



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Period poverty

A silent crisis in Bangladesh



Madhuri Kibria
specialises in sexual and reproductive health rights, and preventing and ending violence against women and girls.

MADHURI KIBRIA

Gossip travelled at light speed through the Class 4 girls’ bathroom: a girl from a higher class had experienced her first period. As whispers rippled through the room, I stood there, grappling with an unexpected wave of confusion. Period, a word until now entirely absent from my dictionary, had taken centre stage.

My confusion persisted, but soon became shrouded by feelings of shame as my own menstruation started. Having to hide my sanitary pads from men in my family and boys in class, I worried whether a blood stain was showing on my clothes, stuttering anytime someone asked me why I could not pray or why I was feeling unwell. And these experiences are not uniquely mine, but shared by about 39 million menstruating women and girls aged between 15 and 49 in Bangladesh.

Such confusion, shame, embarrassment, and ostracism are by-products of a society that evades and suppresses conversations and education on menstrual health management (MHM). Only six percent of schools in Bangladesh provide MHM education, and according to the 2018 National Hygiene Survey, only 53 percent of adolescent girls had heard about menstruation before their first period. Lack of accessible and accurate information on MHM is a core aspect of menstrual or period poverty – which means poor access to affordable menstrual hygiene products, safe and private toilets or sanitation facilities, clean water, and waste disposal bins.

The silencing of dialogue on menstruation breeds myths, misinformation and stigma, perpetuating a vicious cycle of period poverty. As appropriate knowledge, resources and services remain scarce, families and peers fail to change their mindsets, and women and girls continue to avoid seeking help. All of these factors act as significant barriers to ensuring menstruating women and girls’ education, health literacy, employment, opportunity to partake in sports, and safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), with 41 percent of Bangladeshi girls taking absence from school during their period and 86 percent being unable to change or dispose menstrual products due to a lack of safe and private WASH facilities.

What we must recognise is that MHM and adequate access to basic sanitation are inextricably tied to women’s socioeconomic well-being, and the realisation of their human rights, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), dignity, and gender equality. These two factors alone have been attributed to low educational attainment among girls, particularly in low-income and rural communities, as well as poor menstrual hygiene practices, leaving women and girls vulnerable to negative health outcomes such as skin irritation, urinary tract infections, pregnancy complications, and fistulae, to name a few.

Based on pilot studies done in Bangladeshi schools in 2014 and 2022, incorporating MHM education in school curricula has proven to be a powerful and effective pathway for transforming behaviours, values and norms related to menstruation and puberty among adolescents and women. Although WASH projects are regularly implemented, they rarely include MHM advocacy and education. Organisations such as UNFPA, UNDP, Brac, Foundation 21, WaterAid, and Wreetu, among others, have delivered MHM education programmes to limited numbers of beneficiaries, but having such programmes across all schools, with contextually tailored information for rural, disadvantaged or low-income communities, could ensure greater consistency, increased coverage, and widespread shifts in mindsets and behaviour.

Recommendations have emerged highlighting the need to combat period poverty through the widespread introduction of MHM programmes across all English and Bangla medium schools, as well as madrasas. These proposed actions are primarily focused on dismantling the barriers of misinformation and stigma surrounding menstruation. The suggestion is to launch these programmes as after-school activities, integrate them during or between classes, conduct seminars, or use any other format tailored to the community’s needs. It is essential that these initiatives be age-specific, yet comprehensive, addressing topics such as basic sexual and reproductive health, dispelling

social misconceptions, building self-esteem, promoting hygiene practices, ensuring safe disposal methods, and offering guidance on accessing affordable menstrual products and services.

These recommendations are in line with the National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy, introduced in 2021 by the government. This strategy envisions funding comprehensive behavioural-change training modules and making MHM education mandatory from Class 5 onwards. An integral part of the strategy emphasises involving mothers and guardians in MHM programmes. Research has underscored that mothers play a pivotal role in imparting menstrual knowledge to their daughters, sometimes imposing restrictions on movement, diet, and social activities based on misconceptions.

Engaging men and boys is also fundamental to creating an MHM-friendly environment, free from culturally reinforced patriarchal norms that undermine menstruating women’s dignity and deprive them of the physical and emotional support they need. Moreover, for the successful rollout of gender-sensitive MHM education initiatives, capacity development of teachers, especially religious teachers, is paramount, and the urgency and importance given to MHM should not be compromised.

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A lack of publicly available information raises questions on successful implementation of any strategy, making it critical to establish structured monitoring and evaluation frameworks, particularly for MHM programmes in remote and rural areas, low-income settlements, marginalised communities, and madrasas. In line with the national strategy, this limitation can be rectified through rigorous development of methodological and monitoring standards, and by having designated experts conduct technical programme evaluations to track progress, analyse results, identify barriers, and allow for improved design and strategic planning.

The combination of cultural stigma surrounding menstruation and puberty, low rates of literacy, and low decision-making power among women contribute to the continuing neglect of MHM education and awareness in households, schools, policymaking, and public institutions. I acknowledge that changing deeply entrenched unequal gender norms is not easy, as well as the challenges posed by disparities in socioeconomic status and geographical access to creating an MHM-friendly future. However, cultivating a social and political landscape that empowers and dignifies women, addresses MHM as a key public health issue, and stimulates tangible policy action, are steps in the right direction.

This article, along with its policy recommendations, draws from a policy brief co-authored by this writer. The brief was published by BacharLorai, a Canadian youth-driven social impact organisation run by Bangladeshi expats.

What’s happening in Niger is far from a typical coup



Vijay Prashad
is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter, and an editor of LeftWord Books and the director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

VIJAY PRASHAD

On July 26, 2023, Niger’s presidential guard moved against the sitting President Mohamed Bazoum and conducted a *coup d’état*. A brief contest among the various armed forces in the country ended with all the branches agreeing to the removal of Bazoum and the creation of a military junta led by Presidential Guard Commander General Abdourahmane “Omar” Tchiani. This is the fourth country in the Sahel region of Africa to have experienced a coup, the other three being Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali. The new government announced that it would stop allowing France to leech Niger’s uranium (one in three lightbulbs in France is powered by the uranium from the field in Arlit, northern Niger). Tchiani’s government revoked all military cooperation with France, which means that the 1,500 French troops will need to start packing their bags (as they did in both

War. Since then, ECOWAS has sent its peacekeeping troops to several countries in the region, including Sierra Leone and Gambia. Not long after the coup in Niger, ECOWAS placed an embargo on the country that included suspending its right to basic commercial transactions with its neighbours, freezing Niger’s central bank assets that are held in regional banks, and stopping foreign aid (which comprises 40 percent of Niger’s budget). The most striking statement was that ECOWAS would take “all measures necessary to restore constitutional order.” An August 6 deadline given by ECOWAS expired because the bloc could not agree to send troops across the border. ECOWAS asked for a “standby force” to be assembled and ready to invade Niger. Then, ECOWAS said it would meet on August 12 in Accra, Ghana, to go over its options. That meeting was cancelled for “technical

Libya and flock into southern Algeria and into the Sahel. The entry of these forces gave the local elites and the West the justification to further tighten limited trade union freedoms and to excise the left from the ranks of the established political parties. It is not as if the leaders of the mainline political parties are right-wing or centre-right, but that whatever their orientation, they have no real independence from the will of Paris and Washington. They became – to use a word on the ground – “stooges” of the West.

Absent any reliable political instruments, the discarded rural and petty-bourgeois sections of the country turn to their children in the armed forces for leadership. People like Burkina Faso’s Captain Ibrahim Traoré (born 1988), who was raised in the rural province of Mouhoun, and Colonel Assimi Goïta (born 1988), who comes from the cattle market town and military redoubt of Kati, represent these broad class fractions perfectly. Their communities have been utterly left out of the hard austerity programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), of the theft of their resources by Western multinationals, and of the payments for Western military garrisons in the country. Discarded populations with no real political platform to speak for them, these communities have rallied behind their young men



Niger’s junta supporters take part in a demonstration in front of a French army base in Niamey, Niger on August 11, 2023.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Burkina Faso and Mali). Meanwhile, there has been no public statement about Airbase 201, the US facility in Agadez, a thousand kilometres from the country’s capital of Niamey. This is the largest drone base in the world and key to US operations across the Sahel. US troops have been told to remain on the base for now and drone flights have been suspended. The coup is certainly against the French presence in Niger, but this anti-French sentiment has not enveloped the US military footprint in the country.

Interventions

Hours after the coup was stabilised, the main Western states – especially France and the United States – condemned the coup and asked for the reinstatement of Bazoum, who was immediately detained by the new government. But neither France nor the US appeared to want to lead the response to the coup. Earlier this year, the French and US governments worried about an insurgency in northern Mozambique that impacted the assets of the Total-Exxon natural gas field off the coastline of Cabo Delgado. Rather than send in French and US troops, which would have polarised the population and increased anti-Western sentiment, the French and the Americans made a deal for Rwanda to send its troops into Mozambique. Rwandan troops entered the northern province of Mozambique and shut down the insurgency. Both Western powers seem to favour a “Rwanda” type solution to the coup in Niger, but rather than have Rwanda enter Niger, the hope was for ECOWAS – the Economic Community of West African States – to send in its force to restore Bazoum.

A day after the coup, ECOWAS condemned the coup. ECOWAS encompasses 15 West African states, which in the past few years has suspended Burkina Faso and Mali from their ranks because of the coups in that country; Niger was also suspended from ECOWAS a few days after the coup. Formed in 1975 as an economic bloc, the grouping decided – despite no mandate in its original mission – to send in peacekeeping forces in 1990 into the heart of the Liberian Civil

reasons.” Mass demonstrations in key ECOWAS countries – such as Nigeria and Senegal – against an ECOWAS military invasion of Niger have confounded their own politicians to support an intervention. It would be naive to suggest that no intervention is possible. Events are moving very fast, and there is no reason to suspect that ECOWAS will not intervene before August ends.

Coups in the Sahel

When ECOWAS suggested the possibility of an intervention into Niger, the military governments in Burkina Faso and Mali said this would be a “declaration of war” not only against Niger, but also against their countries. On August 2, one of the key leaders of the Niger coup, General Salifou Mody, travelled to Bamako (Mali) and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) to discuss the situation in the region and to coordinate their response to the possibility of an ECOWAS – or Western – military intervention into Niger. Ten days later, General Moussa Salau Barmou went to Conakry (Guinea) to seek support for Niger from the leader of Guinea’s military government, Mamadi Doumbouya. Suggestions have already been floated for Niger – one of the most important countries in the Sahel – to form part of the conversation of a federation that will include Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali. This would be a federation of countries that have had coups to overthrow what have been seen to be pro-Western governments that have not met the expectations of increasingly impoverished populations.

The story of the coup in Niger becomes partly the story of what the communist journalist Ruth First called “the contagion of the coup” in her remarkable book *The Barrel of the Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’État*. Over the past 30 years, politics in the Sahel countries has seriously desiccated. Parties with a history in the national liberation movements, even the socialist movements (such as Bazoum’s party), have collapsed into being representatives of their elites, who are conduits of a Western agenda. The French-US-Nato war in Libya in 2011 allowed jihadist groups to pour out of

in the military. These are “Colonel’s Coups,” coups of ordinary people who have no other options, not “General’s Coups,” coups of the elites to stem the political advancement of the people. That is why the coup in Niger is being defended in mass rallies from Niamey to the small, remote towns that border Libya. When I travelled to these regions before the pandemic, it was clear that the anti-French sentiment found no channel of expression other than hope for a military coup that would bring in leaders such as Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, who had been assassinated in 1987. Captain Traoré, in fact, sports a red beret like Sankara, speaks with Sankara’s left-wing frankness, and even mimics Sankara’s diction. It would be a mistake to see these men as from the left since they are moved by anger at the failure of the elites and of Western policy. They do not come to power with a well-worked out agenda built from left political traditions.

The Niger military leaders have formed a 21-member cabinet headed by Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine, a civilian who was a finance minister in a previous government and worked at the African Development Bank in Chad. Military leaders are prominent in the cabinet. Whether the appointment of this civilian-led cabinet will divide the ranks of ECOWAS remains to be seen. Certainly, Western imperialist forces – notably the US with troops on the ground in Niger – would not like to see this torque of coups remain in place. Europe, through French leadership, had shifted the borders of their continent from north of the Mediterranean Sea to south of the Sahara Desert, suborning the Sahel states into a project known as G-5 Sahel. Now with anti-French governments in three of these states (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) and with the possibility of trouble in the two remaining states (Chad and Mauritania), Europe will have to retreat to its coastline. Sanctions to deplete the mass support for new governments will increase, and the possibility of military intervention will hang over the region like a famished vulture.

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