

# The case for menstrual health

PATH works to build awareness, commitment, and access to improved menstrual care

Menstruation is a natural and routine part of life for healthy girls and women, but in many parts of the world, it is accompanied by shame and fear. Cultural taboos about menstruation and perceptions that women are unclean when they have their periods are barriers to open discussion and societal support. Without education from parents and teachers, girls often begin menarche in isolation, without any understanding of what is happening to their bodies.

In many low-resource settings, this culture of silence is compounded by limited resources to help women manage their periods. Insufficient attention to menstrual care within gender and reproductive health education, a lack of access to affordable and appropriate menstrual care products, and an absence of appropriate sanitation and waste disposal systems limit women's potential and perpetuate gender inequalities.

Fortunately, there is a growing global movement to address these gaps. With increased support, these efforts have the potential to unlock tremendous health and opportunity for girls, women, and communities around the globe.

## THE GLOBAL COST OF POOR MENSTRUAL HEALTH

Poor menstrual health exacts a tremendous human and financial toll. A growing body of global research links menstruation with school absenteeism,<sup>1-3</sup> engagement in transactional sex for money to buy sanitary pads,<sup>4</sup> and lost workplace productivity.<sup>5</sup> Menstrual care also presents unique challenges for women in humanitarian and fragile contexts and among women with disabilities.

Studies in Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda, Lebanon, and elsewhere point to a positive association between the challenges of managing menstruation and girls' performance and attendance in school. Research in Ghana<sup>3</sup> showed that puberty education, coupled with provision of menstrual pads, significantly increased school attendance among girls between 12 and 18 years old. Recognizing that some research has also shown a weak association with school attendance, new studies also measure additional indicators, such as self-esteem, comfort, and classroom participation. Investment in further research is needed.

Not surprisingly, there are also indications that menses-related absenteeism in the workplace leads to lost wages for women and lower productivity for businesses. A qualitative study in Pakistan revealed that female garment factory



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workers missed up to three days of work each month during their periods as a result of infections, embarrassment, and pain.<sup>5</sup> Here too, research is needed to inform workplace policies and interventions.

In addition, because sanitary napkins are prohibitively expensive in many low-resource settings, some women are reduced to using unhygienic alternatives, such as old rags, strips of mattress, leaves, or soil. Among other health concerns, emerging evidence suggests that these practices and poor menstrual hygiene, may be linked to bacterial vaginosis, which affects thousands of women in low-resource settings.<sup>6</sup> The infection raises their risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; miscarriage; preterm labor; and other negative health outcomes.

## INCREASING MOMENTUM

Recognizing these costs, leaders, experts, and communities worldwide are joining a growing movement to address and improve menstrual health. In South Africa, Kenya, and India, national governments have committed to subsidizing sanitary pads for low-income girls and women in rural areas. Increasing numbers of entrepreneurs—many of them women—are developing affordable and appealing menstrual care products. In addition, innovative technologies such as the menstrual cup are providing women with new options.

At the same time, many menstrual care products are still not available through mainstream markets, and prices remain too high for many of the low-income women who would benefit the most. There is also considerable need for educational curricula that can be adapted for different contexts and age groups; improved WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) services; waste disposal approaches

that allow women to manage menstruation safely and with dignity; better research about how menstruation affects women's health and development; and increased awareness and advocacy. Meeting these needs will require innovative cross-sector partnerships to advance effective and sustainable solutions.

#### PATH'S VISION FOR MENSTRUAL HEALTH

PATH, a leading international nonprofit health organization, is deeply invested in improving menstrual health for women worldwide. Our multidimensional approach includes increasing access to affordable, effective, and appealing menstrual care products; increasing education and awareness; and advocating for further investment. These efforts draw on our organizational expertise in user-centered product development, market shaping, behavior change, advocacy, and implementation science, and on long-standing relationships with governments and communities. Examples include:

**Improving data.** In India and South Africa, PATH modeled the impact of disposable pads on sanitation and waste systems and engaged stakeholders to determine how to improve these facilities for women. As part of this project, we gave women disposable cameras and asked them to document how they managed their periods—easing communication about a sometimes sensitive topic.

**Menstrual cup research.** Our global landscaping efforts explored the use and acceptability of this newer option, and identified possible design adjustments to increase its reach.

**Building a “better” pad.** We seek out products that are appropriate, affordable, and acceptable to girls and women, develop new concepts where we see a gap, and look for partners interested in advancing them. For example, we are exploring a reusable and leak-resistant base, worn as underwear, that can be used with a variety of locally available absorbent materials. We have field-tested the pad in Cambodia and India and conducted qualitative research among adolescents in Rwanda, Kenya, India, and South Africa. We've also tested both existing and potential low-cost materials (such as agricultural byproducts) for safe use in pads.

**Spotlighting menstrual health.** Through advocacy and awareness raising, we are ending the silence around menstruation and spotlighting solutions that help girls and women to manage their periods. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, India, our short video, developed with girls and

women in the community,<sup>7</sup> led community health volunteers to begin selling pads. And in India and Kenya, our Menstrual Hygiene Day activities broke through taboos and sparked critical new discussion.

*“I had my first period at school. My teacher said that I must tell them at home and do not come to school the following day. I sat and did not go to school for the whole week...” —PATH study participant, South Africa, 2012*

#### NEXT STEPS

Now, PATH is working to expand and accelerate our work. Key focus areas include:

- Identifying and validating innovative new menstrual health products for women in low-resource settings.
- Developing and implementing a strategy to test market introduction of new products.
- Expanding access through local and global markets.
- Shaping a research agenda and contributing evidence on the impact of improved access to information and products on women's health and development.
- Integrating menstrual health programming into country-level reproductive health, WASH, maternal, newborn, and child health, and gender platforms.
- Building awareness of and commitment to effective programming and policies.

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PATH is the leader in global health innovation. An international nonprofit organization, we save lives and improve health, especially among women and children. We accelerate innovation across five platforms—vaccines, drugs, diagnostics, devices, and system and service innovations—that harness our entrepreneurial insight, scientific and public health expertise, and passion for health equity. By mobilizing partners around the world, we take innovation to scale, working alongside countries primarily in Africa and Asia to tackle their greatest health needs. Together, we deliver measurable results that disrupt the cycle of poor health. Learn more at [www.path.org](http://www.path.org).

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