

A POLICY REVIEW ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT AND COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN CAMEROON



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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a process that every woman goes through in her life for a number of years a natural process since the beginning of time. However society has always treated this topic as a taboo and a topic to be spoken of only in hushed tones. These behaviors over the years have caused a lot of government to treat menstrual health management as an unimportant issue. This policy review was aimed at shedding light on the critical issues of menstrual health management in Cameroon. Through the comprehensive analysis of existing literature, and documents concerning health and women's rights in Cameroon such as national gender policy, The Centre for Reproductive Law and policy association of women jurists of Cameroon, and Cameroon Health sector strategy 2016-2027 a total review at these documents in comparison to other international documents, presented a gap in the policy system of Cameroon thus highlighting a multifaceted challenges faced by women and girls in accessing proper menstrual health management these challenges included limited access to affordable menstrual products, inadequate sanitation facilities, and limited knowledge and awareness. The absence of comprehensive policies addressing MHM increases the perpetuation of gender inequality, hindering educational opportunities and compromising the overall health and well-being of women and girls. Drawing upon successful international models, the document proposed a set of recommendations to guide the development of MHM policies in Cameroon such as having standalone documents that focus on menstrual health management in Cameroon, incorporating a more detailed curriculum on menstrual health management in school and more access to menstrual materials in communities and schools. By advocating for the absence of these policies, this document aimed to raise awareness amongst policy makers, civil society organizations and the general public about the importance of prioritizing MHM in Cameroon development agenda. Menstrual health management (MHM) is a pressing global concern with far reaching implications. Inadequate access to sanitary products, hygiene facilities and education exacerbates health risks, limits educational opportunities and perpetuates social stigmas especially in our country Cameroon and thus addressing MHM is imperative for promoting gender equality, public health and overall wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

HERVOICE POLICY REVIEW

This document review focuses on menstrual health management in Cameroon. Menstrual health is an essential aspect of reproductive health, yet it remains a challenging issue for many women and girls around the world, including in Cameroon. Being a natural biological process that more than half of the world's population goes through it is only but normal that policies Use the "Insert Citation" button to add citations to this document.

policies shows a neglect of crucial health aspect of women and to an extends perpetuates as a form of gender inequality Menstruation is accompanied by various physical and emotional changes, and as such should be treated with a level of sensitivity and inadequate knowledge and resources can lead to negative health outcomes and social stigmatization. This review aims to assess the current state of menstrual health management in Cameroon, examining existing policies, programs, and interventions, as well as identifying gaps and potential solutions. By understanding the prevailing challenges and opportunities, this review strives to contribute to the advancement of effective menstrual health management strategies in Cameroon

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NAME OF POLICY/DOCUMENT OR PAPER

1; National Gender Policy: The Government of Cameroon, after reviewing the comments and points of concern raised by CEDAW on menstrual health, how to care for the vagina and STIs had a session Working Committee (Cameroon National gender policy, 2015)

The National gender policy document of the Republic of Cameroon is a reference and orientation framework for the government actions to promote and integrate gender equality in all development sectors. According to this document the government has taken into its place to set up strategic thrust in line with legal penal codes and decrees to help solve the reviews raised

by CEDAW. Out of the many points touched by this document the strategy that hold importance to us is

Strategic thrust 2 of this documents which seeks to promote better access for women to health care, in particular with regard to reproductive Strategic objectives which includes the following:

- To reduce the rate of maternal and child mortality by at least 50%;
- To reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS among women to a residual level (1%)
- To provide comprehensive care for pregnant women and girls who are infected;
- To provide women and girls with nutritional and health education;
- To improve the use of contraceptives among women of childbearing age by 10%;
- To involve men and boys in the community's response to issues of reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and STIs.

While this document covers a wide range of topics related to gender equality in reproductive health, it is concerning that there is a notable absence of mention regarding menstrual hygiene management.

An inclusive gender policy that speaks of reproductive health should acknowledge menstrual hygiene management as a fundamental aspect of women's health and well-being. It should emphasize the importance of providing affordable and sustainable menstrual products, ensuring access to safe and private sanitation facilities, and promoting awareness and education about menstrual health. By doing so, the policy would contribute to DE stigmatizing menstruation and empowering women to manage their periods with dignity.

In fact, the absence of menstrual hygiene management in the National Gender Policy reflects a broader societal neglect of this issue. It perpetuates the taboo surrounding menstruation and reinforces gender disparities in health and hygiene. To create a truly comprehensive and equitable gender policy, it is essential to address menstrual hygiene management and prioritise the needs of women and girls in this regard.

Thus, while the National Gender Policy serves as a commendable initiative to promote gender equality in reproductive health, its failure to mention menstrual hygiene management is a significant oversight. Acknowledging and addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring the well-being and empowerment of women and girls. It is recommended that future revisions or updates of the policy incorporate a dedicated section on menstrual hygiene management, highlighting its importance and outlining strategies for its improvement.

2. The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP) and the Association of Women Jurists of Cameroon (ACAFEJ) compiled and wrote the report.

It consists of policies and articles of the reproductive health of women in Cameroon which included:

Women's Reproductive Health

(Articles 12, 10 and 15(1) (B) of the International Covenant

On Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)) this article covers issues on: have produced a report on reproductive health in Cameroon covering issues such as access to reproductive health care family planning, and safe mother hood. The report emphasizes community participation, a connection between health and development and respect for individual rights. It also addresses issues related to HIV and aids, sexually transmitted infections, family protections marriage divorce sexual and physical violence against women, sexual violence female secession/ female genital mutilation and the right to education.

While the document highlights a little about menstrual hygiene management for women and girls, it fails to provide concrete strategies or recommendations to address the challenges they face. The absence of practical solutions undermines the effectiveness of the document in promoting real issues of menstrual hygiene management.

Furthermore, the document overlooks the inter-sectionality of menstrual hygiene management. It neglects to acknowledge that women and girls from marginalized communities, such as those living in poverty or rural areas, often face exacerbated difficulties in accessing adequate menstrual hygiene resources. By failing to address this disparity, the document fails to provide comprehensive and inclusive solutions.

Moreover, the document lacks a collaborative approach. It does not engage with relevant stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, or local communities, who play a crucial role in implementing effective menstrual hygiene management initiatives. This absence of partnership limits its potential impact and sustainability and validity.

. As such a more comprehensive and inclusive approach is necessary to ensure meaningful progress in this critical area.

3. Cameroon Health sector strategy 2016-2027

The ambition set out in the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP) to build an emerging Cameroon by 2035 highlighted the need to implement sector strategies for a successful implementation of this reference document. These strategies make it possible to identify the main areas where the interventions of public institutions should be oriented. In the area of health, the existence of an adapted sector strategy is clearly shown when the plurality of actions to be carried (Global burden of disease, 2013).

Out by the various stakeholders involved requires coherence and synergy. This document analyses the health state of Cameroon ranging from its demographic setting to its population, groups of diseases ranging from very dangerous life threatening, to neglected diseases and to improve impairments that affect one's living. It speaks of finances and its budget allocation for the 2016 to 2027 strategy.

The Cameroon health sector strategy for 2016-2027 is a well-intentioned plan aimed at improving the overall healthcare system in the country. However, in its efforts to address various health issues, the strategy surprisingly fails to mention a crucial aspect of women's health - menstrual health management. Thus the omission and the potential consequences it may have on women's well-being is crucial. Adequate menstrual hygiene practices are essential to maintain women's health, prevent infections, and ensure their overall well-being. Unfortunately, the Cameroon health sector strategy fails to acknowledge this aspect, which is disappointing considering the significant impact it has on women's lives.

By neglecting to address menstrual hygiene management, the strategy misses an opportunity to promote awareness, education, and access to menstrual hygiene products. This absence can perpetuate stigma, misinformation, and limited resources for women, particularly those in vulnerable communities. It is crucial to recognize the challenges faced by women during menstruation and provide them with the necessary support and resources (UNICEF, 2015).

While the Cameroon health sector strategy 2016-2027 aims to improve the overall healthcare system, its failure to mention menstrual hygiene management is a significant oversight. By ignoring this crucial aspect of women's health, the strategy misses an opportunity to promote awareness, education, and access to menstrual hygiene products. It is vital for the strategy to be revised to include comprehensive measures to address menstrual hygiene management, ensuring the well-being and empowerment of women across Cameroon (WHO, 2015).

A Policy Review of International Implementations on Menstrual Health

In this policy review, we aim to examine international implementations of policies on menstrual health management. By exploring the diverse approaches taken by different countries and organizations, we seek to identify best practices and lessons learned that can inform the development and improvement of MHM policies in Cameroon.

The objectives of this review are;

1. Assessing the policy landscape to provide an overview of the existing policies and initiatives on menstrual hygiene management across different countries and organizations. This will involve analyzing the legal frameworks, government-led programs, and partnerships established to address MHM.

2. Identify and analyze strategies and interventions that have been effective in promoting menstrual hygiene management.

Kenya

1. **Kenya Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2016 – 2030:** The Kenya Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (2016–2030), section 5.4.9 is explicit on the urgent need to promote good Menstrual Health and Management. Improved MHM and appropriate facilities in public places provide menstruating women and girls with the security, privacy and dignity they need and want during menses. This policy highlights the need for safe collection and disposal of menstrual waste with particular attention to women and girls in humanitarian and emergency situations.

Basic Education (Amendment) Act: The Basic Education (Amendment) Act No. 17 of 2017 addresses the importance of access to menstrual products for girls in learning institutions, and the safe disposal thereof. The document states that the government shall provide free sufficient and quality sanitary towels to every girl child registered and enrolled in a public basic education institution who has reached puberty and provide a safe and environmentally sound mechanism for disposal of the sanitary towels”². When comparing the **health sector strategy 2016-2027** and that of Kenya 2016-2030 you realize the glaring difference in the matter of menstrual hygiene management While Kenya has a well stated out legal policy as shown in act number 17 of the basic education act implement sanitary towels for free and others strategy put in place where's in fact Cameroon still continuously increase tax on the prices of menstrual materials making difficult for communities to gain access to them.

Kenya School Health Policy: The Kenya School Health Policy (2018) states that “Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), is a crucial element of the School Health Policy, being important for dignity, gender equality and the human rights of women and girls. This policy recognizes that women and girls who experience challenges with MHM will also experience negative effects on multiple areas of life; relevant to the human rights of women and girls, including in particular the rights to health, work and education, as well as gender equality” . The School Health Policy outlines clear action points, indicators and objectives to achieve comprehensive MHM across schools in Kenya whereas Cameroon lacks a clear standalone school health policy without one that talks extensively on Menstrual Hygiene Management as far as menstrual hygiene management goes in schools in Cameroon.

Kenya amongst its other practicing policy place these three at the top most these are three aspects that try to touch menstrual hygiene management in every aspect that is three more than Cameroon has that's would greatly improve

SOUTH AFRICA

SANITARY DIGNITARY POLICY FRAMEWORK (SOUTH AFRICA)

Access to sanitary products 8.7.1 It is the intention of this Policy Framework to ensure that every indigent person as defined in paragraph 1, will have reasonable and easy access to free basic sanitary products with a view to protect, restore and maintain their dignity. 8.7.2 Sanitary products as contemplated in this Policy Framework are to be accessed at the places to be identified by the proposed ISMCs which places should be within reasonable distance from where such indigent persons go to school, live or work. In the case of schools and state owned colleges, universities and other institutions, the products must be made available on the relevant premises. It is important that the sanitary products be accessible at any time of the month since the menstruation cycle of girls and women differs and can take place at any time of the month.

The procurement of sanitary products as contemplated in this Policy Framework must be done in accordance with the provisions of the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act, 200060 and the Preferential Procurement Regulations, 2017 (Procurement Regulations).

In as much as such a defined procedure does not exist in the school system in Cameroon if it should be added then a lot of students wouldn't need to face menstrual accidents or stigmatization in school as not just the school but the policy makers would have normalized menstruation through implementation of such policies.

India

Menstrual hygiene management in India

Indian Government declared Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) as a priority area along with hand washing, ending open defecation and building toilets through the launch of Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA) in 2012 and followed by the present flagship program of India the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM).

-In 2017, the Menstruation Benefits Bill was introduced, followed by the Women's Sexual, Reproductive and Menstrual Rights Bill in 2018.

-Recently, a proposed bill called the "Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Health Products Bill, 2022" has been introduced. This bill aims to provide three days

of paid leave for women and Trans women during their periods and extend the benefit to students.

- The Kerala government has decided to grant menstrual leave to female students of all universities and institutions under the state higher education department as part of the government's commitment to realize a gender-just society. Kerala in southern India is set to become the first state in the country to grant menstrual leave for students. Taking into consideration the mental and physical difficulties faced by female students during menstruation, necessary steps will be taken to implement menstrual leave in all higher education departments. Although Menstrual leave policies have not been widely adopted in India, and only two states, Bihar and Kerala, have introduced menstrual leave policies for women.

However, several countries, including Spain, Japan, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, Zambia, South Korea, and Vietnam, advocate for menstrual leave.

-Spain recently became the first European nation to provide paid menstrual leave to workers, with a maximum of three menstrual leave days each month, which can be extended to five days.

UNITED STATES

3. **The Menstrual Equity for All Act:** This is a proposed law in the United States that would require schools and certain public institutions to provide free menstrual hygiene products to students and patients.

THE UNITED NATIONS

4. **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Policy Guidelines:** These guidelines were developed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide guidance on how to create and implement effective menstrual hygiene policies.

UNITED KINGDOM (UK)

There are several menstrual health policies in the UK that aim to support and promote menstrual health and well-being. One of the most notable policies is the provision of free sanitary products in all state-funded primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges in England. This policy was introduced in 2019 to help end period poverty and ensure that all girls have access to the products they need to manage their periods.

VAT improvement in countries on menstrual materials

All over the world different countries are working on improving menstrual health and hygiene management for its women to ensure that the barriers that stand against access to adequate and accessible menstrual materials and information is readily available in fact some countries have gone far to alter their implementation of tax to suit the production and importation of menstrual health materials Globally, proposals to **reduce or eliminate taxes** on menstrual products or their inputs have gained prominence. Countries have taken different approaches.

Bangladesh temporarily removed the value-added tax on raw materials to boost local production of these products. Kenya began removing taxes on menstrual products in 2004, and by 2016 it had removed VAT on imported menstrual products as well as on the raw materials for their production. Similarly, Nigeria removed VAT from locally manufactured products. Countries such as Malaysia, Lebanon, Tanzania, Ireland, Colombia, and Mexico have completely removed VAT on menstrual products.

With regards to the US, the menstrual health policy varies depending on the state and local level. However, there have been efforts to address menstrual health issues in recent years. Some states have eliminated the "tampon tax" or the sales tax on menstrual products. Additionally, there have been efforts to provide menstrual products in public schools, prisons, and other public spaces to address the issue of period poverty

Identifying gaps on menstrual hygiene management in Cameroon

The first thing to know about Cameroon is that it has no standalone legal document, policy or article on menstrual health management be it in schools or generally as such presents little information to the country on this very sensitive and normal topic. After looking at some important legal documents and policies first in Cameroon then internationally, the following few out of the many gaps will be looked at.

Firstly, the lack of access to affordable and hygienic menstrual products is a significant gap in Cameroon unlike in countries like Kenya and South Africa where menstrual products are being given to groups of indigenous women for free and others are sold on a tax free basis . In Cameroon Many women and girls in rural areas cannot afford sanitary pads or tampons, forcing

them to use unhygienic materials like rags, leaves, or even mud. This not only poses a risk of infection but also affects their ability to attend school or work during their periods.

Secondly, there is a lack of knowledge and awareness about menstruation in Cameroon, particularly among young girls. Many girls are not educated about menstrual hygiene practices, including proper disposal of sanitary products, washing practices, and managing pain and discomfort. This lack of knowledge perpetuates the cycle of misinformation and contributes to the stigma surrounding menstruation. If the government can normalize menstrual hygiene management curriculum in schools. Take Kenya for instance in their basic education Amendment act and the school health policy which clearly states implemented rules in school on menstrual hygiene management thus creating a normalcy for MHM

Compared to other countries, Cameroon also lacks adequate policies and initiatives to address menstrual hygiene management. While some countries have implemented programs to provide free or subsidized menstrual products in schools or public spaces, such initiatives are limited in Cameroon. The government's focus on MHM is relatively low, resulting in a lack of comprehensive strategies and interventions to address the gaps in menstrual hygiene management.

More so looking at other countries Cameroon is yet to constitute a well-defined constitution that looks at MHM in schools for adolescent girls in fact much of the government's efforts to promote menstrual hygiene management in the country is spearheaded by international and national non-governmental organizations. It's not quite impressive to note that in the health strategy sector of 2016-2027 a legal document representing an 11 year health program of Cameroon has little to nothing on menstrual hygiene management, a persistent call for concern amongst women and girls.

The government is yet to provide adequate funding to ensure that MHM policies are fully implemented, effective and sustainable in schools. There is no Sustainable Development Goal that focuses on menstrual health management and menstrual hygiene management in Cameroon as of now. More over The lack of funding to at least subsidize the prices of absorbent materials such as menstrual pads is a call for concern as well.

So to say, Cameroon faces several gaps and challenges in menstrual hygiene management when compared to other countries. These include limited access to affordable and hygienic menstrual products, lack of knowledge and awareness, societal taboos, and inadequate policies and initiatives. Addressing these gaps is crucial to ensure that women and girls in Cameroon can

manage their periods safely, hygienically, and without hindering their daily activities and opportunities.

RECOMENDATION

After reviewing policies and documents from Cameroon and other international countries the following recommendations could be made

1. Cameroon should come up with a stand-alone document that contains well written and defined terms for menstrual health management such as in wash facilities in public infrastructure and water points that comply with international standards, and establish a unified waste management system that includes menstrual waste.
2. Review the design of infrastructure elements, taking account of the needs expressed by the populations living in the communities and involving them in the design. Place a greater emphasis on the locations and also the size of toilet booths and their lighting, ventilation, privacy, ease of cleaning and maintenance. Take account of access for vulnerable people; people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women and children.
3. Build women's capacity in regard to menstrual health management in order to reduce the risk of infections and to improve waste management practice. In schools, communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), to teach girls about the menstrual cycle and use of disposable sanitary towels and to raise awareness of menstrual health and the health risks that result from poor menstrual health practice.
4. Enhance awareness campaigns around menstrual health management in schools, communities as well as refugee camps.
5. Provide a system that will do an evidence based advocacy, allocating a budget for menstrual health management and maintenance of infrastructural elements even before they are built and involve stakeholders for the sustainable use of these items.
7. Every girl and young women should have easy access to affordable, sufficient and hygienic absorbent materials especially in schools and public health centers
8. Access to clean water should be made available in households and schools as it is a vital part of menstrual hygiene management

9. MHM must be clearly spelled out in the national policy with budgets and with monitoring to match. Capacity to implement this policy is key together with services on the ground that women and girls can use with confidence.

REFERENCE

1. Cameroon National gender policy, 2015
2. Global burden of disease, 2013
3. UNICEF, 2015
4. WHO, 2015
5. Government of the republic of Kenya, 2014 Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030, Ministry of Health.
6. Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2014
7. Women Republic of South Africa, 2017



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