

# A cross-sector partnership to improve menstrual health and increase awareness and uptake of SRH services

## KEY LEARNINGS

From 2017–2020, Marie Stopes International Australia (MSIA) and WaterAid (WA) worked in partnership to deliver the ‘*Keeping Girls in School through Improved Reproductive and Menstrual Health*’ project. The project was a cross-sector approach to holistically improve menstrual health and increase awareness and access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea (PNG).

An independent evaluation was undertaken in late 2020, involving stakeholder interviews, and found the intervention was effective in building effective partnerships with schools and enabling adolescents to apply the skills and knowledge learned via education sessions to better manage their menstruation at school.



## A NEED TO WORK ACROSS SECTORS

### Reaching newly married adolescents

Collaboration between partners working in SRH and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to improve menstrual health is a relatively new development. SRH and menstrual health are intrinsically related and yet sexuality education delivered in schools often misses the opportunity to speak about both topics. Traditional sexuality education may provide basic biological knowledge about the reproductive system but there is rarely any guidance on how students can practically apply this information to manage their menstruation or their SRH.

Globally, menstrual health studies have repeatedly pointed out that **a cross-sector approach is needed** to properly address the complex issues involved in improving adolescent girls’ menstrual health.

## WHAT WE DID

### A first-of-its-kind partnership

In response to this need, MSIA and WaterAid partnered to design and deliver the ‘GAP Project’, funded by the Australian Government. The first of its kind in the Pacific region, the project focused on adolescent girls and their communities to address the interrelated issues of unwanted pregnancy and menstrual health. There were three outcome objectives:

**1. Increased awareness and use of SRH services and menstrual health practices among adolescent girls** through improved access to girl-friendly facilities, education and services.



**2. Improved availability of appropriate and affordable menstrual products** through strengthened sustainable business models for local women-led entrepreneurs.



**3. Strengthened knowledge of and attention to the importance of SRH and menstrual health** in Timor-Leste, PNG and Asia Pacific more broadly through cross-collaboration, learning and an established community of practice.



## WHAT WE FOUND

### Effective entry into schools

Providing WASH facilities alongside discussions of menstrual health also proved to be **an effective way to develop partnerships with schools**. The approach allowed for the strategic introduction of topics that tackled myths, taboos and misinformation pertaining to menstruation and SRH including fertility awareness.

Interviews with teachers from three schools in PNG highlighted that the **integration of WASH, SRH and menstrual health helped teachers to introduce sexuality education into the curriculum**. All the teachers interviewed believed that young people really needed comprehensive sexuality education and benefited from the education sessions.

Developing education materials in partnership with the government was shown to be an effective strategy to ensure public ownership and context-appropriate materials that can be used in the long term.



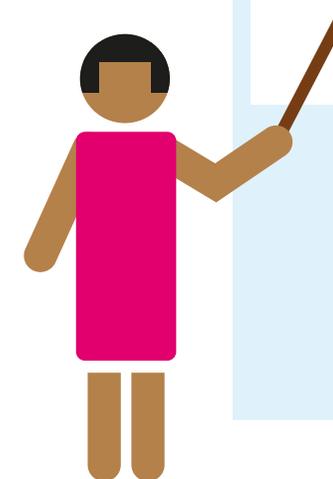
## WHAT WE FOUND

### The cross-sector approach works

By aligning shared challenges and shared goals, the cross-sector approach between WASH and SRH proved a valuable way to holistically improve menstrual health within the project areas.

Shared Challenges	Shared Goals
Difficulties in shifting gender and social norms and attitudes	Educating young people on taboo topics
Challenges in engaging men and boys on taboo topics	Keeping girls in school
A need to reach girls out of school	Improving health outcomes and delivering essential services

The project combined improvements to WASH facilities at schools alongside the delivery of SRH and menstrual health education sessions. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that **this approach was effective in enabling adolescents to apply the skills and knowledge learned via education sessions to improve their ability to manage their menstruation at school**. Although it was beyond the scope of the evaluation to measure impact on menstrual health outcomes, stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation all agreed that integrating WASH and SRH was essential as a means of improving menstrual health.



“The project was a good way to get SRH into schools, as prior to the GAP Project sex education wasn’t allowed in schools. Improving the WASH infrastructure was also a good way to introduce the topics of SRH and MH softly.”

– Project Staff Member, PNG

## WHAT WE FOUND

### Investing in partnership is critical

Partnership is crucial for the integration of WASH and SRH. Menstrual health projects will have greater impact by working with partners to implement innovative solutions.

The partnership between WaterAid and MSI was an integral component of the project. Interviews with project staff revealed a strong partnership in Timor-Leste from the outset due to an existing relationship between the organisations. As a result, staff worked collaboratively to deliver some of the education sessions and activities jointly.

*"The partnership with WaterAid is good for our mission at MSI and for improving WASH at health facilities, at houses and in communities."* - Project staff member, Timor-Leste.

The evaluation found the partnership was open, transparent and harnessed the strengths of each organisation to deliver the project.



The project showed however, that time and investment is needed to establish strong working partnerships. Both organisations also had to adapt their business model to work in partnership and integrate the GAP Project within their 'core' functions.



"I think it is vital to integrate the topics of SRH and menstrual health. This was an eye-opening experience in breaking down some taboos.

When talking about sexual health in the classroom, we can see the students opening up and understanding the issue and respecting each other."

– Government Representative, Department of Health, PNG



### MORE INFORMATION

For more information on MSI Reproductive Choices and the work that we do, please contact:  
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