

# MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

## REGIONAL PROGRESS REVIEW

# VANUATU

## COUNTRY CONTEXT

**The Republic of Vanuatu** is a Pacific Island country with a population of 322,000, including an estimated 97,000 adolescent girls and women of reproductive age.<sup>1</sup> There is no national data on the unmet need for contraception among women aged 15-49 years. Vanuatu has limited data available on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools, with an estimated 59 per cent of schools with basic water service and no estimates on sanitation or hygiene.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 53 per cent of households have access to at least basic sanitation services and no estimates are available on hygiene.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Vanuatu has integrated menstrual health into national WASH and disability policies, with a focus on improving services and facilities:

- **National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2017–2030)**, which contains policy objectives to improve menstrual health outcomes by research and data generation, and advocacy for budget provisions and investment in schools, work and household menstrual health-friendly WASH services.
- **National Syllabus Family Life Education Years 11–13 (2013, updated 2022)**, which contains adolescent sexual and reproductive health information, including menstrual health, for school students.
- **National Disability-Inclusive Development Policy (2018–2025)**, which contains strategic policy on mainstreaming disability, including WASH, the menstrual health of women and girls with disabilities, and identifying barriers to menstrual health facilities.
- **Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (2020–2030)** and associated **WASH in Schools and Minimum Quality Service Standards (forthcoming)**, which are under development by the Ministry of Education and Training for primary school WASH infrastructure. It is expected to contain a provision to develop a national WASH in schools policy and framework with minimum standards, guidelines and curriculum that include menstrual health.

 Information and education	 Services and materials	 Care for discomfort and disorders	 Supportive social environment	 Non-discrimination and participation
<p>✓ National Disability Inclusive Development Policy (2018–2025) includes provisions for the menstrual health of women and girls with disabilities.</p> <p>National Syllabus Family Life Education Year 11–13 (2013, updated 2022) contains adolescent sexual and reproductive health information including on menstrual health for school students.</p>	<p>✓ National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2017–2030) contains policy objectives to improve menstrual health outcomes in schools and households.</p> <p>National Disability Inclusive Development Policy (2018–2025) contains provisions on the need to identify barriers to menstrual health facilities for women and girls with disabilities.</p> <p>WASH in Schools and Minimum Quality Service Standards (forthcoming) under Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (2020–2030): Minimum standards, guideline and curriculum include menstrual health.</p>	<p>✗ Not included.</p>	<p>✗ Not included.</p>	<p>✗ Not included.</p>

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

The review identified three opportunities to include menstrual health and hygiene in national policies, plans or guidelines:

- **National Health Sector Strategy (2021–2030):** In this document, the Ministry of Health defines inclusive hygiene and sanitation targets for households and health facilities; as well as improved health messaging and services for adolescents and young people, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health (objective 2.8). Menstrual health is implicit in this commitment and could be made explicit.
- **National Gender Equality Policy (2015):** This policy recognizes that women and girls have the right to safety, sexual and reproductive health, and family planning, counselling and support services. Menstrual health is implicit in this commitment and could be made explicit.
- **Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Policy, Strategy and Implementation Plan (2021–2025):** Sets out practical plans for the Ministry of Health to support the Ministry of Education and Training to scale up Family Life Education along with health workers from local facilities. While Family Life Education includes menstrual health, there is no explicit mention of menstrual health throughout the Policy, Strategy and Implementation Plan.

## Lessons and insights: Policy commitments for menstrual health are growing

The review found four policies in Vanuatu that explicitly addressed menstrual health. This demonstrates the growing government leadership and commitment towards menstrual health. Many review informants highlighted that the recent commitments to menstrual health in policy frameworks was an indication of stronger cross-Ministerial support. They also identified future policy development opportunities to continue the momentum, such as the forthcoming WASH in Schools and Minimum Quality Service Standards.

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*It is captured at the policy level. The WASH in schools policy is under development. In addition to that, there is Ministry of Health support to develop sanitation and hygiene policy... It is recognized at policy level which is a great thing – Review informant, UN agency*

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## Implementation arrangements

The Ministry of Health's National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2017–2030) does not outline clear roles and responsibilities for menstrual health. The WASH Policy is overseen by the Sanitation Board, Department of Water Resources, and Department of Public Health, which work together to deliver requirements. The Ministry of Health's Department of Public Health and Ministry of Education and Training's Department of Education have a joint agreement and plan underway to review the current family life education curriculum (years 7–10), and develop additional curriculum and teacher training for years 11–13, supported by UNFPA.

Review informants noted there is an active Sanitation Working Group in Vanuatu led by the Ministry of Health, with support from Engineers Without Borders, and made up of civil society organizations (CSOs) and government departments, which added menstrual health as an agenda item recently.

 Information and education	 Services and materials	 Care for discomfort and disorders	 Supportive social environment	 Non-discrimination and participation
<p>✓ Department of Public Health is responsible for National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2017-2030) provisions on menstrual health data.</p> <p>Department of Education is responsible for the development and teacher training of the Family Life Education curriculum which includes menstrual health.</p> <p>The Ministry of Justice and Community Services' and the Department of Water Resources, and the Vanuatu Disability Promotion &amp; Advocacy Association (VDPA) are responsible for delivery of the Disability-Inclusive Development Policy provisions to improve access to menstrual health and hygiene information for women with disabilities.</p>	<p>✓ Department of Public Health is responsible for National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2017-2030) provisions on menstrual health data.</p> <p>Department of Education is responsible for minimum quality standards of WASH in schools, including menstrual health.</p> <p>The Ministry of Justice and Community Services' and the Department of Water Resources, and VDPA are responsible for objective 1.8.2 of Disability Inclusive Development Policy of access to menstrual health facilities for women with disabilities.</p>	<p>✗ No evidence was found.</p>	<p>✗ No evidence was found.</p>	<p>✗ No evidence was found.</p>



### Lessons and insights: Water, sanitation and hygiene actors are driving coordination for menstrual health

The review found that the Department of Water Resources is leading menstrual health coordination. Review informants acknowledged this leadership and noted it as a key success. Informants reported they wanted to see other departments taking leadership of other menstrual health components.



*There remains a disconnect of menstrual health being everyone's responsibility (health, education, WASH, gender and protection) and subsequently no one's responsibility. At a national level, the Department of Water Resources is starting to engage more in conversations and discussions around menstrual health, however, there remains a gap in coordination between different sectors to progress change. – Review informant, international non-governmental organization (NGO)*



## Financing

The amount of public budget allocated to menstrual health in Vanuatu was not found in this review. Though menstrual health is included in the four policies outlined above, we found no budget lines or subsequent policy requirements outlining financing arrangements. Review informants noted that government funding of menstrual health was a challenge, and that development partners were funding menstrual health through WASH activities.



### Lessons and insights: Menstrual health not prioritized in funding allocation

Despite the growing evidence base of the importance of menstrual health, and the increasing interest of the Department of Water Resources to address menstrual health, with support and collaboration from the Ministry of Health, review informants highlighted that there was a lack of government funding to deliver services. This was a barrier to supporting progress.



*Funding is a challenge for the Ministry of Health. Each year they receive money from government to implement WASH activities, which include menstrual health and hygiene. Other donor partners support the Ministry of Health, but there is a lack of prioritization at government level.*

– UN agency representative



## PROGRESS: SERVICE DELIVERY AND PROGRAMMING APPROACHES

In Vanuatu, government-led service delivery has focused on WASH in schools and healthcare facilities, which has addressed some aspects of menstrual health. International NGOs and local CSOs have integrated menstrual health into WASH programmes, with a focus on disability inclusion. The focus has been on information and education, and services and facilities with limited evidence found on menstrual health care, social support or participation. Current service delivery and programming approaches are:



**Information and education:** UNFPA are collaborating with the Ministry of Education and Training and Ministry of Health to develop and roll out a family life education syllabus focused on curriculum and teacher training for years 11–13 across five provinces. World Vision led menstrual health education that reached 40 women with intellectual disabilities and their carers in emergency settings. The social enterprise Mamma's Laef and the international NGO CARE Vanuatu have also delivered school and community menstrual health education.



**Services and materials:** Access to reusable pads during emergencies has been a strong focus in Vanuatu. For example, during the Ambae volcano evacuation in 2018, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Education and Training and Mamma’s Laef to deliver reusable pad kit supplies to nearly 5,000 students and female teachers. Mamma’s Laef regularly manufactures bulk orders of reusable pads for international NGO emergency response programmes. The NGO Live and Learn works with the Ministry of Education and Training on menstrual health as part of WASH in schools, and CARE Vanuatu addresses menstrual health in school WASH. World Vision has two programmes focused on menstrual health in WASH with a focus on reaching women with disabilities, across three provinces reaching at least 1,000 participants, as well as previous sports for development programmes reaching 85 girls aged 14-25 years with menstrual health products and information. Menstrual health in emergencies has received attention, such as when Cyclone Harold and the COVID-19 pandemic spurred disaster-related provisions. ADRA supplied 5,000 dignity kits, while the Pacific Disability Forum and UNFPA collaborated to design dignity kits for women with disabilities. There were also grass-roots efforts distributing dignity kits, with corporate donations of pads also provided.



### Lessons and insights: Not all people who menstruate are women

One stakeholder highlighted that the menstrual health experiences of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics are often missed in mainstreaming efforts in Vanuatu.



*Bring greater visibility, safely, to people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics. There is very little understanding of sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics issues or what we mean when we say ‘not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women’. Its already such a marginalised community. – Review informant, international NGO*








## PROGRESS: MONITORING, EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE

Monitoring of menstrual health in Vanuatu is most advanced in WASH in schools. The Ministry of Education and Training is developing a WASH in schools monitoring module to integrate into the Vanuatu Education Management Information System (VEMIS) with support from UNICEF. The module is based on the Three Star Approach to WASH in Schools, which incorporates an indicator on provision of menstrual health supplies in schools. WASH in schools data has also been collected in Penama using a different digital tool. There is currently no monitoring of family life education in Vanuatu, although UNFPA plans to undertake monitoring of the roll out of the year 11–13 curriculum.

Monitoring of WASH in healthcare facilities in Vanuatu is being integrated into the Ministry of Health’s National Asset registry drawing on the 16 indicators from the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, including menstrual health. UNICEF is supporting digital data collection, and once the system is fully integrated, menstrual health data will be collected as part of an annual asset inventory exercise led by the Ministry of Health Asset Unit.

There has been increasing efforts in Vanuatu to build menstrual health evidence in recent years, such as World Vision and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine menstrual health research with 40 women with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers in 2022, and Red Cross formative research with 192 women and girls', across four sites, on their sanitary pad preferences, also in 2022. Programme monitoring led by international NGOs or local CSOs were mostly pre- and post-knowledge tests to assess information and education efforts.

 <b>Information and education</b>	 <b>Services and materials</b>	 <b>Care for discomfort and disorders</b>	 <b>Supportive social environment</b>	 <b>Non-discrimination and participation</b>
<p>✓ The Ministry of Education and Training has embedded 21 WASH in Schools indicators, including for menstrual health and data collection processes, into the education management information system.</p>	<p>✓ The Ministry of Education and Training and UNICEF are carrying out WASH in Schools monitoring using the Three Star Approach, which includes menstrual health.</p> <p>The Ministry of Education and Training had embedded 21 WASH in Schools indicators, including for menstrual health and data collection processes, into the education management information system.</p> <p>The Ministry of Health is developing WASH in Health Care Facilities indicators as part of the annual inventory assessment monitoring system.</p>	<p>✗ No monitoring data were found.</p>	<p>✗ No monitoring data were found.</p>	<p>✗ No monitoring data were found.</p>



### Lessons and insights: Measuring menstrual health changes over time requires more rigorous monitoring

Review informants highlighted the shortcomings of current programme monitoring on menstrual health changes, particularly in the area of social norms change. They reported it took considerable time to see changes in behaviours, and that social beliefs were highly contextualized on different islands. They felt a clearer set of indicators were needed, along with a set of guiding principles to understand those indicators and measures which different organizations could use to get more standardized measures of menstrual health changes.



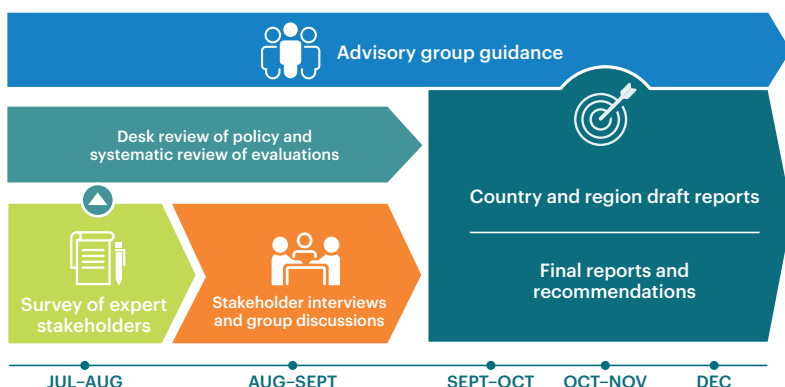
*Shifting attitudes [toward menstruation] from 'dirty' to 'it's a natural process' – that is a huge shift, when we think about how deeply rooted beliefs are. You can measure the change in attitude sort of, but it's much harder to then measure the impact of this. So what?*

– Review informant, international NGO



## Review methods

### Regional progress review methods



**11** policies reviewed across the gender, education, WASH, humanitarian response and health sectors

**5** informants participated in interviews and surveys capturing program 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 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>>

3 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>>

4 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.