

Spreading Fear and Shame: The Forgotten Victims of the Global Pandemic



This is a unique time in history. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to spread through our populations while governments take measures to combat it and keep us safe. Communities are isolating themselves and whole countries are locked down in a global effort to stop infection rates and protect the vulnerable from its indiscriminate clutches.

For many of us, this means taking a break from our usual routines and sitting tight until we can return to normal. But there are some things that carry on regardless of epidemics, and for many women and girls in poor and remote areas, access to essential services and basic hygiene supplies has become almost impossible.

Periods Don't Stop for a Pandemic

Around the world, many women and girls still face challenges when it comes to their monthly periods. Even before the current crisis, it was estimated that up to 5 million each day have difficulty accessing things that many of us take for granted, such as adequate sanitary products, clean water for washing and private places to change. Add to this the feelings of shame and embarrassment, the high cost of menstrual products and the fact that in many countries girls are considered to be old enough for marriage once their periods start, and it's no wonder that studies show a correlation between periods and school drop-out rates.

To make matters worse, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has found that social stigma, political indifference and misinformation further expose women and girls to gender discrimination, child marriage, violence, poverty and exclusion. It also makes them more vulnerable to health problems and conditions, while at the same time making it harder for them to access healthcare and emergency treatment.

In the current crisis, restriction of movement and the closure of essential services means that for millions of women and girls, managing their periods is more difficult than ever.

Menstrual Matters vs Covid-19

Here in Uganda, we are working hard to help our women and girls to manage their periods hygienically and with dignity, without fear of shame or stigma. In our rural and remote areas, we are helping by providing access to clean water for washing, private changing areas and waste disposal facilities. We are also working to include provision for sanitary items in our distribution packages of food and essential items.

As well as practical support, we have been working with local and national authorities to educate communities and raise awareness of women's health and menstruation. As part of World Menstrual Hygiene (MHM) day on the 28th May, we held a series of webinars designed to engage key decision and policy makers in making women's health a political priority and to bring about change at all levels of society. The webinars brought together the WDF, the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports in partnership with Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum, and the Uganda CSO Coalition on MHM, aimed at breaking silence around women's issues, challenging negative social norms and acting as a catalyst for positive change.

When You Can't Call the Midwife

We are also addressing the issue of maternal health services, which have also been severely disrupted by the pandemic. As our health care system struggles to cope with the demands of Covid-19, other services and products become limited or reduced, meaning that many women and girls will struggle to access screening tests, contraceptives, pre-natal, peri-natal and post-natal care. Counselling and child healthcare services are also restricted, as is access to accurate information and support in emergencies. This in turn exposes the women to human rights abuses and unsafe practices, putting them and their children at further risk.

The ability for women and girls to decide when, with who and how many children they want is a fundamental human right, and access to Family Planning Services is recognized as one of the most cost-effective way to protect the health and well-being of women and girls. Furthermore, governments and NGOs around the world recognize that addressing obstacles to menstrual hygiene is a key factor in reaching the United Nation's sustainable development goals of good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality and access to clean water and sanitation.

Here in Uganda, our Ministry of Health is working hard to maintain the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, while at the same time reducing the risk of maternal mortality, unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions, malnutrition and the spread of STIs. It is

essential that we continue to provide these services, despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic.

The Role of Men and Boys

Periods aren't just an issue for women – there are growing reports of increases in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation directly related to an increase in fear and the restriction of movement. This is compounding the already existing gender inequalities and putting more pressure on health and emergency services which are already overwhelmed by the pandemic.

The support and understanding of men in these times - as parents and as key policy makers - is fundamental in protecting these vulnerable women and changing society's attitude to menstruation and women's health.

The Future is Watching

The Wilmat Development Foundation is dedicated to creating a Ugandan society in which every woman and girl is empowered to manage her menstruation safely, hygienically and with confidence. As part of this, we are aiming to provide 200 young girls and teenage mothers with free sanitary towels and pads, helping them live without shame and enabling them to fully participate in their lives. Because with the immense struggles already imposed on them by the pandemic, they shouldn't have to worry about their periods too.

Help us build a community where no girl is limited by her period.