

Breaking the Stigma: Why Menstrual Health & Hygiene is Critical to the Fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals

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Background

- Menstruation is a monthly occurrence for **1.8 billion people** (UNICEF, 2019)
- Over **800 million** women and girls menstruating on any given day (Geertz, et al., 2016).
- Millions of women and girls of reproductive age across the world are **denied the ability to manage their monthly menstrual cycle in a healthy, comfortable and dignified manner** due to:

Poverty

Lack of basic sanitation facilities

Discriminatory social norms and cultural taboos

Traditional gender inequalities

- Long-term negative impacts on the livelihoods of women and girls, not only restricting their movement and freedom, but affecting their education, safety, and participation in society (UNICEF, 2019).



Sustainable Development Goals

Neither 'menstruation' nor 'menstrual hygiene' are explicitly mentioned in any of the Sustainable Development Goals, despite being directly linked to the achievement of several objectives (Tiwary, 2018) – including:

SDG 3: 'Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages'

SDG 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning'

SDG 5: 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'

SDG 6: 'Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'

SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production
(United Nations, 2015).

Cultural & Religious Perceptions of Menstruation

- **India** - the restriction from entering the sacred 'puja' (prayer) room, looking at their reflection in the mirror, wearing new clothes, exercising, or entering the kitchen. If sanitary products are not adequately disposed of, '**black magic**' will be used on it to make the woman or girl infertile (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011)
- **Bangladesh** - menstrual blood is perceived as the "**greatest of all pollution**" (Blanchet, 1987)
- **Taiwan** - Menstrual blood is perceived as '**dirt**' or '**poison**' (Furth & Shu-yueh, 1992)
- **Ethiopia** - referred to as 'it-idif', meaning 'dirt', or 'gadawo', of which translates to '**disease of the abdomen**' (Tamiru, et al., 2014)
- **Uganda** - menstruating women and girls are forbidden from drinking the milk of a cow, as it is perceived that doing so would have negative impacts on the cow's ability to produce milk (Walton, 2013)



Cultural & Religious Perceptions of Menstruation

- **Tanzania** - menstruating women and girls are forbidden from accessing the public water source, cooking, washing up, touching plants, or going near any crop field
- **South Sudan** - if a witch finds a girl or woman's sanitary products, she will make them infertile (Tiwary, 2018)
- **Malawi** – removal of '**bad blood**', a study found that adolescent girls believe that the insertion of a methylated spirit inside the vagina will stop the bleeding (Pillitteri, 2012). Some ethnic groups in Malawi pay a man known as a '**fisi**' to have sexual intercourse with a newly menstruating girl (Kamlongera, 2007)
- **South Africa** - believed to be a "built in cleansing system", whereby '**dirty**' menstrual blood is believed to be the dirt that has accumulated throughout other organs of the body (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002)
- **Papua New Guinea** - believed that any physical contact with a menstruating woman or girl or her menstrual blood will "**sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting**"
- In many **Melanesian and Polynesian cultures**, a woman that is menstruating is believed to radiate a '**mana**' – a **supernatural power**



Chhaupadi Menstrual Huts, Nepal

- Chhaupadi is the **banishment of menstruating women and girls from society**
- An ancient Hindu **tradition**, menstruating women and girls considered **impure** and are banished from their community to reside in '**menstrual huts**', typically unsafe, unhygienic and congested livestock sheds
- **Prohibited from washing, going to school, touching certain objects or having any contact with other members of the family**
- **Not allowed to avail of a nutritious diet** throughout the duration of the menstrual period and instead must survive solely on **dry flatbread with salt**
- **Law criminalising the practice came into effect in August 2018**, whereby anyone found compelling a menstruating woman or girl to live in a hut will be fined and or/must serve three months in jail (Ghimire, 2019).
- While the new law marks progress in acknowledging the harmful impacts of the practice, **Chhaupadi still remains widespread** and implementation of the law remains limited (Amatya, et al., 2018)
- Women rights activist Pashupati Kunwar argues despite the law, the **"social construct is too strong to be dismantled"** (Budhathoki, 2019).



Impacts of Chhaupadi

Serious impacts on both the physical and psychosocial well-being of women and girls:

- **Unhygienic conditions** create risk of **infection** (Thapa, et al., 2017), increasing the likelihood of life-threatening problems such as **pneumonia, suffocation, respiratory tract infection, dehydration, hypothermia, and diarrhoea**
- **Absence of sanitation facilities** facilitates the inability to maintain menstrual hygiene, creating high risk of **gynaecological and genital infections**
- Still expected to engage in **straining work** such as collecting and carrying firewood, digging and farm labour (OHCHR, 2011), despite the lack of basic sustenance or amenities
- The exposed nature of the huts means that women and girls are also more susceptible to animal attacks or bites from poisonous snakes or scorpions (OHCHR, 2011)
- Exclusion from participation in society on the basis of being **'polluted', 'impure' and 'untouchable'** (Amatya, et al., 2018) can evoke feelings of shame, humiliation, abandonment and guilt among women subjected to the practise, particularly adolescent girls (OHCHR, 2011)
- Fear of **sexual assault** due to exposed nature of hut

Changing the world with **women and girls** **act:onaid**

Efforts in International Development

- **ActionAid** has established **community-based women's groups** whereby local women and girls come together to find solutions to the injustices they face, giving them the opportunity to **discuss the impact that Chhaupadi has on their lives** and receive **education on sexual and reproductive rights**.
- The support of ActionAid has empowered women to think critically of the injustice they are subjected to.
- Over **1,400 women** of reproductive age have stopped practicing Chhaupadi since ActionAid began working in Nepal.
- Alongside local partners, ActionAid has helped to establish **11 'chhaupadi-free'** communities, whereby awareness-raising campaigns have started to challenge deeply-rooted beliefs of menstruation (ActionAid, 2020)

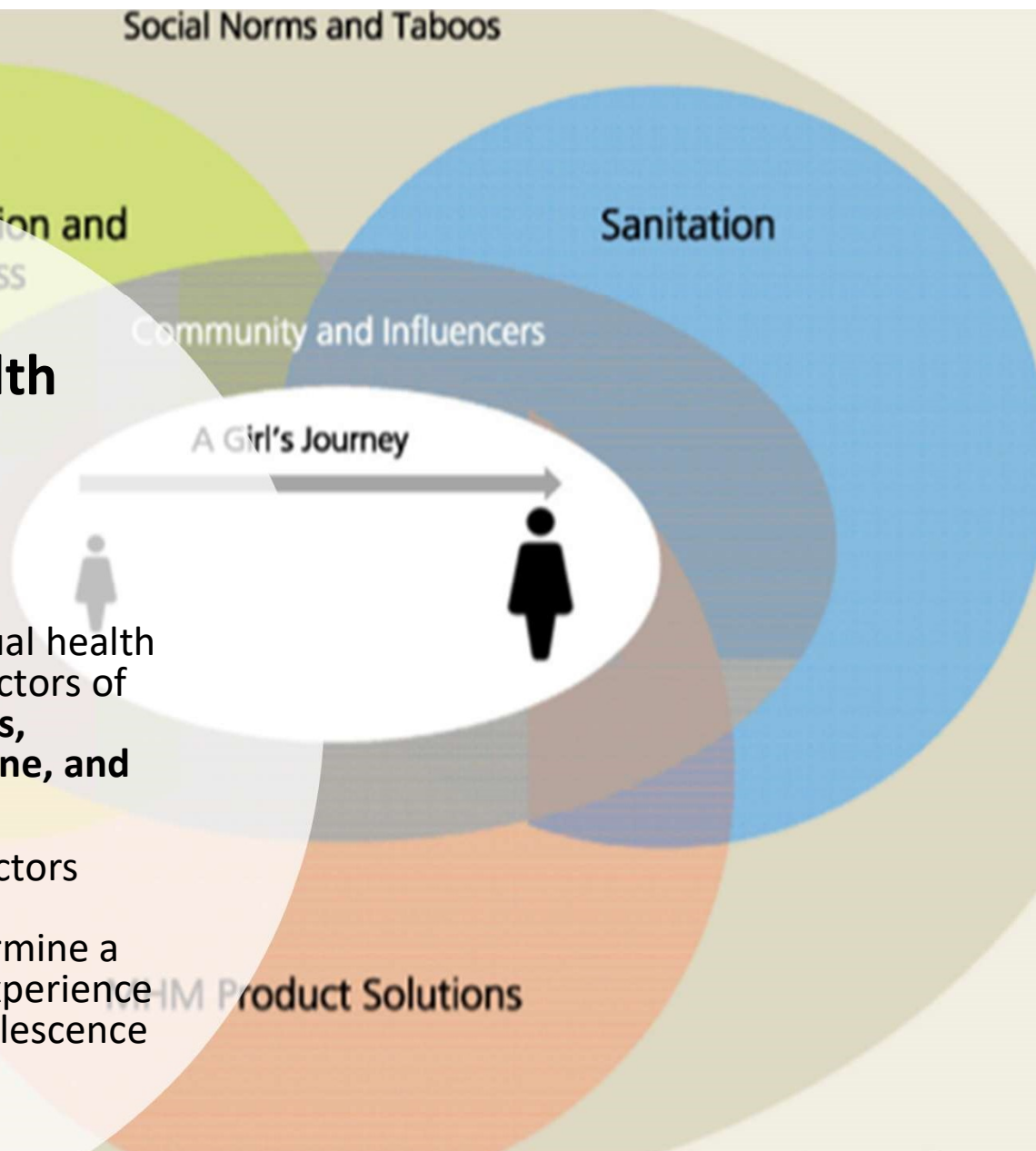


WaterAid

- The WaterAid publication '**Menstrual Hygiene Matters**' was established in 2012.
- WaterAid pooled together development practitioners and researchers with expertise ranging from **water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to gender and education** to develop a resource for improving menstrual hygiene across the world
- Encompasses resources **not only for improved sanitation and hygiene facilities** in developing countries, but in overcoming the foundations of **menstrual stigma through community-based participation and education**

FSG Menstrual Health Framework

- FSG's framework for menstrual health intervention encompasses factors of **policy, research, social norms, awareness, sanitation, hygiene, and community players**
- Demonstrates the scale of factors must be addressed within development efforts to determine a girl's healthy and dignified experience of menstruation through adolescence to adulthood



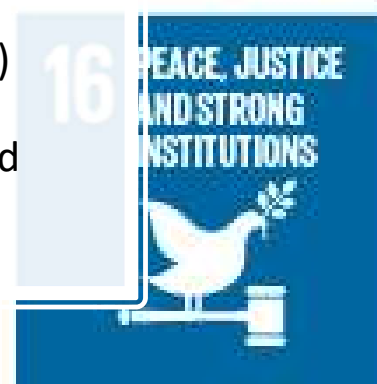
Relevance to SDG's

- **SDG 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”**, encompassing targets to end all forms of discrimination against women (5.1); eliminate harmful practices (5.3); and ensure full participation of women in public life (5.5)

Gender equality cannot be achieved where menstrual stigma, superstitions and taboos continue to oppress women and girls through discriminatory practices harmful to their well-being and ultimately preventing them from full participation in society (UNICEF, 2019)

- **SDG 3 “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”**, includes a specific target to “ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care service” (3.7) (United Nations, 2020).

Inadequate knowledge of puberty and menstruation may lead to unwanted adolescent pregnancy and unhygienic practices



Relevance to SDG's

- **SDG 4 “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”,**

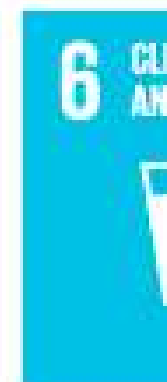
Lack of adequate sanitation facilities in schools has significantly impacted school attendance and educational attainment for girls

Girls in developing countries largely lack knowledge and understanding of the process of menstruation.

A study in South Asia found that 35% of respondents had no knowledge of menstruation before experiencing their first period (Dasgupta & Sarkar, 2008)

- **SDG 6 “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”; with target to pay “special attention to the needs of women and girls” (United Nations, 2020).**

A UNICEF study found that more than 50% of schools in developing countries do not have sufficient toilet facilities for schoolgirls or female teachers (UNICEF, 2012).



Relevance to SDG's

- **SDG 8 “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.**

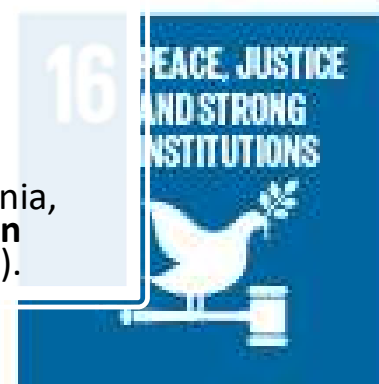
Similarly to school-attendance, lack of adequate sanitation facilities hinder women's **ability to attend work** throughout their menstrual period (UNICEF, 2019)

A study analysing the economic impacts of sanitation facilities in Southeast Asia found that lack of adequate sanitation facilities **could result in 13.8 million workday absences in the Philippines annually, resulting in an economic loss of US\$13 million per year** (World Bank, 2008).

- **SDG 12 “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”**

UNICEF argues that a **failure to build markets for sustainable and affordable sanitary products** for women and girls in developing countries **impacts ability to consume sustainably** (UNICEF, 2019)

For example, in a study analysing sustainable menstrual hygiene management in Zimbabwe, South-Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania, **over 70% of girls reported that high cost was the predominant reason for not availing of commercial sanitary products** (Tamiru, et al., 2015).



Conclusion

- Menstruation requires significant attention from the development sector in **efforts to advance the status of women and girls** in the Global South
- Absence of menstruation from the Sustainable Development Agenda ultimately serves to **enforce the consensus of menstruation as a subject of 'taboo'**
- Extending beyond sanitation and hygiene, the implementation of **holistic, community-based programmes that encompass broader systemic factors of human rights, well-being and education** are required
- Critical not only to the SDG's, but in ultimately **breaking the deeply-rooted menstrual stigma that continues to harm millions of women and girls across the world every day**

