

Menstrual Hygiene Management:
Implementing Technology and Why It Matters

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14. ABSTRACT Access to basic hygiene materials can be hindered following a disaster or humanitarian crisis. To assist women and girls who are encountering issues with Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), humanitarians can utilize technology. While technology is a key component to helping the MHM problem, issues may still be encountered due to women and girls often lacking access to technology. The Department of State's Plan to Implement the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security 2020-2023 includes a Line of Effort Action stating, "Support women and girls' access to humanitarian assistance and provide humanitarian assistance that is tailored to their distinct needs." MHM is a distinct need for many women and girls; technology can help meet that need.				
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Introduction

Following a disaster or humanitarian crisis, access to basic hygiene materials can be devastated. Women and girls in the impacted region are particularly vulnerable to insufficient resources due to unawareness, misunderstandings, and discrimination. To best assist women experiencing issues in Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), humanitarians can utilize the following technology: cellphones to identify women's specific needs, databases to forecast the needs, and online resources to conduct training and destigmatize MHM issues.

While technology plays an increasingly important role in assisting humanitarian response, one cannot overlook that women often lack access to technology. The issues of humanitarian aid and women's rights are complicated. Still, the issue is necessary to discuss as women increasingly play a vital role in conflict resolution. Improper MHM hinders women from participating in regular activities, including education. While this paper alone cannot rectify those issues, the recognition that challenges exist serves the paper's purpose: to expose others to the notion of a problem.

Background

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that 274 million people will need humanitarian assistance this year.¹ “In 2019, UNFPA estimated that out of the 100 million people requiring humanitarian assistance for reasons related to conflict and natural disasters, 35 million were women and girls aged 15–49. Inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services during emergencies contributes to unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion, maternal morbidity and mortality, and increased incidence of

¹ “Global Humanitarian Overview 2022,” Global Humanitarian Overview (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), accessed January 28, 2022, <https://gho.unocha.org/>.

sexually transmitted infections.”² In 2021, humanitarian aid consisting of “reproductive health services and supplies” was provided to 29 million women of reproductive age.³ Women of reproductive age generally menstruate for about two to seven days each month⁴, and therefore many women needing humanitarian assistance in 2022 will specifically need menstrual hygiene management (MHM) products.

The World Health Organization and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program have outlined and defined MHM as:

Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.⁵

To achieve an ideal MHM, humanitarians must be aware of the needs of women and the specific materials utilized in a region during menstruation.

It is important to understand that menstruation is a topic many people feel uncomfortable discussing or acknowledging. Around the world, women experience shame, guilt, and embarrassment because of menstruation. Due to long-held beliefs and lack of MHM education,

² Marta Schaaf et al., “Accountability Strategies for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights in Humanitarian Settings: A Scoping Review,” *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00264-2>.

³ Martin Griffiths, “Global Humanitarian Overview 2022” (United Nations), accessed January 27, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Global%20Humanitarian%20Overview%202022%20%28Introduction%29.pdf>.

⁴ “Fast Facts: Nine Things You Didn’t Know About Menstruation,” UNICEF, May 25, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>.

⁵ “Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene,” *Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene* (New York, NY: United Nations Children’s Fund, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/media/91341/file/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>.

taboos such as menstruating women being impure⁶ tend to develop, and women keep the need for menstrual supplies to themselves. For example, a study completed in Bangladesh identified “that only 23 percent of women use appropriate menstrual materials. The survey also found a high level of misinformation about menstruation, with three-quarters of students believing that activities such as going out, cooking, and eating certain types of food are forbidden during menstruation.”⁷ The range of views regarding menstruation can vary from the United States, where menstruation is generally not discussed in public settings, to western Nepal, where women are required to stay in a hut during menstruation in observation of a practice Chhaupadi.⁸ In communities impacted by Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), unexplained bleeding may be a symptom of EVD, menstrual bleeding is sometimes blamed on EVD and treated as a problem, not a natural bodily function.⁹ In Niger, some believe that menstruating women should not touch seeds as that will negatively impact a harvest.¹⁰ Some girls in Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan do not participate in religious ceremonies while menstruating, and some girls in India, Kenya, and Nepal are allowed to cook while menstruating.¹¹

⁶ Maitreyi Bordia Das and Gaia Hatzfeldt, “The Rising Tide: A New Look at Water and Gender,” *The World Bank*, 2017,

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/27949/W17068.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

⁷ Maitreyi Bordia Das and Gaia Hatzfeldt, “The Rising Tide: A New Look at Water and Gender,” *The World Bank*, 2017,

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/27949/W17068.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

⁸ Thérèse Mahon, Anjali Tripathy, and Neelam Singh, “Putting the Men into Menstruation: The Role of Men and Boys in Community Menstrual Hygiene Management,” *Waterlines* 34, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 7-14, <https://doi.org/10.3362/1756-3488.2015.002>.

⁹ Caitlin Gruer et al., “Integrating Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) into Ebola Response” (Columbia: Mailman School of Public Health, October 2020),

https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/mhm_in_evd_guidance_note_final.pdf.

¹⁰ Islamane Abdou and Salamatou Himou, “Menstruation Is a Natural Fact of Life,” UNICEF, October 8, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/niger/stories/menstruation-natural-fact-life>.

¹¹ Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli and Sheila Vipul Patel, “Mapping the Knowledge and Understanding of Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health Among Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries,” *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0293-6>.

Despite being regularly regarded as taboo or inappropriate for public discussion, menstruation is a basic human function. If women are uncomfortable identifying their menstrual needs in their typical daily setting, one can assume that they are also unlikely to identify their menstrual needs in a disaster setting. Research suggests that there is not much information or completed studies on how technology can benefit MHM compared to other humanitarian topics. Most information discovered appears to have been developed within the past five years and proves that there is still much work utilizing technology on the issue.

Women will still menstruate with or without a disaster, and taboos will likely continue. But humanitarian aid and technological advancements in the field can still greatly assist women by providing clean MHM products and helping destigmatize the shame that some feel regarding menstruation. Many areas of the world already experience non-ideal sanitary facilities that challenge proper hygiene even before a disaster. Only 27 percent of the population in Least Developed Countries have access to a handwashing facility at their home¹², making hygiene a concern, especially for menstruating women. Women's needs are often exacerbated in emergencies due to lack of access to feminine hygiene supplies, leading to embarrassment and unhygienic situations. Particularly regarding menstruation supplies, women in disaster environments may be unable to access supplies and "might be forced to reuse these items or use them for longer periods than recommended by health experts. This can lead to physical health issues such as urinary tract infections or toxic shock syndrome."¹³ Women and girls utilizing reusable MHM materials without proper washing are more susceptible to infections such as

¹² "Fast Facts: Nine Things You Didn't Know About Menstruation," UNICEF, May 25, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>.

¹³ Darcy Sullivan and Joane Nagel, "Code Red: Addressing Menstrual Needs During Emergencies," Natural Hazards Center: Research Counts (University of Colorado Boulder, September 23, 2020), <https://hazards.colorado.edu/news/research-counts/code-red-addressing-menstrual-needs-during-emergencies>.

bacterial vaginosis and urinary tract infections. Infections like these could lead to further complications such as preterm birth or pelvic inflammatory disease.¹⁴

Girls worldwide miss school, and learning opportunities, due to MHM supply inadequacies and embarrassment. Misunderstandings about the basic bodily function “lead to an overall culture of silence around the topic, resulting in limited information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene.”¹⁵ Concerned about blood stains, inability to access a private bathroom, lack of disposal locations for MHM management, and taboos, many girls choose not to go to school during their monthly menstruation. The Norwegian Refugee Council donated reusable menstruation supplies to students in Sudan, which reportedly significantly decreased the female student absence rate.¹⁶ Upticks in school attendance when proper MHM methods are implemented emphasize the criticality of the issue.

Humanitarian Standards

The Sphere Handbook identifies four technical standards for minimum humanitarian response: Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion (WASH), Food Security and Nutrition, Shelter and Settlement, and Health. Meeting women’s sanitary needs in a disaster meets the definition and needs of both the WASH and Health sectors.¹⁷ In addition to providing humans in need with deserved dignity and respect, good menstrual hygiene practices are critical to lessening the spread of disease. Recognition of basic sanitation needs can assist women in

¹⁴ Padma Das et al., “Menstrual Hygiene Practices, Wash Access and the Risk of Urogenital Infection in Women from Odisha, India,” *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6 (June 30, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0130777>.

¹⁵ World Bank Group, “Menstrual Hygiene Management Enables Women and Girls to Reach Their Full Potential,” World Bank (World Bank Group, May 25, 2018), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/05/25/menstrual-hygiene-management>.

¹⁶ “Helping Displaced Children Go Back to School in Sudan,” ReliefWeb, January 24, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/helping-displaced-children-go-back-school-sudan>.

¹⁷ “The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response,” (Geneva, Switzerland: Sphere Association, 2018), <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>.

receiving privacy protection that will ensure sanitation. As is stated in the Sphere Handbook, “simple measures from the start, such as locks on toilet doors, adequate lighting and facilities segregation can reduce the risk of abuse or violence.”¹⁸

The Sphere Handbook notes, “Menstruation beliefs, norms and taboos will affect the success of the response. Investigating these issues may not be possible during the initial or acute phase of the crisis, but it should be done as soon as possible.”¹⁹ Before arriving in an affected region, humanitarians should be aware of the various cultural beliefs regarding menstruation. The Sphere Handbook helps advise humanitarians on enacting procedures that assist women with MHM. Regarding toilet facilities, the Handbook states, “Consult with women and girls on the design of toilets to provide space, access to water for washing, and drying areas.”²⁰ Discussion of specific MHM supplies and logistic needs is vital to understanding and validating women’s needs.

UNICEF identified data sources for compiling information that can help a humanitarian understand the climate and viewpoints on MHM in a particular region.²¹ The first resource is the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), which conducted in-person interviews in 50 locations to garner MHM information. The methodology of conducting in-person interviews is simple and generally without any advanced technological capability; however, delivering the

¹⁸ “The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response,” (Geneva, Switzerland: Sphere Association, 2018), <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>.

¹⁹ “The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response,” (Geneva, Switzerland: Sphere Association, 2018), <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>.

²⁰ “The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response,” p. 118, (Geneva, Switzerland: Sphere Association, 2018), <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>.

²¹ “Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene,” *Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene* (New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/media/91341/file/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>.

information into a public online environment is helpful to humanitarians visiting regions. For example, the MICS conducted in Egypt discovered that sanitary pads were more likely to be used over cloths in urban areas.²² This particular datapoint emphasizes the reality that women may utilize different MHM products. It should never be assumed that all women will be comfortable using typical products found in the United States.

The second resource that UNICEF identified for helping others understand the needs of a region is the Performance Monitoring and Accountability 2020 (PMA2020). This source employs women Resident Enumerators who conduct interviews, then leverage smartphone technology to complete interviews, then “transfer data by phone to a central server via the mobile data network. In real-time, data are validated, aggregated, and prepared into tables and graphs, making results more quickly available to stakeholders as compared to a paper-and-pencil survey.”²³ This technology is an excellent use of traditional interviewing techniques and modernized technological improvements. The use of women to conduct interviews also highlights the organization’s commitment to achieving real results. Women interviewers will be more likely than men to get information from other women about such a taboo for many cultures and communities.

UNICEF’s third resource for humanitarian response is The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. This survey monitors mainly the availability of washing facilities in particular regions. These facilities are critical to menstruating women as many women utilize reusable cloth pads that need to be regularly

²² B. Anton et al., “Menstrual Hygiene Management: Evidence from the 6th Round of MICS,” October 2021, <https://mics.unicef.org/files?job=W1siZiIsIjIwMjE0MTA0MjUvMTQvMzAvMjcvOTMvTUIDU19NZXRob2RvbG9naWNhbF9QYXB1cl8xMV9NSE1fMjAyMS5wZGYiXV0&sha=7f41e0a9d9ca545f>.

²³ “Performance Monitoring and Accountability 2020 (PMA2020),” Hopkins Population Center (Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts and Sciences), accessed January 29, 2022, <https://popcenter.jhu.edu/projects/performance-monitoring-and-accountability-2020-pma2020/>.

cleaned. In its report, the Joint Monitoring Programming noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, innovative methods for collecting data needed to be implemented. Interviewers utilized technology “including increased use of phone surveys, and computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and short message service (SMS) surveys.”²⁴

Using Technology: Databases and Online Resources

Utilizing technology to evaluate past disasters can assist with planning for the next inevitable emergency. For example, understanding the flood patterns in the Bangladesh monsoon season helped the United Nations (UN) Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh anticipate funding and supplies in 2020. As a result, those in need received resources, such as MHM kits, before the kits were needed.²⁵ The UN was able to anticipate peak flooding through data received from the European Union’s Global Flood Awareness System (GloFAS) and Bangladesh Government’s Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre forecasts which monitor the rising waterway levels throughout the country and gave humanitarians an anticipated 10-day and 5-day lead time respectively before peak flooding.²⁶

The need for sanitary products is not only a disaster-related problem. Women throughout the world, including in the U.S., are regularly in need of supplies. While humanitarians may seek to assist women with MHM needs, they may discover that women utilize different types of products simply due to culture, associated supplies, or logistics. Following Hurricane Harvey’s landfall in south Texas, much of the area flooded. Residents were displaced from their homes,

²⁴ “Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: 2000-2020 Five Years Into the SDGs,” accessed January 29, 2022, <https://washdata.org/>.

²⁵ “Bangladesh Monsoon Flooding 2020: Anticipatory Action Pilot,” OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/anticipatory-action/summary-bangladesh-pilot>.

²⁶ Patrick Moser, “Acting Before the Flood: An Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot in Bangladesh” (OCHA, March 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Acting%20Before%20the%20Flood%20-%20Bangladesh%20AA%20synthesis%20report.pdf>.

often staying in community centers with little access to MHM. Fortunately, some media sources in the United States recognized the issue, and several articles and media-related pleas for specific types of donations were answered.²⁷ The simple utilization of media expanded the knowledge scope of the problem and allowed people to contribute donations. However, society does not always recognize this kind of acceptance of the MHM issue.

Noting the need for better MHM education, some organizations have implemented the internet to spread awareness. Days for Girls, a humanitarian organization focused on MHM, has free printable posters in four languages to educate on safe MHM and free online training sessions, including a course for men titled ‘Men Who Know’ with the aim of destigmatizing MHM.²⁸ Period the Menstrual Movement utilizes YouTube to share videos that educate others about menstruation and period poverty, which is a concept that acknowledges the unaffordability of MHM materials.²⁹

Using Technology: Mobile Phones

Technology, particularly in the utilization of mobile phones, can share helpful MHM information. Mobile phones can connect humanitarians with women in need. Phones can also provide access to training for humanitarians on how to accommodate needs and training for people not aware of MHM to dispel myths about menstruation.

Mobile phones can inform women of menstruation product distribution, hygiene practices, and disease mitigation. Phones can also be utilized to conduct polls or attain information on what women need and what MHM products are available. In some areas of the

²⁷ Maggie Mallon, “Hurricane Harvey Victims Need Tampons, Pads, and Diapers-Here's How You Can Help,” *Glamour* (Glamour, September 1, 2017), <https://www.glamour.com/story/hurricane-harvey-victims-need-tampons-pads-and-diapers-heres-how-you-can-help>.

²⁸ “Days for Girls: Emergency Response,” Days for Girls International, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www.daysforgirls.org/emergency-response/#>.

²⁹ “Period The Menstrual Movement,” Period.org, accessed January 30, 2022, <https://period.org/>.

world, women find that reusable MHM products are more practical. However, in some locations in India, women do not have access to hot water to wash reusable products. Therefore, disposable material is the best solution until hot, clean water and soap are available in the region.³⁰ Utilizing cell phone technology could help humanitarians gain insight into local challenges, such as the lack of efficient washing capability. Crowdsourcing can help find the prevailing needs and challenges for women. An example of Crowdsourcing technology is Ushahidi which “is a free and open-source platform that combines SMS, Twitter, and Google Maps to crowdsource crisis information... information collected can be communicated directly to those who most need to use it.”³¹ This kind of technology can be helpful not only in assessing the needs but also in disseminating MHM supplies and information.

Technology provides humanitarians the ability to connect to local populations. Following significant research with adolescent girls in Mongolia and Indonesia, UNICEF released an MHM app, Oky, in 2019. “Oky is age and culturally appropriate, localised, and in local languages.”³² The groundbreaking app is a critical step in technological MHM innovation because most MHM information focuses on women in high-income areas concerned with fertility. By focusing efforts on girls, UNICEF has validated their MHM needs.

A possible benefit of cell phone technology is the ability of humanitarians to contact women needing help. However, getting cell phones to women is not without challenge. A March 2019 GSMA and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) study of mobile phone usage in the Bidi Bidi

³⁰ “Myna Mahila Foundation,” Myna Mahila Foundation, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://mynamahila.com/faqs/#1522839100068-5e5b867a-a11c>.

³¹ Diane Coyle and Patrick Meier, “New Technologies in Emergencies and Conflicts: The Role of Information and Social Networks,” accessed January 29, 2022, http://www.globalproblems-globalsolutions-files.org/pdf/UNF_tech/emergency_tech_report2009/Tech_EmergencyTechReport_full.pdf.

³² “Innovation in MHM: Putting Girls at the Center: Proceedings of the 8th Virtual Conference on Menstrual Hygiene Management in Schools,” accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/media/105506/file/innovation-menstrual-hygiene-management-virtual-conference.pdf>.

Refugee Settlement in Uganda and Kiziba Refugee Camp in Rwanda found that women experience barriers to mobile phone usage due to a variety of reasons that include less financial means than men due to holding community positions such as domestic work that do not pay wages. The study found that social norms from husbands or partners limit women's usage due to men's concern that women will utilize the phone to communicate with or find new partners.³³ It is noted in the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2018 that women in low and middle-income countries are 26% less likely than men to utilize the internet.³⁴

A 2018 Harvard study found that while 71% of men in India own a mobile phone, only 38% of women are cell phone owners.³⁵ The same study also identified that due to cultural norms, many women preferred functions of a mobile phone that favored more private usage such as WhatsApp rather than utilizing a more public function such as posting to a broad audience on Facebook. A further complication to mobile phone usage is connectivity unreliability. Many mobile phone functions require the use of a smartphone with regular internet connectivity that may not always be realistic in a disaster setting.³⁶

Low cell phone usage rates among women appear to correlate with poor social conditions that prohibit them from accessing MHM materials. For example, "South Sudan does poorly on the inclusion dimension, with only 5 percent of women having their own bank account and only

³³ Matthew Downer, "Bridging the Mobile Gender Gap for Refugees: A Case Study of Women's Use of Mobile Phones in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement and Kiziba Refugee Camp," *GSMA*, March 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/m4hgendergaprefugeecontexts.pdf>.

³⁴ Oliver Rowntree, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2018," February 2018, https://www.gsma.com/latinamerica/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GSMA_The_Mobile_Gender_Gap_Report_2018_32pp_WEBv7.pdf.

³⁵ Giorgia Barboni et al., "A Tough Call: Understanding Barriers to and Impacts of Women's Mobile Phone Adoption in India," October 2018, https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/A_Tough_Call.pdf.

³⁶ Mirianna Budimir, Emma Bee, and Jonathan Paul, "Using Mobile Phone Technologies for Disaster Risk Management: Reflections from SHEAR," June 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Using%20mobile%20phone%20technologies%20for%20Disaster%20Risk%20Management%20-%20Reflections%20from%20SHEAR.pdf>.

27 percent reporting use of a personal cellphone—the lowest share in the world— and high rates of organized violence and intimate partner violence.”³⁷ UNICEF identified in 2018 that due to high cost of MHM material, many girls stop attending school or “sometimes use animal skins, leaves, rags and even stones to conceal their bleeding.”³⁸

Complications from COVID-19

Among the many challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to the world are the impediments to menstrual hygiene products, supplies, and equipment. USAID identifies that because COVID-19 has impacted the global supply chain, certain products needed for menstrual hygiene may be unavailable or too expensive. At the same time, lack of access to clean water may limit the washing of supplies.³⁹ Additionally, closures of community centers with internet access because of COVID-19 quarantines and lockdowns have limited information available to women and girls about menstrual health.⁴⁰

The Women Peace and Security Index reports continuing disadvantages to women during the COVID-19 pandemic but notes that technological improvements have assisted in reaching more people. “Ghana and Kenya expanded mobile cash transfers during the pandemic, reaching women in informal work and in remote areas.”⁴¹ However, the Index also notes that displaced

³⁷ “Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022,” Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace, and Security, p. 21, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>.

³⁸ Simon Crittle, “Keeping Girls in School by Helping Them Manage Their Periods,” UNICEF South Sudan, February 21, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/stories/keeping-girls-school-helping-them-manage-their-periods>.

³⁹ “Job Aid Tool For USAID Activities: Carrying Out a COVID-Specific Gender Analysis,” 2021, USAID. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID_CSGA_Job_Aid_Tool_English_Compliant_12_May_2021.pdf

⁴⁰ World Bank Group, “Periods Don’t Stop for Pandemics – Neither Will Our Efforts to Bring Safe Menstrual Hygiene to Women and Girls,” World Bank (World Bank Group, May 28, 2020), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/05/28/menstrual-hygiene-day-2020>.

⁴¹ “Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022,” Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace, and Security, p. 8, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>.

women without a home location often experience challenges receiving cash and voucher assistance. In particular, “forcibly displaced women and host community women in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan reveal that displaced women had an average disadvantage of about 24 percent.”⁴²

Women, Peace, and Security

Recognizing the importance of women’s role in conflict resolution throughout the world, the Women, Peace, and Security Act was signed into United States Public Law on October 6, 2017. Among the findings, Congress listed:

Women in conflict-affected regions have achieved significant success in—

- (A) moderating violent extremism;
- (B) countering terrorism;
- (C) resolving disputes through nonviolent mediation and negotiation; and
- (D) stabilizing societies by enhancing the effectiveness of security services, peacekeeping efforts, institutions, and decision-making processes.⁴³

Acknowledging the meaningful and essential role of women around the world, particularly in conflict areas that are prone to needing humanitarian assistance, is a positive step to ensuring women are viewed as equal members of society. However, more work must be done to ensure that the basic hygiene needs of women are accommodated and not left to misinformation that places women in potentially more dangerous conditions. The financial burden of MHM products is an issue throughout the world. In November 2020, Scotland became the first country in the

⁴² “Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022,” Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace, and Security, p. 9, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>.

⁴³ “Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017,” Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 § (2017), <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ68/PLAW-115publ68.pdf>.

world to make MHM products free of charge. At the same time, many states within the United States tax MHM supplies, despite other necessities not taxed.⁴⁴

Due to the stigma attached to menstruation, care should be taken for menstrual product distribution that meets the needs of the local population. For example, menstrual products can be made available within a private toilet facility and not in a public area to deflect potential embarrassment. While not specifically addressing MHM, the Department of State's Plan to Implement the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security 2020-2023 includes a Line of Effort Action stating, "Support women and girls' access to humanitarian assistance and provide humanitarian assistance that is tailored to their distinct needs."⁴⁵ To understand women's distinct needs, mobile phones offer the capacity to gain insight through simplified communication. However, longstanding blocks between women and technology may hinder the ability to reach women in this manner. For example, "although a 2019 law in Ethiopia allows refugees to work and open bank accounts, implementation has been delayed, and the mobile money market is nascent. Social norms and a lack of financial and digital literacy disproportionately obstruct displaced women's access to financial services."⁴⁶

Conclusion

The MHM needs of women and girls around the world often receive little attention and are exacerbated by disasters that result in displacement and a lack of supplies.

Women's equality around the world is threatened by insecurity and misinformation due to many reasons, but one of the more curious reasons is menstruation. Women's roles in society are

⁴⁴ Emma Goldberg, "Many Lack Access to Pads and Tampons. What Are Lawmakers Doing About It?," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/tampons-pads-period.html>.

⁴⁵ "Women, Peace, and Security - U.S. Department of State." Department of State. Accessed January 29, 2022. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20-01943-SGWI_v11_forWeb_Bookmarks508.pdf.

⁴⁶ "A New Lens on Forced Displacement," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/index-story/a-new-lens-on-forced-displacement/>.

critical to conflict resolution, as outlined in the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017. Women's and girls' needs should not be a subject hidden on a professional, legal, or humanitarian level. Menstrual Hygiene Management is often a taboo subject, and therefore women and girls may experience shame or embarrassment when menstruating. Technology and the utilization of data collected and analyzed regarding varying regional social and health needs before a crisis can assist in identifying best response solutions.

The use of technology can assist humanitarians in identifying the needs of women and educating all on MHM, which will likely benefit women experiencing shame, embarrassment, and inconvenience because of menstruation. Cell phones help attain information on women's needs and get information distributed to women. Still, there are barriers to this method as many women globally do not have cell phone access. Perhaps the most realistic solution to MHM is not a high-tech solution but rather a low-tech solution that implements classic strategies of recognizing someone's needs simply by asking them. Training regarding MHM utilizing internet resources can help educate humanitarians and people living and working with menstruating women.

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