

## Helpdesk Research Report



# Improving access to menstrual hygiene products

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## Question

*Please review major global initiatives which aim to increase the access of women and girls to affordable menstrual hygiene products. Provide brief summaries of different types of approaches and any available information on successes and lessons learnt.*

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## 1. Overview

The market for menstrual hygiene products in developing countries is expanding rapidly, driven both by private demand and by public efforts to improve girls' educational outcomes and women's health and dignity. However, many women and girls cannot consistently afford the monthly cost of disposable menstrual products and revert to less hygienic solutions when facing cash constraints (Hoffman et al 2014). For some this means pads or rags, but for many, it means whatever absorbent material is close to hand: old clothes, saris, tissues, cotton wool, bark, dry leaves, straw or newspapers secured using string or other methods (House et al 2012, pp. 65-66). Reusable technologies such as menstrual cups are much less

expensive than disposable pads over the lifetime of their use, and are a viable option where women may not have underwear. There is, however, an initial higher cost of purchase, learning costs, and psychological barriers to insertion (Hoffman et al 2014).

The choice of sanitary protection is a personal decision based on cultural acceptability and user preferences. It is also often influenced by a woman or girl's environment and access to funds, a water supply and affordable options. It is critical that any programme aiming to support women or girls with sanitary protection materials involves them in the planning discussions and decisions about the materials and/or products to be supported (House et al., 2012). Products can vary in availability, cost, ease of use, suitability for local production, waste generation, comfort, reliability, durability, and cultural acceptability – see Appendix for a summary of options (House et al., 2012, pp. 65-66). Early experience of a particular menstrual product can determine lasting preference, but switching to alternative products can happen if the alternative product achieves similar outcomes and overcomes barriers to adoption (Hoffmann et al 2014).

### **Key findings**

- Menstrual hygiene management has been a neglected priority and rarely appears in donor strategies, national government policies or advocacy agendas.
- Anecdotal evidence of provision of free or subsidised products is positive. However, continuity and sustainability of supply can be a problem.
- Reusable products are more economical, practical and environmentally sustainable than disposable products.
- Menstrual cups are the most cost-effective option in the long term. However, the initial cost is high and there may be psychological barriers to insertion.
- There are examples of small-scale local enterprises manufacturing low-cost pads. Supporting low-cost local production offers a more sustainable solution than free provision of menstrual hygiene products. Some ventures fail due to problems that include lack of standardisation and inadequate saleswomen.
- There is a lack of formal evaluations of programmes supporting access to menstrual hygiene products.

Programme considerations when choosing which sanitary materials to support include:

- Cultural acceptability of the product/traditional practices – also consider the opportunities for changing acceptability or practices.
- Affordability versus the resources available to the woman or girl.
- Availability of materials/products.
- How comfortable/soft the materials are.
- How easily/quickly they dry.
- Absorbency of the materials for light or heavy flow days.
- Frequency that the materials would need to be changed.
- Colour, to minimise staining, but also to let the woman know if she has cleaned the material well enough.
- Likelihood of total protection from leakage.

- How easy it is to secure the material in place? Do women and girls wear underwear?
- Washing, drying, storage and disposal options, including access to water supply.
- How many are needed for each menstrual period.

The **evidence base** for menstrual hygiene management<sup>1</sup> (MHM) interventions is weak and there are important gaps in knowledge. There are very few high quality randomised intervention studies which combine hardware and software interventions, in particular for better understanding the nuanced effect improving MHM may have on girls' attendance at school (Sumpter et al., 2013). Provision of materials to improve girls' awareness of puberty and managing their periods has moved forward, but hard evidence on outcomes like school drop-out, absence, sexual and reproductive health is limited to a few small studies with not very robust methodologies. 'Conclusions' are being propagated and may take hold which are not warranted by the limited data published.

Menstrual hygiene has been 'routinely ignored by professionals' in the water, health and education sectors (House et al., 2012, p. 8; SNV, 2013, p. 3). It 'rarely appears in donor strategies, national government policies or advocacy agendas' (Schechtman, 2015). UNICEF, UNESCO, WaterAID, and Save the Children met in October 2014 at the MHM in Ten international meeting and have included MHM as a priority activity in their programming agendas. The meeting identified a global vision for MHM in schools to be reached by 2024, and identified five key priorities: building an evidence base for MHM for prioritising action; developing and disseminating guidelines for MHM in schools; advocating for MHM in schools; ensuring that national governments take up responsibility for MHM in schools; and delivering inclusive MHM in the education system (MHM in Ten 2014).

Many working on MHM have tried to guide the donor community away from a focus on products and towards interventions that improve the water, sanitation and disposal facilities available to menstruating girls and women as a potentially more sustainable long term approach. However, the provision and access to menstrual hygiene products still remains important.

## 2. Challenges of access to affordable menstrual hygiene products

Women and girls suffer from **lack of access to services and facilities** to help them cope with logistical requirements during their menstrual periods. This especially affects those in rural settings and girls attending school. Some of the problems they face are: inadequate preparations for young girls not yet experiencing menstrual hygiene; lack of or inadequate water to clean and wash the body; lack of materials for managing menstrual hygiene; no private space and wash rooms; inappropriate facilities for disposal of materials for those who have used pads; and lack of access to pain relief. (SNV, 2013)

Many women **cannot afford disposable sanitary products** on a monthly basis or even at all. 'Many who can pay do not, as they hate having to ask for them in drugstores that are usually run by men.' (The

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<sup>1</sup> MHM has been defined as: 'women and adolescent girls using a clean material to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials' (Sommer et al., 2015). MHM also includes the need to address societal beliefs and taboos surrounding the issue.

Economist, 2013) Many enterprises are now developing reusable products produced and sold locally by women.

**Provision of pads can be from sexual partners.** A cross-sectional survey conducted in rural western Kenya found that receipt of pads among married females of partners that were violent was lower than from partners who were not violent (Phillips-Howard et al., 2015). The same study also found receipt among single females was higher if they had two or more sexual partners in the past year. Girls can engage in **transactional sex** to obtain money for sanitary towels so that they can attend school (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014). Phillips-Howard et al found that in rural Kenya girls 15 years or younger were more likely to engage in sex for money to buy pads than girls older than 15 years (Phillips-Howard et al., 2015). Often there is widespread cultural tolerance of sexual exploitation, especially of girls from the poorest households (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014).

Rather than being celebrated as a healthy, normal and vital process, **‘menstruation is often taboo and associated with many negative cultural attitudes**, including the idea that menstruating women and girls are “contaminated”, “dirty” and “impure”.’ (House et al., 2012, p. 8) ‘Evidence reveals the discriminatory nature of many school environments with menstruating girls (and female teachers) unable to adequately manage their monthly menses with safety, dignity and privacy.’ (MHM in Ten, 2014, p. 3) Many girls are unaware of menarche let alone know that monthly menstruation is normal and natural. Girls are often unable to wash and dry reusable menstrual products properly (the taboo around menstruation means that they cannot dry them outside and hide them under their bed or in roof thatches to dry for example), making them a breeding ground for bacteria and increasing girls’ risk of illness.

Encouraging the community, including men and boys, to discuss this taboo subject is proving to have a positive effect. A recent initiative in Uttar Pradesh, India, enabled men and boys to talk about menstruation more freely and engaged them in supporting the MHM needs of women and girls within the household, community, and school. (Mahon et al., 2015) Advancing the global agenda for menstrual hygiene management for schoolgirls to overcome the taboo is recently discussed by Sommer and Sahin, 2013.

### 3. Provision of free or subsidised products

#### Reusable menstrual hygiene products

Reusable items are more economical, practical and environmentally sustainable than disposal products. Barriers to adoption include cost, learning, and psychological barriers to insertion (Hoffmann et al., 2014). Hand hygiene is critical to reduce disease transmission from menstrual blood. A new design by Flo includes a basket to help dry materials, but has yet to be rolled out. Other organisations include washing instructions in packs that are distributed. Training materials have been developed for carers of people with HIV/AIDS in Uganda (House et al., 2012). Accessing a safe water supply can also be a challenge.

Cups are a better long-term solution than reusable pads. A randomised controlled feasibility study conducted among 14–16-year-old girls in 30 primary schools in rural western Kenya examined acceptability, use, and safety of menstrual cups or sanitary pads (Mason et al., 2015). Focus group discussions were conducted to evaluate girls’ perceptions and experiences six months after product introduction. After initial concerns regarding insertion were overcome, girls reported less leakage, the cup was better at staying in place and more comfortable than pads. The same group recently completed a feasibility study examining girls’ use of menstrual cups and sanitary pads on the sexual and reproductive

health outcome of schoolgirls' in rural primary schools in western Kenya (Phillips-Howard et al., 2015 forthcoming). A large scale trial in the same area is now being conducted to examine if cash incentives, cups or both cash and cups will prevent school drop-out and improve girls' sexual and reproductive health.

### **Illustrative examples**

**Flo:** <http://marikoproduct.com/Flo>

Flo has designed and created an affordable kit that allows girls to wash, dry and carry reusable sanitary pads. The drying mechanism is an innovative design from the Art Center College of Design and the Yale School of Management. It is planned to be sold and distributed by an in-country subsidiary, Rubbermaid New Company. It is sponsored by the Girl Effect, US Art Center College of Design and Fuseproject.

**THE CUP:** <http://www.thecup.org/>

THE CUP Foundation is a global campaign, in partnership with some of the leading menstrual cup producers, to give a cup to one million girls living in poverty and to enrol them in a two week programme that tackles several social, physical and emotional problems faced by girls growing up in poverty. Currently girls aged 9-14 are being helped in schools in Kenya and the programme aims to expand to India.

**BeGirl:** <http://www.begirl.org/design/>

BeGirl produce a durable, washable sanitary pad. The pad has a pouch which can be filled with any safe absorbent material (disposable or reusable). The USA-based company works with charitable foundations and invites individuals to sponsor provision of pads to girls.

**AFRIPads** <http://afripads.com/>

AFRIPads is a social enterprise in Uganda. They manufacture a reusable ultra-absorbent pad which comes with a storage bag, is easy to fold and carry, and buttons into underwear. An AFRIPads menstrual kit is designed to provide protection for a year. The products are distributed by NGOs (including Save the Children) and international relief agencies, and are available for sale in Uganda.

**Lunapads, Pads4Girls:** <http://lunapads.com/pads4girls>

Lunapads make washable menstrual pads that last for a number of years. Pads4Girls activities involve collaboration with distribution groups to make pad donations or to provide pad and panty patterns to groups working in the developing world. They work with AFRIPads. Sales of Lunapad products in high-income countries subsidise distribution in low-income countries. Lunapads has helped provide over 14,000 girls and women in 17 nations with over 85,000 menstrual pads and/or menstrual underwear.

**Days for Girls:** <http://www.daysforgirls.org/>

Days for Girls produce kits which include a drawstring bag, a waterproof bag, absorbent tri-fold pads, moisture barrier shields to hold the liner in place, travel sized soap, a visual instruction sheet and two pairs of underwear. The Ziplock bag means that liners can be soaked with very little water before washing. The kits are made by local women and volunteers. In-country staff produce kits and train cooperatives in sewing skills, reproductive health education, and basic business skills. They have reached over 75 countries.

**Ruby Cup:** <http://www.ruby-cup.com/social-mission/ruby-cup-in-kenya/>

This company, based in Germany, sells its products in high-income markets and operates a 'Buy One Give One' programme to support free distribution through local partners, primarily in Kenya. The cup is reusable for up to 10 years. It can be washed with water and sterilised with boiling water.

**Project Mwezi:** <http://www.doublexeconomy.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ProjectMweziOverview1.pdf>

Participatory approaches are used to design reusable towels. The project also provides menstruation-related education and training on how to sew reusable towels by hand using second-hand materials. Funded by UK charitable donations and a small fee for participating women's groups.

## Disposable menstrual hygiene products

Disposable menstrual hygiene products are not an option (or not chosen for environmental reasons) for most of the world's menstruating women. Most women and girls cannot afford these products and/or may be limited in purchasing these products from shops run by men. Disposal of these items also often proves a challenge. In a case study in Kisumu, Kenya, a number of charities provided sanitary towels to schoolgirls but continuity and sustainability of supply were often problematic, so local groups designed reusable sanitary towels instead. (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014)

Hoffmann et al. examined consumer demand for two alternative menstrual hygiene technologies: one with higher barriers to adoption (the reusable menstrual cup), and one with lower barriers to adoption but higher private and social costs (the disposable sanitary pad). These two menstrual hygiene products were distributed free of charge to 960 women across 60 rural villages in the state of Bihar, India. Receiving pads for free strongly increased subsequent demand for pads, as well as demand for a menstrual cup. Findings indicate that experience with a low-barrier substitute can increase demand for the higher-barrier good, and that this effect outweighs any impact of habit formation from use of the low-barrier substitute (Hoffmann et al., 2014).

### Illustrative examples

#### **Proctor & Gamble (P&G) (brand name: Always)**

P&G support various projects in partnership with international and local organisations. The Girl Child Network lobbied P&G to make a three year commitment in 2006 to fund sanitary pads for 15,000 girls in Kenya in 2006 (House et al., 2012). *Always Keeping Girls in School* (P&G) is a current campaign implemented by P&G in partnership with the Department of Basic Education, UNICEF, the Small Projects Foundation and other stakeholders in South Africa. The campaign provides puberty education, Always sanitary protection, access to educational resources and motivation to stay in school. P&G partnered with Save the Children in 2014 to teach girls about menstrual hygiene and distribute 2,900 sanitary pads in Mexico. P&G, with the Centre for Gender Equity, provided sanitary pads and puberty education to over 20,000 girls between the ages of 11 and 18 in six African countries (House et al., 2012). In nine European countries Always makes a contribution to UNESCO for puberty education programmes for each pack sold (P&G, 2012).

In Kenya, P&G's Always pads have a 62 per cent market share. Their market dominance is thought to be a result of providing feminine hygiene education and providing free samples to school girls (Liloba, 2014).

### **Johnson & Johnson (J&J) (brand name: Stayfree)**

J&J funded, with others, a project in a slum area in Nairobi to make reusable sanitary pads (Chebii, 2012). They come in a kit with pants, a water proof storage bag and soap for washing the pads. They also came with information on HIV and AIDS prevention, contacts for counselling services within the neighbourhood and Voluntary Counselling and Testing services, as well as a manual on how to use the pads.

J&J and UNICEF launched a cause related marketing campaign in 2012 (UNICEF, 2012). Part of the proceeds from each Stayfree sanitary napkin sold will go to UNICEF to support a programme creating awareness and empowering adolescent girls for personal hygiene in India.

J&J co-fund the Stayfree Women for Change initiative in India supporting general health and hygiene for girls including provision of sanitary napkins (CSR Resources).

**Grace and Green:** <http://www.graceandgreen.co/>

Produce eco-friendly feminine hygiene products. 10% of pre-taxed profit goes towards helping women in countries with little or no access to feminine hygiene products. Their project Eco FemD works with aid organisations to develop menstrual hygiene products appropriate to the cultural context for use in emergency situations.

## **4. Support for local manufacture and distribution of products**

The social and economic benefits to be had from resolving adolescent girls missing school or dropping out, or women not working are potentially so large that this is now a focus of social entrepreneurs in many developing countries. Small enterprises are rapidly appearing manufacturing low cost pads. Whilst some are proving very successful, many ventures have failed due to problems ranging from a lack of standardisation to inadequate saleswomen (The Economist, 2013).

### **Illustrative examples**

**Sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE):** <http://sheinnovates.com>

SHE is helping women jumpstart social businesses to manufacture and distribute affordable menstrual pads. This is coupled with health and hygiene education in schools and in the community and advocacy. Banana farmers in Rwanda throw away tons of trunk fibre every year. SHE provides the farmers with equipment and training to process it and sell it to the community factory to be cut, carded, washed, fluffed and solar dried and made into affordable menstrual pads. SHE are also bringing Rwandan and global leaders together to advocate to waive value-added taxes on pads. A blueprint to franchise globally is being created to provide a sustainable system that can be rolled out anywhere.

**Aakar Innovations:** <http://www.aakarinnovations.com/>

Aakar have developed a machine that products low-cost sanitary napkins using agri-waste raw materials such as banana fibre, bamboo and water hyacinth pulp. Each machine can churn out 1,600 to 2000 pads a day, to be sold for 40 per cent less than branded mass-market products. To bypass the current female-unfriendly distribution system, Aakar aims to sell its machine for 250,000 rupees (\$4,000) to groups of women. The finished item will be sold door-to-door by village saleswomen who also hawk solar lamps,

stoves and saris. The products will also be distributed in women-run grocery stores and beauty parlours. Aakar's products are competing with global brands.

**Eco Femme:** <http://ecofemme.org/>

Eco Femme is a global initiative that started in rural India in 2010 which empowers women in the areas of environment, education and livelihood. They make 100 per cent cotton washable cloth pads which last for approximately 75 washes. The project promotes the environmental aspect of their work by highlighting waste reduction due to reusability, and health benefits due to using pure cotton which decreases the risk of rashes and yeast infections. The pads are also affordable. A scalable business model is being developed for women's village-based enterprises, where women are trained in stitching and business management skills.

**Goonj:** <http://goonj.org>

Goonj addresses women's need for adequate clean cloth by supporting women to sew and sterilise discard old clothes into sanitary pads (MY Pads). Sorted cotton cloth is soaked and washed, dried and cut, ironed, and folded together to make a handmade cloth sanitary pad. Pads are distributed in a cloth pack with a pictorial leaflet giving instructions for washing, drying, storing and disposal.

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## Appendix: Advantages and disadvantages of sanitary protection measures

(From House et al 2012, p. 65-66)

Sanitary protection option	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Natural materials (eg mud, cow dung or leaves)<sup>3</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free.</li> <li>• Locally available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High risk of contamination.</li> <li>• Difficult and uncomfortable to use.</li> </ul>
<b>Strips of sari, kanga or other cloth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easily available in the local market.</li> <li>• Re-usable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If old cloths are not cleaned well they can become unhygienic.</li> <li>• Users need somewhere private, with a water supply and soap, to wash and dry the cloths.</li> </ul>
<b>Toilet paper or tissues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easily available in the local market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loses strength when wet and can fall apart.</li> <li>• Difficult to hold in place.</li> <li>• May be too expensive for the poorest users.</li> </ul>
<b>Cotton wool</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good absorption properties.</li> <li>• Easily available in the local market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to hold in place.</li> <li>• May be too expensive for the poorest users.</li> </ul>
<b>Locally made re-usable pads</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available locally.</li> <li>• Income generation opportunity.</li> <li>• Cost effective as are re-usable.</li> <li>• More environmentally-friendly than disposable pads.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supply chain limitations may make it difficult to reach potential users.</li> <li>• Users need somewhere private, with a water supply and soap, to wash and dry the pads.</li> </ul>
<b>Locally made biodegradable, disposable pads</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available locally.</li> <li>• Income generating opportunity.</li> <li>• Environmentally-friendly as degrade on disposal.</li> <li>• Natural products.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not always absorbent enough or the correct shape for higher-flow days.</li> </ul>
<b>Commercially available re-usable pads</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost effective as are re-usable.</li> <li>• More environmentally-friendly than disposable pads.</li> <li>• Available on the internet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost may be prohibitive to potential users.</li> <li>• Users need somewhere private, with a water supply and soap, to wash and dry the pads.</li> <li>• Most poor women and girls lack internet access.</li> </ul>
<b>Commercially available disposable pads</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often available, except in remote locations.</li> <li>• Range of sizes and types available in some locations.</li> <li>• Well designed through research and development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost is prohibitive to many potential users.</li> <li>• Generate a lot of waste to dispose of, so not environmentally-friendly.</li> </ul>

*Continued on following page*

Sanitary protection option	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Tampons (with or without applicators)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenient and comfortable to use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not available in many contexts.</li> <li>• Cost is prohibitive to many potential users.</li> <li>• Generates a lot of waste to dispose of, so not environmentally-friendly.</li> <li>• May not be culturally appropriate, particularly for adolescent girls, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> <li>• Hygiene and availability of water and soap for hand-washing are particularly important, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> </ul>
<b>Panties (also known as 'pants', 'knickers' or 'underwear')</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Useful for keeping a sanitary product in place.</li> <li>• Good for keeping the vaginal area hygienic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost may be prohibitive to potential users.</li> <li>• Cheap elastic can wear out relatively quickly.</li> </ul>
<b>Period panties (panties with a rubber lining)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide an additional level of protection against leakage during menstruation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be sweaty to wear in hot climates.</li> <li>• Not readily available to purchase in many regions.</li> <li>• Expensive capital outlay.</li> </ul>
<b>Menstrual cups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-usable.</li> <li>• Only need emptying, washing and drying.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be culturally appropriate for use, particularly for adolescent girls, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> <li>• Hygiene and availability of water and soap are particularly important, for washing hands and menstrual cup, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> <li>• Expensive capital outlay.</li> </ul>
<b>Menstrual sponges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-usable.</li> <li>• Only need removing, washing and drying.</li> <li>• Natural product.</li> <li>• Comfortable because they are flexible and soft and mould themselves to the shape of the vagina.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be culturally appropriate for use, particularly for adolescent girls, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> <li>• Hygiene and availability of water and soap are particularly important, for washing hands and sea sponges, as need to be inserted into the vagina.</li> <li>• Expensive capital outlay.</li> <li>• Last for a maximum of six months.</li> <li>• Delicate and easily ripped.</li> <li>• Not permitted for sale in the USA due to safety concerns.</li> </ul>