



Zambian schoolgirls admire their new bathrooms. Photo credit: USAID/Zambia

Breaking the Taboo: How School WASH Impacts Girls' Education

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The sound of girls singing echoes through the walkways of Kabulonga Girls Secondary School in Lusaka, Zambia. The song is in Nyanja, but the last three words of the chorus are in English. The girls sing: “Water, san’tation and hygiene...” The last syllable of “hygiene” is held through to the refrain.

Outside the classroom, little boys hang on the window bars or sit on the ledges, legs stretched out. They watch the singing with seeming envy. They look, at this moment, like they wish that they too were teenage girls.

The girls are singing at a weekly meeting of their special WASH club — one of more than 400 such clubs in schools across the districts of Mambwe, Lundazi, Chipata, and Chadiza in Eastern Zambia, where USAID’s largest in-school WASH program ran for four years, closing out in November of 2015.

The \$18 million Schools Promoting Learning Achievement through Sanitation and

Hygiene (SPLASH) project was part of the larger [WASHplus](#) program — the Bureau for Global Health’s flagship environmental health project.

The project was groundbreaking in its scope, working in more than 400 schools to train 1,320 teachers and change the lives of more than 200,000 students by encouraging improved hygiene, and making handwashing with soap a part of everyday routine in schools. In addition, the project helped to build 3,059 toilets, improved or installed 423 water points, and put in 622 permanent handwashing stations.

First Came Water

“In the 80’s, it was all about hardware — installing pumps and building latrines,” said Sarah Fry, Senior Hygiene Program Advisor for the WASHplus project. “Over the decades the importance of hygiene and sustainability led to Water + Sanitation + Hygiene — WASH,” she said. “And in recent years, WASH has become important to other sectors, such as Education, HIV/AIDS and Nutrition.”

“At first, the WASH in schools movement struggled because education people were about textbooks and teachers. Reading, writing, and arithmetic,” explains Fry. “But WASH is about improving the whole learning environment, by providing safe drinking water and improved hygiene and replacing open defecation with access to toilets.” This last practice was prevalent in the region, and spread disease in the villages. Due to the poor nutrition that accompanies chronic diarrhea, small children in the villages were showing signs of stunting.

Along with water points, SPLASH — with Parent Teacher Association (PTA) involvement — began installing pit latrines in schools. Soon, households began adopting them as well, and open defecation became less prevalent.

“Diarrhea is now a thing of the past,” said Mulenga Nyirenda, headman for Vimbuza village in Lundazi district. “Everyone in the community is enjoying good health and the children are attending school regularly.”

SPLASH advanced the use of pit latrines by starting the conversation about the hazards of open defecation. SPLASH promoted handwashing with soap as a necessary behavior change and schools as a great place for hygiene habit formation. SPLASH broke new ground in Eastern Zambia by broaching many topics in ways that no one had before.

Breaking Through One Last Taboo

But some things you just don’t talk about.

It is considered “shameful, dirty, and shrouded in secrecy,” said SPLASH Chief of Party, Justin Lupele. “There are myths and taboos around it. The community didn’t want it. Male education officers didn’t want it. Female teachers didn’t want to talk about it.”

Lupele reached out to village chiefs and headmen throughout the districts. “At first the village elders told us ‘you’re not supposed to talk about that. It is not for females to speak of it, and not for men in the villages. It is just this ‘thing’ that girls do.’ They did not even say the word,” Lupele remembers.

The word was menstruation. And SPLASH had a mandate to introduce Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in some 400 schools.

In Africa, one girl in 10 is kept at home during her menstruation. “The girls do not want to go to school because they are afraid that after sitting in class, they will have stained their skirts. They are afraid to put up their hands in case they may have to stand in front of the class to answer a question, afraid they will be teased,” said Malama Munkonge, School WASH Advisor for USAID/Zambia. They also did not have private, secure and gender segregated toilets and access to water for personal hygiene.

These girls will typically miss up to five days of school a month — more than a month of school a year. This has a significant impact on girls’ academic performance, and some stop going to school altogether.

“Not only is the health of these girls at risk, but so is their education and their prospects for future employment,” said Sandra Callier, Project Director of WASHplus.

“When we talked to the elders, we put it in the context of girls finishing school,” said Lupele. In the long run, “the chiefs could have no problem with that. There are a lot of issues around early marriages and adolescent pregnancies,” he explains. “Girls need to be in school. And not married. And not pregnant.”

But MHM was not just about the girls. The boys received the same puberty-related education as the girls. “For boys (menstruation) was a myth handed down over the centuries,” said Munkonge. “Some thought it was funny. Others thought it was scary.”

“We wanted the boys to appreciate what the girl child goes through due to her biological makeup,” said Lupele. “And in the classroom, and in presentations for parents, we were very graphic. Very direct,” said Lupele, who used to teach biology.

“The boys went from teasing the girls to thinking they should support their sisters at this time of the month. And they love that they have been included in MHM education,” said Lupele. “They even told the girls what they should eat,” to combat the nutritional depletion of blood loss.

Sewing It All Up

And just as they did in learning the value of using toilets, soon the communities — through PTAs — adopted another new technology.

“The village children don’t have the money to buy pads in the store,” said Munkonge. “So we introduced cheaper, re-usable pads and we taught school children in about 200 schools how to sew them and the boys really liked that.” So did some of the village men. Soon many community members were sewing them.

In Mambwe District, a pad-making project was established through a local NGO with 60 sewing machines. This project employs out-of-school girls and women to produce the re-usable sanitary pads.

Over the course of the project, SPLASH designed girls’ toilets that had two pit

latrines each, and shower stalls, eventually building more than 380 of them. “Girls at SPLASH schools were thrilled with their beautiful washrooms,” said Fry.

Making a Lasting Impression

To meet the challenge of sustainability, the final year of the project was strongly centered on the institutionalization of MHM within the provincial offices of the Ministry of General Education — just as WASH topics are now a part of the Zambia national curriculum, thanks to SPLASH. By the time it closed, the SPLASH project had trained more than 1,000 teachers in the basics of MHM, and they will continue to use the MHM Toolkit that the project developed.

“Of course, this will have a long-term impact on the girls,” said Munkonge. “Good MHM increases a girl’s confidence, (her) sense of value and self-worth,” she adds.

According to the SPLASH School Outcome Study, due out in 2016, schools with WASH programs can expect up to a 50 percent reduction in absenteeism when compared to schools without WASH.

“In the end, WASH in schools is inextricably linked to a child’s future and the development of a country,” said Fry, “The schools wanted toilets and water, which are sources of pride and importance for both schools and the communities, and we have seen a spillover effect, such as household toilets being built and used, and new classrooms springing up,” she said.

“You don’t get better development than that.”

By Leslie Rose



Additional Resources:

- [USAID/Zambia](#)
- [WASHplus](#)

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