

MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

REGIONAL PROGRESS REVIEW

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a landlocked South-East Asian country with a population of 7.4 million people, including over 2.3 million adolescent girls and women of reproductive age.¹ In 2017, 14.3 per cent of Lao women aged 15–49 years had an unmet need for contraception.² Only 32 per cent of schools in Lao PDR had basic sanitation service, and 35 per cent had basic hygiene service.³ Around 79 per cent of households had access to at least basic sanitation services and 56 per cent of households had access to basic hygiene services.⁴

OBJECTIVES

1. Document the state of policy and programming to support menstrual health. Collate lessons learned and stakeholders' insights on barriers and enablers to effective action.
2. Review the evidence for menstrual health interventions across the region. Document lessons learned and the barriers as well as the enablers of high-quality monitoring and evaluation.

This review report assesses the progress and opportunities using five dimensions of the definition of menstrual health.⁵ Menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in relation to the menstrual cycle. Achieving menstrual health implies that women, girls and all other people who experience a menstrual cycle throughout their life course can engage in the following five dimensions.



Access accurate, timely, age-appropriate information about the menstrual cycle, menstruation and changes experienced throughout the life course, as well as related self-care and hygiene practices.



Care for their bodies during menstruation such that their preferences, hygiene, comfort, privacy and safety are supported. This includes accessing and using effective and affordable menstrual materials and having supportive facilities and services, including water, sanitation and hygiene services, for washing the body and hands, changing menstrual materials and cleaning and/or disposing of used materials.



Access timely diagnosis, treatment and care for menstrual cycle-related discomfort and disorders, including access to appropriate health services and resources, pain relief and strategies for self-care.



Experience a positive and respectful environment in relation to the menstrual cycle, free from stigma and psychological distress, including the resources and support they need to confidently care for their bodies and make informed decisions about self-care throughout their menstrual cycle.



Decide whether and how to participate in all spheres of life, including civil, cultural, economic, social and political, during all phases of the menstrual cycle, free from menstruation-related exclusion, restriction, discrimination, coercion and/or violence.

PROGRESS: ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Policies and plans

The Government of Lao PDR has integrated menstrual health into school water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) guidelines and reproductive health services. National plans and guidelines in Lao PDR that address menstrual health are:

- **Decision on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Standards for Early Childhood Education and General Education (2019)**, which defines standards for WASH at school, including the provision of clean and functional sex-disaggregated toilets that are accessible for students with disabilities, hand washing facilities with soap and hygiene-promotion activities on menstrual health.
- **National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2016-2025**, which commits to strengthening the availability of reproductive health services (including care before and during menopause).
- **Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025**, which outlines a commitment to support schools to achieve basic and inclusive WASH facilities and roll out comprehensive sexuality education at all levels of school education.

 Information and education	 Services and materials	 Care for discomfort and disorders	 Supportive social environment	 Non-discrimination and participation
<p>✓ The Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025 commits to roll out comprehensive sexuality education at all levels of school education.</p>	<p>✓ The Decision on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Standards for Early Childhood Education and General Education (2019) addresses menstrual health through WASH services.</p> <p>The Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025 commits to support schools to achieve basic and inclusive WASH facilities.</p>	<p>✓ The National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2016-2025 addresses menopause.</p>	<p>✗ Not included.</p>	<p>✗ Not included.</p>

Lessons and insights: Opportunities to link existing policies to menstrual health

The review identified five opportunities to strengthen the linkages between national policies and guidelines and menstrual health in Lao PDR:

- **National WASH Policy and Strategy (2019)**, which aims to provide universal access to safe, reliable and affordable WASH services to all, with attention to the specific needs of women and children, which could include menstrual health
- **Law on Hygiene and health promotion (amended 2020)**, which sets forth principles and regulations on hygiene in different settings (personal hygiene, hygiene of education institutes and health care facilities) and the promotion of health education, and adolescent and reproductive health, which could address menstrual health
- **National school health policy (2012)**, which aims to promote personal hygiene, physical and psycho-social school environments, and health care services and nutrition, which could incorporate menstrual health

Lessons and Insights: Greater prioritization of menstrual health needed to drive action

While the inclusion of menstrual health in national policies and plans reflects a strong government commitment, resource allocation is lagging. Review informants reported it is required to ensure more effective implementation.

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Menstruation is not something that you discuss a lot. Women, girls and everyone acknowledge that it is an important issue. Still, they do not bring it up the level of attention and try to cope in their ways. – Review informant

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First, we need to have cross-sector coordination and bring the issue to the priority areas. – Review informant

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Implementation arrangements

The Ministry of Health is responsible for the implementation of the National Strategy on Reproductive Health; however, the review found little evidence of how the menopause service provisions are delivered. The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for WASH in schools and the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education. Review informants reported there is a lack of clear menstrual health responsibility and leadership across relevant ministries. Review informants suggested menstrual health could be addressed at the school level by Hygiene Focal Points and School Health Teacher roles. Review informants reported that there are informal WASH and adolescent working groups led by non-government development partners, which could be good platforms to initiate menstrual health discussion and action.

 Information and education	 Services and materials	 Care for discomfort and disorders	 Supportive social environment	 Non-discrimination and participation
<p>✓ The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for comprehensive sexuality education.</p>	<p>✓ The Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for WASH in schools. The Ministry of Health is responsible for WASH service delivery.</p>	<p>✓ The Ministry of Health is responsible for the National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2016-2025, which addresses menopause.</p>	<p>✗ No evidence was found.</p>	<p>✗ No evidence was found.</p>



Lessons and insights: Adolescent health platforms can be used for the menstrual health agenda

Review informants highlighted a range of opportunities to build menstrual health action and coordination in WASH, health, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. They identified strategic opportunities to integrate menstrual health into existing non-government-led working groups, forums and cross-ministerial agendas.



There are different agencies and working groups which are relevant to menstrual health. The Ministry of Health leads the adolescent-friendly [health] services, and Ministry of Education and Sport leads WASH, health and sex education at schools. Development partners have formed an informal adolescent working group. There are different forums and round table discussions on youth and adolescents that the government, UN and partners organized jointly. I think it is best to use all available platforms to raise awareness, voice and demand about menstrual health. If people are sensitized about this, they will probably take up the issue to other levels. – Review informant



Financing

No evidence of financing for menstrual health was found in the national budget or outlined in the reviewed policies and plans. The Ministry of Education and Sport reported that school grants are the key financing mechanism to improve school environments. Review informants reported that COVID-19 had impacted the country's national budget, resulting in higher competition for limited funding. Development partners and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were the primary funders of menstrual health activities. Review informants reported limited funding specifically for menstrual health, but small funding to mainstream it within school WASH and education programmes.



Lessons and insights: Increasing menstrual health attention not matched with investment

Review informants reported that despite growing attention and awareness of menstrual health challenges in the country, this had not been met with increased funding. Review informants reflected this was a similar challenge for other areas of adolescent health such as sexual and reproductive health. Given the more recent understanding and awareness of menstrual health, this too is receiving less financial support than needed.

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While there is increasing attention to menstrual health, there are insufficient resources. Not only menstrual health, but also sexual reproductive health and adolescent programmes might not receive investment due to limited resources. – Review informant

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PROGRESS: SERVICE DELIVERY AND PROGRAMMING APPROACHES

In Lao PDR, menstrual health activities are implemented as part of education, and school WASH and adolescent sexual reproductive health programmes (ASRH), with a focus on improved access to information and services. Little progress was found on care for discomfort and disorders, and no programmes were found to address participation free from discrimination and a supportive social environment.



Information and education: The Ministry of Education and Sport with support from UNFPA, has approved a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum, which includes puberty and menstruation. The curriculum will be rolled out for primary education (Grades 1 - 5), secondary education, teacher training, non-formal education, technical and vocational education and training, university and out-of-school children. The NGOs Plan International, ChildFund, AIDS HealthCare Foundation and Proud to Be Us are also rolling out the approved curriculum to expand to seven provinces. Teacher training for comprehensive sexuality education has been implemented in eight teacher training colleges nationwide. Comprehensive sexuality education for out-of-school children with the National University of Lao is supported by UNFPA along the Lao-China railway stations.

The NGOs Eau Laos Solidarité and Lao Red Cross developed and distributed puberty books for girls, called 'I am a teenager', for self-learning. Eau Laos Solidarité, Swiss Red Cross, UNFPA and Plan International Laos have led small-scale activities to promote menstrual health knowledge within education, sexual and reproductive health and WASH programmes through capacity development to government counterparts, teachers, nurses and peers. UNFPA also developed a mobile application to create awareness of sexual and reproductive health, which includes information on menstruation.



Services and materials: The Ministry of Education and Sport has raised school awareness of the WASH standards by disseminating WASH guidelines to approximately 480 schools. Other development partners have promoted menstrual-health-friendly WASH services in schools, such as through GIZ's Fit for School approach, THRIVE Networks, SNV, and the World Bank. Initiatives on reusable pads have gained momentum in Laos, such as an online discussion on reusable pads facilitated by the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance. The Lotus Education Fund, Care International and the World Bank have all supported reusable pad production and distribution, while Plan International recently partnered with the company Modibodi to deliver period pants to girls in school.



Care for discomfort and disorders: UNFPA has established three telephone helplines, run by the Lao Union, Vientiane Youth Center and Lao Women's Union, to provide information and counselling to adolescent girls on sexual reproductive health, including menstrual health. One stakeholder reported a focus on strengthening health worker capacity and establishing youth-friendly services at health care facilities, yet the scope has been limited.



Lessons and insights: Menstrual health in schools remains a critical need

Review informants highlighted that the focus on information and education on menstrual health in schools needs to be targeting teachers and staff to ensure there is adequate understanding of menstrual health challenges. They also highlighted that access to WASH is essential to support the roll out of comprehensive sexuality education and to help girls manage their periods.



The key challenge is the lack of WASH facilities. Another challenge is the understanding and attitude of education officers and teachers at all levels – how much they see the importance of menstrual health as significant. We do not have adequate facilities and not see the importance and key players do not see their roles to push the agenda forward, so it is difficult to see the change.

– Review informant



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PROGRESS: MONITORING, EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE

There is some government-led monitoring of menstrual health progress nationally. The Ministry of Education and Sport integrated menstrual health indicators into the education management information system in 2022 with support from UNICEF. These indicators aim to track coverage of sex-segregated toilets, hand-washing facilities with water and soap, and a private space for girls to change menstrual materials. The Ministry of Education and Sport is working to improve the monitoring of WASH in schools through the development of a national database collecting three-star approach monitoring data. The review did not find national monitoring of menstrual health knowledge as part of the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education.

Programme monitoring led by NGOs was found to be limited, given that menstrual health activities are implemented as part of wider programmes. Approaches included tracking the number of comprehensive sexuality education and menstrual health education session participants and the number of pads distributed. The Swiss Red Cross evaluated its menstrual health education intervention using a baseline on knowledge, attitude and practice compared with pre-tests and post-tests during workshops and annual surveys. The World Bank monitored and evaluated local production and post-distribution of pads and user acceptability. Review informants reported challenges in data collection for evaluation, indicating menstruation is considered a private matter and some female respondents felt uncomfortable participating in interviews.

 Information and education	 Services and materials	 Care for discomfort and disorders	 Supportive social environment	 Non-discrimination and participation
✘ No monitoring data were found.	✔ Education management information system collects data on WASH in schools including menstrual health indicators.	✘ No monitoring data were found.	✘ No monitoring data were found.	✘ No monitoring data were found.

Lessons and insights: Monitoring challenges affect multiple sectors

Review informants highlighted that monitoring challenges related to menstrual health were also common in other sectors, such as monitoring of water, sanitation and hygiene, and monitoring sexual and reproductive health education. They reported that accurate data was critical to enhance understanding of issues, but that government monitoring systems were weak, under resourced and not adequately functioning.

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Despite having a checklist and standard on WASH, it is important to ensure that teachers understand them correctly to ensure accurate data is provided. There are limited resources to support the monitoring as there is only one expert at the Ministry of Education and Sport to develop the database and build the capacity of other staff to sustain the system.

– Review informant

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Review methods

Regional progress review methods



8 policies reviewed across the gender, education, WASH, labour law and sexual and reproductive health sectors

5 informants participated in interviews and surveys capturing programme and policy action

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The *Menstrual Health in East Asia and the Pacific Regional Progress Review* report is available at: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/menstrual-health-in-east-asia-and-the-pacific>

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Endnotes

1 Defined as 10–49 years in 2021. See United Nations Population Division Projections, 2022, <<https://population.un.org/wpp/>>, accessed 1 December 2022.

2 Lao Statistics Bureau, *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*, 2018, <<https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr356-other-final-reports.cfm>>

3 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO), *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: 2000-2021 data update*. New York: UNICEF and WHO, 2022. <<https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2022-wins>>

4 UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020: five years into the SDGs*. New York: UNICEF and WHO, 2022. <<https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2021-wash-households>>

5 Hennegan, J., et al., 'Menstrual Health: A definition for policy, practice and research', *Sexual Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021: 1911618. doi: 10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618. PMID: 33910492; PMCID: PMC8098749.