



# Report

## Menstrual Hygiene Management

### Concept Exploration



## Introduction & Context

### Background & Objectives

A lack of Menstrual Hygiene Management leads to barriers in education and employment, restrictions in social, religious and cultural activities, high rates of reproductive tract infections and degraded self-worth as well as body image.

This report is an educational piece that details what Menstrual Hygiene Management is, the different elements that make it up and a brief exploration of the state of Menstrual Hygiene Management in Nigeria.

The data used for this report is primarily based on secondary research, however, to understand better we conducted In-Depth Interviews among parents and teachers in Lagos State, Nigeria who are educated, employed and represent the middle socio-economic class.

This report serves as insights to be used for educational and knowledge sharing purposes.

### Key Take-Away

- Menstrual Hygiene Management is about awareness and access. Educating on menstruation, providing menstrual hygiene products, ensuring there are amenities to change and facilities to dispose of used products.
- It is important to speak to girls early on about menstruating, before the onset of their menarche. As this normalizes their menstruation, dispels myths and makes them feel more in control.
- When menstruation talk is coupled with talks on abstinence rather than reproductive health, there is a gap in the girl's knowledge which disempowers them.
- The mental health, body image and self-worth of menstruating girls and women are being attacked when they are secluded, denied access, silenced, teased and picked on because of their period.
- According to UNICEF, 1 in 10 girls in Sub-Saharan Africa miss school during their periods which means in a school year, these girls are missing 10-20% of school.
- In Nigeria, 25% of girls and women lack adequate amenities to manage their menstruation.

## Concept Understanding

### Menstrual Hygiene Management

The transitional stage between childhood and adulthood is adolescent; children between the ages of 10-19 years old are considered adolescents by the World Health Organization. During the adolescent stage, children undergo physical, psychological and even cultural changes. In adolescent girls, they experience menarche, which is their first menstrual cycle and the official onset of the reproductive phase of their lives. The menstrual cycle is characterized by menstruation.

**Menstruation** (also termed Period or Bleeding) is the process in which a woman discharges blood and other materials from the lining of her uterus monthly. This monthly discharge begins between the ages of 10 to 15 years old and ends between the ages of 45 to 55 years old, once menopause is reached.

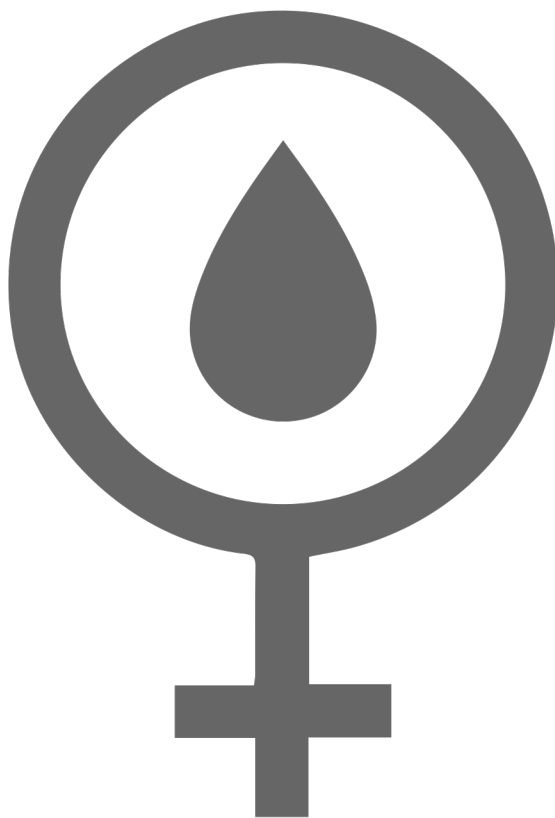
Menstruation comes with its challenges that prevent girls and women from partaking in educational, employment and social, religious, cultural activities. Some of these challenges include

- High cost of menstrual hygiene products
- Lack of toilets at schools, offices or in communities
- Lack of water and sanitation facilities at schools, offices or in communities
- Social, religious and cultural stigmas that lead to period shaming

**Menstrual Hygiene Management** is about awareness and access; educating people about menstruation as well as menstrual health, and providing access to menstrual hygiene products, private amenities to change/clean up and facilities to properly dispose of used materials. According to some of the Nigerian parents and teachers we interviewed, menstrual hygiene management is about puberty, educating girls about their menstruation, and educating them on how to take care of themselves during their menstruation.

Menstrual hygiene management is important because it

- Reduces the risk of infections and diseases as girls and women are not using makeshift menstrual hygiene products: ‘70% of reproductive tract infections in India are caused by poor menstrual hygiene from makeshift products’
- Reduces school drop out and encourages frequent attendance as products, amenities and facilities are available: ‘1 in 10 Sub Saharan African girls miss school during their period’
- Breaks myths, misconceptions and superstitions as communities are more educated about menstruation and menstrual health: ‘60% of US women are period shamed’
- Empowers girls and makes them feel more confident as they are now knowledgeable about their menstrual cycle: ‘by the age of 14, a girl is far less confident than a boy’.



# MENSTRUATION

## Menstruation

### Menstrual Talk

Talking to girls about menstruation before the onset of their menarche is essential to make girls feel confident, comfortable and in control. Most times these conversations are already happening in schools so it essential for guardians to start early. Every girl experiences the onset of their menarche differently; for some girls, there is a feeling of fear, anxiety or isolation especially if they are the first of their friends to begin their period, for some girls, there is a feeling of joy or relief especially if they are the last of their friends to begin.

Whatever situation the girl is in, it is the responsibility of the guardian to have this conversation because it allows guardians to control the narrative and ensure they are passing on truthful, age-appropriate information and dispelling myths. It also breaks the feeling of alienation and reminds the girls of the normalcy of their menstruation.

Child Psychologists have studied the best way to have this conversation with girls. They include

- Have your facts ready! Know all your menstruation facts
- If you are unsure about something, don't make it up, get back to the child
- Books and videos can help the conversation be more comfortable
- Break the conversation into small conversations so it is not overwhelming and is more continuous.

All the parents we interviewed indicated they spoke to their girls before the onset of their menarche because it prepares the child for what is to come, especially if the parent was not available at the time. The content of this conversation revolved around hygiene during menstruation, calculating their cycle and the importance of letting their parents know when they begin the menarche. Interestingly, rather than conversations on reproduction, conversations on abstinence were also discussed with girls. As early as when the female body is preparing for menarche, girls can get pregnant as such when discussing menstruation with girls, reproductive education (processes, systems and functions) is also taught. However, for our parent rather than educating their girls on reproduction, abstinence was taught.

The challenge with speaking on abstinence and not educating girls on reproduction creates a gap in their knowledge which disempowers them and ends up being filled by their friends or the media.

## Menstruation

### Period Shame

According to Global Citizen, 60% of US women feel period shamed. If the same study were conducted in Nigeria, we can assume that the same pattern will be found. Period Shaming is the conscious or unconscious comments, rules and actions made towards girls and women because of their menstruation. The mental health, body image and self-worth of menstruating girls and women are being attacked when they are secluded, denied access, silenced, teased and picked on because of their period. This is because in many cultures, menstruation is not understood; it is seen as a taboo, as unclean and impure. To ensure a healthy sense of self-worth, mental health and body image is developed in girls and women, menstruation needs to be taught more to girls and communities at large.

### Premenstrual Syndrome

Premenstrual Syndrome commonly known as PMS are emotional (irritability, anxiety) and physical symptoms (acne, bloating, stomach cramps) experienced before and during menstruation. According to our interview participants, their girls experience stomach cramps, headaches, acne and loss of appetites. When the girls experience these, they are advised to stay away from sugar, drink water or warm drinks, avoid touching the acne spots, and rest. Very rarely are the girls given pain relievers and never are the girls taken to see a doctor. Doctors will be considered only if the girl has an underlying condition. Believing that all women experience menstruation and PMS the same way is also a form of Period Shaming and affects her menstrual health. The symptoms girls face should not be overlooked because all other girls experience it and are 'strong' through it.

### Absenteeism

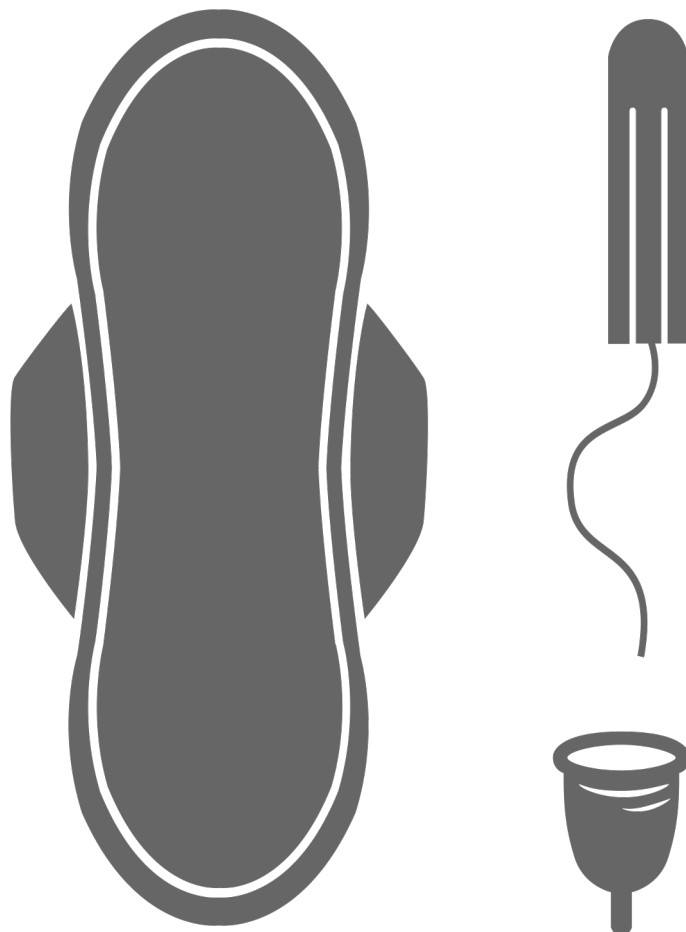
According to UNICEF, 1 in 10 girls in Sub Saharan Africa miss school during their periods which means in a school year, these girls are missing 10-20% of school. Even worse, many girls drop out of school once they begin their menarche. This is because of the high cost of products, no access to amenities to change nor facilities to dispose of used materials as well as period shaming. How do we ensure girls stay in school at the onset of the menarche and continue to stay in school during their periods? By providing them with information, preparation and support. By educating people about menstruation as well as menstrual health, and providing access to menstrual hygiene products, private amenities to change/clean up and facilities to properly dispose of used materials.

## Menstruation

### Nigerian Menstrual Myths & Taboos

A myth is a 'widely held, but false belief or idea'. The challenge with menstrual myths is that it restricts and excludes girls and women thereby affecting their mental health, physical health and education. In Nigeria, there are still so many menstruation myths that need to be debunked through more advocacy and awareness, here are a few

- Girls and women cannot get pregnant during their period
- Girls and women must rest and avoid movements during their period
- Girls and women should avoid showers/baths during their period because it can cause infertility/infection
- Girls and women should avoid showers with hot water during their period because it makes their flow heavy
- Girls and women are unclean when they are menstruating
- Girls and women must avoid places of worship and prayer because they are unclean
- Girls and women should not cook when they are menstruating
- Girls and women should not eat certain foods when they are menstruating
- Girls and women should eat separately when they are menstruating
- Girls are ready for marriage once they begin their menarche
- Tampons can dis-virgin girls and women
- Tampons can get lost in the vagina of girls and women
- PMS is not real.



# MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS



## Menstrual Hygiene Products

### Product Options

There are currently 5 menstrual hygiene products endorsed by UNICEF. These 5 products are used to catch menstrual flow but they vary in terms of their availability, side effects, cost, ease of use, disposal and cultural acceptability.

- Menstrual Cloth
- Reusable Pad
- Disposal Pad
- Menstrual Cup
- Tampons

In Nigeria, when girls are on their period, their choice of product typically ranges from newspapers, toilet paper, old cloth, reusable pads and disposal pads depending on which they can afford. The participants we interviewed frowned against the use of toilet paper as it is messy, non-absorbent, unhygienic and causes infections. As for tampons, they indicated that they will not encourage young girls who have not been sexually active to use the product as using it requires insertion into the vagina. This disapproval for tampons can be extended to menstrual cups as they also require insertion. All participants also indicated that it is unhygienic for girls to wash used menstrual products, they believe it should be disposed of immediately. This reasoning hinders the uptake of the menstrual cloths, reusable pads and menstrual cups.

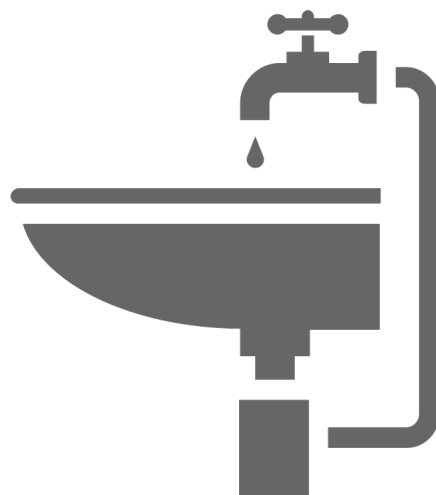
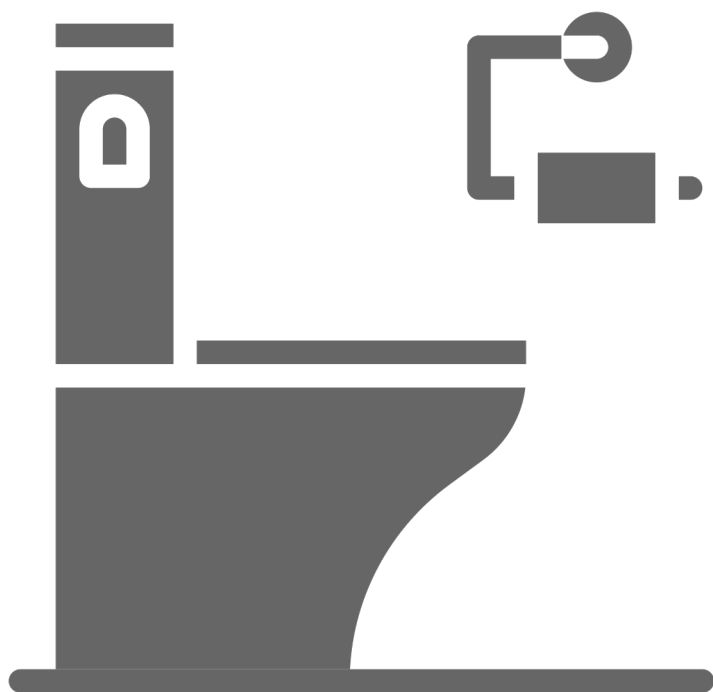
Participants indicated that they usually purchase menstrual hygiene products for their girls. Disposal pads are the most purchased menstrual product. (Important to note that our sample indicated cost is not a factor when purchasing menstrual products) They choose brands based on length, absorbency and softness. Although the guardians buy the products for the girls, they tell the girls which product they should be using and they teach the girls how to use it. Participants indicated that the products their girls use do not affect their attendance at educational, physical and social activities.

## Menstrual Hygiene Products

### Product Options: Pros & Cons

	Menstrual Cloth	Reusable Pad	Disposable Pad	Menstrual Cup	Tampon
<b>Insertion</b>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Reusable</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Wear Time</b>	2-4 hours	3-6 hours	3-6 hours	6-12 hours	8 hours
<b>Amount Need per cycle</b>	1	5	12-22	1	12-22
<b>Price for one item</b>	\$2	\$1.50-\$3	\$0.10-\$0.30	\$10-\$40	\$0.20-\$0.30
<b>Health Risk</b>	Abnormal vaginal discharge, Skin irritations and Urogenital infections	Urinary tract infections, Bacterial vaginosis and Skin irritations	Skin irritations	Toxic shock syndrome	Toxic shock syndrome
<b>Maintenance</b>	Washing after wear time	Washing after wear time	None	Washing after wear time	None
<b>Availability for local procurement</b>	Yes	Yes	Not as available	No	No

This data is from 'Guide to Menstrual Hygiene Materials' by UNICEF.  
<https://www.unicef.org/wash/files/UNICEF-Guide-menstrual-hygiene-materials-2019.pdf>



## AMENITIES TO CHANGE

## Amenities to Change

### WASH

Over 500 million girls and women worldwide do not have access to adequate amenities to manage their menstruation. In Nigeria, 25% of girls and women lack these amenities. WASH stands for water, sanitation and hygiene amenities required out of the home (in schools, workplaces, health centres and communities) to manage menstruation. Examples of these amenities include a separate well-lit toilet for girls and women, doors that safely enclose these toilets, and water and soap to wash hands. In addition to having these amenities, girls need to be taught how to change and manage their periods.

UNICEF, in 2015, conducted a study within three Nigerian states - Katsina, Anambra and Osun states. They found that menstruating school girls experience physical and mental discomfort during their period and as a result, many miss classes. The research also revealed that the schools' WASH facilities were inadequate for menstrual management; only about 42% of toilets had functional locks and just 25% of the schools had running water and soap.

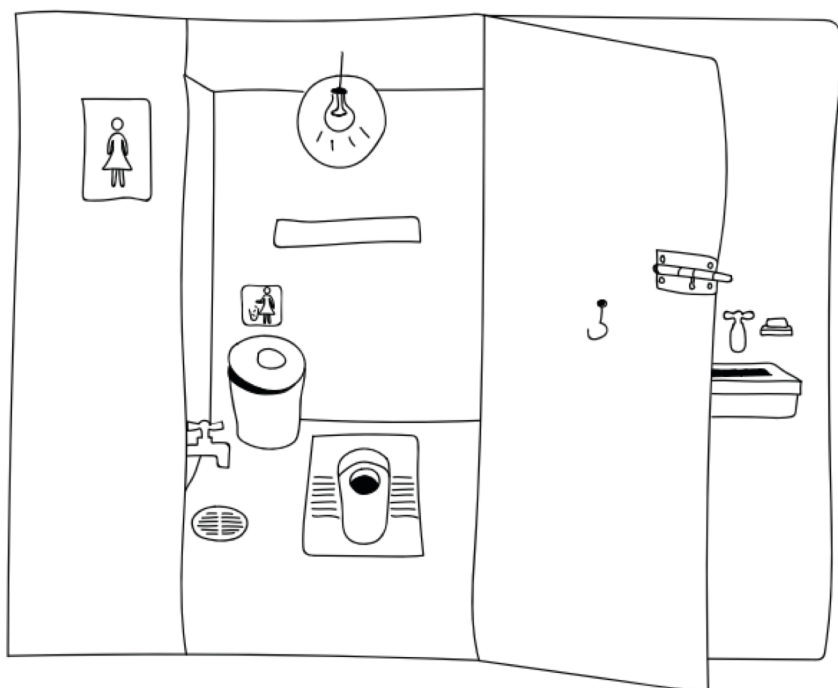
Studies have found that the inability to manage their periods out of the home has led to absenteeism in school, work, religious, cultural and social events. Increased absenteeism harms the education of these girls, the economy as a whole, their self-worth and body image.












## FACILITIES TO DISPOSE

## Facilities to Dispose

### Disposal Options



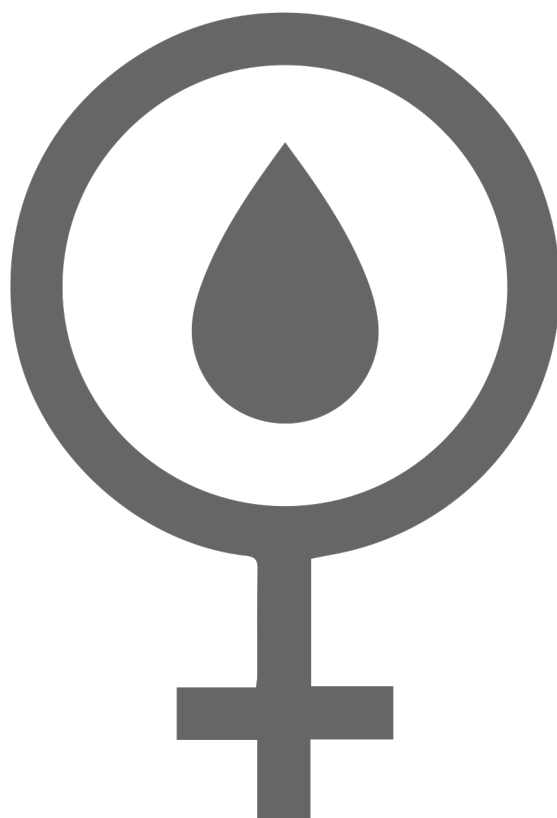
-  Adequate numbers of safely located toilets separated (with clear signage) from male facilities.
-  Safe and private toilets with inside door latch.
-  Clear signs instructing girls and women to dispose of menstrual waste in the trash bin.
-  A shelf and hook for hygienically storing belongings during usage.
-  Night time light source both inside and outside of the toilets.
-  Easily accessible water (ideally inside the cubicle) for girls and women to wash themselves and menstrual materials.
-  Trash bins (with lids) to dispose of used menstrual materials.
-  Walls, door and roof are made of non-transparent materials with no gaps or spaces.
-  Some units should be accessible to people with disabilities

This picture is from the ‘Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene’ Report by UNICEF  
<https://www.unicef.org/wash/files/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>

Having access to safe, hygienic and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual products is essential to having girls and women manage their periods. Inadequate disposal facilities for menstrual products also pose health and environmental challenges. This phase of the cycle is often overlooked which leaves girls and women with very few options;

- Flushing the used menstrual products down the toilet
- Tossing the used menstrual products on the side of the street or in gutters
- Staying home and being absent.

The participants we interviewed specifically mentioned that they taught their girls on how to dispose of their used menstrual products. The girls were taught to wrap the used product in plastic, then toss it into the bin. They all agree that used menstrual products should not be flushed down the toilet.



# CONCLUSION RECOMMENDATION

## Conclusion & Recommendations

### Conclusion

*Menstrual Hygiene Management* is about awareness and access; educating people about menstruation as well as menstrual health, and providing access to menstrual hygiene products, private amenities to change/clean up and facilities to properly dispose of used materials.

Unfortunately, this awareness and access are inhibited by poverty, little to no public infrastructures, poor sanitation, hygiene and waste management.

And the consequences of this inhibition leads to physical and mental health challenges for girls and women such as

- Reproductive tract infections
- Absenteeism from school, workplaces, religious, cultural and social activities
- Low self-worth and distorted body image.

NGOs are working to break these inhibitions by providing menstrual hygiene products to girls and women. They are empowering communities by teaching them how to start producing these products. They are advocating that these products should not be taxed and should be provided for free to school-aged girls. NGOs are building safe, private clean up amenities and providing facilities for disposal.

### Recommendations

What can we do to encourage and support these NGOs?

- As a community, we can advocate and push for legislation to be passed in favour of menstrual hygiene. Eliminate taxes on menstrual hygiene products, provide free menstrual hygiene products to school girls, mandate all schools to have change/clean up facilities, create an effective waste management system.
- As parents, we can debunk the myths and taboos surrounding menstruation. Menstrual hygiene management should not just be reserved for girls, but boys should also be educated and informed that menstruation is as normal as defecation.
- As teachers, we should create enabling girl-friendly environments for our girls to be able to menstruate with dignity. We should push for menstrual hygiene management to be included in our curriculums so as to educate and normalize menstruation.
- As entrepreneurs, we should be creating sustainable, biodegradable, reusable, menstrual hygiene products that are affordable, available and accessible.



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