Missing school in Australia due to gaps in Menstrual Health Management

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I would like to acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples—the traditional custodians of Brisbane. I pay my respect to Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Before we begin: My standpoint

‘Growing Up’ painting by girls and women (Central Australian Youth Link Up Service; CAYLUS)
Impact of barriers to MHM in some Australian remote Indigenous communities

Mothers and grandmothers have said that girls are missing school when they have their periods ... because they don't want to change [pads] at school ... [at schools] often there's no soap, ... there's often no rubbish bins or there's one rubbish bin outside the toilet which is really embarrassing to use.

Indigenous organisation representative #3

Discussion paper: WASH priorities in Indigenous Australian remote communities:
Today’s presentation

• Context of MHM in the UN SDGs and in WASH
• WASH in remote Australian Indigenous communities
• Emerging evidence and impact of MHM in remote communities
• Improving dignity for girls and women on MHM
• Call to action
As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.

UN 2015
WASH in remote Indigenous communities: context

*Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 2016* report:

- Health for many remote Aboriginal communities is compromised
- Access to clean water and functional sewerage are key areas for action
Effective contributions

- Some government programs provide well-funded, long-term service delivery; some utilities provide high-quality, well-maintained services
- Some government programs provide regular and thorough health hardware maintenance to whole community
- New housing being built in growing communities
- Culturally and situationaly-appropriate health promotion and education to complement other layers

Water and wastewater services to the community

Health hardware in the home (taps, toilets, washing facilities)

Social situation in the home (population)

Healthy behaviours in the home (washing hands with soap; toilet only used to flush toilet waste and paper; waste removal)

History of trauma and colonisation

Cracks in the system

- Self-certification in some states enables substandard work
- Old, cheap housing stock breaking down; housing not culturally appropriate
- Chronic overcrowding (e.g. 20 people in a 3 brm house)
- Soap, shampoo, pads, toilet paper too expensive and embarrassing to buy
- Strong desire to live on-country
MHM for indigenous women in remote communities

Word cloud of MHM in Australian remote Indigenous communities
(4 transcripts; 28 references; 50 most popular words- excluding undescriptive words)
Barriers and alternatives to MHM

**Barriers:**
- Knowledge of menstruation
- Purchasing ability
- ‘Health hardware’
- Cultural issues

**Alternatives used:** toilet paper, socks, t-shirts, underwear, rags

People aren’t going to the shop and buying it, because they’re tiny places and people will know that you’ve bought it because you’re menstruating ... There’s sort of stigmatising or feeling ashamed.  

*(Researcher #2)*

... the local plumbing services say there are a lot of problems with not just tampons being flushed, but various pieces of clothing.

*(Indigenous organisation #3)*
Positive MHM contributions

• Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS): MHM toolkit to engage with local schools to ensure access to pads, underwear and bins.

• Share the Dignity: Free sanitary products in vending machines

• Central Queensland University (including MHM)

Opening the MHM conversation in Australia!

It was good for me to share... my desire to do something for our Indigenous girls and women in remote communities... we can turn this around in our communities and in doing so affect the lives of many Indigenous sisters, nieces, aunties, mothers and grandmothers.

(Minnie King, Weipa, Western Cape York, Queensland)

I am very interested in health related hygiene in remote communities. I would like to look at women, hygiene, illness and overcrowding...

(Wendy Anders, NATSIWA, Victoria)

Dear Nina,

I have responsibility for Indigenous Women and Girls policy and was deeply concerned to read these reports.

I would welcome any insight you have gained from your research that might help us answer some of the above questions, and support the Department to investigate the extent of this issue and its impact on school attendance.

Danielle Aeuckens | A/g Assistant Secretary
Early Childhood and Youth
Education, Community Safety and Health, Indigenous Affairs | Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Call to Action for Australian MHM

We need:

• To understand the needs within each context.
• To support girls and women to lead on appropriate solutions
• To respond with input from the relevant sectors
• To provide a cross-sectoral response
• To have a long-term, sustainable policy and budget commitment

With the elected leaders of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Alliance (NATSIWA), November 2017
References


Please join the journey of #monthliesAU

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