Monitoring the Status of WASH and MHM Infrastructure Facilities of Schools in India

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Background: Global estimates suggest that in 2021, over 500 million school-going children lacked basic drinking water and sanitation, and over 800 million lacked basic hygiene at their schools (UNICEF & WHO 2022). Globally, more than 500 million women and girls cannot access menstrual hygiene management (MHM) (The Lancet 2022). The absence of sanitation infrastructure in schools poses a challenge, especially for girls post-puberty (Alugnoa et al., 2022; Rehan et al. 2022). The lack of WASH facilities in schools would create unequal learning opportunities, especially for girls, and inhibit the achievement of multiple SDGs (Adams et al. 2009). Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, specifies the need to build and upgrade access to education facilities that are child and disabled-friendly, gender-sensitive, safe, non-violent, and inclusive and provide effective learning environments for all. Also, SDG 6 aims to ensure clean water and sanitation for all. In India, the 86th Amendment Act (2002) and Article '21A' of the Constitution of India enshrined education as a fundamental right for children aged 6-14, later reinforced by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009. This legislation mandates free education and sets standards for school infrastructure, including facilities like gender-specific toilets and safe drinking water. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) standards set by WHO outline requirements, such as one toilet per 25 girls and access to clean water, which are crucial for managing Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) effectively.

Global Monitoring Report 2012 specified that "Menstrual Hygiene Management should be universally recognised, promoted, and practised as a fundamental to good health, dignity and quality of life". WHO and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene has used the following definition of MHM: 'Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials'.

The SBSV campaign was launched in 2014 to improve the sanitation facilities in schools and ensure girls do not drop out due to a lack of toilets. The key feature of the campaign is to

ensure that every school has a set of functioning and well-maintained WASH facilities in India (GOI 2014). The SBSV guidelines mandate that every school must have (i) separate toilets for boys and girls, (ii) 1 toilet unit for every 40 students, (iii) MHM facilities including soap, (iv) adequate and private space for changing, (v) adequate water for washing clothes and (vi) disposal facilities for menstrual waste such as an incinerator and dustbins (GOI 2014).

MHM is an integral part of the Swachh Bharat Mission, and the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India, issued the national guidelines for MHM in December 2015. These guidelines place a particular emphasis on addressing the sanitation needs of adolescent girls and women. Managing menstruation hygienically and with dignity is integral to attaining hygiene, sanitation, and health care for women and girls. Part 4 of the guidelines focuses on MHM infrastructure in schools and the safe disposal of menstrual waste. Every school must have basic water and sanitation infrastructure, including a separate toilet for (a) girls and boys and (b) male and female teachers. It further states that there should be (i) 500 l of water storage capacity and supply for every 100 students, (ii) soap availability for handwashing, (iii) space for washing and cleaning menstrual products and (iv) facilities for safe disposal of used menstrual products. The guidelines require that the water be available inside the toilet with a tap or a dedicated water container in each toilet or cubicle. A mug should be available to dispense water for personal cleaning and hygiene (GOI 2015). The process of fulfilment of these guidelines and international commitments requires monitoring.

School facilities have an essential role in students' lives, including buildings for academic and non-academic activities, equipment for academic and non-academic activities, space for sports activity, toilet facilities, lighting and transportation, cleaning materials, food services and special facilities for the physically disabled children. Young girls have unique needs during menstruation, like private space to change, toilets with running water for cleaning, etc. In a systematic review of 138 studies conducted on MHM among adolescent girls in India, sixty-four studies reported on school absenteeism associated with menstruation, with one in four girls missing one or more school days during menstruation. The reasons for absence are physical discomfort or pain, lack of water, hygiene, disposal facilities in school toilets, fear of staining their clothes, and restrictions imposed by relatives or teachers.

Birdthhhistle et al. conducted a systematic literature review to verify whether Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Standards (WASH) conditions contribute to girls' educational

outcomes to determine the impact of separate toilets for girls on their primary and secondary school enrolment, attendance and completion. This study did not identify any studies explicitly designed to assess the impact of separate-sex toilets on school enrolment and completion. However, two critical issues emerged from this literature study: the issue of menstrual management in schools, its relationship with attendance, and the existing provision and conditions of school toilets. A study conducted on school absenteeism in Pune reported that girls remained absent from schools during menstruation due to inadequate sanitation facilities in their schools. The most common reason reported by 25% of girls was the common toilet entrance area for girls and boys; 24% said toilets were dirty, and 23% said the water supply was outside the bathroom. In India, women suffer numerous hurdles to social mobility, and education is one of the few mechanisms by which girls can be empowered to break the glass ceiling. Yet, the absence of sanitation infrastructure in school could pose a challenge for girls attending school. Overall, the literature review suggests the need for systematic studies to study the impact of separate toilets and school infrastructure facilities on school attendance, drop-out and completion.

Objectives: The main aim of this paper is to assess the availability of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene and Menstrual Hygiene Management facilities in schools in India. The attempt is to examine the compliance with school WASH standards set by WHO in 2009 and whether the schools adhere to the national standards given in Swacch Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya guidelines and Menstrual Health Management guidelines given by the Government of India.

Methods: This study utilises secondary data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE). Unified District Information System in Education (UDISE) is a national-level school census data collected by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), New Delhi. The data from all the states is downloaded from the National Institute of Education Planning and Administration, New Delhi, after seeking permission. The data was available in Excel format, then imported and compiled state-wise using the STATA software. We studied the questionnaire used to collect data from NIEPA to identify the data availability on WASH and MHM indicators. We have attempted to monitor the sanitation-related provisions given by the international agency WHO 2009 and national standards as per the RTE Act 2009, SBSV and MHM guidelines.

Results: We calculated the ratio of toilets to the number of students in co-ed schools in India. Also, we studied the compliance to the international and national standards. We study the compliance pre and post- RTE Period. The study findings show that there are no adequate numbers of toilets compared to the number of students, and data on the functionality of toilets with water is lacking. The absence of girls' toilets in schools provides disadvantages to female students in terms of managing their menstruation, which is a basic health right. There is a lack of data on Menstrual Hygiene Management facilities available in schools in India. Addressing these challenges requires robust data collection and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with WASH standards and national guidelines. Moreover, targeted interventions are necessary to improve MHM facilities in schools, recognising the specific needs of adolescent girls for privacy, safety, and hygiene. Enhancing WASH infrastructure supports educational goals and promotes gender equality and empowerment, aligning with global initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Implications: The Right to Education Act 2009 of India specifies that there should be sex-specific toilets but does not emphasise the functionality of toilets. There are guidelines on Menstrual Hygiene Management in schools given by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India, but monitoring is lacking. Some schools are not equipped with proper sanitary facilities, and water is a basic necessity in managing MHM for adolescents. The government must recognise gender-specific needs and take appropriate actions to provide basic facilities to meet the MHM needs of young girls in schools in India. There is a need for further research to study the impact of MHM facilities on young adolescent girl's education and health in schools in India. Our study finds limited data availability, making assessing the status of WASH and MHM facilities difficult. It underscores the need to re-orient data collection from schools on WASH and MHM infrastructure.

Keywords: Education, Gender, MHM, WASH, functional toilets, School infrastructure, SDGs.