



## Addressing menstruation-related challenges for women and girls: an untapped opportunity

The menstruation-related challenges that women and girls around the world face are creating a lose–lose situation for individuals, companies, and the global economy, resulting in estimated annual economic damage of more than €107 billion in the European Union alone.

It takes an average of five years to earn a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree. By then, graduates have spent 1,825 days in college. This roughly equals the average amount of time women and girls menstruate over the course of their lifetimes. Menstruation is a normal physical function and the basis of all human life. However, because of a combination of a lack of education about menstruation, negative social norms and practices, limited access to menstrual products, and a lack of access to period-friendly sanitation infrastructure, millions of women and girls are unable to reach their full potential.

This negatively affects not only individual women and girls, but also businesses, economies, and societies at large. We estimate the global economic damage resulting from women and girls around the world missing out on education and job opportunities at hundreds of billions dollars per year. In the European Union, almost nine days of productivity are lost due to unaddressed menstruation-related challenges per working woman every year. This alone results in annual economic damage of €107 billion.

This joint paper by WASH United and Kearney provides exclusive insights into the menstruation-related challenges that women and girls around the globe are facing. Our research reveals how these challenges create a lose–lose situation for individuals and for the global economy. In this paper, we discuss the findings of our study, highlight the solutions for tackling these challenges. Our paper also highlights what businesses can do to address menstruation-related challenges at the workplace and beyond.

**In the European Union, unaddressed menstruation-related challenges result in 8.9 days of productivity lost per working woman per year.**

## The social problem

To deepen our understanding of menstrual hygiene management (MHM), Kearney surveyed 600 women and girls along with 300 men in Germany and the United States. Our study, supported by existing literature, reveals four significant barriers (see figure 1 on page 3).

**Lack of information.** Girls often lack basic information about menstruation, especially before they start menstruating. More than 30 percent of girls in the United States and more than 20 percent in Germany have no to very limited knowledge before their first period and feel unprepared to handle menstruation. In India, 64 percent of girls do not have information about menstruation before their first period.<sup>1</sup>

**Cultural taboo and stigmatization.** A variety of cultural taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation deeply impact women and girls in both developed and developing countries. In extreme cases, such as the practice of *chhaupadi* in Nepal, menstruating women and girls are banished from their homes and forced to spend the duration of their periods in cowsheds or isolated makeshift huts that often pose significant risks to their health and lives. Nearly half of all girls age 14 to 21 in the United Kingdom say they are embarrassed by their periods.<sup>2</sup> And our study reveals that in the United States and in Germany, more than 25 percent of women feel they cannot openly request time off for menstruation-related issues and have to find other excuses instead. Nearly 30 percent of US women feel uncomfortable in social situations when on their periods, and less than 5 percent feel comfortable talking about menstruation to men other than their partners. In both Germany and the United States, nearly 60 percent of men haven't heard women talk about menstruation or talked about it with their female school or work colleagues in the past year.

**Lack of access to menstrual products.** In both developing and developed countries, poorer women and girls face challenges with regard to access to menstrual products. In Kenya, 65 percent of women and girls cannot afford menstrual products.<sup>3</sup> Period poverty is also an issue for low-income girls and women in Western Europe and the United States. In the United Kingdom, 40 percent of girls have had to use toilet paper as a menstrual product because they can't afford proper menstrual products.<sup>4</sup>

**Lack of period-friendly infrastructure.** Inadequate facilities, particularly in public places, is a major obstacle preventing women and girls from practicing good menstrual hygiene. This includes lack of toilets that ensure privacy, safety, and dignity as well as no options for the safe disposal of used menstrual products and no soap and water. More than 500 million women and girls around the world do not have adequate facilities for menstrual hygiene management. In Nigeria, for example, 25 percent of women have to use facilities that don't ensure adequate privacy to manage their periods.<sup>5</sup>

All of these obstacles have a direct impact on the lives of women and girls around the world (see sidebar: Menstruation-related challenges create a wide range of barriers for women and girls on page 4).

<sup>1</sup> "Effect of menstruation on girls and their schooling, and facilitators of menstrual hygiene management in schools: surveys in government schools in three states in India, 2015," *Journal of Global Health*, June 2019

<sup>2</sup> "Almost Half of Girls Aged 14–21 Are Embarrassed by Their Periods," Plan International, 9 October 2017

<sup>3</sup> "Having a period is unaffordable in Kenya, yet no one wants to talk about it," *The Guardian*, 5 January 2017

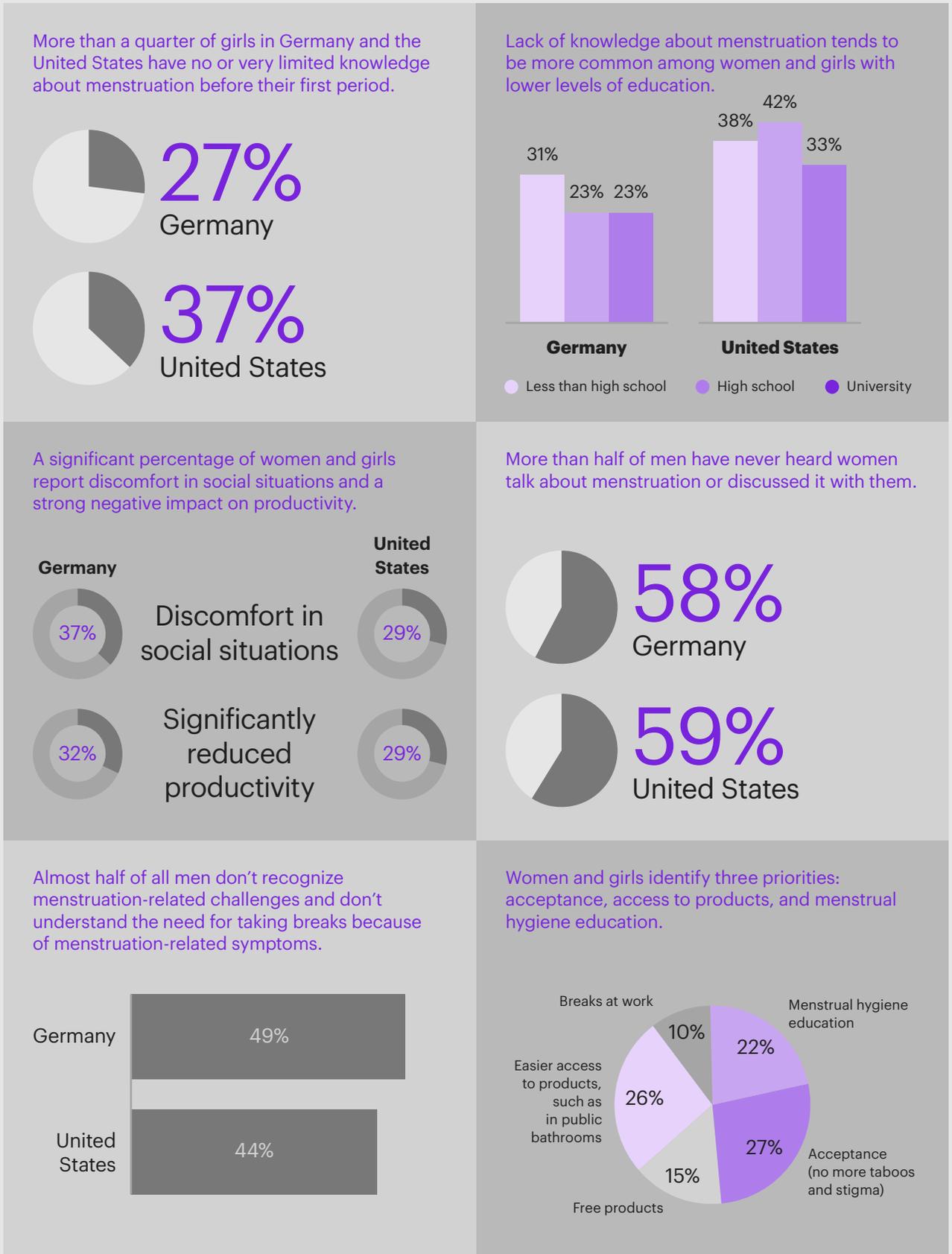
<sup>4</sup> "Break the Barriers," Plan International, January 2018

<sup>5</sup> "#ItsTimeForAction: Investing in Menstrual Hygiene Management is to Invest in Human Capital," World Bank, 24 May 2019

Figure 1

**Issues with managing menstrual hygiene cause a variety of problems for women and girls around the world**

Insights from Kearney's survey of 600 women and girls and 300 men in Germany and the United States



Source: Kearney analysis

## The big picture: how menstruation is connected with the Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to address 17 crucial global challenges, with a focus on poverty, inequality, and climate change. Good menstrual hygiene is particularly relevant to achieving the following SDGs:

**SDG 3: good health and well-being.** Unhygienic practices, such as the use of unsafe menstrual products or products that are not changed often enough, can lead to severe infections, including death from toxic shock syndrome.

**SDG 4: quality education.** Challenges related to menstrual hygiene often negatively impact girls' school attendance and performance and can even result in girls dropping out of school entirely.

**SDG 5: gender equality.** All around the world, the stigma surrounding menstruation means that women and girls are discriminated against, excluded from society, and have fewer opportunities than men for a significant portion of their lives.

**SDG 6: clean water and sanitation.** Access to clean water and sanitation is vital to managing periods safely and hygienically.

**SDG 8: decent work and economic growth.** Period-friendly work environments contribute to decent work conditions and increase productivity.

**SDG 12: responsible consumption and production.** Most menstrual products are single-use and contain plastic elements or packaging, contributing to waste challenges.

## Menstruation-related challenges create a wide range of barriers for women and girls

Three concrete examples of menstruation-related challenges women and girls face in their daily lives:

### Menstruation huts in Nepal

"Following our tradition of *chhaupadi*, I learned from my mother that we women are unclean during our menstruation, so I am not allowed to touch any other human or use communal items. Additionally, every time my menstruation starts, I have to move out of the house into a *chhau*—a hut for menstruating women. Since it is very simple and only made of mud, it is very cold in the winter. So when I light a fire in the *chhau*, I always have to make sure to let in fresh air once in a while. I heard that last month another woman died because she suffocated in her *chhau*."

—Dana, a woman in Nepal

### School absenteeism in Africa

"I really love going to school and learning new things. Last year, I had the best grades in my math classes. Several months ago, however, I had my first menstruation. My friend Wangui was once mocked by the teacher because she had a blood stain on her school uniform. When I am on my period, I am afraid to answer questions because I don't want to stand up. Sometimes, when we don't have pads available, I don't go to school at all."

—Florence, a student in Uganda

### Social norms in Germany

"I like teamwork, and so far, my manager has been great. She appreciates me for the ideas that I bring in. However, I sometimes struggle. Typically during my period, I experience some pain for one day. So most of the time, I just take a painkiller and sit it out. Concentrating until the painkiller kicks in is very tiring, so I wish I could have a short break. Although I think I can openly ask my manager, I feel embarrassed to ask."

—Christine, a consultant in Berlin

## The economic consequences

Over the next 10 years, about 630 million girls in developing countries will experience their first period, according to the World Bank.<sup>6</sup> More than half—around 350 million girls—will not have enough information to manage their periods safely, hygienically, and without shame. Many more girls will lack access to hygienic menstrual products. As a result, many girls will miss crucial parts of their education, ranging from 8 percent in the Philippines to more than 60 percent in Uganda (see figure 2 on page 6).

A growing body of evidence confirms the impact of period-related challenges on school attendance and performance. A girl that is empowered to manage her menstruation safely, hygienically, with confidence, and without shame is more likely to stay in school once she reaches puberty. She is then less likely to get married early or have children when she is not yet ready. On average, she will have fewer children and her family will be healthier, wealthier, and better educated.

Investing in interventions to empower girls to manage their menstruation safely, hygienically, with confidence and without stigma, so that they continue to attend and perform well in school once they start puberty isn't just the morally right thing to do, it also makes economic sense.

Menstruation-related challenges are not limited to developing countries. A study of working women in the Netherlands shows that menstruation-related challenges accounted for 1.3 days of sick leave per year for each woman.<sup>8</sup> In addition, women report a severe impact on productivity when they do go to work (presenteeism), adding another 7.6 days.<sup>9</sup> In total, these unaddressed menstruation-related challenges create 8.9 days of lost productivity for every working woman every year. Extrapolating this data for the European Union with average wages for women per country, €107 billion of productivity is lost each year as a result of lacking support for women to manage their period at work.

Making matters more complex, because of the silence and stigma that still surround menstruation, co-workers and superiors may not understand why their colleagues and employees are absent or less productive, which can create tension in the workplace. The Netherlands study also reveals that only 20 percent of women who take sick days because of their periods tell their employers the real reason for their absence.

Creating a more period-friendly workplace can help ensure that female staff feel comfortable and safe every day of the month. For example, two-thirds of the women we surveyed say they would appreciate flexible work hours and alternative tasks during their periods. A work environment that enables open conversation about menstruation is equally important.

Overall, creating a more period-friendly work environment can help increase productivity, boost staff happiness and loyalty, and help companies stand out in the competition for top female talent.

**“Investing in good menstrual hygiene management to enable women and girls to reach their full potential is a critical measure to build a nation’s human capital over time.”**

**— Jennifer Sara, senior director,  
World Bank Water Global Practice**

<sup>6</sup> Females between the ages of 3 and 13 in 2018, not corrected for non-menstruating women

<sup>7</sup> “Measuring the Economic Gain of Investing in Girls: the Girl Effect Dividend,” World Bank, August 2011

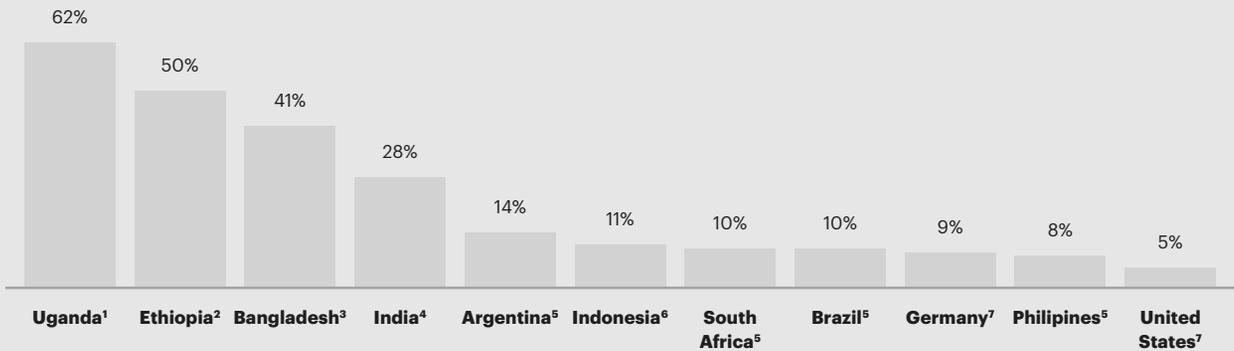
<sup>8</sup> “Productivity loss due to menstruation-related symptoms,” *BMJ Open*, 8 March 2019

<sup>9</sup> Presenteeism is the practice of coming to work despite an illness, which tends to have a negative impact on productivity.

Figure 2

## The education of girls around the world is suffering because of menstrual hygiene issues

Percentage of girls who say they regularly miss school because of menstrual hygiene issues



<sup>1</sup>“Menstrual health and school absenteeism among adolescent girls in Uganda,” *BMC Women’s Health*, 3 January 2018

<sup>2</sup>“Menstrual hygiene management and school absenteeism among female adolescent students in Northeast Ethiopia,” *BMC Public Health*, 29 October 2014

<sup>3</sup>“Menstrual hygiene management among Bangladeshi adolescent schoolgirls and risk factors affecting school absence,” *BMJ Open*, 9 July 2017

<sup>4</sup>“Menstrual hygiene in South Asia: a neglected issue for WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) programmes” Mahon T, Fernandes M. *Gender & Development* 2010;18:99–113

<sup>5</sup>“Understanding menstruation-related challenges for women and girls,” Johnson & Johnson, WASH United, 2019

<sup>6</sup>“Menstrual hygiene management and school absenteeism among adolescent students in Indonesia: evidence from a cross-sectional school-based survey,” *Tropical Medicine & International Health*, 29 October 2018

<sup>7</sup>Kearney’s 2019 Menstrual Health Management Study of 600 women and girls and 300 men in Germany and the United States

Source: Kearney analysis

The corporate investments that have been made so far tend to overlook the importance of educating girls and addressing period stigma.

## Solutions

Gender issues in general are chronically underfunded around the world. “Private donors give \$9.27 to higher education and \$4.85 to the arts for every \$1 they give to women’s issues,” philanthropist Melinda Gates has said regarding funding in the United States. One of the most neglected issues is menstrual hygiene management, especially within the corporate sector. Also, the few corporate investments that have been made so far typically focus on donating products and creating infrastructure but overlook the crucial importance of educating girls and addressing period stigma. Most of the larger and more sustained interventions are from companies with a background in feminine care. Initiatives from companies from other industries are still sparse.

Let’s take a closer look at some of the existing solutions to address these challenges.

## Information about menstruation

There is still a mind-blowing lack of knowledge about menstruation. For example, seven out of 10 adolescent girls in India are unaware of menstruation until their first period.<sup>10</sup> Educating girls—and ideally, boys too—is essential to ensuring that menstruation is perceived as a normal bodily function. Education also provides girls with the information and the confidence they need to handle their periods safely and hygienically. More and better menstrual hygiene education is needed across the globe.

There is a range of tested solutions for period education. Self-study products include the Menstrupedia comic books and the Grow & Know puberty books, which reach an average of 200,000 children every year. While these organizations focus mainly on Africa and Asia, the education campaign Betty for Schools provides menstrual hygiene education to students in the United Kingdom. Another rapidly growing solution is WASH United's MHM Education Guide. The impact of this group- and activity-based training module for schools scaled from reaching 40,000 girls in 2018 in India and Eastern Africa to about 1.8 million in 2019. To take the program to a global platform, WASH United plans to launch an online platform later this year.

When it comes to corporate engagement in menstrual hygiene education, the leading example is the Keeping Girls in School program by Procter & Gamble's period brand Always, which uses educational sessions and brochures to engage girls and boys from grades five to seven. Reaching about 18 million girls and boys with menstrual hygiene education every year, this program is by far the world's largest corporate initiative.

## Tackling cultural taboos and stigma

Breaking the cultural taboos and stigma about menstruation is a challenging task but one that needs urgent attention. Since its 2014 launch by WASH United, Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28 has grown into a global movement with more than 630 organizations, including UNICEF, the World Bank, and Procter & Gamble, working together to make period stigma a thing of the past. In 2020, the global initiative generated 4,140 articles in online media and more than 151,000 contributions on social media, reaching 411 million people around the world.

A few companies also tackle the social taboo. For example, in Germany, Einhorn offers menstruation products packaged in flamboyant colors with bold designs aimed at breaking the silence about periods. Other corporates raise awareness for the issue internally or introduce policies to promote open conversation about menstruation at the workplace and allow for flexible work schemes during menstruation. Indian food delivery service Zomato is one of the most prominent examples with a company-wide menstrual leave policy to destigmatize menstruation and make female staff more comfortable.

In early 2019, the Academy Award-winning documentary *Period. End of Sentence.* boosted the conversation about menstruation. Available on Netflix, this short film follows a group of young women in India as they learn to produce biodegradable sanitary pads to sell to other women at affordable prices.

**“More than half of girls experience a drop in confidence at puberty. That’s why MHM education is so important—and education not just of girls—but also society in general.”**

**—Charlotte Le Fluffy, global social impact program leader, Always/Whisper, Procter & Gamble**

<sup>10</sup> “Spot On! Improving Menstrual Health and Hygiene in India,” Dasra, United States Agency for International Development, and Kiawah Trust, 2015

# Inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, such as the lack of clean water or gender-separate washrooms, is a major challenge around the world.

## Promoting access to hygiene products

So far, most efforts on menstrual hygiene have addressed the lack of access to products, including product donations from intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and companies. If companies engage in menstrual hygiene issues, they tend to do so in this area.

Government programs in India, Kenya, and South Africa as well as in the United States and the United Kingdom give girls free menstrual products. For example, UNICEF, UNHCR, and other United Nations agencies distribute menstrual products in Asia and Africa. Other examples of initiatives addressing access to products include Welthungerhilfe's partnership with Ruby Cup as well as programs by Plan International and DSW. Companies that promote access to menstrual products for poor and marginalized women and girls include Procter & Gamble (committed to donating 100 million period products by 2021), AFRIPads (producing sustainable menstrual products for emergency settings), Monki (donating menstruation cups), Kimberly–Clark (donate millions of period products each year through the Alliance for Period Supplies).

More companies are also making free menstrual products available to employees and customers in women's restrooms—from multinationals such as Google, Viacom, and Etsy to local companies such as Stauf's Coffee Roasters in the United States and Swedish construction company Sh bygg.

## Ensure access to period-friendly infrastructure

Inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, such as the lack of clean water or gender-separate washrooms, is a major challenge around the world. Infrastructure in schools and other public buildings is being addressed by government agencies, with support from bilateral and multilateral funders such as the World Bank. However, countries such as India are still struggling to provide the necessary infrastructure. The Swachh Bharat Mission, a large government project, has aimed to change that with a nationwide hygiene initiative. The World Bank, UNICEF, and GIZ also have infrastructure programs that focus on the basics, such as building separate washrooms for boys and girls at schools and ensuring access to soap and running water. These programs are often combined with educational materials and activities to raise menstrual hygiene awareness. Organizations such as DSW and Plan International are also engaging in infrastructure programs.

Figure 3

## Corporate responses to menstrual hygiene management fall into four areas

### Address menstrual hygiene management within the company

#### Teach about menstrual hygiene management

Offer courses for female staff about how to minimize menstrual discomfort.



#### Talk about menstruation to end the stigma

Conduct companywide awareness activities to address the period stigma, such as on May 28 for Menstrual Hygiene Day.



#### Provide menstrual hygiene products

Make menstrual hygiene products available in staff bathrooms free of charge.



#### Build a menstrual hygiene-friendly infrastructure

Make sure that all company sanitation facilities are period-friendly, including soap, running water, and bins for disposal.



### Address menstrual hygiene management outside the company

#### Teach about menstrual hygiene management

Support NGOs that provide girls with menstrual health education globally.

#### Talk about menstruation to end the stigma

Support global Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28 as an official corporate partner.

#### Provide menstrual hygiene products

Donate to NGOs that disseminate free menstrual hygiene products in developed or developing countries.

#### Build a menstrual hygiene-friendly infrastructure

Support NGOs that are building menstrual hygiene-friendly sanitation facilities.

Note: NGO is nongovernmental organization.

Source: Kearney analysis

## Call to action: what companies can do to address menstruation-related challenges

There are many challenges in this world that we cannot solve in the next 10 years. Looking at the progress we have seen over the past five years, creating a world where no woman or girl is limited because of her period by 2030 now seems possible. However, to turn this opportunity into reality, everyone has to do a lot more, including in particular the corporate world.

Ending period poverty and stigma globally would have a huge impact not only on individual women, girls and their families, but on entire countries and the global economy at large.

All of the above turns action on menstrual hygiene into a win-win for individuals, companies, and economies.

To get your company's development process started, we have gathered some initial ideas into four clusters (see figure 3).

### Get in touch

We would be happy to support you in developing a suitable plan of action for your company. Feel free to get in touch.

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## Authors



**Carsten Gerhardt**  
Partner, Dusseldorf  
carsten.gerhardt@kearney.com



**Markus Plack**  
Consultant, Berlin  
markus.plack@kearney.com



**Saskia God**  
Consultant, Berlin  
saskia.god@kearney.com



**Kai X. Wang**  
Consultant, Berlin  
kai.x.wang@kearney.com

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## WASH United authors



**Thorsten Kiefer**  
CEO, WASH United  
thorsten.kiefer@wash-united.org



**Sarah Bagel**  
Senior Partnerships Manager, WASH United  
sarah.bagel@wash-united.org

### **About WASH United**

As the initiator and coordinator of global Menstrual Hygiene Day, WASH United has reached more than 1 billion people around the world with positive, taboo-breaking messaging about menstruation. In addition, WASH United's innovative low-cost training solutions for schools have helped to provide more than 2 million girls across sub-Saharan Africa and India with education about menstrual hygiene.

Building on its almost 10 years of work experience on the issue of menstruation, strong expertise in design thinking, and a global network of partners, WASH United is designing a new offering to help companies create more period-friendly work environments, which will be available in late 2020.

**[menstrualhygieneday.org](http://menstrualhygieneday.org)**  
**[wash-United.org](http://wash-United.org)**

### **About Kearney**

As a global consulting partnership in more than 40 countries, our people make us who we are. We're individuals who take as much joy from those we work with as the work itself. Driven to be the difference between a big idea and making it happen, we help our clients break through.

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