



HOW DOES INADEQUATE MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT POSE CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING THE SDGs?





WOMENA SUMMARY



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals, adopted by world leaders in December 2015, and covering the period 2016-2030. They follow up on the eight Millennium Goals (MDGs), which covered the period 2001-2015.

The SDGs, in contrast with the MDGs, cover all the world's countries - low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Uganda, but also high income countries (HICs) like Denmark - indicating that we all face some similar problems, and that we are all in this together.

The logo for the SDGs is a circle, as shown above, to indicate the interconnectedness amongst the goals - for example, that poverty and health are closely interconnected. What we would like to demonstrate in this FAQ is that an issue like menstruation is connected to many of the SDGs. This is not unique - many other fields also find this connectedness. However, we find it particularly striking in view of the fact that menstruation has only become a high profile issue in the last 5-10 years, and is still not mentioned explicitly in the SDGs.

As the Minister of Higher Education in Uganda, John Chrysostom Muyingo, has said: Uganda Must Tackle Period Poverty to Achieve the SDGs.

Comments are warmly welcome (please write andisheh.jahangir@womena.dk).

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WoMena.





WHAT DO THE SDGs SAY ABOUT MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT?

The SDGs make only a few references to menstrual health management (MHM), and those references are indirect. However, that is more than the MDGs, which said nothing at all. It is the result of several years of discussion and advocacy, for example in the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (Biran et al., 2012).

Those indirect mentions are:

SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

Indicator 4.a.1- Proportion of schools with access to: (a) electricity; (b) the Internet for pedagogical purposes; (c) computers for pedagogical purposes; (d) adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities; (e) basic drinking water; (f) single-sex basic sanitation facilities; and (g) basic handwashing facilities (as per the WASH indicator definitions).

SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Target: 6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.

However, we believe we can demonstrate strong connections between inadequate MHMa and many of the 17 SDGs.





**1 NO
POVERTY**



Women² have always menstruated - and they have dealt with it - so why do we need to change that tradition? Traditional, low-cost ways of managing menstruation include corn cobs, strips of rags, isolation in a menstruation hut for five days - or nothing, if those who menstruate cannot afford underwear. However, **traditional** is not always ideal.

For menstruation, traditional products are associated with infections, lack of mobility, social isolation. However improved MHM products are costly, and poor girls cannot always afford them. The expression 'period poverty' is beginning to be widely used.

In Uganda, about a million refugees have lived in settlements for 10-20 years. They receive MHM products for the first three months after arrival - food distribution continues longer term.

Humanitarian organisations such as **UNHCR** must prioritise life-saving actions. But women and girls may prioritise differently (Tellier et al, forthcoming): "*Some women will sell their (food) rations but you can only get about (4 USD) from that. You then spend (1.6 USD) of that on pads alone and now you only have 2.4 USD left. You are also now hungry*" (Harriet, trainer of trainers) (CARE International & WoMena Uganda, 2018).

The cost and availability of MHM products varies greatly, but as yet there is very little generalisable information, and the following estimates may change: In Uganda, disposable pads are widely used. They cost around 1.5 USD per package, or around 20 USD per year³ (Tellier & Hyttel, 2018, MoH Uganda et al., 2017). For menstrual cups (MCs) prices offered to donors are as low as 6 USD, that is, within a year they would cost less than disposable pads. For poor people, an up-front high cost may be an impossible hurdle, but a project conducted by **WoMena Uganda** and several partners indicates that the most MC sales were made at approximately 7 USD (Jahangir et al, 2020).⁴ See also Annex I.

Governments are beginning to recognise the issue, both in LMICs and HICs. In Scotland, 'Period poverty' was seen to prevent girls from buying pads, therefore missing school. The government pledged £5.2m to provide (MHM) products e.g. in schools.

In 2020 the Scottish parliament expanded this: to make free MHM products available to all women, the first nation in the world to do so (Howcroft, 2020). Products are at times provided free on a par with food (Khomami, 2018). Many LMICs also provide free products.

We are aware that not all women and girls menstruate, and that not all who menstruate are women and girls. We hope for your indulgence if we do not explain that every time we mention menstruators. The term 'menstruators' also brings opposition.³ 13 cycles per year.

⁴Data on how many people use each product, how many products they use, and channels of distribution are not very solid and often difficult to generalize. WoMena is planning to do an FAQ in future on this topic. Notably, homemade does not mean free.





3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



INFECTIONS, INCLUDING SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS:

- MHM Products are a major cash expense. In Kenya, one study showed 10% of 15-year old school girls engaged in transactional sex for money to buy pads. The younger and poorer, the more prevalent the practice (Phillips-Howard et al., 2015; MoH Uganda et al., 2017).
- This is also a frequent finding in WoMena's pilot projects: girls engage in transactional sex to pay for pads, sometimes at their parents' urging (WoMena, 2020b). "*A girl, even if she asks (her parents, ed) for the pads before her period comes she feels like the parent is telling her to go and get them from somewhere else...so when a girl engages in sexual activity and the parents find out the girl says she was looking for pads.*" (Schoolgirl, Buikwe district, Uganda).
- In the Imvepi refugee settlement, a female Trainer of Trainer says: "*These are things that lead into sexual exploitation. Because me I know I don't have a father, I don't have a mother... Ok, in case if you fall in love with me, I'll provide each and everything. Now comparing this situation I'm in, I will just accept that person so that person will buy me Always [disposable pads], of which it will lead into early pregnancy or it may lead even into school drop-out. ... Because whenever these men give things to you they want those things to be paid back.*" (CARE International & WoMena Uganda, 2018).
- This is not unique. A study in Uganda showed 26.9% of school girls reporting they engaged in transactional sex in general to raise cash (MoH of Uganda et al., 2016)
- An ongoing study in Kenya examines whether providing cash stipends (15 USD in a year) can help (Zulaika et al., 2019).
- Another study from Kenya indicated that, after being provided with free menstrual cups (MCs) or disposable pads, girls had lower levels of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than the control group who received nothing, possibly because they found it less necessary to engage in transactional sex. Those provided with MCs had lower levels of other infections (possibly because girls reused disposable pads) (Phillips-Howard et al., 2016).
- There is little to indicate that any particular MHM product causes high levels of infections (and obviously





FAMILY PLANNING:

- A common problem for long term contraception is that women discontinue even though they do not want to get pregnant. For around 26% of those who discontinue, it seems to be due to concerns about side effects, including menstrual irregularities (Sedgh et al., 2016).
 - Intrauterine Devices may cause heavy bleeding, and therefore a need to buy more products. This is cited as a reason, since pads are expensive (Tellier & Hyttel, 2018)
 - Long acting hormonal contraception often causes spotting during the cycle, which means the partner will not want to have sex and goes elsewhere - an untenable situation (Tellier et al. 2012; Tellier & Hyttel, 2018). One mother explains: "*He doesn't feel comfortable when I tell him I am on period because sometimes he wants to have sex and it's impossible to have it when I am in my period.*" (Mother, Rhino refugee settlement, Uganda) (CARE International & WoMena Uganda, 2018).
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5 GENDER EQUALITY



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



We will discuss these two goals together, as they have many overlapping issues:

CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage conventionally refers to marriage before the age of 18 (Sunder, 2019).⁶

- The connections between child marriage, school drop-out and MHM are recognised amongst leaders. President Museveni of Uganda is quoted as recognising that parents think menarche indicates girls are ready for marriage (Tellier & Hyttel, 2018). This is also mentioned as being a prime reason for school dropout by Girls not Brides⁷.
- Studies indicate that some parents marry off their daughters in order to pass on the cost to the next breadwinner - the husband - and this includes MHM products (Glynn et al., 2010; Gade & Hytti, 2017; Nyakanyanga, 2017; Tellier & Hyttel, 2018)

FROM SHAME AND FEAR TO FREEDOM AND WELL-BEING

- There is strong evidence that menstruation causes shame. A review of over 80 studies noted that knowledge was low (8% to 100% aware about menstruation before puberty) Girls are fearful about menstruation. The more they know, the less fearful (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017). Many consider it 'a curse' (82% in Nepal) (Bobel, 2018)
- This is also true in a High Income Country such as Denmark: girls and women do not know how many 'holes' they have, or whether you can pee if you have a tampon inserted.
- But shame is not only in the minds of the girls. It is also in the minds of their surroundings. That is why WoMena places great value for example on the involvement of males. It adds to the cost, but has great benefits. The finding is that many males are very curious, and are pleased to take on a role as 'champions' for better MHM.
- One of the most powerful, and repeated, indicators of impact in WoMena projects is that this fear and shame can turn 180 degrees, to feelings of freedom and agency, once information, support and products are available (Refstrup Skov, 2015; CARE International & WoMena Uganda, 2018)

⁶ UNFPA, 2020. "Say IDONT: Top 7 things you didn't know about child marriage." 1 February, 2020. Available from: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/say-idont-top-7-things-you-didnt-know-about-child-marriage>

⁷ Girls not brides, 2017: Periods and child marriage: What is the link?. Available from: <https://www.girlsnobrides.org/periods-child-marriage-link/>





- “Because I come and stay freely you don’t think/worry and even when you don’t tell your friends they may not know that you are in your period.” (Immaculate, 14, Gulu) (Tellier et al., 2012).
- “Now I can ride my bike & stay with my friends freely.”(Tellier et al., 2012).
- “Before this knowledge we used to fear to let other friends know that we are menstruating but now we are free to tell them that we are menstruating - even the boys.” (schoolgirl, Refugee settlement, Adjumani district, Uganda) (WoMena, 2020a)
- “Before I got the cup, I found it really difficult when I was in my period to go to school. I really feared shame if I was seated and the blood can smell. Really, I had that fear. But since I received the cup, I can put on the cup and it can just hold the blood. It cannot come out and spill everywhere, and I can even change my cup at school.” (female student, Imvepi refugee settlement, Uganda).
- “Now I can drive my bike and I don’t have to look back, I don’t fear ... now I can stay for a long time at gatherings ... You even sleep freely, no problems with anything.” (Gloria) (Tellier et al., 2012).





6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



There is wide agreement that adequate MHM includes water and sanitation as very important components (Sommer et al., 2016b).

- “*I am very thankful for the Ruby Cup because it uses less water and my grandmother supports me in using it because of that.*” Beneficiaries report that they need only 1 Litre of water to boil and disinfect the MC. It also dries immediately, whereas some products may need up to 2 days. ‘I had to really think how I would manage when that was drying. Now with the Ruby Cup I can just wash with a little water during my cycle and at the end I boil to disinfect it.’ (CARE International & WoMena Uganda,2018)
- The International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) observes that access to single-sex, safe, functional toilets are much more likely to be able to manage their periods with confidence and dignity, yet one-fifth of toilet worldwide have no toilets, and close to a billion practice open defecation (UN DESA, 2015; Crago, 2018).
- An estimated 70% of 400 million health workers globally are women (WHO,2019). 1 in 4 health care workers do not have access to WASH facilities, posing challenges for menstruating health workers managing their menstruation (WHO, 2019).





8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



WOMEN MISS WORK DUE TO MANY REASONS RELATED TO MHM:

- A study among low-income women in the USA found more than 33% of working women missed one or more days of work per month during their periods. Absenteeism was due to factors such as cramps, heavy menstrual flow, high cost of MH products, and concerns about safety, security, and sanitation (Kuhlmann et al., 2019).
- Another study in the USA indicated that women feel increased pain on days when they menstruate; pain, in turn, relates to increased feelings of depletion and lower helping behaviours (Motro et al., 2019)
- In Bangladesh, an estimate found 73% of women factory workers missed work on average 6 days a month. Some take contraceptive pills to avoid menstruation. If menstrual products are provided, this proportion can be dropped to 3% (WSSCC, 2013)
- In India, sugar cane cutters are reported to have hysterectomies so that they can avoid pain and bleeding and continue work (Pandey, 2019)
- A study found that in Cambodia around ¼ of all workplaces had no toilets, 14 % had inadequate toilets in the Philippines and 74 % of market places had no toilets in Vietnam (World Bank, 2008)
- A study in the Netherlands also found some absence/reduced productivity. When calling in sick because of their periods, only 20.1% gave menstruation as the reason (Schoep et al., 2019)

THIS HAS ECONOMIC IMPACT. There are few empirical studies - most calculations are based on models:

- A study from South East Asia estimated that, assuming women employees were absent for one day a month due to a lack of WASH facilities during their period, this would result in 13.8 and 1.5 million workday absences in the Philippines and Vietnam respectively, with an economic loss of USD 13 and 1.28 million per year (World Bank, 2008).

WHAT CAN, AND HAVE, EMPLOYERS DONE TO CHANGE THIS?

- Some countries (Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Zambia) have laws providing various forms of Menstrual Leave (Wikipedia, 2019). Italy declined to approve a law - objections were based on thinking that this would reinforce stereotypes of women as being unable to function during their periods (Momigliano, 2017). In Sweden, a football app startup has been certified to be 'menstruation friendly' (Savage, 2019).
- Employers in the informal sector may have no legal obligation to provide women with a workplace environment that is suitable for their sanitation-related needs (Sommer et al., 2016a)





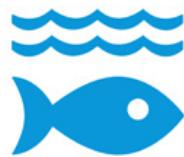
12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



14 LIFE BELOW WATER



15 LIFE ON LAND



- One estimate from a high-income country is that a menstruator will use between 11,000 and 16,800 disposable MHM products in a lifetime which is about 32 products each period. This translates into almost 200 kilograms of disposable products thrown away by a lifetime of menstruating (WEN, 2018). Estimates from LICs are lower - some at 10 products per cycle, 130 annually or around 4'550 in a lifetime or around 4'550 in a lifetime⁸ (WoMena, 2019).
- Globally, over 12 billion disposable menstrual products are used per year, filling up latrine or ending up in landfills. Disposable menstrual products create approximately 6.3% of sewage-related debris along rivers and beaches. The leaching chemical cocktail from most disposable menstrual products can have a detrimental impact on the environment (WoMena, 2019).
- Sanitation companies around the world report that MHM products are involved in 80-90% of these blockages. Some manufacturers label their material as 'flushable', but the base for stating this is not clear (Kjellén et al., 2012).
- From an environmental perspective, reusable menstrual products such as the MC and reusable pads are more environmentally-friendly, though they require clean water for washing the product, and also hands and soiled underwear. For example, high quality reusable pads may result in less leakage than cloth, and therefore less washing (WoMena, 2019).
- Evidence is poor, therefore, there is a need for an assessment of the environmental life cycle for each type of MHM product including the environmental costs across all stages of production, distribution, use and disposal (Weir 2015).

⁸ 'Women of reproductive age' statistically refers to women aged 15-19. Given that menarche gradually seems to begin earlier, but menopause still remains at around 59, and that the average number of children worldwide is 2.4 (allowing for amenorrhoea for about 1.5 years per child this results in about 35 years of menstruation (see also Tellier & Hyttel, 2018)





ANNEX I:

Prices of different MHM products

Estimated Yearly cost in Uganda:

1. Commercial pads: 1.5 USD/cycle	20 USD/year
2. Comm. reusable pads: cost 4-5 USD/pack, last 1+years:	4-5 USD/year
3. Cups: cost 7-35 USD, last up to 10 years	1-3 USD/year
4. Homemade disposable pads from India: 0.05 USD/pc	6 USD/year
5. Homemade reusable pads from Uganda	3- 40 USD/year

Cost estimates especially for Menstrual Cups vary tremendously amongst markets. Prices of Menstrual Cups ranging from USD 0.72 to 46.72 around the globe.

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