Menstrual Hygiene & Human Rights: A bloody road to a more equal world

Presenter: Hannah Neumeyer, WASH United
Placing menstrual hygiene in a human rights framework

• What are a State’s human rights obligations?
• How far do they extend?
• How do they relate to something as private as menstruation?
• What do they mean in concrete terms?
• How to overcome challenges in making MH rights-based?
How does menstrual hygiene fit with human rights?

People = “rights-holders”

State = “duty bearer”

- Refrain from behaviour that violates human rights (respect)
- Improve (realise/fulfil) enjoyment of human rights
- Ensure human rights are upheld in private sphere (protect)
How do we know what a State’s obligations are?

Which human rights are implicated by menstrual hygiene?

**Human Rights Impacted**
- Human dignity
- Education
- Health
- Work
- Gender equality
- Healthy environment

**Enabling Human Rights**
- Water
- Sanitation
- Health
- Education
- Gender Equality
State’s human rights obligations (con’t)

HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES

Equality
Non-Discrimination
Transparency
Access to information
Participation
Accountability

Mandates inclusion of women & girls’ needs, including for menstrual hygiene

Ability of women & girls to practice good MH cuts to the heart of dignity & gender equality
Human rights understanding of menstrual hygiene

- Manage menstruation with safety, privacy & dignity
- Voice & space
- Accurate & pragmatic information
- Society’s views/ gender stereotypes
- Analysis of impacts beyond ‘just’ school days/ infections
- Raising awareness & confidence
- Ability to exercise choice
- Materials/ disposal & infrastructure
Schools, human rights & MHM

**Right to education**
- Education for all
- Adequate institutions, incl. e.g. WASH
- Access to health related education (puberty, sexual & reproductive health, norms, stigmas, taboos)

**Impacts of inadequate MHM**
- Evidence base: Link between MHM & girls’ educational attainment
- “Secondary” impacts, e.g.:
  - Gender equality & women’s ability to achieve their full potential
  - Preventable maternal death
  - Unmet contraceptive needs

Schools are an excellent entry point for discussing menstrual hygiene & human rights
How does approaching MHM from a human rights perspective impact programming?

- Taboos and myths
- Negative attitudes to women
- Discriminatory practices
- Lack of knowledge about menstruation
- Poor sexual & reproductive health choices
- Gender equality & dignity
- Poor sexual & reproductive health choices
- Barrier to women and girls engaging in the public sphere
- Sanitation
- Education & employment
- Health

Courtesy of Iriso
HUMAN RIGHTS RESEARCH TASK:
1) Does the State focus on realization of rights?
2) Help monitor impact & outcomes of MHM programming on girls’ human rights?

- Infrastructure
- Curriculum
- Retention & school achievement
- School completion & employment
- Choices about reproductive health
- Attitudes, self-esteem, empowerment

Quantitative Methods ↔ Qualitative Methods
### Advocacy benefits of a human rights framework

#### International level
- Civil society can engage UN mechanisms
- Common frame of reference for monitoring
- Generates donor support
- Matches indicators w/ gender equality & other impacts

#### National level
- Framework to change law, policies, practice
- Enables civil society monitoring
- Access to judicial or other remedy

#### Local level
Conclusion: Collaboration across sectors needed for a rights-based approach

• Approaching MH as a human rights concern that impacts health & education, but also dignity & gender equality, could bridge sectors, communities of practice/research.

• Integrating a human rights perspective influences (& broadens) the evidence base & influences programming and implementation.
References:

• Inga Winkler & Virginia Roaf, Bringing the Dirty Bloody Linen Out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality, http://tinyurl.com/pkm7aba
• MH Day Human Rights Fact Sheet: http://menstrualhygieneday.org/human-rights/
• IRISE research: http://www.irise.org.uk/downloads.html
We hope this will start a conversation across sectors. Keep the flow going...

Amanda Klasing, Human Rights Watch: klasina@hrw.org
Hannah Neumeyer, WASH United: hannah.neumeyer@wash-united.org
Emily Wilson-Smith, Irise: Emily@irise.org.uk
Inga Winkler, NYU, Center for Human Rights & Global Justice: winkler.inga@gmail.com

Thank you...