

MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS FROM WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Girl's education movement (GEM) clubs in school hygiene and sanitation promotion

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Access to good and safe sanitation is a right; hence the need to protect the rights of girls, boys and women to improved sanitation, hygiene and safe water. It is in this context that the school sanitation program was designed. This paper outlines the various initiatives undertaken by children and youth in school hygiene and sanitation promotion through Girl's Education Movement (GEM) club. It also discusses the respective outcomes.

Background

The school sanitation programme is designed to protect the rights of girls, boys and women to improved sanitation, hygiene and safe water in realisation of the rights of children to learning, survival and development. The programme aims at contributing to the national priority of improved water and sanitation coverage and girls' enrolment, and reduced dropout rates. This includes reducing the pupil / stance ratio, separate facilities for girls and boys, in primary schools from 328:1 to 40:1; ensure that at least one female and one male teacher in every school facilitates hygiene behaviour and; ensuring that child-to-child activities on sanitation and hygiene take place in primary schools.

Access to good and safe sanitation is a right! Investing in schools in the developing world is central to meeting children's rights, confronting issues of gender and ethnic discrimination and preparing young people for their roles in civil society. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which has been ratified by most of the world, including Uganda, provides that children have a right to a safe environment for enhanced learning, health and development of good citizens. To date over 260 schools have been reached with over 600 children so far trained and up to 2500 GEM members in 16 focus districts.

The inputs required are training of children, giving a water tank, bathroom and sanitary towels to the school. It takes about 2 months to start a program in a school after training has been done for 3 days.

Gender disparities in education are mostly caused by high dropout rates of girls in upper primary school characterised by low retention, repetition, and non-completion. Thus while countrywide enrolment figures for girls are fairly good in P1 and P2 (48% for girls and 52% for boys), from P4 onwards there is widening of the gender gap. For example at this level for the year 2003, the dropout rate for girls was at 7% in 2003 compared to that of boys, which was 6% in the same year. The completion rate for girls in the same year was 65% while that of boys was 71%.

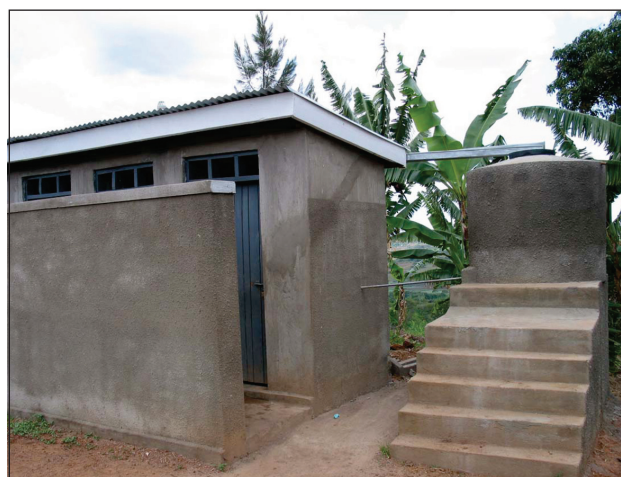


Figure 1. Bathroom made of permanent materials

Unfriendly school environment also serves to discourage girls from persisting in school. Many girls drop out due to inadequate sanitation and hygiene facilities to cater for their needs during menstruation, few female teachers, inadequate school infrastructure such as classrooms and furniture and sexual harassment by teachers or boys. Girls are also affected by violence, gender discrimination in the classroom and poor enforcement of policies and laws regarding issues such as corporal punishment, child labour, school charges/fees and re-entry into school especially when girls have become pregnant.

A study¹ showed that approximately ninety-two percent (92%) of schools in the sample had six (6) latrine stances or less and sixty-seven (67%) had no latrine stances exclusively for girls. Management in several schools stressed the lack of latrine stances for girls as a serious concern. It was also observed that mature girls had no changing facilities. They

¹ Carasco, 1996

would have to move to neighboring homes to change during their menstruation periods. In addition they found that the children's worst experiences centred on water and latrines particularly for girls. The pupils were also concerned about the few teachers that were available in the schools. Other problems specific to pupils included lack of a senior woman teacher for female pupil guidance.

Methodology

Child Participation is key. Various means of involving the young people are used. Children need to get involved in the issues that concern them because they are the experts in this. Various clubs are being promoted like school health/sanitation clubs, child rights clubs and Girl's Education Movement (GEM) clubs.

GEM is a child-centered, girl-led global movement of children and young people whose goal is to bring about positive social transformation in Africa by empowering girls through education. It is a movement and operates through groups of children and young people in schools and communities with girls taking the lead; boys acting as strategic allies while the adults - women and men - provide the wisdom of age. It is these groups that subsequently make the decision on how to interact with and help one another at community, district, national, regional and international levels in co-operation with appropriate government, civil society and donor organisations.

GEM was launched in August 2001 in Kampala by the President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy and was also introduced at the Smart Partnership Conference.

From the start, young people were involved in different activities of the GEM launch conference. Fifty of these boys and girls from various schools and institutions of learning were equipped with exciting and highly creative facilitation skills that prepared them to play a leading role in the activities of the launch.

The Girls' Education Movement (GEM) in Uganda has become a highly child-centred, girl-led grassroots movement for addressing barriers to girls' education in Uganda. Girls have characteristically taken the lead in expanding school/community strategies for getting girls into school and have co-opted boys as strategic allies.

Peer Guidance and counseling

With the advent of GEM, another important aspect of pupils' relationships has emerged. This is peer guidance and counseling and mentoring. Children, especially those in leadership avail themselves to others for counselling. Girls who need counselling about issues like menstruation for example find a willing ear in their peers. Older children have also taken on the responsibility of mentoring younger children, helping them cope with situations that would otherwise been hard for them to deal with. The girl-child has also benefited from these training programmes. Schools are now sensitive to the special needs for girls. Children, through their GEM clubs also discuss how to keep their toilets clean.

GEM Income generating Activities

Children have realized that they need a certain degree of self-reliance and have therefore taken on growing of vegetables, which they sell to get money to support their club activities. They also stage drama and music performances for the communities and these too earn them some income. Children themselves keep records of daily sales. The GEM club members, out of the money from their income generating activities, buy sanitary pads for managing menstruation and items like soap.

Music and drama

The music and drama shows have been a very useful tool for mobilisation and sensitisation of the communities on issues such as girls' education hygiene and HIV/AIDS. The demand for these visits is high. They also advocate and lobby the school management for the school to provide sanitation materials like soap and water. They acquire all these are the skills from the training they undergo where they also gain knowledge on sexuality and reproductive health issues as well common barriers to girl's education.

Development of IEC materials

Various communication and education materials have been produced and distributed by the GEM clubs. These help reinforce the verbal messages and are also used as teaching and learning aides. The main themes are proper personal hygiene during menstruation, hand-washing, proper use and cleaning of toilets, and girl-child promotion.

Building bathrooms

Many of the children in primary schools in Uganda are over age. This means most girls will have started their menstruation periods while still in primary school. In addition, the age of onset of menses has decreased from 11-13 years to 9-11 years. Washrooms are provided in schools for girls to give them an opportunity to manage menstruation hygienically and with less embarrassment through provision of water and privacy. The GEM clubs participate in the construction and maintenance of their bathrooms.

"We saw the value of girls having a bathroom so now we made one out of local materials for boys..... they use it after sports and agriculture activities", Headteacher Mbarara

The original idea was to provide washrooms/changing rooms for girls, but some schools have appreciated the concept to the extent that they have provided bathrooms for boys.

"We have a bathroom also. We use it when we have sweated after sports" Boy FGD Mbarara

Outcomes

Improved facilities: As a result of GEM in action, schools are also increasingly providing special facilities for girls such as, separate latrines, bathrooms and sanitary materials and the government recently allowed schools to use part of the UPE funds for this.

“When the GEM club came then we now have sanitary pads for times when they are needed” (FGD health prefects Mbarara)

“I have been in this school for six years. There was a time I was teaching and a girl had her MP. I told everyone to leave but her. Then I gave her my jacket to cover herself and told her to go home. There was no alternative. But now we have a bathroom and emergency sanitary pads” (Teacher Mbarara).

Clean and safe school environment: Attracts children to school and impacts on enrolment. Parents feel comfortable to send their children to such schools. This can be seen in most communities both rural and urban, where schools with high sanitation standards and cleanliness have higher enrolment. The GEM clubs have sanitation and hygiene as one of their key concerns and organise themselves to clean their toilet’s and compound. They have attained a high level of awareness concerning their sanitation and hygiene. They manage water for washing hands and they say that ever since GEM was introduced in their school, they always have enough soap to wash hands and to use in their bathrooms. The bathrooms are simple, made of local materials, but the children are happy that they have such a vital facility.

Breaking the silence: GEM members openly discuss issues that were formerly taboo. The silence is being broken on issues of menstruation. With the training the children receive in hygiene, sexuality, sexual maturation, guidance and counselling and HIV/AIDS, they have become more open to discussion issues and myths. Teachers are also becoming more open.

“The children are now free to talk about menstruation” (Male Head Teacher)

“We teach them how to make their own sanitary towels” (Senior Woman Teacher)

Health has improved: The GEM clubs carry out hygiene education through training they receive from teachers. There, the girl is taught proper ways of managing menstruation, good hygiene and they are expected to pass this information to their own daughters in the future and thus prepare them to cope better as they grow up and therefore not to drop out of school. Children are brought into the development process as active participants and are becoming change agents within their families and catalysts for community development.

“I learnt how to smoke latrines and wash hands after using the latrine at school and so I do it at home now” (FGD primary pupils Mbarara)

Increased enrolment: Music Dance and Drama seems to be the most popular GEM activity. It also seems to be the main incentive of children coming back to school. Many children testify that after seeing plays by GEM or listening to them sing, they are attracted to join school. A school in



Figure 2. GEM girls map out the sanitation and water situation in their school area

Mbarara, reported that they have debates on different issues including HIV/AIDS and sanitation. A recent debate was on “*Sanitation has helped children in school to be smarter than those out of school*”.

Recommendations

Girls’ can do it. Given the required support, children and especially girls can work to address issues that affect them. Boys need to remain as strategic allies and be mobilized to give space to the girls. Support by school management critical. Where the head teachers and other teachers are available, accommodative and flexible, GEM has had success. Management needs to be convinced that children can also develop strategies and produce results to improve their learning environments.

More partnerships are required in education. The young are key partners, and need to be involved and encouraged to participate. There is need to invest more in them for capacity building and sustainability.

Without follow up and supervision implementation can be a problem. Schools that are not monitored tend to have poorly constructed installation; weak GEM clubs and the teachers who were trained never implement what they have learnt in workshops.

Behavior change calls for participatory approaches and continual reinforcement.

More children and teachers need be trained and more effective sessions should be introduced to cater for the student body represented by their leadership. This will ensure sustainability and promote the children’s participation.

The highest political office in Uganda launched GEM. Political will is still an important ingredient for success of any grassroots interventions.

Further Work

- More support: GEM needs to partner with other NGOs and Government so they are not left on their own since some issues are systemic and need large investments.
- Lobby for free secondary education.
- Scale up to rest of country. 25 more districts still remain on the agenda for training of primary school children.
- Train more trainers. More TOTs will be carried out so those districts are self-sufficient and do not need to rely on national facilitators.
- Documentation is critical. Comprehensive documentation of GEM activities is to continue as well dissemination of reports.
- Acknowledge and reward efforts: In 2001 Government had put up a reward for schools that had provisions for girls' special needs, such as a bathroom, sanitary materials and games uniform for girls.
- Expand partnerships: Other young people partnerships like girl guides and boy scouts need to be mobilised to promote the GEM agenda and hygiene and sanitation issues.



Figure 3. GEM Chairperson gives her report

References

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- GEM Consolidated Report 2004

Note/s

We would like to acknowledge the following:

1. Netwas-U and Ministry of Education and Sports.
2. District Education Officers, pupils, and teachers of Mbarara District:
 - Rubindi Boys' Primary school
 - Rubindi Girls' primary school
 - Rwenstunga Primary School
 - Kikagate Primary school
3. District Education Officers, pupils, and teachers of Masaka District
 - Ggulama primary
 - Nakatete Primary school
 - Rubindi Boys Primary school

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