



## Menstrual Health: Learnings from the Ritu Programme in Bangladesh

### Learn more about:

- **Edutainment:** how to use social media to start the conversation on menstrual health by Nakib Ahmed, Head of Programmes, RedOrange
- **Public-private partnerships:** how does technical innovation strengthen social interventions: developing a biodegradable sanitary napkin by Mathilde Miedema, Programme Manager, TNO
- **School-based MH/SRHR interventions:** how to integrate and sustain MH (SRHR) education in schools by Shahida Parvin, Programme Officer, BNPS
- **WASH in schools:** how to include WASH in MH (SRHR) interventions by Mohammad Zobair Hasan, Chief (REM), DORP
- **Advocacy on menstrual health:** how to build a multi-sectoral platform and other strategies by Mahbuba Kumkum, Ritu Programme Manager, Simavi

## Webinar report

This meeting took place online on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2020 and was organised by the Dutch and Bangladeshi partners who have been involved in the Ritu programme for the past four years: Simavi, TNO, DORP, BNPS and RedOrange.

This webinar report summarises the main lessons learned from the four year programme and provides recommendations on how to improve menstrual health programming.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Ritu programme was funded by the Dutch Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh as part of their broader Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) programme.

In addition to the initial programme funding (November 2015–July 2019), the embassy funded an extension of the programme (August 2019–March 2020). The embassy has been involved in the development and implementation of the programme.

### Consortium partners

The Ritu consortium consists of [Simavi](#) (Programme lead, MHM Platform, direct WASH/SRHR interventions, evaluation), [RedOrange](#) (National media campaign, journalist fellowship), and [TNO](#) (Development of biodegradable sanitary napkins). The Ritu programme was designed and implemented by the Ritu consortium in close collaboration with Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha ([BNPS](#), SRHR education in schools/communities + advocacy), Development Organisation of the Rural Poor ([DORP](#), WASH interventions in schools/communities + advocacy), Impact Centre Erasmus. Maastricht University and Johns Hopkins University were partners in the Ritu study (RCT).

### Theory of Change



**The overall objective of the Ritu programme:** Improved health and well-being, and social and economic participation of women and girls in Bangladesh.

**The specific objective:** Improved health and well-being of girls between 10 and 15 years in Bangladesh

Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3
Increased knowledge and improved attitudes and practice on menstrual health of girls, boys, men and women	Women and girls have access to female-friendly toilets and affordable (biodegradable) sanitary napkins	Increased commitment towards menstrual health by the government and civil society in Bangladesh

### Learnings from the planning and programme development:

During the inception phase, a literature review and various studies were done to explore which interventions would result in the desired impact and to validate assumptions included in the initial programme design. This required time investment, coordination, and courage to let go of earlier designed activities or assumptions based on personal observations. The extra investment resulted in a well-considered set of direct interventions and strong alignment of the ToC with existing evidence, local needs, and priorities.



**There is limited evidence on the health effects of MH programming**  
The Ritu programme decided to contribute to this evidence with rigorous research



**The evidence review further showed that educational interventions are less effective when girls cannot directly practice behaviour**

This led to a sequencing of toilets and education in the Ritu programme.



**The needs assessment concluded that the availability of products did not seem to be a big barrier**

The Ritu programme therefore focused on KAP and women-friendly toilets



**The needs assessment also found that mothers were key providers of MH information and in passing on norms while fathers played a supporting role**

The Ritu programme evaluated the added value of interventions targeting parents of girls towards programme impact

**Impact** of the SRHR/ WASH interventions in schools and communities in the district of Netrakona

- Improved physical health during menstruation
- Improved well-being during menstruation
- Increased school attendance
- SRHR related impact (early pregnancy, child marriage)

An academic impact paper, written by Lidwien Sol, Eleonora Nillesen, and Paul Smeets will be published with the complete analysis of the Ritu programme.

### Sustainability

Share-Net International is funding a sustainability study that is currently ongoing. The study looks at elements in implementation and in the context that did or did not support the continuation of activities after the end of the programme implementation period.

[Read more: Full Ritu programme report](#)

## LEARNINGS FROM MENSTRUAL HEALTH AWARENESS RAISING

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**Nakib Ahmed, Director Head of Programmes from RedOrange, shared the main takeaways regarding preferred platforms to disseminate menstrual health information to different audiences.**

During the discussions in the breakout room around communications and information dissemination, the following recommendations were formulated:



Reach out to parents and communities to provide MH message to everyone, then girls will be indirectly reached as well!



Clear and targeted messaging to save some money within the family budget for MH products and services



Implement savings programmes around menstrual hygiene products: If products are (temporary) for free, it may not be valued and sustainable.

## LEARNINGS FROM DEVELOPING BIODEGRADABLE SANITARY PADS

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Mathilde Miedema, Programme Manager, TNO shared about her learning process when developing the sanitary napkins that aimed to replace the plastic anti-leakage layer, fixation strips and top layer of the current available disposable sanitary napkins by biodegradable polymers.



**Showing a demo product do help to convince local companies to join.**

Talking about innovative bioplastic foils is too fuzzy. When companies can see, look and feel the product, than they believe it is reality and are more eager to invest and join the initiative



**Innovation is balancing in product push and market pull**

You have to work on both sides and timing of activities at production and marketing side is challenging



**Local versus international production**

Manufacturing compostable sanitary napkins exists of 4 steps: 1. Gaining waste starch (potatoes) 2. Manufacturing granules out of starch 3. Blowing granules into bioplastic foil 4. Assembling this compostable foils in end-products like sanitary napkins. Final aim is to have the full value chain active in Bangladesh. But in the first stages it is more practical and profitable to have the first steps in the Netherlands. Dependent of willingness and availability of private sector partners in Netherlands and abroad this trajectory to transfer knowledge and execution of activities internationally is custom made and sometimes challenging and time-consuming. This is quite common in such system innovations and sector transitions, but project partners are not always aware.

## LEARNINGS FROM SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

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Shahida Parvin, Programme Officer presented on BNPS' learnings around best practices from school-based WASH and SRHR interventions within the Ritu programme.



**Engage men and boys!**

BNPS organised community sessions with fathers on MH. They experienced that girls shared open about MHM with the men present.



**Reinforce positive masculinity!**

Actively address and challenge taboos and traditional practices at school by the use of evidence-based information



**Create safe spaces in the schools for girls!**

BNPS experienced positive changes with new teaching methodologies (teachers received student-focused teaching training)



**Collaborate with national curriculum text book board and the teachers training institution!**

## LEARNINGS FROM BUILDING FEMALE-FRIENDLY TOILETS IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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Zobair Hasan, Director, Research, Planning and Monitoring (DORP) highlighted several best practices and lessons learnt drawing from DORP’s experience with mobilizing budget for building toilets in schools in rural areas in Bangladesh as part of the Ritu programme.



**Effective coordination between Local Government and School authority**

Zobair Hasan emphasised the importance of bottom up approaches! The Ministry of Education had issued a Circular in 2015 to ensure separate Toilets for Girls, but it was not operationalised before more effective coordination between school authorities and the local governments were established throughout the programme. A successful practice was painting the circular on the wall of school to create more visibility!



**Mobilising school and local government for Resource allocation to achieve the MHM friendly toilets in the school**

In sum, Zobair Hosan stressed that budget mobilisation from different sources was very effective. They prepared a position paper on MHM and respective budget, which was shared with the Ministry and also submitted a petition to the service providers. Schools also undertook initiatives to explore budget allocation from different service providers Remarkably, budget may often not be the key problem, but connectivity and the implementation of right-approaches!



**Hold the local government accountable to provide allocation for toilet and the right to toilets**

“Leaving no one behind”: DORP focused on the accountability issue in hard-to-reach areas to engage the traditionally excluded communities. An effective practice was setting criteria for MHM quality to ensure safety, security and access (e.g. running water or at least water from

safe distance, enough lights, functioning locks inside etc.) Furthermore, the school management committee has been ensured to visit the local government institutes and service providers





**Importance of linking WASH & SRHR & education**

The main learning on this aspect of the Ritu programme is the mutual influence and impact between SRHR and WASH needs and access to education for those who menstruate!

## ADVOCACY ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH: HOW TO BUILD A MULTI-SECTORAL PLATFORM AND OTHER STRATEGIES

Mahbuba Kumkum, Ritu Programme Manager, Simavi shared lessons learnt around best practices for effective advocacy on menstrual health to build a multi-sectoral platform.

 <p><b>Best practices in terms of evidence informed advocacy</b></p>	 <p><b>Best approaches in collective and sustainable advocacy</b></p>
Engage government in the collection of data	Engage the government and hold them accountable
Making government accountable to collect data.	We need to be open - ensure that the platform is owned by all participants from the beginning.
Process documentation is important.	Ensure that the platform is participatory.
Keeping the objective in mind in advocacy to stay focused.	Joint planning for action.
It helps to systemise data collection - for example, include MH questions in the NHS survey in Bangladesh.	Try to coordination with others Youth forum & media which will make this forum more vibrant & visible.
It would help to have data from different organisations/sources to make a stronger case.	Give room for different priorities of the partners that are part of the platform.
Refer to international standards and frameworks - e.g. SDG indicators - to get government on board in data collection.	Try to make the MHM Platform decentralised among the country and join with other regional & global networks related with MHM & SRHR.

**Key conclusions: 1) engage with the government to ensure systematised data collection, 2) make use of international frameworks and standards.**

**Key conclusions: 1) ensure ownership of all partners involved, 2) link to and engage with other existing platforms and forums.**