

# Break taboo around menstruation, act to end 'disempowering' discrimination, says UN experts

"Persistent harmful socio-cultural norms, stigma, misconceptions and taboos around menstruation, continue to lead to exclusion and discrimination of women and girls", [said](#) the independent human rights experts, ahead of [International Women's Day](#) on 8 March.

Despite recent campaigns by women to challenge menstruation taboos and increasing attention to the issue of menstruation in the media, research, policy-making, and cultural discussion, they underscored the need for "more efforts to address challenges faced by women and girls".

In some countries, said the experts, menstruating women continue to be viewed as "contaminated and impure", often restricted and forbidden to engage in activities like touching water or cooking, attending religious and cultural ceremonies or other community activities.

Menstruating women and girls can even be banished to outside sheds according to custom, where they suffer in cold and isolation, often at risk of life-threatening illness and attack.

"The patriarchal control exerted to constraint women's behavior and mobility during menstruation undermines their agency and equality" the experts underscored. "When combined with the stigma and shame that women and girls are made to feel during that time, it is truly disempowering."

Many live without any privacy to wash, or access to safe, clean toilets or even separate sanitation facilities at work, or in the classroom, or when they're visiting other public institutions.

Additionally, sanitary hygiene products are often inaccessible or too costly, particularly for those living in poverty and crisis situations. As States' policies rarely address these issues. Vulnerable women can be forced to use improvised, unhygienic materials that may cause leaking and infection, putting their health at serious risk.

"Stigma around menstruation has significant health impacts on women's and girls' health", the experts highlighted, pointing out that some providers are prone to dismiss serious issues related to menstruation, citing that it can take several years to diagnose endometriosis and dysmenorrhea – painful disorders that can also affect fertility.

Due to stigma and a lack of sexual education, menstruation knowledge remains limited leaving many girls with negative and ambivalent feelings and experiencing psycho-social stress, which also impacts their ability to learn, said the experts.

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In addition, some countries link the first menstruation cycle to being ready to marry, increasing the risks of adolescent pregnancy, limiting girls’ education and work opportunities.

And the situation spirals further in educational institutions and workplaces as a lack of accommodation for menstruating women and girls’ health, such as allowing rest periods, “has an impact on school and job attendance, and thus affects women’s economic participation and advancement, undermining gender equality”, added the experts.

### **Further progress needed**

“More needs to be done globally to address the menstrual health needs of women and girls and transform the systems, norms and attitudes to support women’s and girls’ menstrual health and well-being” the experts argued, stating that “a global shift in cultures” is needed to respect menstruation, acknowledge it as a human rights issue and “eliminate discrimination, shame and stigma too often attached to it”.

### **Here’s how the UN is working to reduce discrimination and stigma surrounding menstruation**

- Though outlawed since 2005, girls continue to be banished to sheds in rural Nepal, called “chhaupadi”. The UN Trust Fund, in partnership with Restless Development Nepal, is [combatting](#) this harmful practice by educating young people and dispelling the myths about menstruation.
- The [UN Population Fund](#) (UNFPA) [supports sexual and reproductive health](#) services around the world, including by distributing “dignity kits” in communities affected by [humanitarian emergencies](#), that contain menstrual hygiene products and support [comprehensive sex education](#) programmes.
- [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF)-supported [programmes](#) have:
  - Taught more than 10,000 boys and girls in Bolivia about menstrual health and hygiene.
  - Used community outlets and radio stations in Niger to promote, discuss and debate menstrual health, including sketches and songs in French and Hausa.
  - Distributed almost 100,000 water, sanitation and hygiene kits in Nigeria, including reusable menstrual hygiene pads.
  - Partnered in Kenya with the Government, civil society and private sector to expand access to a wider range of absorbent materials and

ensuring stronger product regulation for health and safety.

- Worked with the Ministry of Education in Zambia to integrate water, sanitation and menstrual hygiene management into its strategic policies and plans, including girls' health at school.
- Worked with the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars in Indonesia, producing guidance on menstrual health and hygiene management based on religious teachings, including a comic book and video to share knowledge, and discourage teasing of girls.