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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 May 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



Addressing Menstrual Hygiene Insecurity (MHI) as a preventable barrier to women and girls' education worldwide and the importance of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Right now, 800 million women around the world are menstruating (1), with many trying to hide the evidence of bleeding or struggling to find and afford sanitary supplies and adequate sanitation. Nearly 83% of women feel their periods stop them from participating fully in activities, and 70% say they have missed work or school because of their periods (2). Secrecy, shame, stigma, and cost burden women who menstruate, reduce education opportunities, and economic stability in many cases.

Graduate Women International (GWI) notes with anticipation Human Rights Council (Council) resolution (A/HRC/47/L.2) adopted on 12 July 2021, on MHM, human rights and gender equality. The resolution calls upon States to ensure that women and girls have access to adequate facilities, information, and products for optimal and effective MHM, including by taking measures to, inter alia, ensure that women and girls, including in particular those in vulnerable situations, have equitable access to affordable, safe and clean water, adequate sanitation, hygiene and washing facilities with soap, including a choice of menstrual hygiene products.(3)

Nevertheless, MHI creates considerable barriers across the world for women of menstruation age inter alia, access to sanitation and period products, shame and taboo association with menstruation, cost and concerning reduced education. The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified these problems.

Some 1.2 billion girls and women across the world lack access to the basic sanitation necessary by the natural process of menstruation. Globally, 2.3 billion people lack basic sanitation services and in Least Developed Countries only 27 per cent of the population has a handwashing facility with water and soap at home. Managing periods at home is a major challenge for women and adolescent girls who lack these basic facilities at home.(4)

Lack of access to period products frequently occurs due to financial barriers. Prices of period products can put these vital supplies out of reach for many people in both developing and developed countries. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, women are forced to turn to the black market for period products because extreme hyperinflation has increased the price of tampons by 1800%. (5)

GWI recognises the strong global leaders who are emerging in the fight against period poverty. In 2020, Scotland became the first country to make period products universally free. (6) The Scottish government is leading the effort to fight period poverty and inspire other countries around the world to follow suit.

With this statement, GWI also draws attention to the issue of MHI and menstrual stigmatisation as significant barriers to girls' and women's safe access to education. The first period can be met with either celebration, fear, or concern. For every young woman, this signifies an important transition to womanhood.

Disconcertingly, however, periods are all too often a matter of shame and embarrassment for millions of girls and women around the world and a major impediment to their successful completion of secondary and tertiary education and professional advancement. Stigma and shame often shroud menstruation globally and societies around the world cultures of harmful ideas and beliefs about menstruation. Such cultural myths often portray women and girls as inferior to men and boys, thus promoting gender discrimination, inequality, patriarchal practices and causing reduced education opportunity and advancement due to dropping out.

GWI emphasizes that access to education is both an internationally recognised human right, as well as a fundamental enabler to achieve economic growth, human development, and peace and stability. GWI also notes that education is a prevailing means of empowerment for women and girls around the world. Consequently, the barriers preventing women and girls from fulfilling their right to education and thus becoming independent and valuable members

of society must be acknowledged and fully eliminated; this includes addressing MHI by all United Nations member states.

Global respect and action on MHM is also a crucial component for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and especially Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all (at all ages); SDG4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education; SDG5 achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and SDG6 ensuring access to clean water and sanitation for all, and SDG 10 aimed to reduce inequalities.

While the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on MHM and MHI are not yet fully known, the morbidity and stress from contracting or caring for those with COVID-19 can impact menstruation and one's ability to safely manage it (7). The COVID-19 pandemic changed how women manage their periods. Period poverty, including the lack of access to menstrual products, menstrual education, toilets, and hand washing facilities, intensified when lockdowns and economic changes hit countries. Low-and-middle income countries were especially affected, yet many communities in higher-income nations were also impacted. (8)

GWJ calls on States to recognise the right to adequate menstrual hygiene management as a human right and to enable girls to stay in school by ensuring access to hygienic menstrual products, adequate toilets, water and disposal options. Further, GWJ calls on States to mindfully consider the negative impacts of COVID-19 on MHI and MHM.

GWJ, through its global network of National Federations and Associates, aims to be the vehicle for change in collaboration with the United Nations governments, public, and private sectors on the growing problem of MHM and MHI and to work towards the elimination of MHI as one of the most critical barrier to women and girls education.

Recommendations to the 50th session of the Council

Bearing in mind that MHI, menstrual stigmatisation and the lack of access to MHM severely infringe the ability of millions of women and girls across the world to fulfill their right to education, GWJ makes the following recommendations to

States

Develop and fund programs aimed to break down taboos and build positive social norms and perception on menstruation and train community leaders to organize these programs.

Collaborate with NGOs who work on MHM; utilize NGO expertise as a means to break taboos and decrease MHI.

Encourage communities to identify both male and female role models who will speak out positively about menstruation.

Include MHM as a critical component of reproductive and sexual health and teach in language for which teens are comfortable.

Widely dispense information related to sexual health and MHM to young men and women alike at an appropriate age as part of school curricula; utilize local information channels to continue distribution into adulthood.

Enable teachers at all levels to teach and speak about menstruation with comfort.

Ensure access to free sanitary products and adequate toilet facilities in every school as a means to improve girls' and female teachers' school attendance.

Encourage policies that promote safe and affordable options for menstrual products.

1. <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/generation-2030/the-cost-of-a-period-the-sdgs-and-period-poverty/>
2. <https://www.citronhygiene.com/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-menstrual-hygiene/>
3. <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/generation-2030/the-cost-of-a-period-the-sdgs-and-period-poverty/>
4. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>
5. <https://www.citronhygiene.com/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-menstrual-hygiene/>
6. <https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/period-products-free-provision-scotland-bill>
7. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/period-equity-what-is-it-why-does-it-matter-202106012473>
8. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/how-pandemic-changed-attitudes-about-menstrual-health-india>