IN AFRICA
Over 400 million women and girls are of reproductive health age. For many of them, being able to manage their monthly menstruation safely, comfortably and with dignity is a struggle.

COVID-19
Menstruating girls and women face limited privacy, inadequate access to toilets and water and may lack menstrual products, underwear and soap as they are in quarantine, isolation or due to the COVID-19 related lockdowns.

RESPONSES
Multi-sectoral responses, partnerships and collaborations that are working.
“We will continue to boldly and urgently take action so that every girl, woman and girl can enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights and not be limited or held back by their periods.”

- Dr Julitta Onabanjo
  Acting Deputy Executive Director Programme, UNFPA

BACKGROUND
In Africa, over 400 million women and girls are of reproductive health age. For many of them, being able to manage their monthly menstruation safely, comfortably and with dignity is a struggle. Menstruating girls and women face limited privacy, inadequate access to toilets and water, and may lack menstrual products, underwear, and soap as they are in quarantine, isolation, or due to COVID-19 related lockdowns.

As an urgent call to action, the African Coalition for Menstrual Health Management (ACHMH) and Days for Girls (DfG), with support and guidance from UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office hosted a virtual discussion on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in responding to menstrual health needs in Africa.

Held online on 27 May 2019, ahead of the International Menstrual Hygiene Day commemoration, the dialogue had various stakeholders including government partners, UN Agencies, members of the private and public sector, social media influencers, researchers, members of the civil society, and NGOs.

More than 270 participants joined from across the globe.

OBJECTIVE
In this Decade of Action, the dialogue brought all menstrual health stakeholders to review issues, challenges, and opportunities amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. It has been agreed that all the lessons shared will be collated to inform a policy/position paper on MHM and health emergencies in particular.

SPEAKER’S PROFILES

UNFPA

Dr Julitta Onabanjo
Acting Deputy Executive Director, Programme
DISCUSSION

The discussion centred on multi-sectoral responses to Menstrual Health during COVID-19, especially lessons and best practices which can be replicated, scaled up and sustained beyond the pandemic.

Furthermore, the discussion focused on messages and communication strategies that have been effective.

The panelists also shared the resources they utilized and are maintaining during various COVID-19-related lockdowns across the region and beyond.

Finally, the panelists were encouraged to share which partnerships and collaborations have worked during the pandemic that will be useful and can be sustained post-COVID-19.

HIGHLIGHTS

JUSTINE COULSON

Justine Coulson welcomed all participants to the webinar and highlighted that it is significant that the web dialogue has been organized as part of activities to mark this year’s International Menstrual Hygiene Day, and two months after the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Since then, the global community has been experiencing an increase in COVID-19 infections and mortality rates. However, organisations and communities have also seen the implementation of stringent prevention and risk mitigation measures such as lockdowns in Africa and globally. The dialogue comes at an opportune time to reflect on some of the highlights, issues, challenges, successes and lessons in dealing with menstrual health within nationwide, regional and global restrictions.

JULITTA ONABANJO

In her opening remarks, Dr. Julitta Onabanjo acknowledged that we need to secure and protect - in the midst of this pandemic - the human rights including the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people.

The need for continuous access and choices to essential quality and integrated sexual and reproductive health and menstrual health information, education, products and services are being set aside or simply being ignored in the many COVID-19 related responses and recovery efforts.
Due to the pandemic, several communities have experienced disruptions in supply chain leading to challenges of sanitary products and contraceptive supplies; suspension of the free menstrual products distribution and comprehensive sexuality education including menstrual health and puberty education as well as heightened period poverty associated challenges.

However, she pointed that periods do not stop for pandemics and neither must we. Many communities have shown their resilience, calling for all of us to seize this unprecedented time to plan better.

As the theme of this year’s menstrual hygiene day continues to be ‘#itstimeforaction’, Dr. Onabanjo reiterated that it is “an urgent call to all of us to continue to collectively voice that menstrual health and hygiene and sexual and reproductive health and rights should not be an addendum or an afterthought to COVID–19 and all other health and humanitarian responses.

LAURA AMAYA

Laura Amaya spoke about COVID-19 Influence on the MHM landscape - opportunities to fast-track MHM responses.

Focusing on the recent report released by FSG titled Advancing Gender Equity by improving Menstrual Health, Ms Amaya highlighted there is a correlation between increased economic standing at population level and improved Menstrual Health Management.

The presentation brought in some interesting perspective that, within countries, it is actually cultural and gender norms and stigma around menstruation that have a deep influence and impact on improving Menstrual Health Management (MHM), and these are not necessarily correlated to wealth.

A significant proportion of girls (approximately 70 percent in India) still do not know what menstruation is, and when they got their first period.

Knowledge of menstrual hygiene not only helps women to understand their bodies better but is also helps them to easily recognize things that are not normal, such as miscarriages and other kinds of vaginal bleeding that might be harmful to their lives. She emphasized that focus should be given to the entire woman’s reproductive health cycle from menarche to menopause.

Addressing stigma associated with menstruation needs to be done at an individual, family, community and institutional level such as media and political institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore could present an opportunity to fast track Menstrual Health Management and related responses including tax-free sanitary products.

JANET MBUGUA

Janet Mbugua spoke about The Importance of Communication Conversation around menstruation in mainstream media and political institutions. This is helping to highlight menstrual hygiene management issues. However, stigma associated with menstruation still persists being seen. For instance, in some cultural settings, women and girls are not allowed into the house during their period- being told “you’re dirty.”

Local community radios, community health volunteers and workers are important channels of communication especially in communities with limited or lack of internet connectivity. Equipping these individuals with advocacy tools as they are the people on the ground is a good strategy.

Train local media on good communication skills but still leverage on the power of both digital and traditional media.

Effective public engagement using a multi-stakeholder approach involving academics, civil society and influencers is vital to promote Menstrual Healthy Management.

Story telling is also a great tool to use in demystifying issues around menstruation and can also be used as a tool to push for policy implementation.

There is need to advocate, amplify and act. With advocacy, it’s about awareness to get people to open up and enable them to have period open discussions/conversations on menstruation around period poverty and menstrual inequality.

“Lack of menstrual knowledge for young girls translates into barriers to contraceptives access and appropriate family planning methods.”

“Innovation and creativity is a great asset to incorporate to an identified communication channel or platform.”
The experts spoke about Programme Implementation during COVID-19: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities.

Literature review and research using focus group discussions and survey as some of the research methodologies were done to understand menstruation related issues among pupils such as absenteeism and the effect of menstruation on school attendance.

Before the lockdown, learners face challenges when it comes to Menstrual Health Management. But taking into account that most learners were having difficulties with connectivity, tools were then provided to learners with the aim to provide information on COVID-19 and how they can manage their menstruation.

Through a WhatsApp chat survey, it was revealed that...

"Survey revealed that 30 percent the girls have no sanitary pads at home. They had to use old blankets, old clothes instead. But availability of clean water to clean the identified materials was also a challenge."

Soap in most schools to effectively help learners clean themselves might be a challenge when school opens.

The effects of the lockdown on MHM educational sessions that help learners to understand issues around menstruation were discussed.

It was concluded that there is need to incorporate counselling to women when they are choosing a contraceptive method, since depending on the chosen method of family planning, their menstrual cycle might be impacted.

**ALICE WAMBUI**


There has been scarcity and limited accessibility of menstrual products as governments focus has been on creating awareness about COVID-19, and less priority has been given to Menstrual Health Management.

"Menstrual stigma and shaming have been on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. An incident of one girl who had soiled her dress and then told by her community members that we don’t even want to associate with you because maybe the blood on your dress could even transmit the virus."

Lockdown has seen women and girls facing challenges to manage their periods due to lack of privacy in their households.

At the grassroots level, individual door-to-door strategy was used to enhance communication COVID-19 prevention measures alongside menstrual health and hygiene; and these were strengthened by local partnerships with all local actors.

She concluded by emphasizing the need to continue to engage men and boys around issues of menstrual health management.

**JASMINE BURTON**

Jasmine Burton speaking about MHM and Waste Disposal in the COVID-19 era.

Innovation is key to the toilet economy. COVID-19 has disrupted revenue across the board, but the sanitation and hygiene sector has been quick to bounce back – in many geographies sanitation is an essential service – this showcases the recession-proof nature of Sanitation Economy.

"Communication is key as it is the in road to completely debunk a lot of the issues and misconceptions around menstruation."
Charlotte Soulary speaking about Reproductive health / MHM Products and Supplies During COVID-19: Issues, Challenges and Successes.

The effects of the lockdowns and their have given rise to huge socioeconomic impacts among communities were once again echoed by Ms Soulary. We have seen supply chain disruptions and families have experienced financial stress to access basic needs including menstrual hygiene products. It is however encouraging to note that some quick advocacy efforts.

“Innovations in MHM have helped to mitigate some of the negative impacts of lockdowns, such as declaring menstrual hygiene products as part of the essential goods/commodities.”

This also allowed for the continued manufacturing of sanitary products as well as distribution.

There is need to push for a sustained momentum to make a case for menstrual hygiene products and services as essential and not as a luxury. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us a foundation to promote that promote for that new reality. Similarly, the same goes to continuing to ensure that have these products and services to be part of Universal Health Coverage.