

HSBC programme improves lives of rural adolescent girls

The 5-year plan aims to reach 231,375 people with safe drinking water and 404,662 with improved toilets

SAJJADUR RAHMAN, back from Rangpur and Lalmonirhat

RINA Akter, a ninth-grade student at a rural school in Rangpur, used to skip classes for three to four days a month due to menstruation. The fact that the school lacked proper facilities was not the only reason she missed school; ignorance and the attitude of society and family came as a big barrier to accepting this normal biological process.

"Like other menstruating adolescent girls in our area I used to feel ashamed and embarrassed. My mother forced me to stay at home at that time," said Rina.

Gone are those days for Rina and her friends at Ghatabil Shahid Smriti Girls High School in Badarganj, an upazila in the northern district of Rangpur. They are not shy anymore as they have shifted from using unhygienic cloth to hygienic sanitary napkins during menstruation.

A five-year (2012-16) programme sponsored by HSBC has changed the lives of hundreds of girl students. Under its corporate social responsibility, HSBC is spending a total of \$3.12 million (Tk 24.6 crore) to help the rural people in Bangladesh get safe drinking water and sanitation services.

The bank initially provided the napkins to spread awareness on their use and disposal. In addition, mothers of adolescent girls were educated on menstrual hygiene.

WaterAid, with its partner NGO Mahideb Jubo Somaj Kallayan Somity (MJSKS), is implementing the programme in 35 unions in six districts: Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Munshiganj and Sylhet.

"The environment at the school has completely changed. Girls are no longer shy about sharing their menstruation needs with their teachers and parents," said Shahjahan Ali, the school's head teacher.

Ali, a young man with great zeal for education, said the programme has not only taught the girls about hygiene, but it has also instilled positivity in their lives.

"Child marriage has declined," said the teacher, analysing data from his school. Earlier, five to six girls of this school out of more than 200 became victims of child marriage in a year. "Now it is almost zero."

The first baseline survey on hygiene in Bangladesh last year found the menstrual hygiene management situation 'alarming' and hand washing practices 'very poor'.

The report showed that 80 percent of girls used old cloth for menstrual hygiene management and 40 percent of girls missed an average of three days of school during their period. It also found that only 40 percent of households had hand washing facilities.

The survey also found that over 23 million people in Bangladesh lacked access to an improved water source, 43 percent did not have access to improved sanitation and over 7,000 children under five years of age died annually from poor water and sanitation in Bangladesh.



A man from a non-governmental organisation educates girls at Ghatabil Shahid Smriti Girls High School on sanitation and hygiene.

To address the problem, the education ministry stepped in and issued a notice on June 24, ordering the construction of decent sanitation facilities in every secondary and higher secondary school, college and madrasa. One of the key points there was 'separate toilets for girls with a provision for menstrual hygiene management facilities'.

"It is now important to ensure associated action, informing the educational institutions and teachers to take it forward," said Imamur Rahman, programme manager of WaterAid in Bangladesh.

"With our collective and follow-up efforts, we hope the sanitation and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in educational institutes will improve and benefit female students."

WaterAid has so far set up sanitation and MHM facilities in seven schools in Badarganj. They plan to set up the same facilities in three more schools in the area.

According to Rahman, MHM was initially not a component in the HSBC Water Programme. Safe water, sanitation, solid waste management and hand washing were the major projects under the programme. The critically important but often neglected issue of menstrual hygiene was included as a part of raising awareness.

The overall programme aims to reach 231,375 people with safe drinking water and 404,662 people with improved toilets in the five-year effort that will end next year. After this period, the management and ownership of this project will be handed over to the respective community-based organisations (CBO).

The programme addresses safe drinking

water and sanitation crisis through hardware and human development interventions.

Hardware activities include installation and renovation of shallow and deep tube-wells, ring wells, platform construction, infiltration gallery, mini-piped water systems, rainwater harvesting and submersible pump. A water quality test is mandatory for all water points built or renovated.

Sanitation activities include promotion of household toilets through motivation and construction of school and public toilets. The programme also addresses improvements in hygiene behaviour, especially hand-washing practices with soap, through awareness and promoting hand-washing stations.

The Daily Star spoke to a number of beneficiaries of sanitation and safe drinking water at Hasina Nagar in Gopinathpur Union of Badarganj. The beneficiaries include the poorest of the poor who could never think of a proper sanitation system before this programme reached them.

"The spread of diseases among the inhabitants in this area has now come down significantly," said Aduri Begum, a beneficiary and member of the CBO that implements and monitors the project.

Earlier, unsafe water and poor sanitation caused diseases like diarrhoea and hookworm infection, she said.

Each ward of a union has a separate CBO comprising 9 to 11 members, both male and female. The CBO helps identify the people who actually need the service and how to implement it -- such as maintaining distance between the toilet and the tubewell. CBO also motivates beneficiaries

to make the programme sustainable.

A midterm impact assessment report carried out last year found that the HSBC Water Programme has benefited 76,254 rural poor and the marginalised population, including the disabled, with access to safe drinking water; and 156,692 people with access to improved sanitation. In addition, the programme promoted hand washing practices with soap among people in the same community and menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in school.

"From an equity point of view, the programme has reduced social inequality at household and community levels in terms of water and sanitation rights and access," said the report.

The project interventions have also influenced both peoples' demand and local government's responses towards basic health and hygiene issues. It was found that union parishads in Badarganj under Rangpur and Patgram under Lalmonirhat districts spent budgetary allocations for sanitation. For example, Burimari Union in Patgram allocated Tk 4 lakh for sanitation in fiscal 2014-15.

It was not so smooth to implement the programme in areas that are really backward and poor, said Abdullah Al Jubayer, manager of corporate sustainability at HSBC Bangladesh.

"The biggest challenge so far has been the floods of 2014. Due to this natural disaster, installations were affected in Rangpur."

Other challenges they encountered while implementing the project were educating the people and influencing a cultural change in their hygiene practices.

Nestle's Maggi noodles return to India after crisis

AFP, Mumbai

Nestle's hugely popular Maggi noodles returned Monday to shelves in India five months after the government banned them over lead levels, in one of the biggest crises to hit the Swiss giant.

India's food safety watchdog banned the noodles nationwide in June after test results showed packets exceeded legal limits of lead, while criticising Nestle for failing to list flavour enhancer monosodium glutamate (MSG) on labels.

But the Bombay High Court, the highest court in the western city now known as Mumbai, overturned the ruling two months later, calling it "arbitrary" and ordered fresh tests.

Nestle said last month those tests had found that Maggi noodles were safe to eat. It has restarted production at three of its five India plants.

Nestle lost more than 75 million Swiss francs (\$74.7 million) over the ban, which forced it to destroy more than 37,000 tonnes of the noodles, India's leading brand.

"What we have been through has been like a life crisis for a human being," Nestle India Managing Director Suresh Narayanan told reporters on Monday.

"It will need investments to nurture back the brand into the health that it was," he said of Maggi, which previously accounted for about 30 percent of the company's Indian sales.

Maggi's return comes as Indians prepare to celebrate the Hindu festival of Diwali, a time when food shopping is at its peak.

Fans of the brand, which had 80 percent of India's instant noodle market before the crisis, reacted with delight on Twitter.

Go green to save the world and the world economy: OECD

AFP, Paris

The OECD urged nations yesterday to step up environmental investments to ward off not only catastrophic climate change but to give the global economy a much-needed boost as China struggles to rebalance its economy.

With a critical UN summit opening in Paris later this month that aims to get an agreement on cutting back greenhouse gas emissions enough to limit the increase in global temperatures to a safe level, the OECD said action could also support the global economy.

"Addressing climate change is critical for long-term economic sustainability and healthy growth," said the OECD's chief economist, Catherine Mann, in a statement accompanying the body's latest update on the global economic outlook.

That report singled out a slowdown in China as it seeks to rebalance its economy from manufacturing and exports to services and consumption as being the main culprit behind slower global growth, along with subdued investment.

Mann said "...environmental spending would both support demand and encourage the necessary rebalancing of the global economy."

The Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation, a Paris-based policy analysis group that represents 34 advanced economies, trimmed its forecast for global growth this year to 2.9 percent, while lowering its 2016 forecast to 3.3 percent.

Thanks to prompt introduction of stimulus measures, however, the OECD bumped up its forecast for Chinese growth this year to 6.8 percent, with 6.5 percent growth foreseen in 2016.

Slower Chinese growth has triggered a slump in commodity prices that has affected emerging economies across the world.

Mann characterised as "deeply concerning" the stagnation in global trade this has caused, as in the past this has led to global recessions.

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