



AFRICAN COALITION
FOR MENSTRUAL
HEALTH MANAGEMENT



CONCEPT NOTE

Improving Menstrual Health Management in Africa Symposium

May 2021

1. Introduction

The beginning of puberty and the menstruation cycle are a fundamental and healthy aspect of the lives of women, girls and people who menstruate. This is a phase indicating and symbolising growth and development, yet usually characterised by anxiety, fear, shame, stigma and discrimination. Menstrual health management is directly linked to the fulfilment of human rights and specifically reproductive rights, both as a precondition for attaining rights such as health and education, and also as a matter of dignity in its own right. It is an integral component to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and essential for the advancement of the Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development in Africa Beyond 2014 and the African Union [Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#).

It is imperative that girls, women and other people who menstruate are provided with the necessary information, resources and support to manage their menstrual needs throughout the lifecycle- from menarche to menopause. Yet, menstrual health remains a silent issue in Africa, where girls, women and other people who menstruate access to menstrual health management is negatively influenced by social norms, limited access to age-appropriate information, unavailability of affordable sanitary products, and limited quality of water and sanitation facilities, as well as health services. This hinders their daily activities, increases the risk of school absence, leads to stigma and discrimination, and has negative implications for their sexual and reproductive and mental health.

As a result of strengthened global and localized advocacy, MHM has gained greater attention in recent years as an integrated, cross-sectoral response involving sexual and reproductive health, social development, education and life skills, water, hygiene and sanitation, and waste disposal among others, both in development and humanitarian contexts. It is also increasingly

being recognised as a topic requiring more in-depth research and a stronger monitoring and evaluation (M&E) focus. This is demonstrated by the rapid momentum and partner engagement, as well as the increasing number of commitments being made at country, regional and global levels, including the commitments made at the recent [International Conference of Population and Development \(ICPD\) Nairobi Summit](#), conclusions at the [63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW63\)](#) on MHM, the recommendations made by some partners to include MHM questions and indicators in Demographic Health Surveys (DHS), the legal and policy decisions by some countries to subsidise and / or zero-rate taxes on sanitary products, the development and adoption of MHM policies and MHM integration, as well as the ongoing acceleration of efforts to harmonise tools and indicators for MHM measurement and strategic information, to mention a few. This continued advocacy has also led to MHM no longer being a silent issue within the various sectors and communities, highlighting its multisectoral nature, and the need for all stakeholders to address the MHM related needs and strengthen its integration in policy and programming.

In Africa, efforts to improve policy dialogue, knowledge management, partnerships and coordination of menstrual health management across the continent are advancing, with some results of joint advocacy being realised in countries such as Kenya, Lesotho, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe announcing the removal of Value Added Tax (VAT) on menstrual products; and the adoption of national standards for menstrual products in Uganda and South Africa, as well as the integration of MHM into school health, WASH, education and gender policies, strategies or guidelines in Cameroon, Nigeria and Ethiopia, for instance. These efforts have been taken further to include other key policy decisions such as the diversification of menstrual products in an effort to improve choices and options for the various population and age groups. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on MHM, several efforts have been implemented by several partners including UNFPA and the African Coalition for MHM. These include advocacy for the inclusion of menstrual products as essential items, the integration of MHM into other public health and pandemic responses, as well as the development of guidance documents including the ACMHM, Days for Girls & UNFPA publication, [MHM Lessons Learnt from COVID-19](#) released in October 2020.

2. Background

In May 2018, UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office (UNFPA ESARO) and the Department of Women in the Presidency of the Republic of South Africa co-hosted the first [African symposium on menstrual health management](#). With the support and collaboration of several other partners and UN agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO), the

Symposium brought together 300 representatives from more than 20 national governments, academic institutions, religious and traditional leaders, non-governmental organizations, donors, United Nations agencies, private sector organizations, youth-led organizations, private sector and social entrepreneurs.

The Symposium contributed to strengthened commitment to better respond to the MHM needs of people who menstruate throughout their reproductive life cycle, by supporting the evidence-base and showcasing a range of innovative and sustainable models. From the Symposium, a **Call to Action** was made and, among other issues, Symposium attendees called for the establishment of an African Coalition for Menstrual Health Management, with the aim of sharing experiences and available evidence, and coordinating efforts to address menstrual health management issues in Africa. In addition, it was concluded that the symposium should be held every two (2) years to take stock, reflect on progress and share lessons and updates. The Coalition was established in September 2018, and the commitment to host the symposium is being upheld, hence this upcoming symposium.

2.1. The African Coalition for Menstrual Health Management

Since its establishment in September 2018, the Coalition has established itself as a collaborative partnership of practitioners working on MHM, Public Health, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the African region. The Coalition is made of almost 600 experts working in or interested in MHM issues, policy makers, young people, social entrepreneurs, civil society organisations and individuals. It is coordinated by the Secretariat and governed by the leadership team which comprises the leads and co-leads of the six (6) task forces of the Coalition, with Research and M&E being an overarching task force:

- Education
- Humanitarian settings
- Marginalised Groups
- Products and Standards development
- Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and
- Water, Sanitation, Hygiene & Waste disposal.

Among other functions, the Coalition has the convening power to bring on board various stakeholders to prioritise menstrual health management across the continent. The mandate of the Coalition cuts across the policy and programmatic aspects through advocating for evidence-based programming and social accountability as Coalition members jointly hold leaders and governments accountable, especially for the implementation and financing of the commitments made.

Even though the Coalition has had some commendable successes in its two years of operation, more efforts are still needed to strengthen evidence-based and data driven advocacy, policy development and implementation, programming that integrates MHM, and the need to ensure sustainable financing for implementing and monitoring programmes at scale and across the various sectoral mandates and avenues. The need to develop effective and innovative approaches to ensure a wider range of interventions including products, supply management and distribution has also been identified as a priority during the various consultations and reporting platforms.

It is against this background that the [African Coalition for Menstrual Health Management \(ACMHM\)](#) under the auspices of UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office (UNFPA ESARO), and selected partners aim to convene the second African symposium on menstrual health management in May 2021, and this will be a virtual symposium. The initial plan was to have the symposium in October 2020 but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Purpose

The purpose of the symposium is to take stock since the 2018 East and Southern Africa symposium, share updates and highlights, strengthen linkages and commitment, support the evidence base to better transition research to action, and to demonstrate and share innovative, sustainable and scalable models to address the menstrual health management needs of adolescent girls, women and people who menstruate throughout their menstrual lifecycle – from menarche to menopause. The symposium will also track the implementation of the 2018 Call to Action, and the commitments made. In emphasising the life course approach, the symposium will highlight issues related to menarche and menopause, with deliberate efforts to enhance the integration of MHM into SRHR policy and programming.

In addition, the symposium will contribute to the commitments of the Generation Equality Forum that focuses on the rights of adolescent girls and young women to have access to quality menstrual health information and technologies. The symposium will strengthen the outcomes of the Generation Equality Forum which mobilize adolescent girls and women and young people in general making their voices heard, lifting up those who have been silenced and stigmatized far too long and empower them to drive the transformative change required to bring gender equality across regions. This symposium will zoom into menstrual hygiene management and seize the moment to reimagine the norms and values of societies towards

MHM, navigate economies and systems to communicate new technologies and uphold human rights in order to ensure that no one is left behind.

4. Objectives

The symposium aims to:

- I. Report on and take stock of the progress in menstrual health management (MHM) and the commitments made during the 2018 ESA MHM symposium; follow up on MHM commitments made during the Nairobi ICPD Summit and feed into the commitments to be made in the Generation Equality Forum.
- II. Create a platform for advocacy, dialogue, knowledge and research sharing, skills building, networking and partnerships to strengthen policy, programming and research on MHM within SRHR, public health and the development agenda.
- III. Strengthen the linkages between community-based organisations / entrepreneurs and national, regional and global partners and leaders; and enhance learning and sharing of best practices on successful, comprehensive and innovative policy and programme approaches on menstrual health management.
- IV. Enhance South-South learning, strengthen and strategically position the African Coalition for MHM (ACMHM) to facilitate the visioning process from the 2018 MHM **Call to Action**, and to improve advocacy, coordination and synergy among African countries.
- V. To enhance partnerships for innovative financing for MHM.

5. Expected outcomes

- I. Recommendations for strengthening the integration of menstrual health management into SRHR, public health, gender, and climate resilience, in development and humanitarian settings;
- II. Strengthened policy, programme and financial commitments from national governments, donors and the private sector and consensus among partners on programmatic priorities to address key barriers and challenges related to menstrual health management in Africa;
- III. Documentation / a compendium of replicable MHM policies and programmes;
- IV. Enhanced skills and competencies to manage MHM programmes
- V. Strengthened partnerships, financing and shared action for the African Coalition, with a clear focus on contributions to be made in line with the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development and the Universal Health Care (UHC) agenda.

- VI. A draft scorecard/roadmap to guide members of ACMHM and countries to monitor progresses towards achieving MHM commitments developed.

6. Participants

The virtual symposium will be convened over three days, and it is expected to bring together 200-300 representatives from civil society organisations, influencers, Champions, national governments, philanthropists, academic institutions, development partners, donors, the private sector, media houses, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), United Nations agencies, youth led organisations and social entrepreneurs from across the various sectors, including WASH, education, gender, sexual and reproductive health, and adolescent development.

7. Symposium structure

Led by the symposium steering committee*, the symposium will focus on programmatic, partnerships and financing opportunities linking MHM and other sectors and focus areas including sexual and reproductive health and rights; gender; community and social development; education; water, sanitation and hygiene; climate change; humanitarian settings; marginalised groups; and the development and standards, among others. It will provide a space to learn about new and existing evidence on menstrual health management and share good practices and lessons from within the African continent and beyond; and will comprise a multisectoral mix of:

- High-level plenaries and keynote speakers
- Plenary discussions on key thematic areas
- Concurrent sessions to ensure detailed discussions and knowledge sharing on relevant topics
- A community zone / Exhibition corner to showcase evidence informed MHM and related programmes, products, and innovations from the community, national, regional and global levels. These will include films, poetry, fashion, art and other innovations.

The symposium will be an avenue for networking and establishing alliances to strengthen advocacy efforts towards advancing menstrual health management and leaving no one behind, focusing on these key themes / streams:

- 1) Laws and Policies - human rights
- 2) Community based solutions - FemTech / Start-ups; Social entrepreneurship and manufacturing, youth-led initiatives
- 3) MHM Integration, Measurement and Research

- 4) Government ownership and leadership
- 5) Policy development and translating policy into action
- 6) Innovative technologies and Financing, Enabling Markets and Sustainability
- 7) MHM and the SDGs

The extended themes clearly show that MHH is beyond health and specifically SRH and it cuts across number of high-level global and regional targets which call the collaboration of other UN agencies and bilateral organizations to which the symposium invites their partnership.

Furthermore to increase the ownership and leadership of countries and cascade the replicating effects of the symposium, country led satellite sessions will be organized with the support of Uganda, Ethiopia, Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique country offices. Countries will take specific theme that is applicable to their own context in a way that will be exemplary to other countries.

8. Dates and venue

The symposium will take place from 25-27 May 2021 and will be held virtually.

9. Communication

A communication package for the symposium has been developed by UNFPA ESARO and the ACMHM and will be shared with their **partners including the Global Menstrual Collective (GMC), UN agencies, other key partners; and will be shared electronically and made available to participants prior to the symposium.

**The RD sent a message to the regional directors of WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNAIDS, and UN Women in March 2020 requesting collaboration and names of steering committee members, but only UNICEF responded and provided a name.*

***To be listed*

Programme Outline

Symposium Streams / Tracks

- A. Laws and Policies - human rights
- B. Community based solutions - FemTech / Start-ups; Social entrepreneurship and manufacturing, youth-led initiatives
- C. MHM Integration, Measurement and Research
- D. Government ownership and leadership
- E. Policy development and translating policy into action
- F. Innovative Financing, Enabling Markets and Sustainability
- G. MHM and the SDGs

Time	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Country led satellite sessions			
10:00 – 11:30	Official Opening & High level Plenary <i>Laws and Policies - Government ownership and leadership</i>	High level Plenary <i>MHM Integration, Measurement and Research</i>	High level Plenary <i>Innovative Financing, Enabling Markets and Sustainability and MHM and the SDGs</i>
11:30 - 12:00 Break & Exhibitions	MHM Videos, Music, Art, Poetry	MHM Videos, Music, Art, Poetry	MHM Videos, Music, Art, Poetry
12:00 – 13:30	Concurrent Sessions (4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Youth Participation and Leadership in MHM ● Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities (SOGIE) ● MHM and bodily autonomy ● MHM and CSE 	Concurrent Sessions(4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vulnerable populations, including people with disability ● Social Norms and MHM ● Male Engagement strategies for MHM ● Climate change and MHM 	Concurrent Sessions (3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Humanitarian settings and Health Emergencies including pandemics ● Human rights and MHM ● Digital Health and MHM
13:30 – 14:30	Exhibitions	Exhibitions	Exhibitions