

MANAGING MENSTRUATION



Most women have periods for the majority of their careers. This is not gross or icky. It's just a biological reality. It should not be surrounded by shame or embarrassment, but in far too many situations it is. Female aid workers who are living in and traveling to remote locations have some significant considerations that must be managed on a monthly basis, and often in ways that are shrouded in secrecy because of the cultural, religious and personal taboos that often surround this topic. It's time that we talk about this. And it is time that we present some practical suggestions organizations can implement to demonstrate that a focus on promoting gender equality and gender transformation in our programming also needs to extend to the ways in which we support the different needs of our female and male staff. It's important to note up front that not all of these suggestions will be available to all women, in all locations, for a variety of personal, cultural and religious reasons.

This guidance note is a compilation of over 100 submissions by national and international female aid workers from around the world who shared the things that they do to make managing their periods easier, as well as their ideas on how humanitarian aid organizations can better support their female staff who menstruate¹.

INDIVIDUAL PREPARATIONS BEFORE AND DURING DEPLOYMENT:

- Ask your host what access you will have to sanitation facilities: What do the 'toilets' look like? Will there be soap and water? Is there toilet paper? Is there a garbage in the latrines/office bathrooms? This gets you the information you will need to properly prepare, and also highlights for your host that this is an issue that needs to be considered and built into visitors' briefings and new staff orientations.
- Consider the many different menstrual hygiene items that exist, as well as their pros and cons:
 - a. Menstrual cups can be incredibly useful because they can be left in for long periods of time, do not produce any garbage, and you don't need to pack a year's supply of disposable menstrual hygiene items in your very precious luggage space. Once they fill up they will leak, but they can be paired with a pad for extra protection on long road trips. The downside of these is that they need to be rinsed with clean water and properly sterilized on a regular basis to prevent infection, and users still need a discreet place to empty the contents. You may need to take your own bottle of water to the latrine with you if your organization hasn't properly prepared for this. Cups can be a little bit messy at times so it's pretty important to have a way to wash hands afterwards, whether that's soap and water, wet wipes or disinfectant. Availability of these is not widespread globally, nor are they an option that all women can use based on personal preference, religious and cultural issues.
 - b. Tampons can also be used with pads for extra protection and can be left in for a few hours at a time. Close attention needs to be paid to the timing because if they're in for too long the risk of toxic shock increases. This is of particular concern on long road trips. These need to be disposed of, so if there's no disposal bin, you may need to wrap them up and carry them with you until you find a place you can throw them out. Ziploc bags provide an excellent way to carry these, and if

¹ It is not only female staff who menstruate. Male trans staff may also have periods that may cause significant trauma for them on a monthly basis, and which, if discovered, may draw attention to their gender identity if this is not openly known. This in turn may put them at significant risk of harm. A much higher level of sensitivity and security needs to be taken into consideration when figuring out the best way to meet the needs of these men. This guidance note is focused on women.

you're really concerned about being discreet, you could cover the bag in duct tape to hide the contents from view. Availability is becoming more widespread globally, but is still not guaranteed in every country, nor in remote places. So you'll need to ask in advance, and may need to carry a supply with you to last your full time in the remote location. Like menstrual cups they're not always acceptable based on personal preference, religious or cultural taboos.

- c. Pads are most commonly accessible and come in a variety of shapes and sizes to accommodate body types and the changes in flow throughout a cycle. These need to be disposed of, and that can often be challenging. Some aid workers have discussed how revolutionary it was to discover reusable pads, which they could wash themselves and hang up on a makeshift clothesline in their own tents or bedrooms. This eliminated their need to find places to buy them, or pack a full supply of disposable ones.
 - d. Period-proof underwear is becoming increasingly available at least in North America and many female aid workers have found these incredibly useful.
 - e. Many aid workers mentioned using a combination of the items listed above for times when they really had limited access to toilets, and many also add one last protective measure of wearing dark clothing so that stains wouldn't be so noticeable if they happened.
- Carry extra menstrual hygiene items with you and openly tell your female colleagues that should they find themselves in an emergency situation, you've got extra. This helps out other women, and also presents an opening for discussing periods and taking away some of the secrecy and shame.
 - Carry a small menstruation kit with you when you're conducting short trips, whether you think you will need it or not-consider Ziploc bags for disposal, pads/tampons/menstrual cups, wet wipes, toilet paper, a small bottle of water, etc. If water is just not available, pack disposable rubber gloves. If you put two on your hands, you can carry used tampons/pads in one, while the other serves to keep your hands clean.
 - Use a period tracking app to know in advance what days you'll be experiencing the most pain, heaviest flow, etc. and plan your travel accordingly. Recognize however that no matter how regular your cycle is, stress, travel, and crossing time zones can alter this and apps won't be able to take these factors into consideration.
 - Many aid workers have reported using various forms of birth control methods to stop their periods entirely for the duration of their postings. This is something that should be discussed with a medical professional to ensure that this is the right decision for you and your health.
 - If you have bad cramps, migraines, and other forms of menstrual pain, use a sick day. That's what they're for.
 - We don't say "issues regarding fevers and aches that come from mosquitos" to talk about malaria. So don't use vague terms like "issues regarding feminine hygiene" to talk about menstruation. Own the words and use them-it sets an example for others to do the same.
 - Make your needs known without apologizing. If you need frequent stops on a long road trip, request them. If you need request an itinerary change to delay a long road trip, request it.
 - Know that if you are in a pharmacy or other type of store that you think should sell tampons and pads and you can't find them, they are often kept out of sight and you may need to ask for them.
 - While flying, carry an emergency supply of menstrual hygiene items with you in your carry-on luggage in case your period starts while you're mid-air. If you're not prepared, the passenger bathrooms usually have some pads tucked away in one of their many drawers. Look for them. If they don't, ask a flight attendant.
 - Offer to be a resource to your male colleagues who would like to understand these issues better.

ORGANIZATIONAL MEASURES:

Note: While all of these suggestions will directly benefit women who menstruate, many will also support the hygiene needs of men on your teams as well.

HR

- Strive for representation of both women and men on your security, logistics and driving teams, since these are the staff members who are often overseeing and making decisions about guesthouse facilities, latrine facilities, road trip planning, first aid, and emergency planning. This diversity, provided it's accompanied by an openness to listening and learning by all team members, will help your office identify and support the varied needs of our female and male staff (only one of which is menstruation).
- Openly acknowledge in your written HR policies that sick days can be used for menstrual pain (even though this isn't a sickness). This recognition goes a long way in acknowledging that women have different needs, that your HR team is sensitive to that, and that managers need to stand behind this.
- If it's possible to designate a small private space in your offices where women can go to curl up on a couch or cot for a few minutes when cramps get really intense, do it. This won't just benefit women during their periods, but it's also providing a space for pregnant women to have short naps to get through the day, for male colleagues who may get sick at work or may have been up all night with a baby at home, and for women and men to use as a quiet space for prayer or reflection.
- Take a 'No Tolerance' approach to jokes about women during their periods, just as you do about other forms of inappropriate humour that degrade employees.
- Provide flexible approaches to working from home and guesthouses.

Logistics

- Make it a standard requirement that all latrines and bathrooms have separate garbage bins with lids for disposal of pads and tampons, and ensure that these get emptied on a regular and frequent basis. Pay attention to the fact that if you are throwing bags of garbage out on the road because that's how it's done in your location, dogs often get into this and have been observed carrying around used sanitary items in front of guesthouses and offices. This can be pretty embarrassing for your female colleagues, especially if you only have a limited number on a team largely comprised of men. So try to take this into consideration when you're dealing with garbage disposal.
- Basic WASH principles would dictate that all toilets have soap and water for handwashing. This shouldn't be a particular intervention for supporting women while they have their periods. But if you don't have these, fix it because menstruating women need this.
- Keep emergency tampons and pads in women's toilets and toilets that are shared between women and men. Build the very small cost of these into your overall office supply budget.
- Include the procurement of emergency menstrual hygiene items as part of the logistics team's responsibilities, just like they manage other office supply procurements. Don't delegate purchasing these to a woman just because she's a woman. If these aren't available locally, get them from somewhere else and figure out your supply chain for this just as you would any other emergency item. In remote cases offer procurement assistance to any woman who is working long-term in a remote environment.
- Wherever possible ensure all team members are consulted in setting dates for long road trips they will need to take part in, and allow for some flexibility in planning if timing and activities allow.

Safety and Security

- Require tampons and pads in first aid kits, and in all of your vehicles, along with wet wipes and Ziploc bags for disposal. Let women and men know that they are there. Monitor their use and replace them when supplies start to decline. Don't wait until they are completely gone. Make this the responsibility of the person who oversees your first aid kits. Don't delegate it to a woman just because she's a woman.
- Ensure that your hibernation kits have a supply of tampons, pads, wet wipes and Ziploc bags. Take into consideration that you may have visitors, etc. who may need these as well, and that when women spend a lot of time together their cycles often line up, so if a group of women are stuck in a hibernation situation together, they may all need these if they've run out of their own supplies.
- Explicitly state that personal quick run bags should include menstrual hygiene items.
- Visitors briefings need to include a section on what to expect in terms of sanitation facilities (which is of interest to both women and men), and what the availability of tampons and pads is throughout the country.
- Female aid workers have reported very high levels of stress around menstruation in advance of, or while participating in, residential remote courses such as Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)²:
 - Pre-course briefings should explicitly address menstruation concerns, explaining the sanitation facilities that will be available, assuring participants they will never be denied a bathroom break (see more on this below), reminding them that periods can happen off-schedule if women are stressed, traveling, crossing time zones, peri-menopausal, etc. (HEAT is a perfect combination of many of these). Ensure that this is part of the general HEAT pre-briefing pack and not just something that goes to women. Men need to be aware of the challenges that their female colleagues are facing as part of fostering a team approach to safety and security. The reverse is also true.
 - No participants should ever be denied a bathroom break. Not having a porta-potty/porta-loo or other appropriate toilet option within easy access is the equivalent of denying someone a bathroom break. Plan accordingly for the varied locations and timings of your course.
 - If you have female trainers and actors, which you should, don't stick them out running serials for many hours without a bathroom break (don't do this to your male trainers/actors either!)
 - All toilet facilities used by women on the course should have as a minimum, an emergency stock of tampons and pads, wet wipes, water, and a way to discreetly dispose of these items. It's not enough for your training team to have these available should someone ask. Often training teams are entirely or mostly made up of men. It can be really uncomfortable for a female participant to have this conversation because of gender dynamics, because of the trainer-trainee relationship, and because of power dynamics between security and non-security staff.
 - During particularly intense simulations of a long duration, participants need to be briefed in advance that even if they FEEL they cannot or should not ask for a bathroom break for whatever reason, they CAN and SHOULD. Let them know how to do it. Because if a woman is fearful to ask, and she is concerned about standing up and having blood stains on her trousers or skirt that everyone will see, she is no longer learning in your session and you have failed as a training team to meet your learners needs.
 - All of these preparations should be systematically incorporated into your training checklist so that nothing is forgotten.
- When topics are being taught in any kind of security training that can incorporate planning for menstruation, they should: kidnapping, hibernation planning, quick run bags, deployment/travel planning,

² These suggestions are equally relevant for any other type of residential experiential learning course where you will have female participants and limited access, or perceived limited access, to toilets and sanitation facilities.

diversity sessions, etc. Don't have a woman trainer add in these bits just because she's a woman. If you're leading the session, it's your responsibility to talk about it and to do so confidently and professionally.

Drivers

- Drivers need to understand the challenges that women with periods experience during long road trips. Stops at the side of the road where men can urinate don't work for women in the best of circumstances, and they certainly don't work for women who are menstruating. Have the drivers plan their journey ahead of time to incorporate "short stops" in towns, petrol stations, other NGO offices, etc. to accommodate women who might be menstruating. Drivers do not need to know for sure. If they've got a woman as a passenger, they should just do it, or at least ask if anyone would like to stop as they approach each suitable place along the way.
- Explain to the drivers that if a woman asks for a drive to a pharmacy there's probably no need for the driver to accompany that woman inside. This is often done as a very kind courtesy, especially when this request is made by a foreign visitor, but pharmacies are places where it's nice to have a bit of privacy- both for women and men.

WHAT WOMEN RESPONDENTS WOULD LIKE THEIR MALE COLLEAGUES TO KNOW:

- 1) Menstruation is different for every woman. Some women experience significant cramps, migraines, back pain, issues focusing, etc. Others do not. Please do not use the experiences of the very lucky latter group to discount the different needs and concerns of the former group.
- 2) For many women this is something that we put a great deal of thought and planning into managing and it's incredibly difficult in remote settings. It's even more difficult when we are sharing living accommodations and toilet facilities with male colleagues because we have less privacy, despite a greater need for it.
- 3) An unexpected period is an emergency. Despite our best efforts to plan, these happen and can happen for a variety of reasons: peri-menopause, travel, stress, crossing time zones, etc. And some women just have really irregular periods.
- 4) An urgent need to change a tampon, pad or menstrual cup is also an emergency. And if we're not able to do this it leads to really embarrassing situations.
- 5) Among women there are varied levels of comfort in discussing this. So we understand your discomfort too.
- 6) Please don't make jokes about women and their periods. They're not funny and they make for uncomfortable work environments. Most of you don't.
- 7) We don't want to be the person on your team who is always raising this issue, just because we're women. We'd like for this to be a shared responsibility and that something that is normalized.
- 8) If a female colleague tries to talk to you about this, it's not to make you uncomfortable. It probably took courage for her to raise it which is a sign that she trusts you. Please don't shut her down.

"The Tough Stuff" is a series of guidance notes put out by CARE Canada's Safety and Security Unit that addresses some of the uncomfortable-and important-safety and security issues facing our staff.