



Family Digest 40

10th June 2021

The Importance of Menstrual Hygiene Day

Menstrual Hygiene Day is an annual awareness day held on 28th May to highlight the importance of good menstrual hygiene management at a global level. It was initiated by the German-based NGO *WASH United* in 2014. The day is observed on 28th May because an average menstrual cycle is 28 days in length and girls and women menstruate on an average of five days each month – and May is the fifth month of the year. Menstruation is one of the most significant processes a woman's body undergoes. Good menstrual hygiene management makes a huge difference to the quality of life and the realization of many basic human rights of girls and women from the age of menarche to the menopause – including the rights to dignity, equality and health.

“Poor menstrual hygiene caused by a lack of education on the issue, persisting taboos and stigma, limited access to hygienic menstrual products, and poor sanitation infrastructure undermines the educational opportunities, health and overall social status of women and girls around the world. As a result, millions of women and girls are kept from reaching their full potential.”¹

There are seven million girls in South Africa between the ages of 13 and 19, the school-going ages of menstruating girls. Statistics show that about four million of them do not have regular access to sanitary products.² These girls experience what is called ‘period poverty’; their household budgets cannot accommodate sanitary products. Without menstrual products women and girls are forced to use improvised materials to manage their periods, including torn pieces of clothing, rags and newspapers, which can cause infections. This is compounded by an inadequate supply of water and sanitation at schools and in informal settlements. Women who have lost everything as a result of humanitarian crises and environmental disasters tell us that amongst the essential items they need most are sanitary towels, wipes and soap.³

Research has confirmed time and time again the negative effects of poor menstrual health management on a girl's education. The lack of access to sanitary wear and adequate sanitation facilities can affect a girl's attendance at school by 25% per year. That is one week every month, which is a massive set back in her school career and for her future prospects.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “when girls do not have information and manage menstruation inadequately, they may experience negative health impacts, or may not fully enjoy their right to health. In addition, taboos or stigma around menstruation may prevent girls

from seeking or receiving timely medical treatment related to abnormal bleeding or pain. Lack of knowledge around menarche and menstruation may increase anxiety or psychosocial stress, in particular for adolescent girls.”⁴

Making menstrual hygiene management available and affordable is important, as is raising awareness about healthy menstrual hygiene management for women and girls in the communities. More education about reproductive health might result in a decline in teenage pregnancy, and would help young girls to make informed choices about sexual activity, marriage, and motherhood.

The *Sanitation Appropriate for Education (Safe)* campaign was announced in August 2018 by President Cyril Ramaphosa, targeting schools where sanitation is inadequate or unsafe. At that time, according to the Department of Basic Education's audit, 3 898 schools across the country did not have appropriate sanitation. However, a year later only 266 schools had benefited from the *Safe* project, and there was no indication as to which were primary schools and which were high schools.⁵

There are pioneering initiatives to provide girls with non-disposable, hygienic sanitary wear. Investing in non-disposable pads is certainly worthwhile in the long-term. Although they are costly when compared to disposable pads, they are washable and reusable, and can last several years. They are also environmentally friendly. Some come complete with a small bucket, soap and a hanger. Distribution of these products is often accompanied by discussion about women's reproductive health. Many companies and individuals have sponsored these products, which are distributed through schools in both rural and urban areas. Corporate social responsibility in this critical area should be encouraged.

Recently, some countries have made sanitary supplies free or tax-free to help fight period poverty. New Zealand, France and Namibia are the latest countries to announce such initiatives, after Scotland became the first country to provide period products free to anyone who needed them last year. The global lockdown due to COVID-19 has raised concerns worldwide regarding access to sanitary products, particularly among those vulnerable to period poverty.

Human reproduction is one of the miracles of creation and menstruation is part of the cycle of life. The right to manage menstruation without period poverty and stigma is possible with access to sanitary products, as well as safe and hygienic spaces in which to use them. These are essential for the dignity, equality and health of everyone who menstruates.⁶ The following links provide more information on this issue, and on various products and projects addressing menstrual hygiene.

<http://subzpads.co.za/>

<https://www.palesapads.com/products/>

https://www.tatuproject.org/kilipads-social-business/?gclid=EAJaIQobChMIkb-gyIz-8AIVWuvvtCh03ggUYEAAYAiAAEgIPE_D_BwE

<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>

https://www.tatuproject.org/kilipads-social-business/?gclid=EAJaIQobChMIkb-gyIz-8AIVWuvvtCh03ggUYEAAYAiAAEgIPE_D_BwE

https://beginet.org/2016/05/12/end-period-poverty-in-karoo-boesmanland/?gclid=EAJaIQobChMIyJv5_T98AIV0OvtCh01cQV-EAMYASAAEgI-cPD_BwE

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

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Water/10anniversary/Menstruation_Annex.pdf

<https://www.sahrc.org.za/index.php/sahrc-media/opinion-pieces/item/1789-the-cycle-of-the-menstrual-burden>

<http://www.women.gov.za/images/Sanitary-Dignity-Framework---June-2019-9-07-2019-without-highlights.pdf>

<https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/opinion-creating-a-more-equal-post-covid-19-world-for-people-who-menstruate-97312>

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¹ <https://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/about-mhday/>

² <https://subzpads.co.za/>

³ <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/get-involved/days-we-celebrate/menstrual-hygiene-day>

⁴ <https://www.unfpa.org/events/menstrual-hygiene-day>

⁵ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-03-03-only-266-of-3898-schools-have-benefitted-from-ramaphosas-sanitation-campaign/>

⁶ <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/get-involved/days-we-celebrate/menstrual-hygiene-day>

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