

Women-Specific Findings: RTI Focus Group Discussions—Round II

Location: Ahmedabad and Vadodara, India

Date: September 2014

Sample Size: 36 focus groups, ~335 participants

Sampling: Convenience sample* recruited by local NGO (SEWA); recruitment targeted participants in communities lacking improved sanitation and Muslim communities.

Summary Findings

- During menstruation, women feel a high degree of responsibility to conceal menstrual hygiene management (MHM) products and tailor regular behaviors such as cooking and religious activity (Hindu and Muslim); several participants suggested this leads to increased use of public toilets for privacy over open defecation.
- Women support having a menstrual pad disposal option inside the RTI toilet. Discussions that explored combustion as a disposal strategy found near unanimous support for incineration of menstrual pads based on higher perceived convenience and discreetness. A small subset of women ages 18 to 30 (5%) directly opposed pad incineration for superstitious, religious, or health reasons.
- Women strongly supported having a vending machine for MHM products for convenience and privacy.
- Participants support urinals placed outside of the toilet for convenience (men) and improved privacy (women).

Background. This brief highlights key women-specific findings (and several male-specific findings) from recent focus groups conducted by RTI in India. The topics discussed were identified following June 2014 focus groups as both (1) representing a particular application or significance to attributes of the current RTI sanitation system and (2) requiring additional data collection to assess opinions/preferences. The topics include several gender-specific elements, such as MHM, male urinals, and current sanitation behaviors of women and girls and potential applications to address these in the RTI system.

Menstrual hygiene management. Discussions surrounding practices and perceptions of menstruation gave insight into challenges and constraints regularly faced by women participants. Many discussions covered limitations of some women's activities during menstruation, including not engaging in religious activities (e.g. performing pooja, offering Namaz), and in some cases, not participating in household cooking or not touching any household members. During menstruation, some women who rely on open defecation discussed seeking public toilets for increased privacy, washing facilities, and disposal options, during this time.

Discussion of MHM products highlighted the association of menstrual products with impurity; some participants believed these products carry germs and a risk of infection. Overall, activities and materials associated with MHM are considered private and are often secreted from other household members. Women reported having to hide the washing of reusable cloths from household members (especially

*Note: The non-representative convenience sample used implies that findings herein are not broadly generalizable. These FGDs allow basic understanding of some local preferences and behaviors, but require further and systematic data collection and analysis.

men) and were concerned about exposure of the disposed materials to other people and animals for both health and religious reasons. Some participants cited community superstitions or religious beliefs that heightened the importance of women's cleanliness and of product disposal, suggesting it a "sin" if women's used MHM products were encountered by others, leading to women's loss of child-bearing ability, their children becoming ill, or animals becoming blind.

- **RTI System: MHM product vending.** Women reacted positively to a proposed vending mechanism for MHM product purchase inside the toilet cabin. Some women saw this as a means to preserve the secrecy that they sought during menstruation; as one participant suggested, "Sometimes we feel shy to buy from the shop, so [vending machine] is very nice."
- **RTI System: MHM plus solid waste combustion.** The presence of a MHM disposal option in the RTI system was strongly endorsed as bringing improved privacy and limiting exposure to human waste. A majority of male and female participants supported the incineration of MHM products via RTI's solid waste combustion system (i.e., shredding and burning used MHM products along with solid waste). Proponents suggested that immediate disposal of used MHM products held value in that it eliminated the possibility that they might be encountered (by humans or animals) after disposal. A small sub-group of women aged 18-30 did not support burning MHM products offering complex reasons—e.g., superstition, religion, and health—which require further data collection and analysis.
- **RTI system. Cabin size and user features.** Women and men who participated in FGDs in Vadodara were able to see the actual RTI prototype and gave positive feedback on the size of the cabin in the current design. Several women expressed their appreciation that the cabin was big enough for both a mother and child to fit in each stall.
- **RTI system. Water reuse.** FGDs explored user perceptions of the reuse of water in the RTI system for 3 applications: flush water, body wash and hand-washing. Some women expressed cultural and religious factors that impact the acceptability of water reuse but in general responded positively to the concept of water conservation. Data analysis is on-going to assess differences among men and women and their perception of water reuse for each of the 3 applications.

Current sanitation behaviors and facilities. Discussions of current behavior and toilet facility use highlighted several differences by gender and suggested that gender-responsive designs may help to improve adoption of new sanitation systems such as the RTI system. Women's concerns often focused on privacy and safety. Where communities rely on open defecation, women suggested that they feel they must wait for men to leave the defecation site before they use it, or must rush to finish; further where sites are close to roads or other public thoroughways, complete privacy is often not an option. In public toilets, participants suggested that lighting is often unreliable and doors are not adequate or may be broken, making privacy and security primary concerns. Several female participants discussed regularly bringing a household member to these sites in the night for protection, or trying to wait until the morning to urinate or defecate.

- **RTI System: Safety and privacy features.** Women suggested a variety of features aimed at increasing privacy and security around the RTI system—for example, improved outside lighting, indicators of toilet occupancy, and security guards at night. Participants also suggested a desire to have the toilet accessible 24 hours a day.
- **RTI System: Urinals.** The subset of male and female discussion groups that were asked about preferences regarding urinals and their incorporation into the RTI toilet responded positively and nearly uniformly in favor of placing them on the outside of the unit. Male participants suggested that this would make it convenient for men to quickly use, while keeping the enclosed facility available for use. Some men noted that a urinal might lead to fewer men using the enclosed toilet, which if a shared facility, might make women more comfortable. Some female participants suggested that a male urinal might also increase their comfort with the toilet, through the increased privacy of the bathroom (i.e. fewer men using) and improved cleanliness.

Next Steps. Analysis of the data collected during focus groups in Vadodara and Ahmedabad in September 2014 is still ongoing but will be finalized by early December 2014. A summary report of all data collected and analyzed and a revised version of this brief will be available in December. Insights gleaned from these focus groups are being used in two primary ways—to support the design of a representative household survey which RTI plans to administer in Ahmedabad in December and to provide input into the ongoing development and design of the RTI technology.