

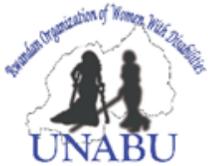


*"Together As one For A Healthy Society"*

**POSITION PAPER:**

**“ENHANCING MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRODUCT ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY IN RWANDA: A CALL FOR COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL GUIDELINES”**

**PREPARED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:**



**Contact Person:**

**Aimable MWANANAWÉ, LLB, MIRD**

**Executive Director, IMRO Rwanda.**

**Phone: +250788304999**

**Email: [info@imrorwanda.org](mailto:info@imrorwanda.org) / [mwananaweaimable@gmail.com](mailto:mwananaweaimable@gmail.com)**

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## 1. JUSTIFICATION

Adolescents and young people, particularly girls, face significant challenges in accessing SRHR information and services in Rwanda. According to World Bank statistics, at least 20% of Rwanda's school girls, particularly in rural areas, miss up to 50 days of school per year due to menstruation-related challenges (Aime & Pugalenthi, 2020). Over the course of their basic schooling period, which runs from grade 4 to grade 6, this translates to approximately 540 missed days—equivalent to one and a half years of schooling. These absences contribute to an estimated loss of USD 215 per woman annually, resulting in a total loss of USD 115 million in potential GDP for Rwanda each year.<sup>1</sup>

The disparities in access to menstrual products create substantial barriers for marginalized communities, hindering their health and active participation in education and other facets of life. Adolescents and young people, particularly girls, face significant difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive health services due to restrictive provisions under the reproductive health law, social norms that create stigma lack of social support, poor or misguided information, as well as insufficient access to sanitation products, and the high cost of menstrual products.<sup>2</sup>

Compounding this problem is the absence of specific national guidelines, heightening the urgency for Rwanda to implement comprehensive policies. Such policies would ensure that menstrual sanitary products are affordable and available to all individuals, regardless of their demographic or socio-economic status. This challenge underscores the critical importance of addressing menstrual hygiene as a fundamental aspect of women's health and rights within the country.

Ensuring the affordability and accessibility of menstrual hygiene products in Rwanda is crucial not only for public health but for achieving broader societal goals. This position paper was developed to strategically target the issue of insufficient accessibility to menstrual sanitary products for women and girls in Rwanda, aiming to inform policymakers and while calling for a decisive reshaping of national guidelines.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this position paper is to call for urgent action of policy makers in favour of menstrual health, management in Rwanda. It aims to advocate for establishment of comprehensive guidelines that promote a more equitable and supportive environment for women and girls as far as access to affordable menstruation products is concerned.

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<sup>1</sup> Aime & Pugalenthi 'Menstrual health & hygiene: Why there is still more to be done' (2020), available at <https://rwanda.unfpa.org/en/news/menstrual-health-hygiene-why-there-still-more-be-done>

<sup>2</sup> WHO & UNICEF (2021) 'Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020

### 3. POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERSISTING

The Government of Rwanda has demonstrated commitment to improving menstrual hygiene management through various initiatives, such as establishing safe spaces in schools to provide sanitary products and essential items for menstruating girls. However, despite this progress, menstrual health and hygiene management still receives insufficient attention. According to 2022 statistics, women and girls make up approximately 51.8% of Rwanda's population,<sup>3</sup> all of whom require proper menstrual health management. In 2015, the Ministry of Education provided minimal guidance on water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in schools. Since then, the ministry has developed guidelines for managing menstrual health in schools and initiated the construction of gender-segregated toilets.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.1 Inaccessible Sanitary Products due to high-Cost Barrier

The cost of disposable pads in Rwanda remains exorbitant, rendering them unattainable for a significant portion of women and girls. Quality pads are priced between Rwf 1000 (USD 0.78) and Rwf 1200 (USD 0.93), placing them out of reach for many. This high cost underscores the necessity for the 2019 government decision to exempt all sanitary products from value-added tax (VAT).

The implementation of this exemption is crucial to alleviate the financial burden on menstruating individuals and ensure their access to essential menstrual hygiene products. Failure to effectively implement this policy undermines efforts to promote menstrual health and hygiene and perpetuates inequities in access to basic necessities among women and girls in Rwanda. Despite government exemptions, the price of menstrual hygiene products remains prohibitively high, exacerbating negative consequences for those in need. In refugee camps, families often prioritize food over menstrual supplies, leaving girls feeling neglected and vulnerable,<sup>5</sup> This dire situation sometimes compels girls to engage in risky behaviors, such as trading sex for essential items. This challenge is especially acute for women and girls from low-income households, who face significant barriers in accessing menstrual hygiene products. The ongoing high cost of these items perpetuates a cycle of inequity and poses a serious threat to the health and dignity of menstruating individuals.

#### 3.2 Barriers related to Stigma and Cultural Taboos

Stigma and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation remain deeply entrenched in Rwandan society, creating significant barriers for women and girls. Open discussions about menstruation are often taboo, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment. This stigma contributes to widespread misinformation and inhibits access to essential resources and education on menstrual

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<sup>3</sup> NISR 'Fifth Population and Housing Census Report' (2022) available at <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/datasource/fifth-population-and-housing-census-2022>.

<sup>4</sup> WHO & UNICEF (2021) 'Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020.

<sup>5</sup> Yvette Ruzibiza (2020) 'They are a shame to the community stigma, school attendance, solitude and resilience among pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in Mahama refugee camp, Rwanda.



hygiene management. As a result, many women and girls face challenges in accessing adequate menstrual products and information, which can have negative implications for their health and well-being.<sup>6</sup>Efforts to address menstrual stigma and promote open dialogue are essential for improving menstrual health outcomes and ensuring the dignity and rights of all individuals in Rwanda. Efforts to incorporate menstrual hygiene education into school curricula will ensure promising results. By integrating this topic into the education system, as well as initiating health clubs at YEGO Centers for out-of-schools adolescents, young girls can effectively access accurate information about their period and effective management of menstrual hygiene. Additionally, such programs help combat stigma and normalize discussions about menstruation.

### **3.3 Barriers related to Inadequate Infrastructures**

In Rwanda, numerous schools, healthcare facilities, and public spaces still lack sufficient infrastructure to adequately support menstrual hygiene management for women and girls. The absence of proper sanitation facilities, including clean and private toilets, handwashing stations, and waste disposal systems, presents significant challenges for menstruating individuals. This deficiency not only compromises their ability to maintain hygiene during menstruation but also undermines their dignity. The lack of access to appropriate facilities exacerbates the stigma surrounding menstruation and contributes to health risks and discomfort for women and girls. Addressing these infrastructure gaps is essential for promoting menstrual health and ensuring the rights and well-being of all individuals in Rwanda.

## **4. POLICY ACTIONS**

### **4.1 Establish comprehensive national guidelines for menstrual hygiene management**

Establishing national guidelines to improve menstrual hygiene product accessibility, affordability, and quality is crucial for promoting the health, dignity, and well-being of women and girls. These guidelines provide a roadmap for policy solutions aimed at overcoming barriers to access across the country. Collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, and the private sector, is key to developing and implementing these guidelines effectively. By leveraging diverse expertise and resources, Rwanda can create sustainable responses to menstrual hygiene needs. The guidelines will set standards for accessibility, affordability, and quality; ensuring products are available, affordable, and safe for all, regardless of socio-economic status or location. Implementation of these guidelines will empower women and girls to manage their menstrual health confidently, promoting physical and emotional well-being and advancing gender equality, public health, and sustainable development goals.

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<sup>6</sup> Isano, S., Iradukunda, I. G., Ingabire, P., Igiraneza, B., Nkurunziza, F., & Wong, R. (2022). Assessing the knowledge and attitude of menstrual hygiene among high school students, and menstrual practices among high school girls in rural Rwanda. *International Journal of Reproduction, Contraception, Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 11(3).

## **4.2 Implement fully subsidized menstrual hygiene products**

Implementing subsidized menstrual hygiene products in Rwanda is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by women and girls in accessing these essential items. Currently, the cost of menstrual hygiene products remains prohibitively high for many women and girls with low-income. To address these challenges, the government of Rwanda should consider effective implementation of subsidized menstrual hygiene products to significantly alleviate the financial burden on women and girls and ensure their access to essential menstrual hygiene items. By providing subsidized menstrual products, the government will be promoting menstrual health and hygiene and upholding the dignity and rights of all individuals. This initiative aligns with the government's commitment to addressing menstrual hygiene management through various initiatives and policies. It will contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality by enabling women and girls to fully participate in education, work, and public life without being hindered by menstruation-related challenges. Overall, implementing subsidized menstrual hygiene products is a crucial step towards promoting gender equality, health, and well-being in Rwanda.

## **4.3 Strengthen education and awareness about menstrual health management:**

Strengthening education and awareness about menstrual health management in Rwanda is essential to address the challenges faced by women and girls regarding menstruation. Currently, deep-rooted stigma and cultural taboos persist, inhibiting open discussion and perpetuating shame and embarrassment among menstruating individuals. This stigma contributes to misinformation, hindering access to education and resources and undermining efforts to improve menstrual hygiene management. To combat these challenges, enhancing education and awareness initiatives is crucial. Providing comprehensive menstrual health education in schools, healthcare facilities, and communities can empower women and girls with accurate information about menstruation, hygiene practices, and menstrual health. This education should be inclusive, culturally sensitive, and address the needs of all menstruating individuals, including those in marginalized communities.

Moreover, raising awareness campaigns through various media channels, including radio, television, and social media, can help destigmatize menstruation and promote open dialogue. Engaging community leaders, educators, healthcare providers, and youth organizations in these initiatives can amplify their impact and foster supportive environments for menstruating individuals. By strengthening education and awareness about menstrual health management, Rwanda can break the silence surrounding menstruation, challenge harmful stereotypes, and empower women and girls to manage their menstrual health with dignity and confidence. This proactive approach aligns with the government's commitment to promoting gender equality, health, and well-being for all individuals in Rwanda.

## **4.4 Introduce reusable menstrual commodities:**

The introduction of reusable menstrual products like cups and cloth pads offers Rwanda an opportunity to tackle environmental and economic challenges in menstrual hygiene management. Disposable products contribute significantly to environmental pollution, making reusable



alternatives crucial for environmental conservation, aligning with Rwanda's prioritization of eco-sustainability. For example, a single menstrual cup or cloth pad can be used for years, minimizing waste compared to disposables. Moreover, reusable products offer long-term cost-effectiveness, contrasting with the ongoing expense of disposable options. This affordability is particularly significant in Rwanda, where many women and girls face financial barriers to accessing menstrual products.

While many women and girls use reusable sanitary pads to manage their menstruation. However, in Rwanda they are not always an available option due to their continued limited accessibility.<sup>7</sup> According to a joint study from WEEAT and WaterAid Rwanda (in 2022) 92.1% of Rwandese women would welcome increased access to reusable sanitary pads, both to ensure the consistent use of safe menstrual health products and to avoid the financial and environmental burden of single-use products. While numerous non-governmental organizations and social enterprises attempt to provide sufficient reusable pads, there remains significant unmet demand due to unclear product standards. Consequently, many reusable pad manufacturers and factories regularly encounter difficulties due to lack of production regulations and a standard for these pads.<sup>8</sup> In addition, by embracing reusable alternatives, Rwanda can advance sustainable development goals, including health and well-being (SDG 3), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12). To ensure successful adoption, comprehensive education programs are imperative to inform individuals about the benefits and usage of reusable products, dispelling myths and promoting acceptance among menstruating individuals.

#### **4.5 Ensure Access to Menstrual Products during Emergencies**

The government should prioritize access to menstrual hygiene products during emergencies, such as natural disasters or humanitarian crises. Special attention should be given to vulnerable populations, including refugees, individuals with disabilities, and residents of low-income areas, to ensure their health and dignity is upheld in challenging circumstances. Integrating menstrual health management into emergency response plans is critical for addressing the unique needs of menstruating individuals in times of crisis.

#### **4.6 Introduce Flexible School Absence Policies for Menstrual Health**

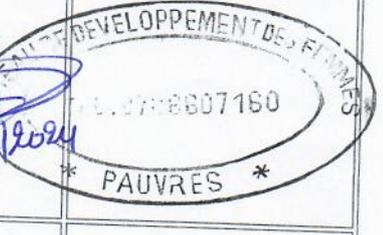
Schools should implement flexible sick leave or absence policies to accommodate adolescent girls experiencing menstrual pain or discomfort. Such policies would allow girls to manage their health without fear of disciplinary action, reducing absenteeism and promoting their well-being. This approach supports educational equity and ensures that menstruation does not hinder girls' academic progress or participation.

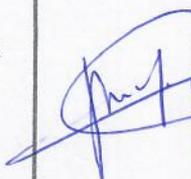
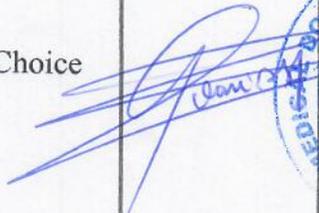
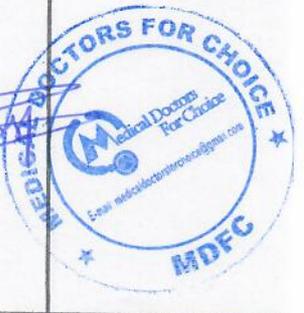
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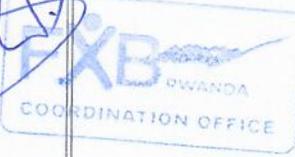
<sup>7</sup> Violah Natukunda (2022) 'Women in rural Rwanda find affordable Sanitary Solutions. Africa Health Solutions Journalism Initiative (AHSJI) available at <https://healthsojo-africa.org/women-in-rural-rwanda-find-affordable-sanitary-solutions/>

<sup>8</sup> Water-Aid Rwanda & WEEAT 'Feasibility study on Reusable Pads Development in Rwanda' (2022).

ENDORSED BY:

Name	Position	Organization	Signature	Stamp
MWANANAWWE Aimable	Executive Director	Ihorere Munyarwanda Organization (IMRO-Rwanda)		
KABANYANA Nooliet	Executive Secretary	Rwanda NGOs Forum on HIV/AIDS and Health Promotion (RNGOF)		
MURAMIRA Bernard	Executive Director	Strive Foundation Rwanda (SFR)		
MULISA Tom <i>Vestine Umulisa</i>	Executive Director	Great Lakes Initiative for Human Rights and Development (GLIHD)		
MUKANTABANA Crescence	Executive Director	Reseau de Development des Femmes Pauvres (RDFP)		
KANEZA Emelyne	Executive Secretary	Rwanda Women's Network (RWN)		

Name	Position	Organization	Signature	Stamp
MUTANGANA Kabera	Executive Secretary	Rwanda Youth Organization Forum (RYOF)		
KAGABA Aflodis	Executive Director	Health Development Initiative (HDI)		
UWAMUNGU Marie Ange Raissa	Executive Director	Impanuro Girls Initiative (IGI)		
MUSHIMIYIMANA Gaudence	Executive Director	Umuryango Nyarwanda w' Abagore Bafite Ubumuga (UNABU)		
MURAGIJERUREMA Viateur	Executive Director	Kigali Hope Organization (KHO)		
MUTIMUKEYE Clarisse	Executive Director	Medical Doctors For Choice (MDFC)		

Name	Position	Organization	Signature	Stamp
KABOGO Alestide	Country Director	The African Youth and Adolescents Network-Rwanda (AfriYAN Rwanda)		
KAYITANA Emmanuel	Executive Director	FXB Rwanda		
IRIBAGIZA Patience	Executive Director	Afro Ark		
NDAYISHIMIYE Mick	CEO	Urukundo Initiative		
NYINAWUMUNTU Yvette	Executive Director	Save Generations Organization (SGO)		
MANZI Norman	Founder	Dream Village		

Name	Position	Organization	Signature	Stamp
MUTONI Fidele	Executive Director	Living Equality Initiative (LIVEI Rwanda)		
UWIZEYE Grace	Executive Director	Nyampinga Ushoboye Organization		