

Helping young girls finish school

by Nicole Harvey

For Vera Kupe and fellow students at Tambul Primary School, a lack of privacy and proper toilet facilities is stopping girls from attending school during their menstruation.

With no place to change, wash or properly dispose of sanitary items, it is easy to understand why young girls are missing class and falling behind. “There are no doors on our toilets, so there is no privacy for the girls. The boys’ toilets are very close to the girls’ toilets. Sometimes they even throw stones at us when we are using the toilet” explained Vera.

Vera believes better sanitary facilities will keep girls in school. However, more is needed than a new block of toilets. “We need somewhere to wash and change in private. If we get our period at school, there is not even a bucket or drum we can put our waste in.” she added.

Mr Joseph Mangbi, the District Education Adviser for Mt Hagen Provincial Education Office, worries about the effects of this problem. “If a girl misses one week a month of school, that’s 12 weeks of classes in a year. This makes it considerably harder for her to get passing grades and properly finish school.”

At the Alkena Lutheran Primary School, students can enjoy the benefits of new water and sanitation facilities. These facilities were installed by the provincial health and education offices with support of UNICEF and the European Union.

Mr Abel Wama, headmaster of Alkena Primary School is excited about the improvements, “We’ve never had projects like this before. There are more girls coming to school. With the help of these new facilities, we anticipate an increase in enrolment in the new year.”



Before, boys and girls were using the same toilets. Now there are eight ventilated improved pit latrines with separate facilities for the boys, girls, male staff and female staff. Since all the latrines have doors, the young girls now have the privacy they need.



In addition, there was a new water tap installed on the school grounds. Access to clean water is vital for these students. Now they can properly wash their hands with the knowledge that the water they drink will not make them sick.

Keeping girls in school is critical not only for their futures but for the future development of Papua New Guinea.

The installation of water and sanitation facilities encourages girls to remain in school during their menstruation. This gives them confidence and dignity and a better chance to finish their schooling.

UNICEF helps provincial health and education offices equip local schools with the proper sanitary equipment. This ensures that children, especially girls, only need to concentrate on learning when they come to school.

Date: 28 October 2009