

# Healing Waters International Women's Health and Hygiene Program Overview

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## Introduction

Healing Waters International (HWI) is a faith-based organization that exists to end the global water crisis by carrying out their WASH solution: water purification systems, health and hygiene education, and water-business and operations training. HWI was operating under an older health and hygiene education curriculum; however, approximately two years ago, it was restructured and rewritten in order to better meet health and hygiene needs and improve the cultural context of the program so that it is more relatable and relevant. The new women's curriculum, "Clothed in Strength and Dignity," was piloted in Guatemala and Mexico and is now being used extensively in all four staffed HWI countries: Guatemala, Mexico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

## Background

The previous curriculum consisted of 14 different lessons that were quite extensive in size and content. The curriculum guide was a thick manual that was overwhelming and intimidating to both trainers and participants. Additionally, the majority of the content was conceptual in theory versus practical in application. Because of this, the need was identified to create a culturally-relevant, practical, and applicable program for women. The curriculum is currently being implemented in new HWI project sites with hopes to take the program to older project sites as well. "Clothed in Strength and Dignity" focuses on educating women as they are consistently agents of change within communities, interfacing regularly with not only their own household but also the community at large. As women constitute a larger part of the world's poor and

have the main responsibility for caretaking and household, they are more dependent on functioning basic services such as water, sanitation, and hygiene. [1] They have a large reach within the community as they educate and shape not only their actions, but the actions and behaviors of their children, families, and neighbors. This was the goal and hope for the new hygiene program: that women would be empowered to better the lives of their children, families, and communities. In order to rewrite the curriculum, the health and hygiene coordinator worked with the previous curriculum and resources from outside WASH organizations that were also doing health and hygiene programs. However, the majority of the changes came from input from field staff and local health and hygiene trainers discussing what was and was not working in the field in order to ensure the new program would truly bring about lasting change.

## Overview of Curriculum

The overall goal of the health and hygiene program is to teach women to protect their family from diseases. Each HWI staffed country has national health and hygiene staff that follow a "train the trainer" model as they identify and train local facilitators to lead the weekly meetings. The program consists of six group meetings that are usually taught once a week in a small group of 8-10 women. The process of finding interested women differs in each community. For example, it may involve holding an informational meeting that identifies interested women or it may include a group of women from a church or community group that are wanting to participate. While

many programs charge an enrollment fee, there is no cost to women to participate in this program. The women usually meet in a home or community space in order to create a comfortable, safe environment for the women to build talk, learn, and discuss valuable content. Each lesson begins with a Christian devotional that connects a spiritual truth about their purpose and dignity as women created and loved by God. Throughout the six weeks, women walk through parts of Psalm 139 and Proverbs 31. These devotionals teach that they are seen, known, and valued as women created with a purpose. Not only are the devotionals meaningful for those who are Christians, but non-believers are also taught about their worth and value as women. They are then led into a specific health and hygiene themed lesson, which includes discussion based questions related to a topic. Throughout the lesson, women are encouraged to constantly identify how they can apply this lesson in their home each week. These applications are reinforced through activities, visual aids, and repetition throughout the lessons. Additionally, they receive a laminated take-home card at the end of every meeting that contains important information from that lesson and also reminds them to practice what they learned once they return home. After women complete the six-week program, they participate in a closing ceremony, which could look like a graduation ceremony, a celebratory dinner, or a special gathering with friends and family. These events look different in each community, but they are all planned by the women themselves in order to celebrate and share what they have learned with family and friends. Another important part of the program involves following-up with the women after they have finished. Native trainers and facilitators work towards building meaningful mentoring relationships in order to reinforce what the women have learned and encourage them to continue putting these

changes into practice in their homes and communities.

### **Program Lessons**

Each class is focused overall on helping the women apply the lessons learned to their lives. This includes a welcome/reception time for the women to get to know each other, a devotional around the topic of “Clothed in Strength and Dignity,” the health and hygiene lesson, and a closing discussion of applications for the week.

The first lesson is titled “Water is Life or Death.” There is often a mentality that “clear water is clean water.” This lesson aims to address that myth and teach the women that it is important to know where water comes from as germs are not visible to the eye yet present in water sources. The goal of the lesson is to teach and reinforce that it is important to drink safe water.

The second lesson is titled “Germs and Handwashing.” Good handwashing practices are a major focus of the program as they are key in decreasing disease and making individuals healthier. This lesson begins by addressing four common fecal-oral transmission routes: flies, fruit and vegetables, bodies of water, and hands. The fecal-oral route describes a particular path of transmission of a disease where infectious agents found in feces are passed from one person to the mouth of another person, most commonly through unapparent fecal contamination of food, water, and hands. This pathway leads to diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, typhoid, and infectious hepatitis. Therefore, it is important for the women to become aware of these transmission routes so they can stop diseases from spreading. In learning about each route, women are taught specific “blocking behaviors”, such as covering the food so flies cannot contaminate it, washing fruits and vegetables with clean water

before eating them, and making sure to not drink or use contaminated river water. Additionally, the women walk through when and how to best wash their hands, ensuring they are using clean water and soap each time.

The third lesson is titled “Diarrhea and Dehydration.” Women take time identifying signs and symptoms of diarrhea and dehydration as well as learning what it is doing to the body. They then learn how to make an oral rehydration solution that can be made in their homes and given to kids or adults when needed. Most women usually bought the oral rehydration solution at the pharmacy because they did not know they could make it in their homes. Therefore, this lesson is important in equipping them with the tools they need to make their families healthier by using supplies and items they already have.

The fourth lesson is titled “Clean House: Healthy Home.” This lesson aims to teach the women how to identify potential sources of contamination within their home, such as in the kitchen, bedroom, or bathroom. This again brings their attention to the different sources of contamination and how to best stop diseases from spreading. It teaches the women to decrease contamination by using clean water and clean rags and also stresses the necessity of paying attention to all potential routes of transmission in order to lower the possibility of disease.

The fifth lesson is titled “Personal and Feminine Hygiene.” This lesson begins by creating a safe space where the women are able to talk about menstruation issues, allowing them to come together and identify as women while talking about issues they have never been able to talk about before. The lesson also covers good health and hygiene practices, such as how to correctly use sanitary napkins, when to change them, and how to correctly clean or dispose of them. Additionally, it stresses the importance of having soap and water available

to wash hands frequently. Lastly, the lesson ends with teaching the women how to make reusable sanitary napkins which not only provides them with a necessary product, but reduces the cost needed to purchase them in the market.

The sixth and final lesson is titled “Nutrition for the Family.” This lesson teaches women about the five natural food groups and what their body needs in order to be healthy. Because junk food is often cheaper and tastes better, it usually makes up the majority of their family’s diet. This lesson aims to teach them the importance of eating a balanced diet of protein, dairy, vegetables, fruits, and grains. It uses examples of foods that are financially accessible and readily available to the women. Additionally, they are taught the importance of breastfeeding and correctly preparing formula with clean water when necessary.

### **Health and Hygiene in WASH**

The Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) recently issued their *2017 Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene* report in order to evaluate progress that has been made and further tasks to complete. The JMP has historically evaluated water and sanitation progress across countries at different stages of development. However, the 2017 report has also included hygiene as an area for further monitoring and evaluation. [2] The global mean prevalence of handwashing with soap after contact with excreta is estimated to be 19%. [3] While much work is still needed to increase the prevalence and effectiveness of handwashing, hygiene is becoming an important part of the holistic WASH model needed to combat disease and make healthier communities. Hygiene behaviors are appropriately holding more weight in the overall picture of how to create healthier individuals and communities.

Within education curriculums, three factors need to be addressed in order to ensure

lasting changes in hygiene behavior: predisposing factors, enabling factors, and reinforcing factors. [4] Predisposing factors include engaging and including the individual's knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in the curriculum. In the HWI program, each lesson begins with questions to open the conversation that engage the women's thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about the given topic, thus engaging their predisposing factors about health and hygiene behaviors.

Enabling factors include the availability of resources, such as sanitation facilities and safe water supply, that enable the women to transform the newly acquired knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs into desirable behaviors. Each lesson in the HWI program ends with the question of how they can apply the lesson in their home that week. WASH interventions are often proposed that are unrealistic for the individuals to carry out, such as the need to purchase costly soap or other hygiene products. The HWI program teaches the women to improve their health with items they already have in the home which makes the curriculum more feasible and applicable for the women. As this program is being piloted and implemented in communities, it is important that the presence of the clean water supply be integrated with the health and hygiene program, ensuring the women are receiving clean water. If healthy hygiene behaviors, such as using clean water for cooking and eating, are taught to the women but clean water is not available, there will be no lasting health changes in the community. This highlights the importance of combining hygiene education with the construction of water and sanitation facilities and involving the community in the holistic model of hygiene education.

Lastly, reinforcing factors are elements that affect the individual's ability to sustain a certain behavior, such as support and cooperation received from family and

community members. The take-home cards are a large part of the reinforcing behaviors of the program as they give the women an opportunity to not only remember what they have learned but to teach others as well. These cards have become something the women look forward to receiving and treasure once returning home, often hanging them in their kitchens or living rooms so all can see.

At the completion of the six weeks, women partake in a closing ceremony where they receive a certificate or memento surrounding the topic of "Clothed in Strength and Dignity" as well as have the opportunity to share what they have learned and enjoyed about the program. This recognizes them within their community as agents of change that are actively working to better their families. Women have the chance to invite friends, family, and neighbors to be a part of another health and hygiene group. This is important as the women are excited to share what they have learned and see themselves as worthy and capable of teaching others. Additionally, facilitators are encouraged to follow-up with the women who completed the health and hygiene program in order to help reinforce what they have learned and continue to mentor and develop their dignity and worth as women.

### **Highlights of the Health and Hygiene Program**

There are several aspects of the new health and hygiene program that are especially important in empowering women to become agents of change in their communities. First, each lesson in the HWI program begins with a devotional. Often times, women feel marginalized, forgotten, and undervalued within their family and community. Health and hygiene programs in general can make them feel more included and important in the overall health of their family, however, there could still be feelings of shame or inability surrounding a

lack of knowledge about health practices. By starting with a devotional, it first teaches the women that their identity and worth is most important. Rooted in the truth of who they were created to be, they can then become agents of change in their community, affecting not only the spiritual health of others but the emotional and physical health as well. This also breaks down walls between the women in the community so they can better learn and grow together. This program offers them a place to connect with other women they might not have known or interacted with had it not been for the program, often leading to new friendships that extend well beyond the six weeks of lessons.

Second, the program is infused into many different circles within a community, including the individual, household, community, and institutional level. Interventions will be most effective when the change and impact is felt across many different levels as it will increase compliance, follow-through, and ultimately, lead to changed behavior. The health and hygiene education components are being reinforced at various levels: among the women, in their homes, at the schools, and in community circles. Additionally, women are encouraged and empowered to teach their neighbors and friends about what they have learned, thus expanding the reach of the curriculum and hygiene behaviors in the community.

Another important aspect of the program happens when women are given a safe space to talk about menstruation and feminine hygiene issues. The health and hygiene program facilitates discussions about issues that have greatly affected their lives yet they have never talked or discussed about because of cultural myths or taboos. Gender inequalities, specifically around women's health issues, are inextricably linked with water, sanitation, and hygiene issues. For women in

the HWI program, they have a safe space to identify with other women about issues that greatly affect their everyday lives. This further fosters and brings out their worth, dignity, and purpose as women and agents of change in their communities.

Another benefit of the HWI health and hygiene program is that it teaches the women to use what they already have to improve their health. Often times, interventions require individuals to purchase certain supplies or resources in order to carry out the learned behavioral changes. These tasks can be overwhelming and are not feasible for families struggling financially. While the program does stress using clean water, it is connected with the clean water sources in each community which provide an affordable option for families. Additionally, the lessons show the women how to improve the health and sanitation of their homes by teaching them to use what they already have in a clean, effective way.

A major theme and goal of the curriculum is establishing dignity. Within the WASH field, there are interventions and methods that are centered around exposing the shameful side of sanitation and hygiene issues. While this technique has resulted in changed behaviors, there are often hesitations that arise when programs start by exposing shame. Establishing and fostering dignity is becoming a new norm in the WASH field as organizations, both secular and faith-based, desire to bring about lasting changes that invite community members to be a part of the solution. Many organizations, such as UNICEF, recognize the value of partnering with faith-based organizations "whose tenets of religion include an interest in the health and wellbeing of people." [5] This is not only advantageous to faith-based organizations operating in the WASH field, but it also furthers the impact of the curriculum within the WASH community, reaching both believers and non-believers with

truths about their dignity and worth as individuals.

Lastly, the curriculum brings women together. This is one of the most powerful parts of the curriculum as women see that they are not alone in their struggles, but that there is a community of women around them in which they can work together with to further improve the health of their families. This allows them to have a support system to learn with as they continue to implement the health and hygiene changes in the community after the meetings have ended. This improves the effectiveness and sustainability of the curriculum, and most importantly, continues to build dignity, worth, and value among the women in the community.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, HWI has worked hard to revamp their health and hygiene education curriculum in order to ensure it is effectively meeting the needs of the community while also being culturally relevant. The new curriculum focuses on fostering dignity and worth while offering important and practical education about health and hygiene issues. While the program does cover several topics relating to health and hygiene needs, it does not currently include good sanitation infrastructure or construction guidelines. While this does not negate the topics it does address, it may limit the effectiveness of the lessons related to sanitation. Additionally, it is important for all WASH organizations to establish effective monitoring and evaluation systems in order to truly measure the impacts of all WASH interventions. In order to end the global water crisis, organizations must continue to invest in the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals while also ensuring interventions are working at improving their physical state. HWI has proven committed to bringing clean water to communities through their water purification systems and now has a health and hygiene

program that is culturally-relevant, applicable, and exciting for women to be a part of. It fosters dignity and worth while ultimately enabling these agents of change to better the lives of their children, families, and communities.

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### **References**

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