

Breaking the Silence about Menstrual Hygiene Management

Menstrual Hygiene and human rights.



Ladies and gentlemen,

I am a forty five-year-old woman. I menstruate. All my adult life, and a few years of my childhood, I have been menstruating. I expect I will continue to menstruate for a good few years yet.

I am fortunate. I have the facilities in my home, at my work, even here at this conference centre, where I can manage my menstruation hygienically, in comfort, in privacy, with dignity. Although, I confess, I do not feel free to talk about my periods, there is no threat to my person, no limitations set on my activities. No-one tells me how to behave, where to go, what to do.

This is not the case for a significant proportion of the female population of the world. Menstruation is truly the last taboo, stronger even than the taboo against talking about defecation. There is in almost every culture, shame, disgust and stigma attached to menstruation. It is no surprise that this stigma should be attached to women, half of the population and yet discriminated against in many aspects of their lives. There is a joke that says that if men were to menstruate, they would boast about the length of the period, the amount of blood, they would compete for suffering the worst pain. Women, at best we suffer in silence, at worst we are subjected to stigmatization and discrimination.

The impact of the lack of attention to menstrual hygiene management is a concern for all those who work on issues of water and sanitation. But it goes beyond this. The way monthly menstruation is dealt with – or not dealt with – stops girls from attending school. According to UNICEF one in 10 African girls skip school during menstruation. Some drop out entirely because they lack access to sanitary products.

On my missions to various countries as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, I always visited schools.

Girls in a school I visited in Dakar, Senegal, explained to me how they had to leave school for 5 days when they started their monthly period. In Tuvalu, a Pacific Small Island State, a mother explained to me that either she had the money to buy her daughter sanitary napkins or pay the school bus for her to attend school – which meant she would not attend school 5 days a month. These and other stories are clear evidences that lack of adequate menstrual hygiene management can and does violate the human right to education.

But it's not just girls' education that suffers during menstruation, but overall health. For instance, 70% of all reproductive diseases in India are caused by poor menstrual hygiene – it can also affect maternal mortality. In urban India, 43%-88% of girls use reusable cloths during menstruation, yet these are often washed without soap or clean water. In another study, 73% of Bangladeshi garment workers interviewed missed work for an average of 6 days per month due to vaginal infections caused by unsanitary menstrual hygiene management. They were not paid

for those days they didn't work – so menstrual hygiene affects health and the ability to earn a living.

And consider the way different cultures place constraints on women and girls during menstruation. In countries like Nepal the practice of chappaudi determines that women are considered 'impure' during their menstruation cycle, and are subsequently separated from others in many spheres of normal, daily life. The tradition is that women cannot enter inside houses, kitchens and temples. They also can't touch other persons, cattle, green vegetables and plants, or fruits. Similarly, women practicing chappaudi cannot milk buffalos or cows, and are not allowed to drink milk or eat milk products. Generally, women stay in a separate hut or cattle shed for 5 days during menstruation. However, those experiencing menstruation for the first time should, according to practice, remain in such a shed for at least 14 days. Access to water taps and wells is also limited. These practices are clear cases of discrimination against women and violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women.

This is why I felt it was important to come here today to help break the taboo and to support those like yourselves who are making sure that menstrual hygiene management receives the attention it deserves.

We must put menstrual hygiene management on the table, discuss it in different fora – including human rights fora – and break the taboo. Unless menstrual hygiene management is addressed, the rights to water and sanitation, and other related rights, cannot be realized. Partnerships like the one I represent, Sanitation and Water for All, are implementing exactly this vision. We are bringing issues related to WASH to the highest-political level nationally and globally, without taboos. From ministers of finance to the UN Secretary General, from MHM to open defecation, we want to make sure we are all talking about what really matters.