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What Water Means to Girls - From Going To The Bathroom to Having a Period

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It's a fact of life - everybody goes to the bathroom. You feel the urge, take care of business... done deal. Except, it's not that simple for the 2.6 billion people who live without even basic sanitation facilities or access to water, which is a fact of life that disproportionately impacts women and children.



In many parts of the developing world where access to water is scarce and information about sanitation and hygiene haven't yet hit home, there are no bathrooms, toilets or even latrines. There might be designated fields or trenches, but nothing that guarantees privacy, protection from germs and the ability to wash. In many developing countries, lack of privacy and fear of exposure means that for girls, going to the bathroom is dangerous. In some parts of the world, mothers train their daughters to "go" only during hours when darkness can provide a measure of safety and privacy and to avoid food and water or "hold it" until they can ensure a safe time to relieve themselves.

Globally, diarrhea is the leading cause of illness and death, and 88 percent of diarrheal deaths are due to lack of access to sanitation facilities, inadequate water for hygiene and unsafe drinking water. According to the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, treating diarrhea consumes 12 percent of the health budget in Sub-Saharan Africa and patients with fecal-related diseases fill up more than half of hospital beds. This is especially tragic in light of the World Health Organization's estimate that simple hand washing can reduce the risk of diarrheal diseases up to 47 percent.

Even in areas where improved water and sanitation has been established, fewer than 50 percent of primary schools have sufficient water and only a third provide sanitation facilities. That means children either "hold it," use public places or don't go to school.

Schools often don't have separate facilities for girls or anyone designated to monitor and clean bathrooms. When Emory University partnered with CARE and other organizations to research water, sanitation and hygiene projects (nicknamed WASH), they interviewed girls in developing countries who reported they won't use school facilities. Reasons included:

They're not used to using latrines, they're dirty, scary, smelly and dark, too many people, they're afraid of getting hurt or sick, no water, no privacy, and too many flies. And because they won't use the bathroom, many girls won't go to school.

When separate, monitored girls latrines were provided though, girls reported more willingness to use bathrooms and this translated into fewer days missed from school. But, that doesn't begin to cover what it's like when girls are menstruating.

Ladies, you know what I'm talking about. Gentlemen, here's how it goes:

In the US, when it's "that time of the month", girls go to the bathroom, freshen up, and rustle around in their "girl drawer" where they stash an arsenal of feminine hygiene products. Even on especially heavy days, we're not worried. There's extra-strength, extra-large, maxis, minis, shields, pads and tampons as tiny as a stick of gum so no matter what we're dealing with, we're covered. For cramps, there's pain medicine and a hot bath. For women with bigger menstrual problems, a visit to a gynecologist usually solves them. In short, except for the inconvenience and minor discomforts, menstruation in America is no big deal. But, try having that period in a developing country.

For millions of girls getting water requires a walk to and from the closest pond or well, often alone, lugging 5-gallon jugs. Freshening up is a luxury. Clean underwear and laundry? Only when there's extra water. And that drawer full of "girl supplies?" Some girls use rags or wear men's pants to protect their outer clothing, but many girls have nothing to absorb the blood and keep it from showing. That's why menstruation contributes to girls leaving school.

In the Emory-CARE research interviews, girls were asked about the issues preventing them from getting an education and their responses included early marriage, drought and menstruation. Girls reported that being teased or bullied for blood on their clothes, having to ask male teachers for permission to use facilities, and lack of sanitation resources caused so much fear, stress and shame that it interrupted learning or caused them to miss school altogether.

What's happening to improve this? Water is a huge focus among NGOs, humanitarian and faith-based organizations, the United Nations, and most recently, the United States. Providing access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities is one of the Millennium Development Goals and is an increasingly important focus for American legislators. Later this year, with your help, Congress will have an opportunity to pass the Senator Paul Simon Water for the World Act of 2012, introduced by Rep Earl Blumenauer (D-OR). This legislation, which already has strong bipartisan support, increases coordination of WASH programs, improves targeting of WASH funding, enhances the capacity of USAID and Department of State to sustainably help the nearly 800 million people who lack access to water and 2.5 billion that lack sanitation facilities and to better leverage current investments to create improved long-term outcomes for the world's poorest. It's not anticipated to require any additional federal funding and has been proven to be among the most efficient investments that can be made in reducing global poverty. In fact, for every \$1 invested in WASH projects, \$8 is returned in saved health care costs and increased economic productivity.

What can you do?

Ask your Representative to support [HR 3658](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c112:H.R.3658.IH) (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c112:H.R.3658.IH>), Water for the World Act of 2012.

Support organizations making a difference in the lives of girls and women like [CARE](http://www.care.org) (<http://www.care.org>), [Mercy Corps](http://www.mercycorps.org/) (<http://www.mercycorps.org/>) and [Every Mother Counts](http://www.everymothercounts.org). (<http://www.everymothercounts.org>)

Log on to [Luna Pads \(http://lunapads.com/\)](http://lunapads.com/) ' website and learn about their [One4Her program \(http://lunapads.com/blog/2012/10/share-one4her/\)](http://lunapads.com/blog/2012/10/share-one4her/) that helps provide girls in need with reusable menstrual supplies.

Get involved with faith-based and charitable organizations focusing on water projects like [World Vision \(http://www.worldvision.org/\)](http://www.worldvision.org/), [Living Water International \(http://www.water.cc/\)](http://www.water.cc/) and [Water Africa \(http://waterafrica.org/\)](http://waterafrica.org/).

Organize fundraising events with your community, church, business or school and donate to organizations working on water projects including [Charity: Water \(http://www.charitywater.org/\)](http://www.charitywater.org/).

Keep a look out for [Prance \(http://www.weprance.com/\)](http://www.weprance.com/), creators a patent-pending line of leak-proof, stain-resistant, anti-microbial, moisture-wicking and sexy underwear. Their Uganda-based partnership with [AFRIpads \(afripads.com\)](http://afripads.com/) helps women in developing countries who are missing 25% or more of school or work due to menstruation. For every pair of Prance sold, one 7-pad kit of AFRIpads is made by local workers in the developing world to help those who need them most. Sign up for more info via [www.weprance.com \(http://www.weprance.com\)](http://www.weprance.com/).