creating a sustainable MHM model which includes them exploring good, affordable, environment-friendly, menstrual hygiene products as well as finding an alternate environment-friendly disposal system for the state. This is a perfect example of a working committee moving toward the right way.
3. Taking Andhra Pradesh MHM working committee as an example, the neighbouring state of Karnataka has also formed its state MHM working committee and is in the process of implementing a similar strategy. Tamil Nadu state is also in the process of forming a similar MHM working committee, learning, and initiating from the existing one. Assam is also another such state which has caught on to the learnings from this working committee and has formed a district-level MHM working committee to start collaborative MHM initiatives in their state.
4. The Andhra Pradesh working committee has also developed and released some uniform IEC materials on MHM ranging from educational MHM videos to posters for dissemination of awareness.
5. The MHM working committee in Andhra Pradesh is working towards becoming a successful model structure that can be replicated in many other states. Successful implementation through collaboration is a lesson learnt by all within various sectors and the MHM sector bears the same consequence. The MHM working committee still has a long way to go and has just started its initiations but one can see its wave of success from the early stage. Experience sharing and learning from each other's work is the right direction the committee has adopted and this will be enhanced by programme and fund planning and execution.

6. Menstruation is a taboo subject around the world and manifested strongly in India because of the associated traditional practices and customs governed by rigid beliefs and practices. Eradicating such a deep-rooted behavior has to be a joint and concerted effort. The formation of such a working committee will help to display this particular aspect and will enable the mirroring of such working committee in other states, thus leading to effective menstrual hygiene management in our country through joint efforts.

Related links:

- [4th Working Committee Meeting on MHM with Line Departments – 28th February, 2020.](#)
- [One Day State Level Workshop on Menstrual Hygiene Management – “It’s Time for Action”.](#)
- [7th Working Committee Meeting on Menstrual Hygiene Management \(MHM\) organized by Dept. for Women, Children, Differently Abled and Senior Citizens in association with AP HRD Institute, Bapatla and supported by UNICEF](#)

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Author: Jennifer Selvaraj; Email: jenny.selvy@gmail.com

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