



CASE STUDY

Taking the “Sick” Out of Sikmun

By Michelle Kenney + Elissa Webster

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In 2016, CARE International in Vanuatu introduced a Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) program in Tafea province to tackle the barriers to education and other opportunities that young girls commonly face in relation to menstruation. The program has reached more than 450 girls aged 12 to 18 years old in 18 schools across the islands of Tanna, Futuna and Erromango.

Menstrual Hygiene Management helping keep girls in school

“Before, when I got my period, I did not go to school. I was afraid of being humiliated, so I just stayed at home,” says Florence, a 17-year-old student on Tanna Island in Vanuatu’s south.

Florence is not alone. According to early research, an estimated 75% of girls in Vanuatu miss up to three days of school each month because they have their period, or “sikmun”.¹ The reason is multifaceted – safe, private toilet facilities are often not accessible at school, and neither are commercial sanitary pads, which are an unattainable expense for many families. Girls, particularly in rural areas, often use rags or even leaves to manage their menstruation, which is unreliable as well as unhygienic. Cultural taboos that prohibit girls and women from everyday activities, including cooking or washing dishes, during menstruation also contribute to a widespread belief that periods are unclean. Misinformation and a lack of knowledge about menstruation about the reproductive system in general compounds the problem. The result is that many girls are left scrambling to catch up at school every month, impeding educational outcomes, increasing the likelihood of school drop-out, and reducing future employment opportunities and earning potential – impacts that in turn, diminish the capacity of whole communities for growth and development.

The Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) program that CARE has implemented in partnership with UNICEF is designed to break down the stigma surrounding girls’ menstruation, while educating girls on their changing bodies and providing a hygienic and sanitary learning environment. The program uses a three-stranded approach. MHM kits, which include two reusable sanitary pad shields with six liners, hand soap, laundry soap, a bucket and a pair of underwear, are distributed to girls aged 10 and above. The kits are delivered as part of half-day MHM awareness sessions run for girls at their school, providing information about the reproductive system, the menstrual cycle and good menstrual hygiene, and in doing so, helping to correct misinformation and superstitions about menstruation. CARE also builds Ventilated Improved Pit (VIP) latrines with dedicated MHM facilities – a tap inside a private cubicle – at these schools, so that girls have a safe and private environment to use to clean themselves and their reusable pads.

“Some of us girls, our mothers are afraid to talk to us about menstruation. But when we come to school, people from CARE talk to us. Now everyone, even the small girls who haven’t started their periods yet, they already know. Now we understand what to do when it comes to a period,” says Florence.

CARE partners with Mamma’s Laef, a ni-Vanuatu social enterprise founded after Cyclone Pam in response to the

MHM challenges that emerged, to implement the MHM program. Mamma's Laef is a women's social enterprise that sews the reusable pads and delivers the MHM awareness sessions, as well as trains others in running the sessions. The Mamma's Laef partnership enables CARE to deliver specialised and localised training while supporting a women's cooperative that provides an important source of income for their households, building women's economic empowerment.

CARE has identified targeting girls through schools as the best means of effecting change on MHM because girls who are experiencing menstruation for the first time are more likely to adopt alternative behaviours and attitudes, and the negative consequences of existing behaviours and attitudes, such as early school departure, can be averted. With UNICEF's support, CARE has distributed 383 MHM kits and run awareness sessions in six schools in Tanna, two schools in Erromango and a school in Futuna, reaching 454 school girls, and built latrines with MHM facilities in 17 schools across Tanna and Erromango.

"Before, we used to throw disposable pads into the toilet and the toilets would start to stink and there would be so many flies. The smell spread to the road and we could even smell it in the classroom. Now that CARE has given us the reusable pads we can wash the blood out of them, which means the toilet doesn't smell so much," says Florence.

School staff have been very supportive of CARE's MHM program. Many principals and teachers have highlighted the economic benefit of the kits for families, explaining that girls from rural areas often used to ask for funds to buy sanitary products because their parents could not afford them. One package of disposable sanitary pads costs 100 to 200 vatu every month, a high price for young girls whose families struggle to even pay school fees. The MHM kit costs less than 2500 vatu to supply and is provided at no cost in a one-time distribution that gives sanitary protection for at least a year. However, it is the social impact that is truly powerful: the kits have opened conversations around menstruation, which has previously been considered taboo.

"The girls are really interested to hear and to know more about menstruation because it is a new thing to them, because their mothers did not have a conversation with them at home," says Norine Koda, a teacher at Petros School in Tanna.

Another key component of CARE's MHM program is to engage with men and boys, because community attitudes and behaviours cannot change without them. CARE is currently developing a session tailored specifically for boys in schools to provide correct information about the menstrual cycle and reproduction system and explain the importance of gender equality and inclusion within the community. The program also aims to broadly and sensitively address harmful customs that restrict women's participation in community life, seeking to recast menstruation as a source of life rather than sickness.



Girls are interested to learn about menstruation because it is not discussed at home, says to Norine Koda, a teacher at a Tanna school where the MHM program has been implemented. © **Gaelle Meheut/Groovy Banana**

"Men are becoming more aware of menstruation through the MHM kit awareness and distributions. Prior to the MHM program, most men had no interest in discussing menstruation because they did not believe it was a man's issue. Now, especially since the El Nino drought, men are becoming more aware of women's needs to access water, the importance of good sanitation and the role of menstruation as a normal, healthy part of life," says Andrew Koda, CARE's WASH team leader.

The initial phase of the MHM program revealed some important lessons that are shaping CARE's future work in this area. While the feedback from the girls using the reusable pads was overwhelmingly positive with regard to functionality, several girls indicated that they needed more and thicker liners. Similarly, girls from rural communities have expressed a need for additional underwear to be included in the distributions. In response, Mamma's Laef are investigating ways to enable the kits to be tailored to individual girls' needs. One school also reported that the girls are embarrassed to wash and hang the sanitary pads in public, so identifying how and where the pads can be washed discretely has now been included in the awareness sessions. CARE has also provided resources and tools for teachers where the MHM program has been implemented to ensure that MHM awareness sessions can continue to be run for students into the future.

The need for sustainable and culturally appropriate menstrual hygiene management in Tafea is clear and affects all school-aged girls. CARE's MHM program is making some important progress in addressing the challenges that women and girls face in achieving equal opportunities in education, employment and society with interventions designed to tackle the root causes as well as the everyday impacts of the issue.

"I was trying to understand things myself and then CARE came and explained everything to us," says Florence. "I feel like now I know everything; I feel like when I get my period, I am not worried. I am not afraid anymore."

"When we received the kits, the younger girls in our dorm asked us what the kits were. We explained to them what menstruation was and what the kits are used for. The girls are now more interested and comfortable in talking about their periods than they were before."

¹ Oxfam, 2016. Local study.