

Access to Menstrual Health as a Public Service: The Lived Experiences of Women and Girls

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Breaking the silence on menstruation is a step towards improving the lives of women and girls
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I. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is emerging as a key component of the global human rights and sustainable development agendas. Over the last five years, efforts to address menstrual health have brought great strides in promoting discussions on issues linked to women’s and girls’ menstrual needs by governments, social entrepreneurs, in the media, in official UN resolutions and, most importantly, by women and girls themselves. In many countries, discussions are taking place on policies and regulations including on the elimination of the value added tax on hygienic products.

Through Agreed Conclusions from its 60th and 62nd sessions, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has also progressively recognized menstrual hygiene management (MHM) as a cross-cutting human rights and development issue. In this forum, States have acknowledged the threats posed to women’s and girls’ academic experiences and overall safety when access to water and sanitation (WASH) and MHM are poor. This year’s CSW presented an opportunity to revisit the links between menstrual health, women’s empowerment and sustainable development.

In line with the priority theme of CSW63, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and Columbia University convened a side event on 18 March 2019 titled, Access to Menstrual Health as a Public Service: The Lived Experiences of Women and Girls. The event was co-hosted

by the Permanent Missions of Germany and Spain to the United Nations in New York. The session aimed to elevate menstrual health as a cross-cutting rights issue and expand discourse on the issue beyond the purview of private spaces, to consider menstrual health needs in public spaces. In doing so, a spotlight was placed on the experiences of menstruating women and girls who belong to marginalized groups, and their lived experiences with menstruation both in and outside the home. Takeaways and conclusions from the session informed the deliberations around the Agreed Conclusions of CSW63.

The session was attended by delegates attending the Commission on the Status of Women including government officials and representatives, civil society organizations, women networks, researchers, and UN agencies.

Priority areas discussed included the rise in interest and collaboration on elevating menstruation in both developing and developed countries, the cautions menstrual health advocates should take in seizing and expanding on this progress, the potential for using culture and religion as means of driving positive behavioral change, and the lived experiences of women and girls who are homeless or from low-income backgrounds in seeking or using public menstrual health services.

This report is a summary of their discussions and presentations.



Speakers at the Commission on the Status of Women side-event held on 18th March 2019 in Conference Room A at the United Nations in New York.
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II. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION

The session's objectives were to:

- Examine the role and challenges of States in delivering WASH, with a focus on menstrual hygiene and health as a public service;
- Focus on the lived experiences of women and girls in different settings.
- Feed discussions on WASH services for women and girls as a key priority and determinant for women's empowerment, and;

III. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Ms Sue Coates, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)

Sue Coates, Executive Director of WSSCC, opened and acted as the moderator of the session. After introducing the panel and thanking the events hosts, panelists and attendees, she remarked on the encouraging increase in global attention to menstrual health as a cross-cutting human rights issue.

"Menstruation is really at the heart of all human rights of women and girls... and we seem to be seeing an interest in this area, and a change in how people are thinking about it. I think it is important to say that something that was just about hygiene, was just about toilets and products, is now really about so much more. It always was, but it had not been widely thought of this way in the domain (of the UN)."

Ms Sue Coates

Ms Maria Bassols, Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations

Ms Maria Bassols, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Spain to the UN opened the session talking about the centrality of the issue and its importance for Spain. She informed the audience of the recently adopted Human Rights Council Resolution championed by Germany and Spain which calls upon States to address the widespread stigma and shame surrounding menstruation and menstrual hygiene by ensuring women and girls have access to factual information, universal access to hygienic products and gender sensitive facilities, including disposal options for menstrual products.

Ms Waltrand Dahs, German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth



Ms Waltrand Dahs
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Head of Division at Germany's Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, Ms Waltrand Dahs informed the audience of the recent progress seen at the UN level in recognizing menstrual health as a cross-cutting rights issue, and its connections to improving equal access to WASH.

She commended States on their progress in elevating menstrual health at high-level forums over the past decade. Looking forward, she hopes for sustained increase in States' ownership of addressing menstrual health, and in building comprehensive discourse on the issue

EVENT TWEETS



 **WSSCC** @WSSCCouncil
Danielle Engel from @UNFPA on #menstrualhygiene in emergency situations "Its taken years and years of advocacy to have sexual and reproductive health be seen as life saving necessities, and for us, #menstrualhealth as a part of that" pic.twitter.com/Jpkwv3qStQ



WSSCC @WSSCCouncil
Danielle Engel of @UNFPA says that we currently have a "unique opportunity to see #menstruationhealth integrated into the agenda as an integral part of #reproductivehealth and right as well as the #SDGs"



 **WSSCC** @WSSCCouncil
The #CSW63 panelists discussing this "unique moment" and how to best implement #menstrualhealth as a public service. Thanks to @LCHoughton1 @SadviBhagawati Olivia Bloum of @Kmerpad, Danielle Engel of @UNFPA Armiante Mohedano of @wscah for their presentations! pic.twitter.com/dEDlBjwMhN



 **WSSCC** @WSSCCouncil
At #CSW63, Olivia Boum from @Kmerpad emphasized the importance of social enterprise around #MHM as well as the role that social media can play in menstrual health education. pic.twitter.com/fyvbMCXrkO9

IV. PRESENTATIONS

Dr Lauren Houghton, Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University

Dr Lauren Houghton, Professor of Epidemiology at Columbia University, offered insight on how States and global publics can help to normalize menstruation, and how they can achieve progress that meets the full spectrum of menstruators' needs.

Houghton framed the recent interest in menstruation as a “menstrual moment”, noting increased regard for the issue as cross-cutting by, “policy-makers, researchers, journalists, social entrepreneurs and women and girls themselves”. Menstruation involves the human rights to education, work, health and participation in public life, among others. Moreover, Dr Houghton affirmed that, “it united the personal with the political, the intimate with the public, and the biological with the cultural”.

Thus menstrual health is central to the realization of the full spectrum of human rights, and to ensure one's full potential can be reached.

She also noted her work on normalizing menstruation as part of Columbia's Working Group on Menstrual Health and Gender Justice, whose members represent the fields of gender studies, human rights, bio-informatics, public health, epidemiology, nursing, economics and anthropology. Houghton shared that the group, “[sees] risks of seeking ‘quick fixes’ in the form of products, of rushing into ill-conceived policies that are not evidence based, risks of sensationalizing the knowledge and diversity of lived experiences of menstruators, of further dividing the global North and South, and risks of further marginalizing



Dr Lauren Houghton
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vulnerable groups”. In light of these risks, Dr Houghton closed by noting that initiatives like those run by the organizations represented by her fellow panelists were a welcome step forward in normalizing menstruation and seeing it covered more comprehensively.

“The Working Group welcomes the attention that menstruation is receiving in the public sphere. Inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural investigation of menstruation can shift the current momentum focused on products and facilities and technologies, towards normalizing menstruation and garnering inclusive, informed research, communication and policy.”

Dr. Lauren Houghton

Ms Amariante Mohedano, West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH)

Amariante Mohedano works as WSCAH's Director of Social services to change public perceptions of those who are hungry and homeless, and to help these groups obtain food with dignity. She works directly with women in New York who are homeless and who menstruate, and used her platform at the session to shed light on the difficulties these women face without regular access to spaces for adequate, safe and private menstrual health.

Many women cannot afford products or access to appropriate spaces to clean or change themselves and, in many cases, must resort to compromising their well-

being in order to cope. Those in New York's shelters must use facilities that are often inappropriate and ill-maintained. Public showers have limited hours, meaning these women must go hours or days without the ability to clean or change themselves safely and in privacy. Some have spoken to Mohedano about using the free bathrooms of coffee shops, where they sometimes stay for the duration of their periods (about three to four days). One woman reported that sleep deprivation allows her to delay, or completely miss, her period, so “she tries not to sleep and does certain things she believes will alter her body, because she says that during those three of four



Ms Amariante Mohedano
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days when she's menstruating is when she feels the most vulnerable”.

WSCAH's model of holding those who are homeless and hungry as equal partners in generating change has opened a space for these women themselves to provide input on what steps New York and other cities could take to help homeless menstruators.

They have expressed needs for tents, water bottles, bathrooms and spaces for washing up, and for a general wider public availability of affordable menstrual products.

Ms Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA)

Ms Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati shared stories from her work with the GIWA in India to exemplify programming which successfully avoids the sensationalization and condemnation of women for their menstrual practices and beliefs. She and her colleagues have found that faith can be a powerful tool in creating social and behavioral change around menstruation.

The team have engaged in menstrual health advocacy in large spiritual gatherings, including the most recent Kumbh Mela. This 6-week-long Hindu pilgrimage of faith is held every 12 years, and is attended by over 120 million people. Saraswati explained that these gatherings present a gift of opportunity as, "millions of people come together already expecting and hoping to be inspired and informed".

In her experience, this openness is a chance to advocate for change in menstrual attitudes and behavior. She stated that at the last Kumbh Mela, "the GIWA had a major event in partnership with WSSCC. It was so extraordinary to have thousands and thousands of rural villagers there, and to have some of the top religious leaders of India, both men and women, on stage to talk to women about how there is nothing wrong with menstruation".

Outside these events, the GIWA are also working with different organizations to discover the most effective means of community engagement where they already have WASH programs, namely in the hopes of initiating programs for women to make their own menstrual pads. Beyond giving women regular



Ms Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati
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access to menstrual products, Saraswati hopes such programs would provide them with a form of financial security and empowerment.

Ms Olivia Boum, KmerPad Cameroon

MHM Trainer and Director of KmerPad Cameroon, Olivia Boum discussed her working knowledge of women and girls' lived experiences with menstruation outside the home in Cameroon. Boum and her team are working to improve the living conditions and hygiene of young women through menstrual health workshops and self-made products.

After conducting extensive research, they designed a kit composed of their own washable and reusable menstrual pads, accessories, and an informative user-guide. Beyond supporting menstrual hygiene, the production of KmerPads also provides seamstresses with steady

employment and a source of income, and contributes to environmental conservation by reducing the use of non-reusable products and materials. Ms. Boum shared that the KmerPad team maximize their reach and sustainability of their program by travelling through Cameroon to educate MHM trainers, engage boys and girls in learning about menstrual health, and improving the accessibility of re-usable pads. They complement these efforts by using technology and social media to inform youth about menstruation. In Boum's view, Africa's social enterprise initiatives are the most promising means of further scaling up KmerPad's approach and,



Ms Olivia Boum
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reaching larger audiences of menstruators and their communities.

Ms Danielle Engel, UNFPA

Danielle Engel, Technical Specialist on Adolescents and Youth for the UNFPA, spoke on garnering, developing and sustainably organizing collaboratives that serve to promote comprehensive menstrual health on wider, regional scales. She turned the audience's attention to the African Coalition for MHM as an example of elevated global interest in menstrual health as an issue that concerns more than products and facilities.

The coalition is one of many positive outcomes of the world's first regional conference on menstruation, which was convened by African nations in Johannesburg in July 2018. Apart from States, the coalition's ranks include five UN agencies (the UNFPA, UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, and WHO),

academia, regional NGOs and CSOs, as well as media representatives and social media influencers. Together, they have identified six main strategies to achieve more comprehensive policies and the understanding of menstruation on the continent between 2019 and 2021. These involve: strengthened and expanded collaboration; evidence-based and gender-inclusive advocacy; the development of MHM standards, toolkits and guidelines; filling gaps in menstrual health data; further investigation and discussion of menstruation as a cross-cutting rights issue, and; greater allocation of resources to improving menstrual health.

Engel closed by summarizing some of the common challenges of such large-scale collaboration, namely issues with



Ms Danielle Engel
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organization, information sharing, communication and aligning expectations. She also warned against falling into the trap of focusing extensively on products and facilities.

"We really see that the common focus is on products as a main solution to the issue. We really have to worry about that, because that instills very narrow programming. We believe that we need to position menstrual health as a human right for all women and girls, and as essential to sexual and reproductive health rights, and access to products should be formed parallel to that."

Ms Danielle Engel

V. CONCLUSIONS

This year's CSW presented an opportunity to revisit efforts in past sessions of the Commission to examine menstrual health as a cross-cutting human rights and development issue, and to expand this discussion to link menstrual health with women's empowerment and sustainable development in both public and private spaces. Attendees of the side event had the unique opportunity to hear directly from an all-woman panel with speakers from different professional and national

backgrounds. Panelists' insights pointed to cross-sectoral collaboration, embracing rather than sensationalizing cultural beliefs and practices, and working directly with women and girls themselves to improve access to public menstrual health services as integral parts of achieving women and girls' empowerment, as well as their full inclusion in sustainable development agendas.

ABOUT THE REPORT

Acknowledgement to the speakers:

Ms Sue Coates
Ms Maria Bassols
Ms Waltrand Dahs
Dr Laura Houghton
Ms Amariante Mohedano

Ms Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati
Ms Olivia Boum
Ms Danelle Engel

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