

Advocacy Report

Menstrual Hygiene Matters: Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity (MHI) and the need for a global recognition of adequate Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) as a fundamental right for all women and girls

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Graduate Women International (GWI)'s first observance of Menstrual Hygiene Day (MH Day) on 28 May. Initiated by the German based NGO [WASH United](#) in 2014, this annual awareness day was thought as a “global platform that brings together non-profit organisations, government agencies, private sector, the media and individuals to promote Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)”¹. Graduate Women International is happy to announce the start of its collaboration with the [Menstrual Hygiene Day \(MH Day\)](#) organisation in their efforts to catalyze a growing, global movement that recognizes and supports girls’ and women’s rights and advocate for the integration of MHM into global, national and local policies, programmes and projects.

Menstrual Hygiene Day, observed each year since 2014 on 28 May, is a reminder that women and girl across the world continue to face a variety of unnecessary challenges due to their menstruation. The date, 28 May has been chosen for its special significance. May is the 5th month of the year, representing five days, or the average number of days (between two to seven) a woman or girl menstruates each month. Twenty-eight represents the average number of days in a menstrual cycle². The 2018 theme, “#NoMoreLimits” puts a timely emphasis on how empowering good menstrual hygiene can be for all women and girls. This theme also aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5, achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls.

In total women spend around six to seven years of their lives menstruating and on any given day, more than 800 million women between 15 and 49 have their period around the world, according to WaterAid. However, 1,25 billion women³ globally are unable to manage their menstruation with normalcy and dignity due to a lack of access to the basic sanitation rendered necessary by the natural process of menstruation. Without access to adequate MHM, millions of women and girls across the world must suffer the multiple and interrelated consequences of MHI in multiple areas of their lives.

¹ <http://menstrualhygieneday.org/>

² <http://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/about-mhday/>

³ <http://worldtoilet.org/documents/WecantWait.pdf>

Menstruation matters worldwide. The specific challenges that women and girls experience differ widely, depending on social norms, customs, education and socio-economic factors. It is however fair to state that managing menstruation with normalcy and in dignity remains a challenge for too many women and girls across the world.



Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity (MHI) results from a lack of access to adequate Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)⁴ and the World Health Organisation (WHO) define MHM as the awareness, information and confidence to manage menstruation with safety and dignity, using safe hygienic materials together with adequate water, agent and spaces for washing and disposal with privacy and dignity. GWI enhances this definition by emphasizing access to menstrual hygiene products as integral to furthering women’s and girls’ social and economic development. The lack of one or several of the aspects of MHM puts women and girls at risk of experiencing the detrimental consequences of MHI.

Ahead of Menstrual Hygiene Day, let’s start the conversation about menstruation by examining the crucial importance of MHM as a human right for all women and girls. The time is now to finally put an end to the multifold, far reaching and detrimental impact of MHI on women’s and girls’ ability to reach their full potential. We will examine the consequences of MHI and the importance of adequate MHM for girls’ and women’s dignity, education, social and economic empowerment and health, as well as for the protection of the environment. This will allow us to conclude by pointing out the intrinsic interrelation between adequate MHM, the protection of women’s and girls’ fundamental human rights and the realization of several of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

⁴ https://www.unicef.org/wash/schools/files/MHM_vConf_2014.pdf

Shame, taboo and embarrassment: MHM matters for women's dignity

The impact of MHI: Although menstruation is common among most women around the world, menstruation is also a globally stigmatized issue. Stigma and shame shroud menstruation around the world and many societies maintain archaic and often harmful ideas and beliefs about menstruation. Such myths often portray women and girls as inferior to men and boys, thus promoting gender discrimination, inequality and patriarchal practices.

In many areas of the world, menstruating women are wrongly deemed unclean and impure, preventing them from accomplishing some everyday tasks and severely infringing their basic rights. In many traditional Hindu homes, menstruating women cannot perform religious rituals, touch idols, pray, visit temples, cook serve food or touch drinking water because they are considered impure⁵. In some parts of Bangladesh, girls are confined indoors upon their first menstruation. In parts of Nepal, this happens every time a woman or girl menstruates⁶.



The persistence of widespread taboo surrounding menstruation results in girls in many low and middle-income countries (LMIC) entering puberty with knowledge gaps and misconceptions about menstruation. In India⁷, only one out of two girls have knowledge about menstruation before their first period in stark contrast to Japan where 92%⁸ of survey participants report receiving adequate information about menstruation.

Negative talk about periods are damaging girls' self-esteem and sense of self-worth, putting their physical health at risk and contributing to MHI. In the United-Kingdom today, 48% of girls aged 14-21 reported that have been made to feel embarrassed by their periods, while 71% have felt embarrassed buying sanitary products, as pointed out by Plan International UK⁹.

Why the right to MHM matters: This situation underscores the need to expand health education: women and men, young girls and boys, no matter where they live must know about their bodies and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Ensuring every women's and girls' access to adequate MHM starts with the provision of accurate education on menstruation and menstrual hygiene so that women and girls feel confident and empowered enough to make informed decisions about their body, their health and how they manage their menstruation, thus giving them confidence to live their lives normally.

Accurate education on menstruation before menarche (the first period) allows girls to be prepared for their first period and live this natural change without fear. Access to correct information about hygiene

⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/06/living/india-menstruation-irpt/index.html>

⁶ http://menstrualhygieneday.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MHDay_Infographic_Large.pdf

⁷ <http://menstrualhygieneday.org/>

⁸ <https://iwhc.org/2016/03/blood-sweat-and-tears-how-menstruation-holds-women-and-girls-back/>

⁹ <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v>

and adequate sanitary materials enables young girls to feel more confident and comfortable with their bodies.

Educating girls and women but also boys and men about feminine hygiene and biology helps to bust myths and cultural superstitions¹⁰. Understanding menstruation helps women and girls as well as boys and men realize that menstruating women are not unclean, nor impure.

Educating men and boys about menstruation can help men develop higher levels of understanding of women and girls' bodies and needs. Correct information about menstrual hygiene fills boys' and men's knowledge gaps, clearing up misconceptions they may have about menstrual blood. Desensitizing men and boys about menstruation leads to more open conversations and empathy, thus significantly enhancing women's safety and confidence.

Higher absenteeism and drop-out rate: MHI as a severe barrier to education

The impact of MHI: Menstruation contributes to the school absenteeism of millions of girls and women. Without any reliable products to take care of their periods, many girls choose to stay home during their menstruation, hence limiting their basic right to get an education. Young women and girls MHI often forces girls to miss class with the onset of their monthly period and, as absence increase so does the likelihood they will drop out of school entirely. For instance, in Kenya girls will miss an average of four days of school each month, totaling about 20% of the school year¹¹.



MHI in school is also caused in many areas of the world by a severe lack of clean and private toilets with water and soap as well as safe disposable facilities to allow women and girls to manage their menstruation adequately, privately and with dignity. According to WASH United, only 34% of school girls in India have access to functioning toilets on the school premises. Only 17% of girls in Burkina Faso have a place in their schools to change their sanitary materials¹².

MHI directly contributes to maintaining gender inequalities between school girls and their male peers. Lack of access to adequate MHM in school often leads to lower school attendance rates and lower results on the part of female students. When girls miss school because of their menstruation, they risk losing educational pace with boys, making them more vulnerable inside and outside the classroom¹³.

Why the right to MHM matters: Education is a prevailing mean of empowerment for women and girls around the world and a fundamental enabler to achieve peace, stability and human development. As a consequence, the barriers preventing women and girls from fulfilling their right to education and thus becoming independent and valuable members of society must be acknowledged and fully eliminated; this includes addressing MHI.

¹⁰ <https://www.girlsglobe.org/2014/05/28/28-reasons-why-menstrual-hygiene-matters/>

¹¹ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/kenya-will-give-free-menstrual-pads-to-girls/>

¹² http://menstrualhygieneday.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MHDay_Infographic_Large.pdf

¹³ <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/get-involved/days-we-celebrate/world-menstrual-hygiene-day>

With accessible water and sanitation facilities that are safe, socially and culturally acceptable and where they can safely dispose of menstrual products within the school premises, women and girls are able to manage menstruation in privacy and with dignity and do not have to miss out on their studies when they menstruate.

What seems like a small and little change will then have a tremendous impact on women's and girls' lives as well as on their societies in the form of economic and social development. When the percentage of women with secondary education increases by 1%, the annual per capita economic growth increases by 0.3%¹⁴. Furthermore, when girls complete secondary school, they marry later and have less children. They also have better maternal health and their children are healthier and better educated.

MHI as a risk for women's and girls' health

The impact of MHI: When hygienic and affordable sanitary products are not available, many women and girls must resort to using unsanitary materials such as old rags, dried leaves, grass, ash, sands, newspaper or socks to manage their periods. This situation severely impacts women's dignity but also presents a significant hazard for women's and girls' health. The homespun solutions raise the risk of vaginal infections that suppress the reproductive track's natural defenses, putting women at higher risks of developing an infection. Women and girls who cannot afford to regularly change their tampon risk being infected by the staphylococcus aureus bacteria. In rare cases these bacteria lead to TSS an infection that may result in shock, renal failure, or even death¹⁵.

Why the right to MHM matters: providing women and girls access to adequate MHM helps women to maintain their physical health but also their social and mental well-being. Comprehensive and adequate education about menstrual hygiene management helps ensure cleanliness. Knowing what product or material to use, how often to change it and having access to WASH (water, sanitation, hygiene) facilities helps girls and women maintain good hygiene while menstruating.



Access to adequate MHM helps reduce the likelihood of women and girls getting reproductive track infections and other types of diseases such as cervical cancer. According to the World Health Organisation, India accounts for 27 percent of the world's cervical cancer death¹⁶. The incidence rate there is almost twice the global average and doctors studying the disease believe poor menstrual hygiene is partly to blame. A weaker immune response can compromise the body's ability to fight the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, the microbial cause of most cervical cancers.

Inadequate disposal and pollution: MHM matters for the environment

The impact of MHI: access to safe disposal facilities for menstrual products is an integral part of adequate MHM. It is also crucial for the protection of the environment. The average woman throws away 250 to 300 pounds of pads plugs and applicators in her lifetime¹⁷. The plastic in a pad will take hundreds of years to decompose. It is estimated that nearly 20 billion pads and tampons are discarded every year in North America alone¹⁸. In areas of the world where there is no standardized method of

¹⁴ <http://menstrualhygieneday.org/project/infographic-education-menstruation/>

¹⁵ <https://www.girlsglobe.org/2014/05/28/28-reasons-why-menstrual-hygiene-matters/>

¹⁶ <http://cancerindia.org.in/statistics/>

¹⁷ http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/the_green_lantern/2010/03/greening_the_crimson_tide.html

¹⁸ <https://www.treehugger.com/health/reasons-why-you-should-switch-to-reusable-menstrual-products.html>

sustainable sanitary waste disposal, every menstrual product disposed contributes to either soil, air or water contamination.

Why the right to MHM matters: Ensuring that every women and girls can safely dispose of their menstrual products can help reduce waste in the environment. Promoting the use of reusable and biodegradable sanitary products can also significantly reduce the impact of menstrual waste on the environment while also providing women with healthier and more affordable options to manage their menstruation. In India, where an estimated potential of 9'000 tons of sanitary waste (432 million pads) is being generated annually¹⁹, the government launched last March low cost biodegradable sanitary napkins to be available across 586 Indian districts, as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise of delivering health products at affordable costs²⁰.



MHM: a human right necessary for the achievement of the SDGs

Menstruation is an issue of human rights and dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds the right to health (Article 25) and the right to education (Article 26) as fundamental rights for every human being. Nevertheless, considerable barriers curtailing the equal and safe access to hygiene and education for women and girls across the world persist to this day, among which is the issue of Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity (MHI). By preventing women and girls from fulfilling their full potential through education and professional life, and by jeopardizing their right to health and dignity, MHI is a fundamental human rights issue and a severe barrier to the advancement of the status of all women and girls. The time is now for the global community to recognize the right to adequate menstrual hygiene management as a human right and to enable girls and women to stay in school and manage their menstruation with dignity and normalcy.



Menstrual Hygiene Management is also a crucial component for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While there is no specific goal or indicator for MHM, menstruation matters to several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including SDG 3 ensuring healthy lives and well-being for all, SDG 4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, SDG 5 achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and SDG 6 ensuring access to clean water and sanitation for all. For further information about the intrinsic interrelation between adequate MHM and the realization of several of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we invite you to read and share this interesting Menstrual Hygiene Day [infographic](#).

¹⁹ <https://www.thebetterindia.com/100510/menstrual-waste-sanitary-napkins-india-uk-best-practice/>

²⁰ <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/on-women-s-day-govt-launches-biodegradable-sanitary-pad-at-rs-2-50/554790.html>

Join GWI in celebrating Menstrual Hygiene Day!

GWI encourages all members, partners and friends to celebrate Menstrual Hygiene Day on 28 May. More information about our MH Day 2018 Advocacy Plan are coming soon. Beginning 25 May, plan to follow and share the GWI social media campaign that will offer three daily posts on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#) towards the empowerment of women and girls through good menstrual hygiene.



28 May
**MENSTRUAL
HYGIENE DAY**



28 de Mayo
**DÍA DE LA HIGIENE
MENSTRUAL**



28 मई
**माहवारी
स्वच्छता दिवस**



28 Mai
**JOURNÉE DE L'HYGIÈNE
MENSTRUELLE**