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Statement submitted by Mothers Legacy Project, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

With the ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is clear that the world is ready to turn the page on gender inequality. We are ready for change. We are ready to live in a world where people of all genders are able to actively participate in their social, political, public and private community spaces. But this is a broad goal, and the road there will not always be easy or straightforward. Because in reality, Gender Equality is about much more than “Goal #5.” Gender equality is a cross cutting issue that will require partnerships, collaboration, and cooperation across and between sectors. Menstrual hygiene management has the power to tie together many different sectors — water, sanitation, hygiene, education, public health, economic empowerment — because it is one of the most basic activities undertaken by all women around the world, and it has a tangible, simple solution.

Days for Girls is committed to reaching Goal #5 by reducing health, social, and environmental vulnerabilities at this most basic level of human development: the menstrual cycle. While this may look like a niche topic or a trendy issue, the fact is that menstruation is a part of the most formative period of a girls’ development, and one of the longest running health events of a woman’s life. In all parts of the world, menstruation signals the beginning of puberty and the major physical and emotional changes that an adolescent girl will go through. Unfortunately in many parts of the world, these changes in turn signal the onslaught of myths, taboos, and cultural practices and perceptions that contribute to the marginalization, exploitation, and discrimination of girls (Sumpter C, Torondel B. “A Systematic Review of the Health and Social Effects of Menstrual Hygiene Management.” PLOS One, DOI 10.1371. April 26, 2013).

Without appropriate education and behaviour change interventions, girls, boys, and parents are left unprepared to tackle the changes that menstruation brings. In Nepal, 89 per cent of women practice some form of social exclusion during menstruation, due to myths about the cleanliness of menstrual blood (Mahon T, Fernandes M. “Menstrual Hygiene in South Asia: A Neglected Issue for WASH Programmes.” *Gender & Development*, Vol. 18, No. 1. March 2010. P. 103). In Uganda, 6 out of 10 girls miss school each month due to menstruation, including lack of menstrual hygiene products and inadequate facilities at their schools (“Study on Menstrual Management in Uganda”. SNV & IRC. August 30, 2013. P. 4).

Furthermore, without access to affordable and culturally appropriate products, girls and women are unable to practice proper hygiene, leaving them at an increased risk of urogenital infections and discomfort, in addition to emotionally stressful experiences stemming from leaks and stains. A 2015 study from India found a statistically significant relationship between inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities and products and urogenital disease among women (Das P, Baker KK, et al. “Menstrual Hygiene Practices, WASH Access and the Risk of Urogenital Infection in Women from Odisha, India.” PLOS One, DOI 10.1371. June 30, 2015).

While there has been a surge in the level of interest surrounding menstrual hygiene — ranging from news coverage to trending tweets to emerging non-profit and for-profit initiatives — there is a surprising lack of funding for the research and development needed to push these efforts ahead. Some bilateral institutions such as the United Nations, SNV, United States Agency for International Development, Samaritan’s Purse, and Plan International have invested time and effort into learning

more about the programming aspects of menstrual hygiene. But at the same time, as the topic gains more traction in the media, it seems there are many other large donors that are quick to dismiss menstrual hygiene as a “fad” with an impact that isn’t backed up by research. In reality, there is a great deal of quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal research available on this topic, but the funding structures do not exist to conduct the large scale randomized control trials needed to prove the social, health, and economic impact of this issue. It is time for governments and civil sector partners to formally recognize the role that menstrual hygiene plays in gender equality for women around the world.

So the question remains: how can the public and private sectors work together to utilize menstrual hygiene management as an entry point to the empowerment of girls and women? Well, there are already a plethora of incredible examples.

WASH United has helped raise the profile of menstrual hygiene tremendously through their introduction of Menstrual Hygiene Day, celebrated appropriately every May 28th (5/28, meaningful numbers in the average menstrual cycle). The government of Uganda recently set an example for other countries by mandating the supply of pads to all female students in their public schools. Social enterprises like Afripads have demonstrated a model for factor-based production of washable pads, while businesses like Ruby Cup have lead the way on breaking cultural barriers with their introductions of menstrual cups in Kenya. “Menstrual hygiene man”, also known as Arunachalam Muruganathamhas, blazed a trail for affordable, local production of disposable pads. Research-driven organizations like Irise are leading the way on evidence building for menstrual hygiene. And non-profits such as Days for Girls have pioneered the way for community-owned enterprise solutions for making and selling washable menstrual hygiene kits with comprehensive health education.

The progress is clear. Menstrual hygiene is making its way into the gender quality agenda, but there is still a long way to go to overcome this component of women’s empowerment and gender equality. Research is needed to fully understand the intricacies of this issue and the best pathways for promoting improved knowledge, attitudes and practices. Creative partnerships are needed to engage boys and men in this conversation to create a global culture of acceptance and understanding. And finally, increased coordination is needed between these various actors and stakeholders to promote a fact-based educational message, and widespread access to environmentally friendly, affordable, and socially responsible menstrual hygiene products. Through these powerful, human-centred partnerships, menstrual hygiene can transform from one of the most consistent challenges women face throughout their lives, to a point of empowerment, confidence, and healthy hygiene habits.
