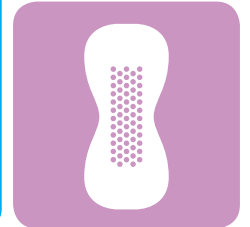


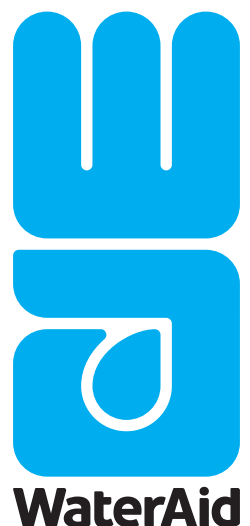
A holistic approach to menstrual health through access to WASH



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Summary

Menstrual health is a key component for a more equal society. When good gender-responsive water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is missing from schools and workplaces, people who menstruate are not able to manage their menstruation safely and hygienically during the day. This leads to girls leaving school when their menstruation starts and women having difficulties working during their menstruation. Thus, affecting women's and girls' education and participation in the labour market. Investments in WASH would therefore not only have a positive effect on the health and well-being of people who menstruate but also benefit the society at large as well as countries economy. By investing in safe access to WASH, access to menstrual products, and education around menstruation we would be able to reach SDGs 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8.

Menstrual health, a prerequisite for gender equality

Menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, concerning the menstrual cycle. This holistic definition aligns with the WHO definition of 'Health' and was developed by the Global Menstrual Health Collective in May 2021. The definition is now commonly used by global actors like the Joint Monitoring Programme (UNICEF and WHO). There has been a shift and menstruation are now seen as a health issue whereas before it was usually framed as more of a hygiene issue.

Menstrual health is a largely overlooked aspect of development cooperation and is a critical pathway for gender equality and female empowerment through integrating WASH, health, and education interventions. There has been an increased interest and progress in menstrual health over the last few years. However, the funding for menstrual health does not yet match the needs of millions of women, girls, and transgender or gender nonconforming people, worldwide who face restrictions and discrimination when menstruating.

In 2022 it was estimated that about 500 million women and girls globally face constraints in their needs to manage their menstruation well,

which is almost one-fourth of the global female population of reproductive age.¹

Improved menstrual health can positively impact several aspects of life, such as participation in education and work, empowerment, health, and mental health.

When good gender-responsive water and sanitation are missing from schools and workplaces, people who menstruate are not able to manage their menstruation safely and hygienically during the day. This usually leads to girls leaving school when their menstruation starts and women having difficulties working during their menstruation. The World Bank estimates that each additional year of schooling raises earnings by 8-10 percent later in life.² So, by leaving school when their menstruation starts, girls will most likely earn less throughout their lives.

Good menstrual health across the life cycle also requires that people have the knowledge and social support so they can understand their bodies, identify symptoms, and make informed choices about how to take care of themselves throughout the menstrual cycle and access health services if required.

¹ Making the case for investing in Menstrual Health and Hygiene (2021)

² A crisis in learning: 9 charts from the 2018 World Development Report (2017)

Menstrual health and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Investing in menstrual health will impact the following SDGs:

SDG 3: The right to health

People who menstruate may experience negative health consequences when they lack the supplies and facilities to manage their menstrual health. Menstrual stigma and poor menstrual health literacy can also prevent individuals from seeking treatment for menstrual-related disorders or pain, adversely affecting their enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and well-being. By investing in menstrual health and access to safe WASH, we would be able to reach parts of SDG 3.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



SDG 6: The right to water and sanitation

Water and sanitation facilities that are private, safe, and culturally acceptable, along with a sufficient, safe, and affordable water supply are basic prerequisites for managing menstruation.

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



SDG 4: The right to education

Lack of a safe place or ability to manage menstrual hygiene as well as lack of medication to treat menstrual-related pain can contribute to higher rates of school absenteeism and poor educational outcomes. By investing in menstrual health and access to safe WASH, we would be able to reach parts of SDG 4, and more girls would have the chance to attend school.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



SDG 8: The right to work

It is estimated that between 50-90 percent of girls in school suffer from menstrual pain. Access to WASH, menstrual products, and medication to treat menstrual pain enables individuals to work during their period which would strengthen their economic empowerment as well as the economy of the country. By investing in menstrual health, safe access to WASH, and education on menstrual health women would have a better opportunity to work and thereby reach part of SDG 8.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

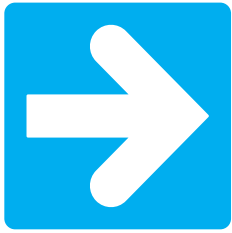


SDG 5: The right to non-discrimination and gender equality

Stigma and norms related to menstruation can reinforce discriminatory practices and structures. Menstruation-related barriers to school, work, health services, and public activities also perpetuate gender inequalities. By investing in education around menstrual health we would be able to reach parts of SDG 5, increase gender equality and reduce stigma and harmful gender norms.

5 GENDER EQUALITY





Policy recommendations/way forward

A holistic approach to menstrual health can be designed to support girls so they can stay in school throughout menstruating and promote body integrity, as well as enable women to work while menstruating. This approach includes several interventions such as gender-responsive WASH facilities, education and information about menstruation, and improved access to good menstrual products. The work should not only focus on women, girls, and people who menstruate but also has to include education on negative social norms and discriminatory beliefs among men, boys, family members, school staff, employers, and government policymakers. When this is provided at schools and workplaces, absenteeism is reduced.

Interventions at the workplace, such as access to WASH, menstrual products, and information, have also been shown to increase attendance and participation in economic activities.³

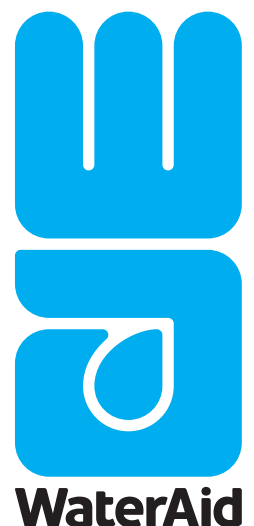
When individuals are not discriminated against because of their menstrual needs, they can attend school for a longer period, participate in the workforce more effectively, and contribute to their communities in more productive ways, all of which are essential to reduce poverty.

For example, when girls stay in school, they are less likely to become victims of child marriage or to have children early in life. When extending education, girls also tend to have fewer children, and their families become healthier, wealthier, and better educated.

Investment in gender-responsive WASH and menstrual health is not only crucial to create a more gender-equal society, but it is also crucial to increase economic growth in countries and empower women and girls.



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³ Making the case for investing in Menstrual Health and Hygiene (2021)