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## About BBC Media Action

BBC Media Action is the BBC's international development charity. We use the power of media and communication to help reduce poverty and support people in understanding their rights. We aim to inform, connect, and empower people around the world. We work in partnership with broadcasters, governments, non-governmental organisations, and donors to share timely, reliable, and useful information. Please visit <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction> to find out more about the work we do.

# What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

## Water Sanitation and Hygiene practices (WASH): What are people's needs?

Data for this bulletin was collected between December 2023 and February 2024 as part of formative research through 13 focus group discussions (FGDs) with pregnant and lactating women, 30 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with mothers-in-law and husbands. We also conducted nine key informant interviews (KIs) with implementing partners and other humanitarian organisations including World Vision (WV), Action Against Hunger (ACF), Agency for Assistance and Development of Afghanistan (AADA), International Medical Corps (IMC), and Nai Qala, across the project's target provinces - Badghis, Herat, Faryab, Daikundi, Badakhshan, Nangarhar and Ghor - and Kabul.

## About What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is a quarterly bulletin which shares how people are experiencing issues on the ground with the humanitarian community. It is part of the Driving Action for Well Being to Avert Mortality (DAWAM) project which aims to contribute to decreased morbidity and mortality in women and girls and high-risk groups including persons living with disability in Afghanistan. The project is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It is implemented in seven provinces by a consortium consisting of World Vision (WV), Action Aid, Action Against Hunger (ACF), Afghanistan Women's Education Centre (AWEC), Agency for Assistance and Development of Afghanistan (AADA), BBC Media Action, and Nai Qala.

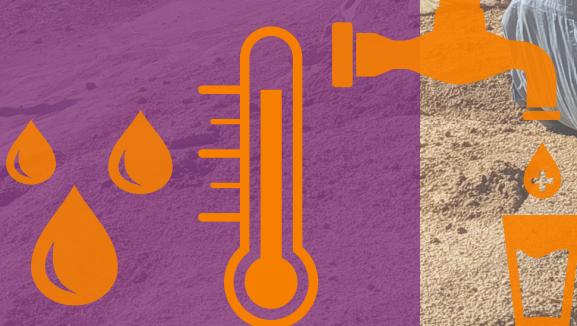
This bulletin is produced by BBC Media Action Afghanistan.

# Water

People lack a clear understanding of what is clean water and face barriers to accessing it

People are aware of the health risks associated with drinking unclean water, but...

- lack a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes clean water, basing their judgements predominantly on its appearance and taste
- many are unsure about the correct amount of time required for boiling water to ensure it is safe for consumption



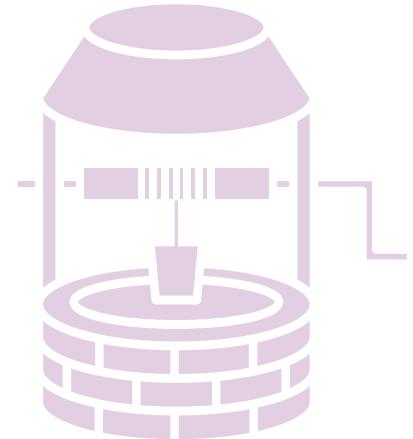
People struggle to access drinking water due to:

- distance to water sources, often requiring hours of travel
- financial barriers to constructing private or communal wells
- impact of harsh seasons and weather impacts such as drought
- concerns about water contamination

“ We've dug two wells in our yard for water, but they've both dried up. There's a hand pump well in our nearby area, but it doesn't always have enough water. If we go in the morning, we might get some, but it runs dry by lunchtime because too many people take water...It's especially hard in the cold winter weather. If we don't get water from the hand pump, we have no choice but to send the kids out in the cold to the river. We also have a pipeline, but it only brings water once every four days, and it's not enough to fill even two containers. ”

*Mother-in-law, Ghor province*

There is a perceived lack of support from NGOs and government agencies for protecting water sources, which further exacerbates these issues.



### Sources of information

People mostly receive information about clean water and water treatment in community engagement sessions conducted by NGO staff in villages and from local health facility staff while they visit clinics. Some also talk of getting information from radio and TV.



# Sanitation

## Why do people continue to practice open defecation and how do they dispose of waste?

Despite being aware of the negative consequences of open defecation, it is practiced in both rural and urban communities. Our research found that some people, often women, don't know the health risks of doing it and as such it is an ingrained habit. People did recognise that it produces bad smells, disrupts communities and is not condoned by their religion.

Where toilets or latrines are available, these are often built in locations that are set some distance from homes. Fears of groundwater contamination, bad smells and embarrassment drive decisions to build facilities away from living areas. Accessibility and suitability are often overlooked during the construction of latrines, which poses additional challenges for pregnant women, children, older people, and persons with disabilities in the household.

- Fear of wild animals, darkness, and ghosts cause some people to avoid making the journey to use distant or outdoor latrines at night. Some people attempt to use solar lighting to overcome this but it is not a solution available to all.

- Severe weather is also a deterrent to using latrines outside the home, while some express a sense of futility in constructing toilets, noting that these structures are often destroyed when natural disasters occur.

**“ Open defecation is not allowed in Islam, and it also makes the streets dirty. Passersby might see the waste, which is not good. We have a toilet at home, and everyone in the family uses it. ”**

*Lactating woman, Nangarhar province*



### Men in particular are resistant to using latrines because:

- They feel embarrassed to use them in the presence of women, and dislike the unpleasant odours associated with these facilities. This is especially true during family gatherings.
- The lack of public toilets forces men to defecate in the open during long commutes to work.
- In addition to being a habit, men often continue this practice where large families mean latrines are in use by other members of the household.



**“We are encountering problems frequently due to the absence of public toilets...in areas like markets or other open spaces. While most people have private toilets in their homes, the lack of public facilities leads to widespread open defecation. ”**

*Husband, Faryab province*

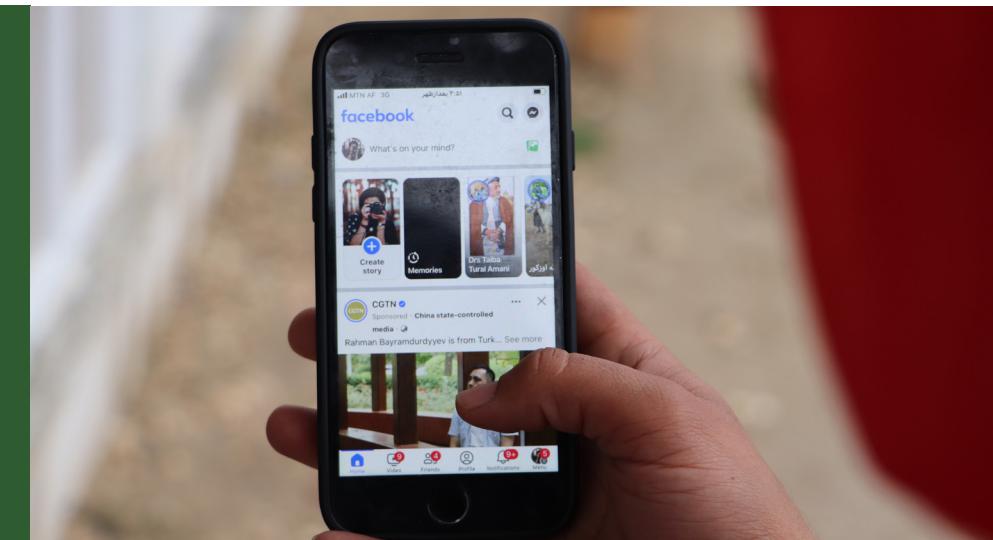
There is an awareness that a good latrine should have a flush and septic tank, vent system, doors for privacy, concrete construction and handwashing station, but economic barriers force this to be out of reach for many. There is a need for support and assistance from NGOs or other organisations to equip families with appropriate toilet facilities.

In addition, the unsafe disposal of human excrement and household waste is increasing the risk of disease and infection. Human waste is often mixed with mud and buried or deposited in farmland, canals or garbage collection areas. People in rural communities mentioned that they lack access to waste collection by municipalities, forcing them to burn or bury it.



## Sources of information

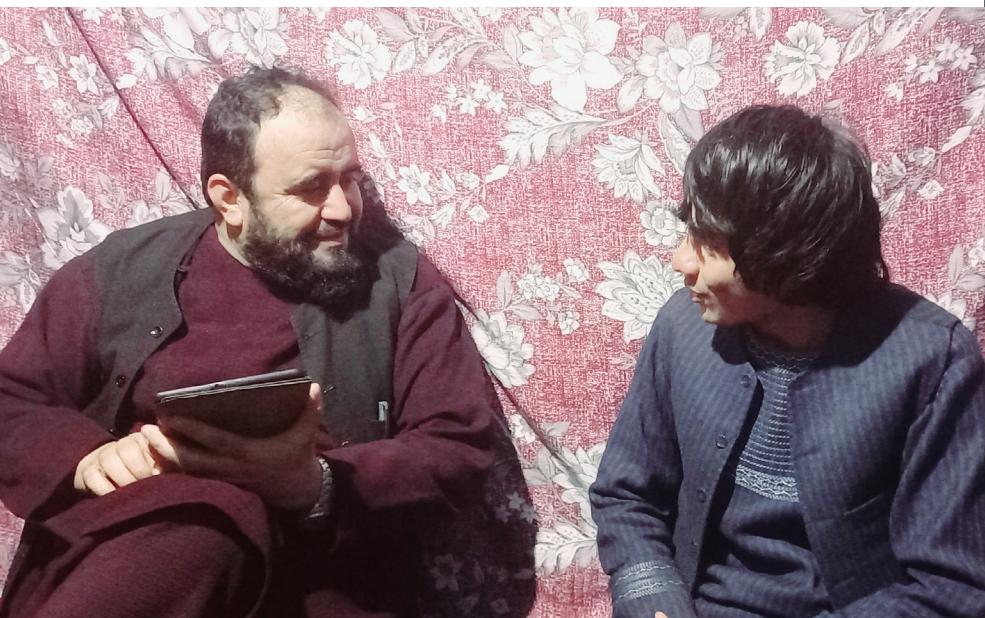
Men had information on the safe disposal of human faeces from radio, clinic staff, and NGOs, schools, universities, and through the Internet. Some pregnant and lactating women (PLW) are informed by NGOs, books, clinics, elders and teachers.



# Hygiene

## What are the barriers to safe handwashing practices?

Communities are largely aware of when and for how long to wash hands, as well as the materials to use, only a few believing that washing with only water is sufficient. Yet in practice people use just water, often because they cannot afford soaps or handwash. While a few use soap sparingly, only when there is visible dirt, in provinces like Daikundi, some women resort to using mud, ashes or flour in addition to water.



### Sources of information

Although people value information about safe handwashing practices, not everyone has access to it. Those who do say they learned this from a variety of sources, including NGOs, the media, doctors and clinics, educational establishments and by word-of-mouth, with mentions of the COVID-19 pandemic as a time when such information was available.



## Social stigma and embarrassment create barriers to accessing information about menstrual hygiene

Women and girls are generally aware of basic information such as the typical onset of menstruation, and have strategies for the use of menstrual hygiene cloths. However, they lack information in other areas. Most women say they have not received information about menstrual hygiene from any organisation, with NGOs and the media rarely mentioned as a source. Sometimes information is available from teachers, doctors, or from books.

Girls feel shy about discussing menstruation with others, learning instead from their own personal experience. Although some discuss with their mothers, others feel shy about asking, instead, hearing from their aunts or from women who gather and share their menstrual hygiene stories, or from girls their own age.

Women also talk of following certain rules during their menstruation, many of which are not based on medical fact or advice, including:

- **Dietary restriction:** not eating cold, bitter, or sour foods because they believe that this might harm their reproductive system.
- **Limiting physical activity:** avoiding heavy lifting and excessive physical activity due to concerns about bleeding, refraining from going outside or sitting on cold ground.



- **Hygiene practices:** approaches to changing, washing and managing menstrual hygiene cloths vary. Women feel it important to wash themselves on the last day of menstruation as a way to return to household activities and prayer.





## Recommendations

- Communities need assistance to access fresh water. They need to better understand when water is safe to drink, and the procedures they can take to make it safe.
- Increasing the availability of toilets, and improving existing facilities, particularly in public places, would help discourage some from practicing open defecation. For example, increased solar lighting would encourage use. But this needs to work in tandem with efforts to educate people about the health risks, break down fears around safety when using latrines and role model men using public toilets.
- Similarly, people need information about the safe disposal of household and human waste so they are aware of what options exist in their area.
- Although the benefits of handwashing are mostly understood, there is a lack of awareness of invisible germs which needs to be communicated. People need access to soap or handwash to do so effectively. They also need to be encouraged to use these products more often and more consistently.
- Women and girls need more comprehensive information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene, as these subjects are still taboo in many settings. Providing opportunities to hear advice about menstrual hygiene and ask questions would help tackle beliefs and practices that are not based on medical fact and may even be harmful.

BBC Media Action welcomes collaboration with other organisations collecting feedback in areas where they work or who would like to contribute to the analysis and production of this bulletin. Please contact Mahdi Zaki at [mahdi.zaki@af.bbcmediaaction.org](mailto:mahdi.zaki@af.bbcmediaaction.org)

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