



Sanitation provision in Ethiopia's regional schools — girls' and women's experiences

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Girls in Ethiopia's rural boarding schools often have to deal with inadequate or no sanitation, and the problems of menstruation, without being able to talk to their teachers, who are mainly men. It is small wonder that they frequently drop out of school early.

The right to quality education remains a struggle in a region that has yet to contend with other basic rights, such as access to safe water. In Mankush School, Guba *woreda*, Ethiopia, where the temperature often reaches 44°, children cry for water to drink. 'How can we clean our schools, let alone the latrines, when there is not even any water to drink?'

Ethiopia is making progress towards fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals in providing education for all. However, research indicates that girls have lower enrolment and higher dropout rates than boys in Ethiopian schools, particularly in remote rural areas such as Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS). Poor learning conditions, such as a lack of sanitation, can have a detrimental effect on girls' enrolment and retention rates. The ratio of students per latrine in the BGRS region ranges from 1 latrine for 46 students to 1 for 386; and some schools do not have latrines at all. These figures indicate the urgent need for more latrines, notwithstanding additional problems of usage, design and maintenance. The need becomes more urgent with the projected increase in enrolment alongside a projected increase of population growth in the region.

Consequently, WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE), UNICEF and Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) decided to collaborate on conducting a qualitative study in the BGRS schools to assess how the girls'

and women's learning environment was being affected. This two-month study assessed all dimensions of hygiene and sanitation in sampled BGRS schools, in order to arrive at recommendations for improvements.

The ultimate goal was to develop recommendations to improve the hygiene and sanitation status of schools in the region by using the feedback of all stakeholders, with particular attention to the perspectives of girls and women.

The girls' responses

After listening to 304 participants in 32 sample schools in BGRS, poor water, sanitation and hygiene in the schools assumed a human face (see Box 1).

The following thematic patterns provide a picture of the girls' and women's experiences.

Fear of authority restricts initiative. Given the timid attitudes of the female respondents, it did not come as a surprise that the girls said they were frightened of asking permission from their (mainly male) teachers for any reason, especially for personal matters such as hygiene and sanitation. A culture of fear seems to have been instilled in them, such that their initiative to do anything is stifled. In this situation, the simple gesture of asking permission to leave the class when they are sick is a struggle.

A prevailing culture of waiting. Especially among boarding school

students there appears to be a quiet acceptance of their situation, as they feel they should be thankful that they have the opportunity to be in school at all. In their suggestions for improvements, most students stated that there must be a directive from school authorities even for simple tasks, such as cleaning the latrines. When students are afraid of authority, they need prompting to take action.

Where students demonstrated full obedience to their teachers, teachers' subservience to their school directors was also apparent; and directors acting in deference to their superiors; and so on, up the ladder. In this way, a chain of waiting prevails in the schools, so that even a very personal matter, such as cleanliness, has to be initiated from above.

Cultural traditions affect girls' school attendance. Menstruation is a taboo topic in Ethiopia, especially among certain ethnic groups. In Gumuz society, a girl menstruating for the first time will be sent to live far away from her family for some time. Varied answers were given regarding the length of time, from a week to a month, or even as long as a year. In some cases, the girl will be provided with a hut, food and clothes, but she will be isolated from all others. Others responded that she remains living with her family, but she is not allowed to go out or to prepare food, and that anything she touches will be considered unclean by others, even her

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own family. Some responded that girls in the same situation live together as a group, but far from their respective families.

Menstruation is not only a taboo topic in BGRS or in Ethiopia. Taboos about menstruation are also manifested in developed countries, although maybe in different ways. In BGRS, however, the consequences of menstrual isolation can be far-reaching, from causing some girls to miss classes, affecting their academic performance, to falling behind a year or even dropping out of school altogether.

Not all traditional practices are harmful. Gumuz women use a tree bark, pounded very well until it becomes soft like a sanitary pad. This indigenous practice may even be more sanitary than commercial pads that are saturated with chemicals. In the absence of water, strips of cloth used as pads may be difficult to wash, so 'natural' disposable pads are preferable and free.

Low confidence levels chain girls to a culture of ignorance. Aggravated by various factors, low self-esteem in girls results in their keeping their concerns to themselves. Most say that they do not talk to anybody about such personal matters as menstruation, because it is too embarrassing. One respondent said that on the occasion of her first period, she isolated herself in the kitchen and thought of killing herself, because she did not understand why blood was flowing from her. Even students who had been given some information about menstruation said that they were not prepared for the reality, and still found it difficult to talk to anyone about their concerns.

Some high school students in rural areas marry at 15 years of age or younger, then have children, so their concerns went beyond menstruation to difficulties with birth control. One married student commented, 'I learned more about my body when I gave birth, so now I am more aware.' Participants aged over 18 often suggested the need for provision of clinics in schools. Child rearing is another issue that has a bearing on sanitation concerns. As many participants expressed, hygiene and sanitation issues are first learned at home and these are not reinforced fully in the schools.

Hygiene and sanitation are not given priority in schools. In Ethiopian society, girls and women are responsible for the home and for rearing children. In schools where male teachers dominate hygiene and sanitation are not prioritized in teaching or in practice. Hygiene and sanitation are barely taught, either separately or integrated into other subjects, and few sanitation clubs were encountered during the research. The absence of female role models in secondary education also conveys negative signals to girls about the ability of women to achieve more than they do at present.

Sanitation in schools is subordinated to other needs. Two student participants from different schools asked why we only wanted to talk about latrines, when there are bigger problems. Similarly, a school director inquired, 'why the emphasis on latrines, when there is no water?' Another director complained that books are more important requirements than latrines. These attitudes prevailed regarding maintenance of the facilities. In some cases weekly cleaning by students was organized, but normally classrooms are prioritized over latrines for cleaning. In addition, although one school mentioned a budget of 150 Birr per year for maintenance, there were no details provided as to how the budget was allocated or used.

Gender is not considered during latrine construction and maintenance. In many of the schools studied, the latrines are situated badly, such as close to a public road or to the classrooms, and in the majority of cases, the door is missing or broken. Although most schools nominally separate male, female and teachers' facilities, male students often ignore the signs. Concerns about privacy overwhelmingly affect girls and women, yet women play no part in the planning or design of school latrines, although they may occasionally provide unskilled labour.

Recommendations

The suggestions for improving the sanitation situation in BGRS schools that came from the respondents are reflected here.

More latrines. It is very important that more latrines are built in BGRS, despite non-use of many of the existing facilities. Participants in the research indicated that traditional pit latrines are generally more suitable and convenient in the local context than modern flush toilets. Flush toilets can only provide a facade of modernity in a region where water supply is not yet stabilized. As the population of the region is expected to rise, and school enrolment is encouraged it is important that the current situation is improved upon. Latrines are now included in new school construction plans. In addition, the local community increasingly helps build school latrines and scaling up is sometimes later done by government bureaux or NGOs.

Awareness-raising programmes. Sanitation in schools will continue to remain a problem unless and until a space for raised awareness is created and pursued. Those who asked, 'why talk about latrines when there are other bigger problems?' demonstrated that awareness needs to be developed. Consciousness of the problem precedes the decision to take action. An awareness-raising programme, which will allow space for innovation, initiative and creativity, will be a path to bring about behavioural change.

Teaching health and sanitation in schools. Curriculum training programme designs are usually evolved by experts from the Regional Education Bureaux. A training programme on health and sanitation could be designed by key players from schools, with guidance from an REB expert and possibly a health or medical expert for content enrichment. Gender mainstreaming could crosscut all aspects of the training programme.

Teaching hygiene and sanitation in schools will not have an impact if children do not see the lessons practically applied in their surroundings. Children also need to be involved in the production of their own learning materials, so that they become relevant to their own lives. For example, children can produce illustrations to share with their families, showing how they clean their surroundings, which materials to use, how and where to dispose of their

Box 1. Interviewing in the schools

The school director prompted a teacher to send 10–12 students, and, without question, the students trooped into the room, not knowing what the summons was all about. Most of the interviews initially started with deep silences or long pauses. After a few minutes there is progress, but interviewers have to work hard to coax a response. Gradually, the students warm up to the situation. By the end of the day, a look of relief and what passes for achievement transforms their earlier gloomy faces, and some even appear animated.

'We have no latrines in the village. I have seen other latrines in other homes but when we came to this college, the flush toilets were new to me. Nobody taught us how to use them. As you can see most of them are broken even if they are newly constructed. I did not like to use this toilet for these reasons: there is no water to flush with, the latrine surroundings are not clean and, most of all, we were told to use only tissue paper, which I cannot afford to buy. [A roll of tissue paper costs 3.50 birr – the daily wage in Ethiopia is 7 birr].

Gumuz girl, aged 18

If I experience menstrual pains, I ask permission to go home. I don't tell the truth. I just say I have a headache or a stomach ache. All our teachers are men.

Amhara girl, aged 18

We don't have regular water. If there is, it is not potable. We have to buy outside the campus but bottled water is very expensive. The smallest bottle costs 3.50 birr so we contend with unsafe underground water sold at 0.20 birr per bottle.

Shinasha Girl, aged 19

Hygiene and sanitation topics are not discussed in class. I only remember these being taught to us during our elementary days. Sometimes the health personnel come to talk to the students when there is problem in the community like malaria or typhoid. That's the only time we learn how to deal with sanitation.

Berta Girl, aged 19

waste, which are the best habits to follow, and so on.

Empowerment of school directors. School directors need to find ways to resolve how they can become more decisive, especially where the well-being of their students and teachers is at stake. Some decisions do not require prompting from above, for example, cleaning the latrines every day. Leaders should not make excuses that it is not in their culture to perform menial women's work. Sanitation may be menial but it is necessary, and everyone should reflect on the many benefits of a clean environment.

If leaders and managers were given wider opportunities to be more creative, there might be more energetic activity from the ground level. This shouldn't mean a loss of control, but a chance to engage with the creativity

of teachers, students and communities. Teachers who are empowered to make decisions can provide inspiration and transfer those skills to their students.

Networking. BGRS is not poor in resources. In fact, it has a lot of potential, starting with the peaceful co-existence of all the ethnic groups living in the region. The people's commitment to peace, for instance, is a wealth that other nations may not have. However, what is lacking is a way of mobilizing resources in ways that spur creativity and create better opportunities.

Schools have become dependent on resources provided by a network of donors, but schools also have to learn that partnership is not one-sided. Their responsibility to the donors, the students, staff and community at large is to ensure the school's ability to

create a wholesome place for learning, starting with a clean environment.

Future outlook

In July 2005, these recommendations were presented to national key officers in Addis Ababa, in particular the Ministries of Health and Education. International foreign donors such as UNICEF and DFID expressed support to replicate the study in other regions to widen the awareness of girls' and women's perspectives. Meanwhile, local officials expressed support for more effective work on the ground.

WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE), in its micro projects already planned in BGRS, is encouraging the local people to make their regional government and partners accountable. A Citizens' Action for Accountability in Water and Sanitation was piloted in BGRS where poor people are not just asking 'where is the water and where are the toilets?' but also 'who is responsible?'

The local teacher participants of this study all expressed the desire to be more conscientious in their efforts to integrate hygiene and sanitation in their teaching. As one male Biology teacher remarked 'I have to be more open to understanding girls' physical predicaments because I have a wife, mother and sisters and may later have daughters of my own.'

Also at the BGRS, a full-time UNICEF local staff member has recently been assigned to monitoring Girls' Education Initiative projects. One of these projects is the training of education students enrolled in the newly established teachers' college in the region in integrating water and sanitation in the teaching and learning environment.

There is still a distant hope that the millennium development goals will be reached if all responsible agencies get their acts together. The realities of the situation on the ground are no longer unknown, but they need to be confronted, negotiated and reformulated as they affect all those concerned.

About the author

Marilyn Ngales was at the time of writing the Lead Consultant for the survey with Voluntary Services Overseas.