

An illustration of a woman's hands resting on her belly. She is wearing a white top with a red polka-dot pattern and white shorts with a blue heart pattern. The background is a vibrant red with various patterns, including white polka dots and white daisy-like flowers. The overall style is bright and colorful.

Re-educating society about menstruation
through youth work!

Impacts of coronavirus pandemic on menstruators

The benefits of menstrual health literacy in times of crisis.

EU's 10-year economic-growth strategy stresses enough that health policies that keep people informed, healthy, and active are crucial for a smart and inclusive growth as they have positive impact on productivity and competitiveness. That is, health and education are closely linked and influence other parameters such as poverty, income level, etc. That is, education is a strategy to contribute to improvement of society health, literacy, and well-being that help people be more autonomous and responsible for their health.

Through Period Empowerment Network project, consultations with young people and youth workers showed that, despite its immense benefits, menstrual health and hygiene literacy remains a challenge for the global public health. That is, a big portion of the global population of menstruators faces difficulties and frustrations in understanding, accessing, or using menstrual hygiene facilities and information to manage their periods in normal times.

Considering the current global crisis as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, one of the main challenges has been to fight the pandemic and contain the virus, which imposes restriction on menstruators. In such times, a basic menstrual health literacy can affect the outcomes of an outbreak on menstruators in multiple ways. However, non-existent menstrual health policy and literacy in the health system and a lack of public debate that promotes menstrual hygiene, represent a challenge for menstruators and health workers worldwide.

As a human and citizenship right, menstrual health literacy is not only about addressing inappropriate menstrual myths, stigma and taboos, or accessing menstrual hygiene facilities and information for safe, dignified menstrual hygiene management, or increasing the knowledge, attitudes and self-management capacity of menstrual hygiene, it is also about the sense of competence and freedom of menstruators regardless of gender, or sexual identity to equally participate in public health debate and all other aspects of life.

Thus, investing in health through a life-course approach, by empowering citizens and strengthening people-centred health systems and increasing public health capacity require a holistic vision that encompasses a global approach to each person in their different dimensions in constant interaction with their environment. As such, menstrual health literacy should be a holistic process, which aims at creating the supportive society and resilient communities, to increase the menstrual health knowledge and skills of a person or group, by seeking to develop an internal introspection that allows the person to adopt menstrual healthy attitude and behaviour that respect their lifestyle, or belief.

Therefore, educating for menstrual health and hygiene involves the improvement of the basic menstrual health and hygiene knowledge that leads to the development of attitudes and behaviours that promote inclusive menstrual healthy lifestyles, creating favourable conditions and systemic health policies for each person to safely manage their periods and at the same time, reduce the impacts of an outbreak on menstruators ability to manage their periods and health. Especially, those in the poorest and most vulnerable communities to economic and disasters, where millions of menstruators across the world cannot manage their monthly cycle in a safe, dignified, and healthy way.

The Period Empowerment Network project has also stressed how gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty, and lack of basic menstrual knowledge, and services cause menstrual health and hygiene needs to go unmet. During the current global crisis, these deprivations have intensified; causing far more reaching negative impacts on the lives of those who menstruate as a result of restricted mobility, freedom, and choices, and reduced participation in school, work, and community life, which have compromised safety and caused stress and anxiety as the coronavirus pandemic has upended the way we use to work, live, connect with others, and/or carry out daily activities.



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Challenges faced by menstruators during covid-19.

The main impact of coronavirus pandemic on menstruators has been the real stress associated with the outbreak, as experiencing a lot of anxiety can have a major impact on the menstrual cycle. Stress hormones can react with the regular hormonal cycle and misguide the body; that is, menstruation can occur early, late, or not at all. The most common form of a disrupted menstrual cycle is missed or delayed periods as the body is adapting to protect itself.

The coronavirus pandemic has put the entire world in a state of perceived stress, thus, the menstruator's body system prioritises safety over ovulation. That is, a menstrual cycle requires a delicate chain of events for the right hormones to be created at the right time, and stress can disrupt that and may cause the body to decide that it's not a good time to ovulate or have a period.

Even though yet, the medical community does not have enough information about how coronavirus affects other organ systems in our body, the physical and mental stress it places on the body could have downstream effects on the regularity of a menstrual cycle. Periods are influenced by our diet, sleep, exercise routines and more. During time of physical distancing, many menstruators might be experiencing a dramatic change in their usual routine. As a result, they might notice a missed period, spotting, or even a heavier flow than usual, or forget about their birth control that can also disrupt the cycle.

Though not all menstruators suffer the consequences in the same way, the main question is: when should a menstruator know that it is time to talk to a gynaecologist? That is, if there are no improvements after a couple months to regulate and adjust to new routine and changes in the cycle. If the bleeding is longer, excessive, or experiencing clotting, spotting, bleeding in between periods, or pelvic pain, this needs to be brought to a gynaecologist to know what is going on.

It is always worth checking in if one is concerned. A gynaecologist is in the position to provide guidance on what a menstruator can do in such circumstances, tailored to them, their issues and health history, so they can get back on track.

However, it should be noted that there are other possible reasons for missed, or changed periods. There are a number of non-coronavirus related reasons, or triggers that could cause a person to miss a period:

- **Birth control pills:** some birth control pills, such as the progesterone-only "mini pill," can cause irregular bleeding.
- **IUDs:** IUDs may cause spotting, irregular bleeding or missed periods. An intrauterine device (IUD) is a physical contraceptive that sits inside the uterus. IUDs are a highly effective, long term form of birth control.
- **Thyroid disorder:** thyroid can help control your period. An issue with this function can cause either excessive bleeding, irregular bleeding, scant or absent bleeding.
- **PCOS:** Polycystic ovarian syndrome, a hormonal disorder, can cause menstrual irregularity and missed periods.
- **Endometriosis:** A condition that causes extreme painful periods, and can also result in abnormal periods and irregularity.

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Mitigating impacts of coronavirus pandemic among the health workers.

Overworked and exhausted, health workers: doctors and nurses fighting the coronavirus pandemic across the world face a daunting task, caring for a big number of patients while risking infection due to a shortage of protective gear. Considering that most of the global health workforce are menstruators who face additional challenges in managing their periods, which compromises not only their health and dignity, but also the ability of the health system to deliver.

More than half of the global frontline health workers are neglected; struggling to access menstrual products, and battling with the not fitting equipment, in addition to the stress of avoiding to eat or drink during long shifts, to minimise bathroom breaks so that they make the most of their masks, suits, and goggles.



WEAR
A PROTECTIVE MASK



WASH HANDS
FREQUENTLY



USE PROTECTIVE SUITS



ISOLATE PATIENT



PROTECT YOUR FACE



DISINFECT
MEDICAL EQUIPMENT



USE GLOVES



DISINFECT SURFACES

Challenges	Mitigation measures
The facility managers are not aware of or do not prioritise MHH needs of menstruating health care workers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document and raise awareness of needs to facilities' managers and health departments.
The lack of documented contextual evidence of MHH experiences and challenges of menstruators in health care settings, which may differ from context to context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formative research with health care workers to understand menstruators experiences and needs during an outbreak.
Lack of menstrual hygiene materials for healthcare workers provided by the state's health system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider menstrual hygiene materials as essential supplies for menstruating health care workers and procure in sufficient quantity. E.g., disposable pads or tampons, and reusable material that require washing facilities.
Long shifts without enough time for putting on and removing Personal Protective Equipment prevent a safe and proper MHM, which might lead a menstruator to bleed into their PPE.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to sufficient quantity of PPE that would allow menstruator to take breaks at least every 4 hours to change menstrual materials, particularly where tampons are used to avoid the risk of toxic shock syndrome. If pads are used, consider high absorbency pads that are safe to be changed less frequently, as long as they are accepted by menstruators.
Lack of access to WASH facilities at hospitals, other health care facilities, prevents those menstruating from managing their menstrual hygiene while at work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to WASH facilities and services, and that they are menstruator-friendly and inclusive of people with disabilities; and that the disposal systems for menstrual waste are in place.
Pain during menstruation may make it challenging for a menstruator to work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider providing pain killers to manage menstrual pain. Provide adequate breaks, hydration, and provisions for rest throughout the workday.
The infected menstruators who are hospitalised, or in quarantine centres for coronavirus may lack access to WASH and MHM supplies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide menstrual materials and painkillers at health care centres and quarantine centres. Support WASH in health care centres and quarantine centres for the patient to access facilities for menstrual hygiene. Train caretakers on how to assist a menstruator with personal hygiene including menstrual hygiene.

Mitigating the impacts of coronavirus pandemic in the broader community.

The global population has been affected in different way; directly when they are quarantined, when WASH services are disrupted, or more indirectly when the response results in a lock down affecting households' livelihood. Indeed, the lock down resulted in severe disruption of basic services, and reduced capacity for menstruators to access menstrual hygiene products, or WASH services. Since MHM requires a regular access to services and relevant supplies, it is not certain how country-based health policy ensured that the most socially and economically fragile population continues to access those services during the lock down.

Thus, menstruators in the broader community face increased challenges accessing services, resources and information that are critical to menstrual health and hygiene.



Challenges	Mitigation measures
Gaps in provision of water and sanitation service, such as disruption of safe water supply or lack of sewerage system maintenance, or due to the increased costs driven by scarcity of supply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support through direct or indirect mechanisms to ensure access to water and hygiene materials. • in-kind distribution to vulnerable population identified might be needed (distribution hygiene and cleaning kits, water distribution etc.
Persons with confirmed or suspected of coronavirus in quarantined, or isolated at home may lack access to water supply, on site sanitation, handwashing facilities, soap, and menstrual hygiene supplies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support continuity of WASH services in the homes, or regular deliveries of essential WASH supplies. • Include menstrual materials in distributions of food or non-food items to persons in home quarantine.
Disrupted access to menstrual hygiene materials, particularly disposable menstrual hygiene materials that require monthly replenishment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that sanitary pads are deemed essential commodities, removing barriers to manufacturing and supply. • Discourage panic buying and hoarding. Encourage limited purchase of disposable materials to safeguard one's own access while respecting the needs of others. • Where washing is possible, consider promoting reusable materials as an alternative, such as a menstrual cup.
This may be due to stock-out or increased price as a result of panic buying, supply chain disruptions due to stay-at-home orders or increased demand due to needs to keep extra essential supplies on hand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • washable pads, or absorbent underwear. Promote do-it-yourself designs and instructions for safe reuse and disposal via networks or digital platforms. • Advocate for the removal of taxes from menstrual hygiene materials.
In settings where the poorest population commonly use disposable materials, financial stress may lead to families to prioritise other needs such as food or essential utility bills over purchasing menstrual hygiene materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that menstrual health and hygiene information is included is standard in health services and make provisions for these services to be continued. • Consider the use of alternatives to communicational channel such as social media, radio, or messaging services to spread menstrual health information.
Limited access to critical information related to menstrual health and hygiene due to disruption in the health services routine, and the shutdown of schools, youth organisations, clubs, or centres, and low levels of literacy in some settings, particularly among the most vulnerable adolescents.	



P.E.N
Period Empowerment Network

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