Menstrual Hygiene and Human Rights

The diagram below illustrates how Menstrual Hygiene impacts on different human rights and the key principles of Equality and Dignity that underpin the human rights system.

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**Sanitation:** We found that over half of the girls we work with were using alternative materials like bits of rag, mattress or even cow dung or leaves and a recent survey in Uganda found that only 7% of schools had basic menstrual hygiene facilities like a clearly marked separate toilet for girls.

**Education:** We found that many girls’ lack basic information about their own bodies with 75% of girls believing period pain is a sign of illness and 43% afraid to run or dance during their period. This impacts on their ability to engage in education with lack of knowledge about menstruation associated with low self-esteem and over half of girls reporting missing school during their period.

**Health:** Some evidence suggests that poor menstrual hygiene may increase girls’ risk of reproductive tract infections. In addition to this the lack of knowledge and myths and taboo that form an important part of poor menstrual hygiene act as a social determinant of poor
reproductive health as girls are poorly equipped to make good decisions about their own health.

**Equality:** In addition to acting as a barrier to girls’ participation in the public sphere the menstrual myths and taboos reinforce negative attitudes to women and girls through the perception that during menstruation they are dirty and through emphasising the value that society places upon young girls’ fertility and potential as mothers.

**Dignity:** The shame and discomfort caused by a combination of the menstrual taboo and the lack of appropriate products and facilities compromise girls’ dignity.

The interaction between menstrual hygiene and girls’ rights to sanitation, education & employment, health and dignity is illustrated in the case studies below.

**Rose**

‘One year after my menstrual cycle began, I still did not understand what was happening in my body. I started to have pains on the first day of my period and crawled to the school matron’s door. She told me the pain would cease when I give birth to a child. I started to look forward to having a child.’

The next day of class, my male class teacher called me forward to punish me for missing class the previous day. Startled, I tried to explain how I was resting and trying to get relief from the pain of my period. Unfortunately, he would not listen to me and I lost my seat for the class.

I realized I have to bear the pain in silence. The stigma combined with missing classes was a lot to bear. Everyone knew when my periods started because I had to miss class due to the pain.’ (Irise International 2015)

**Joanne**

“I remember the first time I had menstrual period pain... My older sister ran to our elderly lady neighbour who supplied herbs to the whole village. She ‘examined’ me and deduced that I was about to experience change, and she was right. She also told me that I was not allowed to take any pain killers because no one is allowed to interfere with the natural process. The pain being natural, I had to bear it. She gave me some herbs to ease my discomfort. She said my body was getting ready for a process, without telling me what the process was...

.....With the dawn of every single period; the heat, the sitting arrangement, the lack of proper washing facilities, the lack of sanitary pads, the anxiety and self-consciousness made me feel like I was in prison, a monthly prison.

We used to use old t-shirts and other cotton fabric as sanitary towels. Changing and reusing them was impossible. It was unsustainable given the lack of facilities to wash and dry these
materials at school. It is daunting to carry the used material in a school bag around the school on a warm sunny day, which was almost all the school days.

Other girls use dried maize cobs as tampons, toilet roll, absorbent leaves, etc. Some choose to not bother going to school at all, especially those whose periods lasted longer than usual. The shame of blood leaking through your skirt, boys calling you names, sores and infections, to mention but a few, makes you hate being a young healthy woman.’ (Irise International 2014)

For more information:
