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A Rapid Assessment Report for

PROJECT MAHAMPHY – MHM

**Supporting and empowering the women weavers of Sainte
Luce**

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Executive Summary

As part of the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) pilot of Project Mahampy, a rapid assessment was conducted from January 25 – 28, 2021. This baseline included questions about MHM practices and challenges in Sainte Luce and identified areas of possible intervention and training for members of the Weavers' Cooperative. Concurrently, a sewing assessment was conducted to gauge weavers' willingness and ability to sew reusable sanitary pads as part of the MHM pilot.

Many women reported experiencing some degree of discomfort during their menstruation, often due to premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and insufficient menstrual hygiene management. This was especially prominent for women with heavier periods and when a woman's menstruation would start unexpectedly. Currently, all women reported repurposing cloth to manage their period, folding fabric into makeshift pads. This presents challenges including discomfort, fear of leakage or the cloth falling out of place, and worry about how to discreetly change and manage the pads during the day.

To address these challenges, SEED will provide training sessions on MHM and sewing reusable sanitary pads, with the content and structure of the sessions informed by the rapid assessment results herein. During the rapid assessment, all survey participants expressed support of the project, hoping to improve MHM practices and increase their confidence and comfort during menstruation. Through teaching women how to create sustainable, low-cost menstrual hygiene products, this project will help address widespread period poverty whilst providing supplementary information on menstrual health.

Methods

A rapid assessment was conducted from January 25 – 28, 2021 to gain an understanding of the challenges, barriers, and opportunities regarding Menstrual Hygiene Management in Sainte Luce amongst Weavers' Cooperative members. At least four women from each sub-Cooperative were surveyed, for a total of 22 woman weavers surveyed (Table 1). Survey available in Appendix I.

Table 1: Number of weavers surveyed per sub-cooperative

Sub-Cooperative	No. members surveyed
Fanatenana	5
Mahefa	4
Soa gny rary Ste Luce	4
Soamandroso	4
Taratsy Mahavotsy Mpandrary	5
Total	22

Concurrently, women interested in becoming trainers were assessed on their sewing abilities. During the sewing assessment, women were provided with a reusable sanitary pad template and sewing supplies. With guidance from the Sewing Trainer and Designer, they were led through how to construct the pad. Ten women, two from each sub-Cooperative, were chosen democratically to undertake this assessment, administered by Project Mahampy's Sewing Trainer and Designer.

Results

Ease of Discussion

All of the women surveyed reported being comfortable speaking openly about menstruation amongst their peers. Similarly, all the women reported that older women and daughters from the same household were comfortable discussing menstruation with each other, with young women often turning to their mother for advice and support.

Current MHM Practices

Currently, all women reported using *vorotsembo*, old fabric, or a folded *lamba* to manage their menstruation. Two of the 22 women reported buying fabric specifically to cut and fold into makeshift pads when they first began menstruating, with the intention of using it for many years. All other respondents used material that was already on hand, with many citing that this was their only option due to the cost of disposable period products and lack of local availability. Women needed to change the folded cloth 2-6 times per day, depending on the heaviness of their period.

All of the women reported washing and re-using the folded fabric for their next period. Most women washed their sanitary supplies in the river, whilst a few washed them in a bucket of water in the toilet at night. All women surveyed placed great emphasis on privacy when washing and drying the fabric. Some women only dried their supplies inside for this reason, while others spoke of hiding their pads during washing and drying because it is fady (taboo) for the community to see.

Challenges During Menstruation

Women had mixed responses to how menstruation affected their daily routine. A third of women surveyed reported no problem during menstruation, stating that they were able to carry on with activities and duties as usual. Other responses varied, from mild physical challenges such as PMS, to more moderate issues, such as skipping school or work because of a heavy period and / or difficulty managing menstruation. Some women expressed unease using the *vorotsembo*, as it can shift or even fall out while walking or other physical activity. Others spoke about the uncertainty of their menstruation, and how the first day of their period can take them by surprise, leaving them unprepared.

For young women, in particular, the lack of a safe and private space to change their pad at school caused multiple challenges. Twenty women reported that the lack of facilities at school was a major issue for young women. Some women expressed that girls would not change their pad until they got home from school, whilst others relayed that young girls must find a hiding place outside to change their pad or rely on neighbouring houses' toilets. Some women reported there were facilities at the secondary school, but not the primary school.

Interest in MHM Pilot

All 22 women were interested in participating in the MHM pilot, and wished to learn how to sew reusable sanitary pads. Women were also shown a pad prototype during this portion of the interviews, with its function and features explained by the Sewing Trainer and Designer. This again was met with support and enthusiasm. Reasons for interest in the MHM pilot included creating more options for their daughters, having a cleaner and more sanitary option, greater comfort and security than folded fabric, and the desire to learn a new skill. Participants hoped that the new pads

would make managing their menstruation easier, and enable them to carry out daily activities with more confidence.

Participants were also confident in the train-the-trainer model proposed during the sewing assessment, with members of each sub-cooperative electing 10 total women to receive intensive sewing training. After successfully completing a sewing assessment, these 10 trainees were officially assigned to the role of sub-cooperative sewing trainers. Both the trainers and the general members of each sub-cooperative voiced support of this arrangement.

Discussion

Ease of Discussion

A key factor in project delivery is ensuring that the women feel comfortable discussing their menstruation. The survey revealed that the women are comfortable speaking openly about MHM with each other and with other female family members. Therefore, group sessions are a favourable and plausible approach to deliver informal MHM informational and sewing sessions.

Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges experienced by women surrounding menstruation broadly fell into two categories; physical and mental wellbeing, and the management of periods themselves. As many women reported experiencing symptoms of PMS, training sessions could provide information on this topic to explain how menstruation can affect a woman's mental and physical health. Concurrent with sewing training, the group sessions may create an open and comfortable environment to encourage group discussion and facilitate greater learning about MHM.

With regards to managing their period, the women identified multiple issues, including being unprepared for their period, discomfort with current sanitary materials, and lacking access to sanitary facilities. MHM information sessions will therefore include material on cycle tracking to help the women prepare for their menstruation. The surveys also revealed that re-using sanitary supplies is already a common practice amongst women in Sainte Luce. However, current management techniques, including the use of folded *vrotsembo* or *lamba*, left some women feeling uncomfortable, especially when their period was heavy or during physical activity when the folded fabric was at risk of shifting out of place. At the moment there are no alternatives to this practice, with women using materials already on hand due to financial constraints and because disposable sanitary products are not available. There is therefore great scope to support women during menstruation through improved menstrual hygiene supplies. All women surveyed expressed high levels of support for this option and were excited at the prospect of learning how to sew reusable sanitary pads.

The prototype for the reusable sanitary pad has also been developed with context-specific challenges in mind, making it of further appeal to the women of Sainte Luce. It is hoped that the structure of the pad will help ease many of the problems faced by the women, particularly the replaceable liner that allows for multiple changes throughout the day. Additionally, the pad is comparably easy to wash and dry. As the women are already accustomed to washing their current menstrual hygiene supplies in this way, little to no additional effort is expected when caring for the reusable pad prototype. Furthermore, the pad fastens to bikini underwear with two buttons,

ensuring the pad is secure and comfortable. The buttons also allow the user to easily fold up the used pad into a discreet packet, allowing for more privacy when women are changing or carrying pads outside the home. When the pad prototype was shown and explained to participants, these features were received favourably, strengthening project buy-in.

Further Considerations

A key remaining challenge for survey respondents and young women in the area was the lack of sanitary facilities at school, with many girls unable to change their pads during the school day or on school grounds. Whilst providing such facilities is outside the scope of this project, it is hoped that with more secure and sturdy sanitary pads, girls may have greater confidence in managing their menstruation, and experience less worry about leakage or security from their menstrual hygiene supplies. Future projects may seek to address this lack of facilities, providing spaces where girls may safely and comfortably change their sanitary pads throughout the school day.

Furthermore, while the current MHM pilot is targeted at the women weavers of Sainte Luce, it is anticipated that many women and girls outside of the Weavers' Cooperative experience similar issues and challenges. This pilot project may therefore inform future projects, with potential applications in similar rural settings.

Conclusion

Overall, the rapid assessment revealed current MHM practices as well as challenges faced by the women weavers of Sainte Luce. Survey findings suggest a need for improved menstrual hygiene materials, as currently-available supplies are inadequate to comfortably and securely manage one's period. Some knowledge gaps regarding menstruation were also uncovered, including how to track menstrual cycles, and addressing common symptoms of PMS. A crucial action for future MHM projects may be to address the lack of sanitary facilities available for young women in schools.

Alongside identifying challenges and current practices, the survey also revealed a high level of support for an MHM pilot project in Sainte Luce. Participants were keen to learn how to sew and use a reusable sanitary pad, and anticipated that the prototype shown would increase their confidence and hygiene during menstruation. As a key first step, enthusiastic sewing trainers were democratically chosen from each sub-cooperative to receive further training in creating the reusable sanitary pads.

Results from previous and current MHM work carried out in the Anosy region by SEED Madagascar's Community Health team endorse this model, supporting women to develop agency and independence during their menstruation. The Mahampy MHM pilot will therefore build upon previous work, with adaptations to address emerging concerns from the rapid assessment. Access to MHM information and sanitary materials will empower women and girls, enabling more bodily autonomy and minimise disruption to their daily life and wellbeing.

Appendix I.

MHM Rapid Assessment – Survey Questions

1. Do people openly talk about menstruation? (Y / N)
 - a. Are women comfortable talking with women from a different household about menstruation? (Y / N) Why/why not?

 - b. Are mothers and daughters from the same household comfortable talking about menstruation with each other? (Y / N) Why/why not?

2. How does menstruation affect a woman's or girl's daily routine?
 - a. Does menstruation limit the activities she can do, such as going to school or work? (Y / N) If so, why?

 - b. Do schools have somewhere where girls can safely and privately change their pads? (Y / N)

3. What products do women in your community use to manage their menstruation? (Example: Cloths, disposable sanitary pads, other)
 - a. If women use cloths, do they need to obtain new cloths every cycle, or can cloths be re-used? **[IF PARTICIPANT DOES NOT RE-USE, please skip to Question #4].**

 - b. Where do you wash the cloths? (Example: Outside, inside, at a specific river)

 - c. Where do you dry the cloths? (Example: Outside, inside) Why? (Example: dry inside because embarrassed to dry outside)

- d. How often do you wash your menstrual products?
 - e. What do you use to wash your menstrual products? (Example: water only, soap, detergent)
 - f. Do you feel safe and comfortable washing and drying your menstrual products? (Y / N) Why?
4. If you do currently use menstrual products, how do you get them? (Example: Buy cloth and make them, use materials already in the house, buy disposable pads from the store). Is there a reason you choose this option, and not a different one? (Example: cost, convenience, few alternatives)
- a. Are there any challenges to obtaining menstrual hygiene management materials in this way? (Y / N) If yes, what are they?
 - b. If you buy products from the market or store, how much do you spend each month on them?
5. Are there any other challenges that women face in managing their menstruation not yet discussed? (Y / N) If yes, what are they?
6. Would you be interested in participating in a programme to learn how to sew a reusable sanitary pad? Do you think this would be beneficial? (Y / N) Why or why not?
7. These pads require the use of underwear/pants to stay in place. Are there any challenges to accessing underwear/pants? (Y / N) If yes, what are they?

8. If you had a reusable sanitary pad, is there a safe and comfortable place to wash it? (Y / N)

9. If you had a reusable sanitary pad, is there a safe and comfortable place to dry it? (Y / N)
a. Is it possible to dry the sanitary pad outside? (Y / N) If not, why?

10. Are there any other challenges that might arise from using a reusable sanitary pad, or would make you hesitate to use one? (Y / N) If yes, what are they?