



Peer Education for Women Empowerment in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The 'Peer Education for Women Empowerment in Afghanistan' project had two main aims. One was to improve peer education methods among women in Afghanistan to empower them to educate each other, and second was to inform them about healthy menstrual hygiene by conducting informative workshops. This project took place in four schools in Kabul and two schools in Urozgan Afghanistan. The results of this project are ongoing workshops organized by our participants which also involve male partners as well. By ongoing projects, the taboos and stigmas attached to menstruation can be reduced. The knowledge level of people especially women will increase about the normality of menstruation or any problem related to menstruation.

Introduction

More than three decades of war, restricted cultural beliefs, and poverty have caused most Afghans, especially most Afghan women to be far away from education. According to *Human Rights Watch* 2017 report, "The Taliban and other insurgents now control or contest more than

40 percent of Afghanistan's districts. Fighting between Taliban and government forces has driven thousands of families from their homes, and more than a million Afghans are internally displaced". The areas under Taliban control often limit girls from getting education in different ways. Not being educated, most of the Afghan women do not have proper information about their health issues, more specifically their menstrual hygiene which is essential for them. Menstrual hygiene is not only one of the most important health issues for women but it is also related to family issues. Many Afghan young women while menarche, do not have proper knowledge of menstrual hygiene and they use unhealthy methods during their periods. These unhealthy methods create menstrual problems and sometimes even cause women to become sterile. In the traditional society of Afghanistan, a woman who is not able to give birth to children is not acceptable to her in-laws' family and it causes many other family issues. At the same time, the lack of professional teachers and lack of good quality education at schools have also caused that many young women do not have enough knowledge about their menstruation.

Literature Review

Insufficient information about menstrual hygiene, taboos and the stigma attached to menstruation and limited access to hygienic menstrual products, challenge the educational opportunities and health status of girls and women around the world. Menstruation is a matter of dignity and humanity to everyone, everywhere. According to a UNICEF report, "addressing issues related to menstrual hygiene are not only important for girls and women, but also for the overall socio-economic development and growth of a country".

The misconceptions and myths about menstruation that exist in most parts of Afghanistan have been very problematic. UNICEF's 2016 *Formative Research on Menstrual Hygiene*

Management (MHM) in Afghanistan found that “lack of knowledge and facilities is a major reason why girls often miss school while menstruating, sometimes even dropping out of school”. One of the most striking findings of this 2016 study is that “70 percent of girls do not bath or take shower during menstruation for the fear of infertility”. Additionally, “over half of the schoolgirls in Afghanistan did not know about menstruation before getting their first period, leaving them shocked and frightened when it occurs”. Moreover, “less than half of the girls in Afghanistan are taught about menstrual hygiene in school and majority of adolescent girls never discuss menstruation with their mothers, teachers, and classmates”. The security problem, conflict, and traditions have limited girls not to get basic education and adequate information about menstruation.

Based on the Human Rights Watch report, The Taliban conflict has been “accompanied by lawlessness, as militias and criminal gangs have proliferated, and girls face threats including sexual harassment, kidnapping, and acid attacks, as well as targeted attacks and threats against girls’ education.” At the same time, there is less number of schools for girls than boys in Afghanistan. Khatera, 15, from Samangan province, told Human Rights Watch, “It was very far to the nearest girls’ school – it was in another village.... On a donkey or horse, it would take from morning until noon.” Lack of female schools, security problems, have caused that most of the families could not afford to get some formal jobs. Not having a formal job has increased poverty in Afghanistan.

Poverty has also been one of the main problems for the families to let their children especially their daughters to get an education. Even though Afghanistan has made it compulsory to get education till ninth grade but the country is lacking resources to establish more schools or provide uniforms, books, pens, transportation etc. for the students. Based on *Human Rights*

Watch report, “international standards established by UNESCO, the government should spend at least 15 to 20 percent of the total national budget, and 4 to 6 percent of GDP, on education. The United Nations urges that least developed countries, of which Afghanistan is one, should reach or exceed the upper end of these benchmarks. As of 2016, 13 percent of Afghanistan’s public expenditure, and 4 percent of GDP was spent on education”. Poverty, conflict, and traditions have limited girls from getting the education.

The traditional society of Afghanistan Menarche is perceived as being ready for marriage and childbearing. As such, in some instances, many girls reported that they hide their menstruation from family members due to fear that families would stop them from getting an education or marrying them off at a very young age. According to UNICEF report, Rula Ghani (Bibi Gul), Frist Lady of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the Girls Hygienic Day program in the Ministry of Public Health said, “Attention to personal hygiene and proper nutrition during adolescence are important for girls for better growth and can help avoid health complications and disability. With good hygiene, they can have better control over their bodies, increase their self-confidence, and improve their attendance at school. Most importantly, healthy girls of today are the future mothers who will safeguard the process of motherhood and decrease mortality rate amongst young mothers”.

Also, Dr. Mohammad Mirwais Balkhi, the Minister of Education in the same program stated that “Girls have an irrevocable right to education, which is lost if they feel unable to attend lessons because of a lack of sanitary products or clean, private toilets at school. Governments simply need to ensure that every school has clean water, decent toilets, and good hygiene. Better facilities in schools will not only help towards the global promise of universal access to clean

water but are also essential for achieving other Sustainable Development Goals on quality education, gender equality, and good health and well-being.”

Besides water and sanitation services and sanitary supplies, women and young girls need accurate and practical information as well. Girls often turn to their mothers and female teachers for support, but if they lack the confidence and information themselves, they may instead face taboos and stigma; as the common misperception is that “periods are a dirty secret”. We need to spread out the message so that “periods are seen by all as healthy and normal”. Therefore, the peer education for women empowerment in Afghanistan by raising awareness about menstrual hygiene among young girls can be a step towards breaking taboos and the stigmas attached to them.

The objective of the project

1. Menstrual Hygiene Presentations
2. Peer Education for Women Empowerment

The significance of the project

1. Informing the young female school students about menstrual hygiene

We started this session by asking a simple and basic question related to menstrual hygiene. After getting their overall knowledge on menstrual hygiene, we gave the presentations in different schools. At the same time, since we wanted our participants to feel comfortable we shared our own stories of our first menstruation experience. At the end of the storytelling part, we distributed the sanitary pads among the participants.

2. Empowering female students by peer education methods among them

In this session, after conducting the workshops we made different groups on how to give the same presentation in other schools on the same topic. First, we had an advisory session with each group to train them how to give a presentation. Each group one by one gave their presentations and we asked other groups to give them feedback. After their presentations, we gave them solid feedback. In the end, we gave them some information about the power of knowledge and how their participation in such projects can change the life of a person. According to one of our participants, Hajira Mahmoodi from Kabul, “attending this workshop gave me the confidence to talk and to ask more open about the problems I might face in future, and I can share this information to my friends who were not able to attend the session”. Finally, the participants were ready and excited to join other schools for the information session on menstrual hygiene.

Methodology

Firstly, we started by asking basic questions of the teenage girls about how much they knew about menstrual hygiene. By the end of workshops, participants were able to answer the below questions in detail. The questions were:

1. What is menarche?
2. Why do females menstruate?
3. What is a menstrual cycle?
4. How long does a period usually last?
5. How much blood does a woman lose during every menstrual cycle?

6. Are periods painful?
7. Popular myths and existing realities?
8. Why is menstrual hygiene important?
9. What are the sanitary products available for menstruating females?
10. What to do in case a sanitary pad is not available?
11. How can Menstrual Hygiene be promoted?
12. Where can I get a sanitary pad from?

We conducted workshops at girls' secondary schools, where most of the girls are in an age that experience menstruation. These workshops took place in four different schools in Kabul and two schools in Urozgan one of the less developed provinces. We gave them a solid foundation or basic understanding of menstrual hygiene as well as some videos that show how to use pads. Then we shared our own stories of how we got to know about menstruation, and then we asked them to share their stories of how they got to know about menstruation. Hearing each other's stories made the participants feel that menstruation is not a sensitive issue but in fact, a normal experience that almost every woman faces and there is no stigma attached to menstruation. In the end, we distributed pads to them just to introduce how they are used.

In the peer education part, we trained our participants who were secondary school students to conduct the same kind of workshop for elementary school students. We divided a group of girls into groups of four or five and we asked them to educate elementary school students about menstruation hygiene. This could be one step towards empowering women to educate each other,

at the same time we informed them about menstrual hygiene and the importance of reducing the stigma regarding menstruation.

Findings

By the end of the project, we found that the presentations had been very helpful for the participants. After a few months, we received positive feedback from our participants. We got to know that our participants from Kabul are conducting the same ongoing projects in different schools which would involve male partners as well. Recently, we got to know from the only specialist Dr. Din Mohammad Frotan in the medical clinic of Shenya Urozgan that, the workshops had helped a lot the women from the village. The demand for buying sanitary pads has increased. Many women share their menstruation problem openly with the female doctors. And even some have traveled to Kabul for the treatment. So, we can say that this project has been very beneficial for us but also for our participants.

Limitations

During our project, many schools were closed due to the parliament elections and security problems. For the first month, we were not allowed to conduct the project in Kabul. So, we decided to conduct our project in Urozgan. After three days and two nights travel by car we reached Urozgan. We conducted the workshops in two weeks, and we returned back to Kabul. After a few days, we contacted the principals of the schools, and they agreed to let us conduct our workshops.

Conclusion

By the end of the project, some of our participants learned the required skills to organize the same projects. The participants were organizing the same workshops in different school and unofficial learning places which would also involve male partners as well. Involving male partners in such projects can help to increase awareness about menstrual hygiene among families and can break taboos and the stigmas attached to it. Therefore, women and young girls can ask for consultation freely from their families and doctors during their menstruation if they face any problem. The power of knowledge on menstruation has already given the ability for some women in Kabul and Uruzgan to talk freely about menstruation and ask for a consultation from doctors.

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