



EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR
ON WOMEN RIGHTS

KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON “MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE” IN MARKING THE
MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY – 28TH MAY, 2024

EVENT THEME: “MAKING NORMAL MENSTRUAL HYGIENE – SAVE THE EARTH,
SAVE THE FUTURE”

- Prof. Eric Koech, Vice Chancellor of the University of Kabianga;
- Prof. Paul Onsare, DVC A&SA;
- Prof. Isaac Naibei, Ag. DVC A&F;
- Prof. Maurice Oduor, DVC PR&D;
- Dr Wangila Phanice, Director of Gender and Development;

Ladies and Gentlemen; good afternoon!

Today, we gather to address a topic that is often shrouded in silence: **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**. Menstruation is a natural biological process for a significant portion of the world’s population. Yet it remains shrouded in stigma, misinformation, and even shame.

Sadly this silence has had a profound impact on the lives of millions of girls and women in Kenya. Today, we aim to shatter that silence and create a space for open dialogue about this natural biological process, which is like breathing or digestion.

Every month, young girls from about 12 years of age, experience what we call a period. They need to manage this process with clean, safe, and effective products like disposable sanitary pads, re-usable pads, tampons, menstrual cups and menstrual cloths. Our girls also need access to clean water and sanitation facilities to ensure proper hygiene during menstruation.

This is why we are gathered here today in commemoration of the 10th World Menstruation Health Day. **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** are fundamental aspects of women’s and girls’ overall well-being. Having good menstrual health means experiencing regular, predictable periods without pain or discomfort. Practicing good menstrual hygiene means keeping yourself clean and comfortable during your period. Together, these two aspects empower girls and women to participate fully in all aspects of life – at school, work, and in their communities.

When girls and women have poor **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**, it has a negative socio-economic impact on their lives and our economy. How? Girls who lack access to hygiene products or clean sanitation facilities miss school, impacting their education and

future opportunities. Similarly, women who cannot manage their period effectively struggle to participate fully in work or social activities.

According to ZanaAfrica, a Kenyan non-profit Organization, a staggering one million girls miss school regularly because they lack access to regular menstrual hygiene supplies. The stigma surrounding menstruation also leads to feelings of shame, isolation, and a decrease in self-esteem. This is unacceptable.

Thus when we prioritize **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**, we empower girls and women to reach their full potential. When girls and women manage their periods effectively, they are empowered to participate fully in all aspects of life.

For our girls and women to achieve good **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**, we must address several key challenges. The biggest hurdle is the stigma and shame that persists around menstruation in many cultures. Common period taboos include the idea that women are impure, dirty or sinful while menstruating. In extreme cultures, women are discouraged from touching or bathing during their periods to eliminate the possibility that they might contaminate the water of a communal bathing area.

Such retrogressive myths and taboos lead to girls and women feeling embarrassed or even isolated when they get their period. This makes it difficult for them to talk openly about their needs.

Another challenge is access to affordable menstrual products. ‘Period poverty’ is a major problem in developing countries. This simply means the cost of sanitary products is so prohibitive forcing many women to stay at home, sinking them further into poverty. According to a report from the US Agency for International Development, a depressing 65% of women in Kenya cannot afford basic necessities to manage their periods.

For them, pads, tampons, or menstrual cups are a luxury they cannot afford. This forces them to resort to unsafe or unhealthy practices, like using rags or dirty cloths. Additionally, inadequate sanitation facilities in schools and public places make it difficult for girls and women to manage their period hygienically.

Lack of education and awareness about **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** also means many people don't have the knowledge they need to make informed choices about their menstrual health.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is not all gloom. I am happy to report that Kenya is a leading voice in advocating for **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** on the global stage. Kenya is one of the first countries to implement progressive policies around **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**. We already have the **National Menstrual Health and Hygiene Strategy (2019-2024)**.

This is a comprehensive strategy that outlines a multi-sectoral approach to improve **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** across the country. The Government has also put in place tax reforms. In 2004, Kenya scrapped its 16% value-added tax (VAT) on the raw materials used to make pads, becoming the first country to do so and winning global

praise. Several years later in 2011, Kenya removed the import duty, making pads more affordable.

Our Government also signed into law the **Basic Education Amendment Act (2016)** which places the responsibility of providing free, sufficient and quality sanitary towels on the Government. This aims to reduce the number of girls missing school during their menstrual cycle.

We also have in place a **School Health Policy**. This is the deliberate integration of **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** education into the school curriculum to ensure girls receive age-appropriate information. At the same time, **Community Outreach Programmes** in various organizations **exist** to address stigma, myths, and misconceptions around menstruation in communities.

And, as part of measures to make sanitary products accessible, the Government has initiated subsidy programmes. These are initiatives that provide free or subsidized menstrual products to those in need. Local production of low-cost, reusable menstrual products is also encouraged to improve access and sustainability.

Additionally, under the **Sanitary Towels programme**, the Ministry of Education is required to provide free, quality and sufficient sanitary towels to every girl who has attained puberty, registered and enrolled in a public basic education institution for retention, transition and improved performance.

However despite these advancements, challenges persist. Funding for **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** programmes is limited hence the need for continuous resource mobilization. Reaching rural communities with information and products in remote areas also remains a challenge.

Further, long-term solutions are required to address the underlying issues of poverty and gender inequality. Additionally, limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities in rural areas hinders proper **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** practices.

Kenya's global leadership in **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** paves the way for other countries to prioritize this critical issue. Continued efforts are needed to ensure allocation of sufficient resources for National and community-based **Menstrual Health and Hygiene** programmes. Partnership with Non-State Actors and Development Partners in this area is encouraged.

We also need to support research and development of affordable and sustainable menstrual products. And, as part of empowerment and public participation, women and girls have to be engaged in decision-making processes to ensure their needs are met.

What is the way forward on this matter? Creating a world where menstruation is no longer a taboo subject obviously requires a collective effort. We all have a role to play in breaking the stigma around menstruation.

First, we need to ensure increased access to safe and affordable menstrual hygiene products. We must advocate for policies and initiatives that make menstrual products accessible and affordable for everyone.

Second, parents and caregivers must start having open conversations with girls about their periods, even before they begin menstruating. It is important to remind them that menstruation is not a disease or something to be ashamed of.

Third, the stigma surrounding menstruation usually has a profound negative impact on people's lives. We need to create a safe space for open and honest conversations about menstruation, so that individuals feel empowered to manage their periods with confidence.

Fourth, education is a powerful tool for promoting **Menstrual Health and Hygiene**. Educational programmes need to be integrated into school curriculums and community outreach initiatives. These programmes should provide accurate and up-to-date information about menstruation, address common myths and misconceptions, and promote healthy menstrual hygiene practices.

Other stakeholders we cannot leave behind on this journey are the Media. They can play their role by portraying menstruation in a positive and realistic light. And, of course, men and boys can become allies and advocates for menstrual health, showing their support for girls and women.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen;

We can create a more inclusive and understanding world for everyone by working together. We can create a Kenya where menstruation is normalized, not stigmatized.

Let us empower individuals to manage their periods with dignity and confidence. Together, we can ensure that all 'menstruators' have access to the information, resources, and support they need to manage their period in good health.

By addressing these challenges and continuing the positive momentum, Kenya will continue serving as a model for ensuring good menstrual health and hygiene for all.

Thank you.

Hon. Harriette Chiggai
President's Advisor on Women Rights