



Menstrual Health

More than one fifth of the world's population consists of women of reproductive age. On average, a woman spends seven years of her life menstruating, making menstruation a natural and essential part of the reproductive cycle. In addition to menstruation, women also experience other forms of vaginal bleeding and at the end of the reproductive cycle they experience menopause. It is an essential human right to have the ability to manage menstrual health and all other forms of vaginal bleeding with adequate knowledge, safety, and dignity and without stigma. However, menstruation is a taboo topic in almost all cultures around the world; it is not openly discussed and menstrual health of women and girls is not prioritised. They lack access to the information, products and infrastructure that is needed to manage menstruation with dignity. When women and girls are isolated from their families and forced to be absent from work, school, or community activities, and have their physical safety at risk, this has a severe impact on their health, well-being, and rights. It should be noted that adolescent girls, and girls and women living with a disability, are especially vulnerable to negative outcomes related to menstruation, including effects on their overall self-esteem and confidence.

Menstruation as a starting point

In many cultures a girl's first menstruation marks her transition into womanhood. With that transition comes a broader set of restrictions and roles that girls are expected to align to. For Simavi, interventions that aim to improve women and girls' experience of menstrual health are an opportunity to address a broader set of barriers and tackle issues surrounding gender (in)equality and sexual reproductive health. Our aim is to improve the overall wellbeing of girls, women and other menstruators by supporting them to improve their menstrual health and challenge the restrictions they face in regard to their menstruation and other forms of vaginal bleeding. We combine the following five approaches in our programmes:



Menstrual health defined

Simavi uses the term 'menstrual health' to describe both menstrual hygiene management practices and the broader interventions that link menstruation to health, wellbeing, gender, education, equality, empowerment and rights.¹ In Simavi's work on menstrual health we incorporate other episodes of bleeding between menarche and menopause and refer to these as 'other types of vaginal bleeding'. And, although we focus on women and girls, we recognize that there are women and girls who don't menstruate due to health or anatomical reasons, trans men that menstruate, trans women who do not menstruate and intersex people who do or do not menstruate.

1. Inspired by Path's Outlook on Reproductive Health, Girls' and Women's Right to Menstrual Health: Evidence and Opportunities, February, 2016. https://www.path.org/publications/files/RH_outlook_mh_022016.pdf

1. Empower, educate and inform

Using a comprehensive rights-based menstrual health curriculum, Simavi works with teachers, (peer) educators, health workers and other stakeholders to educate women and girls, and teach them the necessary skills for managing their menstrual health, menopause and other forms of vaginal bleeding. In addition Simavi educates gatekeepers, with a special focus on men and boys, to play a supportive role in ensuring menstrual health. Building on this knowledge, we work with women and girls and their communities to address existing norms and other barriers that restrict their participation in daily life during their period. In our work to raise awareness on menstrual health and other forms of vaginal bleeding, we make use of traditional methods such as school-based education as well as more innovative methods, including our [Happy Periods App](#).



2. Access and use of services and products

To ensure women and girls have access to gender sensitive toilets, we work together with them and their communities to realise these facilities. Through awareness-raising, capacity-building and social accountability methods such as resources mobilization, we work with schools and communities to prioritise expenditure and access available government budget to realise the construction of toilets. Regarding access to products, our aim is to enable women and girls to make an informed decision by providing information on the use of several products to manage bleeding, including instructions on the use of cloth. Where necessary, we work with (business) partners to create access to menstrual products through sustainable business models, promoting female entrepreneurship and environmental friendly solutions for disposal whenever possible.

3. National advocacy and policy influencing

Advocacy towards policy or implementation of policies is an important instrument in creating sustainable change. Therefore in our programmes we work closely together with local and/or national governments to ensure that our work on menstrual health, menopause and other forms of vaginal bleeding is sustained through government programmes and/or policies. We implement our programmes alongside existing policies and advocate for inclusion of menstrual health in government curricula and the availability of women and girl-friendly toilets in schools and communities.

4. International advocacy

In addition to our work on national level, Simavi advocates for increased prioritisation of menstrual health on the global level. To increase priority and build capacity on menstrual health, Simavi engages with researchers, UN agencies, (i)NGOs and the private sector to organise side-events at conferences and events such as the High Level Political Forum ([listen to the recording here](#)). Furthermore, we organised a MH webinar series ([see here](#)) as an activity under the MH Alliance as a platform to facilitate sharing and learning on menstrual health.

5. Evidence informed programming

There is a need for more rigorous and systematic research on the specific barriers to menstrual health, as well as evaluations of menstrual health programmes, to better inform future programmes and messaging. Simavi works closely with researchers to ensure our programmes are evidence-informed and contribute to the evidence base on menstrual health. An example of this is our [Ritu programme](#), in which we work closely with the Erasmus University, Maastricht University and Johns Hopkins University on a Randomized Controlled Trial of 4000 girls involved in the programme).

Our menstrual health programmes

Simavi works on menstrual health in several countries and in different partnerships. Examples are:

[Making Periods Normal](#) – with Rutgers, Women on Wings, in India

[Ritu](#) – with RedOrange and TNO, in Bangladesh

[Perfect Fit](#) - with Kopernik, in Indonesia