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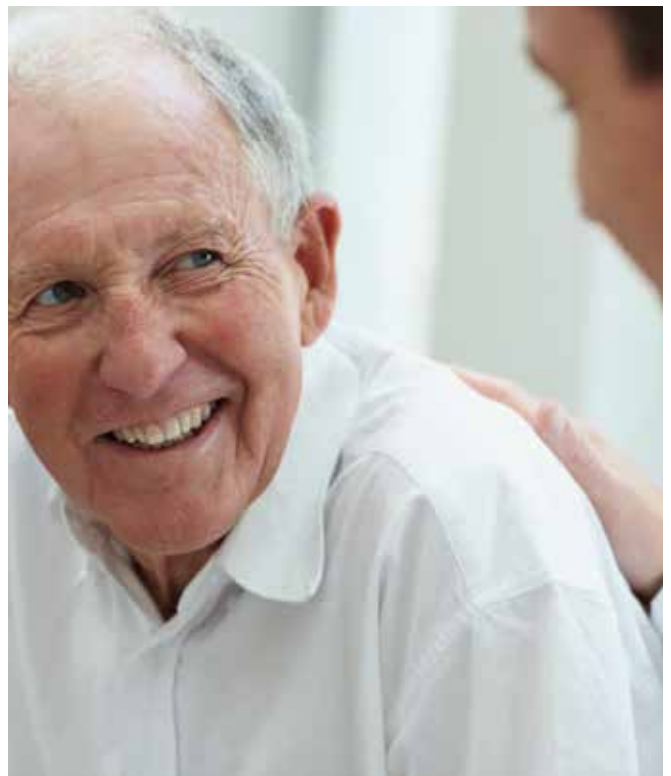
A large, bold white number '2' is positioned on the left side of the page. The background is a deep blue with a subtle, artistic image of a water droplet splashing, creating concentric ripples. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Chapter 2

Emotions in the way of progress

Even when we have access to sanitation facilities, and the hygiene products we need, stigma caused by taboos surrounding natural bodily functions can limit our ability to participate fully in society and live an active life. Securing investments to improve hygiene is therefore not enough. To fully realize the value of hygiene we must address and break down the emotional barriers to progress.

Negative perceptions of natural phenomena, such as menstruation and menopause or common conditions like incontinence, damage self-confidence and make it difficult to seek help for something that is seen as embarrassing or against societal norms, even if such help were to be both accessible and affordable. In this chapter, we look closer at some of the sensitivities surrounding personal hygiene and the norms that keep us from moving forward.



More than half of women feel uncomfortable in social situations when they have their period.

Shame surrounding natural bodily functions

At any given moment, 800 million women and girls around the world are menstruating. The menstrual cycle is a sign of female health and vitality yet rather than celebrated it is often shrouded in shame, embarrassment and even fear. The freedom to manage one's menstrual hygiene adequately and with dignity is a central facet of women's and girls' human rights and gender equality. Yet the biological fact itself and the necessity of managing menstruation are often overshadowed by society's response to them.

More than half of the female population in the majority of the countries covered in the Hygiene Matters Survey said they feel uncomfortable in social situations when they have their period. This discomfort is strongly connected to norms and social stigmas. Among the countries we surveyed, Mexico and China are where the menstrual stigma is most pronounced. More than seven in ten women in these countries say they feel uncomfortable in social situations when they have their period. The shame and stigma is manifested by the fact that many people prefer to use other words when speaking about menstruation (see page 29).

Changing perceptions of menstruation, and breaking the silence around it, is essential for women and girls to reach their full potential. In 2014, Jyoti Sanghera from the UN Human Rights Office, described the stigma around menstrual hygiene as "a violation of several human rights, most importantly the right to human dignity."

There are more extreme cases, such as in India, where menstruating women are forbidden from taking baths, touching sour foods such as pickles, cooking or even entering the kitchen. Some Muslim women are not allowed to offer prayers during their periods, nor touch the Holy Quran, visit religious shrines or

fast during Ramadan. In rural Nepal, superstition leads to girls being separated from their families for up to six to ten days during menstruation and forbidden from, for example, looking at the sun, or touching fruit and flowers.

Menstrual hygiene is not only an enabler for women and girls to participate fully in society but it is also an important entry point to raising broader issues around gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. Wassalke Boukhari,

Niger's Minister of Water and Sanitation, said at the Fourth AfricaSan conference in Dakar, Senegal in 2015, that: "Taboos are accompanied by ignorance which results in high-risk practices endangering women and girls. We must raise awareness and conduct advocacy to break taboos and replace ignorance with information."

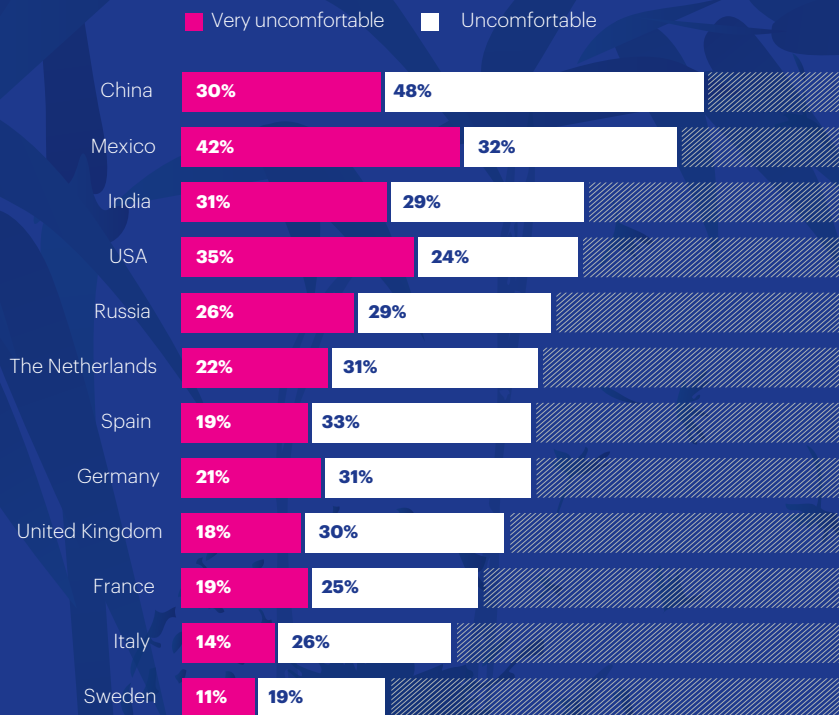
In a 2016 WSSCC report from Kenya (First National Training of Trainers on Menstrual Hygiene Management - Kenya), participating County First Ladies stressed that the challenges related to menstrual hygiene management are interconnected: the affordability of material, the disposal of menstrual waste, the silence around menstruation and the need for education. Sanitary pads are important, but not sufficient by themselves. There is a need for accurate and non-judgmental information before menarche. Such information is not only for girls, but men and boys must also be involved.

One in four women in the countries surveyed said they feel uncomfortable buying necessary items such as sanitary pads. Men feel even more embarrassed, and in China and Russia, the percentage who said they feel uncomfortable buying such items rose to as high as 65% and 64%, respectively.

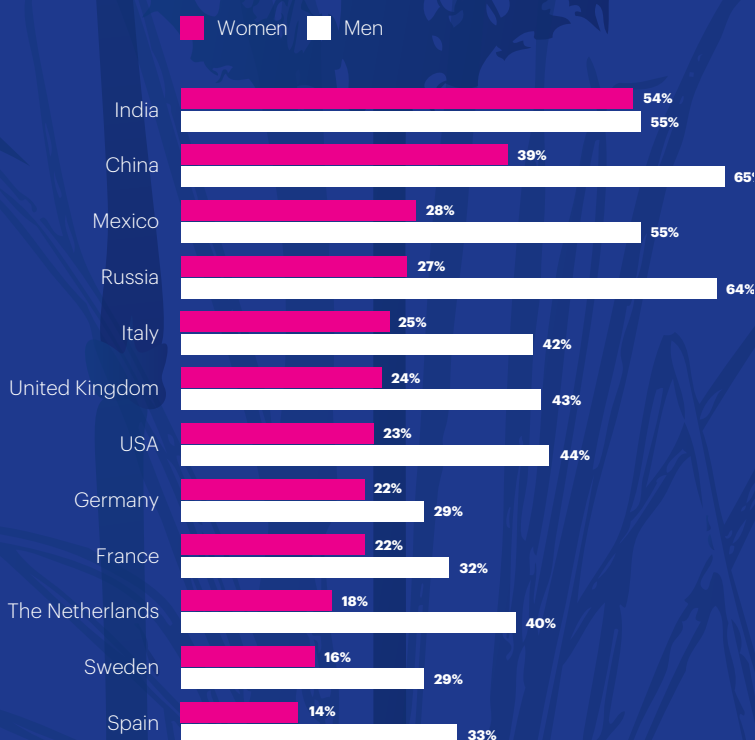


Hygiene Matters Survey 2016/17

Women and girls feeling uncomfortable in social situations when they are on their period:



People feeling discomfort buying menstrual hygiene (a lot or some):



Managing menstruation in West and Central Africa

In many parts of the world, menstruation is a taboo topic, surrounded by silence and shrouded in myths. Yet, menstruation and menstrual hygiene are emerging as central issues for gender equality, human rights and development.

Since 2014, WSSCC and UN Women have co-organized a Joint Program on Gender, Hygiene and Sanitation. Implemented in Senegal, Niger and Cameroon in West and Central Africa, the program aims to establish a framework within which all women and girls in this region benefit in a sustained manner from sanitation, hygiene and water (WASH) services.

WSSCC and UN Women have conducted several studies in the region on menstruation practices and behaviors. The findings of these studies echo concerns from many countries around the world. A first, and very critical, problem is limited or incorrect knowledge and information. Many girls do not understand what is happening when they start menstruating and have limited knowledge on biological processes. Mothers often do not discuss menstruation with their daughters before they have their first period. As one girl in Cameroon explained: "My periods started when I was in the field with my mother. Since I was ashamed I didn't say anything to her... when my mother realized that it was my period, she discreetly took me into her bedroom and took out a sanitary cloth and explained to me how to wear it. She also told me not to greet any boys anymore, because if I did I would fall pregnant straight away."

The absence of adequate sanitation facilities is another factor with a significant impact on the daily lives of women and girls. Over 40% of the girls surveyed said that they missed school for at least one day per month during their periods and a majority of economically active women said that they missed work during this period, preferring to stay at home. Due to a lack of facilities at school, at work and in public spaces, women often prefer to manage menstruation at home, meaning they are unable to participate in cultural, educational, social and income-generating activities. Poor practices and unsafe materials compound this problem.

Last, but not least, some of the most significant barriers for women in these countries are the social restrictions, beliefs and myths that influence the management of menstruation. Menstruation is a taboo issue in the community. Seen as an impurity or even a disease, menstrual blood is managed in secret. When menstruating, women and girls are subjected to various religious, food-related, domestic or sexual prohibitions, which often lead to further isolation or stigmatization.



WSSCC/UN Women/Javier Acebal

The unmentionable menstruation

Around the world, girls and women use different words to say they are menstruating.





Daring to discuss incontinence

If shame around natural bodily functions such as menstruation is a limiting factor, the stigma surrounding incontinence is even stronger. As we saw in the first chapter, incontinence is a complex health and social issue that can cause devastating social and economic exclusion as well as psychological stress. Despite impacting the daily lives of an estimated 400 million men, women and children around the world, it is rarely talked about openly, limiting knowledge about the help and products available.

Incontinence is most common among women, and one in three women over the age of 50 is affected at some point in their life. People living with incontinence are prone to embarrassment over potential leakage or smell and can feel ostracized or isolated as a result. They may experience anxiety about finding a place to relieve themselves with dignity.

Many people are unaware that help is available. Instead people use toilet paper, socks, double underwear and other things that are not effective. Worse still, people with leakage issues do not talk about their problems with anyone – not even their doctor. “It’s a pity they hesitate to seek help,” says Ralph Peeker, professor and consultant at Sahlgrenska University Hospital in Gothenburg. “Incontinence can be treated in very many cases. It’s also important to find out what it’s due to.” This is particularly important since incontinence can be a sign of a more serious health issue such as prostate cancer or ovarian cancer that requires the attention of healthcare professionals. When it comes to contact for diagnosis, a 2013 study of ours into men’s health in Germany, India, Sweden and the UK found that one in four of respondents had not yet seen someone about their bladder problems but intended to, and one in three in the UK and Sweden had not seen anyone at all.

Many people affected by bladder problems and leakage issues endure strong social stigma. Some become depressed while others become dehydrated because they are afraid to drink too much liquid. Worst of all is the constant fear of discovery.

Speaking up about male incontinence

Women are most affected by incontinence but as many as one in four men over the age of 40 also have some form of leakage issues. Since incontinence is rarely spoken about, and male incontinence even less so, sharing the stories of sufferers is important to break the silence surrounding the condition.

Jörgen Pihl, a 72-year-old man in Sweden, lives with incontinence as a result of a prostate cancer operation six years ago. Although past retirement age, he remains highly active, both in his own business and as a municipal councilor. Incontinence has meant a more carefully planned day-to-day life; always checking for the nearest toilet, watching how much he drinks and always carrying an extra pad.

But perhaps more than a physical and practical inconvenience, incontinence proved to be a mental challenge. For Pihl, it was a particularly hard blow to his identity. "I think your psychological attitude toward experiencing incontinence is very dependent on your background," he says. "I'm an old commando and strongly marked by a male environment. That's not made it any easier. At first I had great difficulty in accepting the situation and felt ashamed."

Until now, his incontinence has been a well-kept secret apart from his immediate family. The social stigma that surrounds incontinence has also meant Pihl has felt reluctant to visit the pharmacy to buy protection and so instead orders it from his incontinence nurse. And although active in many areas, he describes sometimes withdrawing from social life more or less unconsciously.

Throughout, Pihl says he has had good support from his wife and a friend in the same situation, and over time, the situation has become easier to accept and the feelings of shame are not as strong. "I hope to be able to contribute to a more open discussion about incontinence by sharing my story," Jörgen says. "If I were to give advice to other sufferers, it would be to try to accept the situation and still make the best of it."

I had great difficulty in accepting the situation and felt ashamed.



For Jörgen Pihl, incontinence was a hard blow to his identity.

Hygiene seen as a female domain

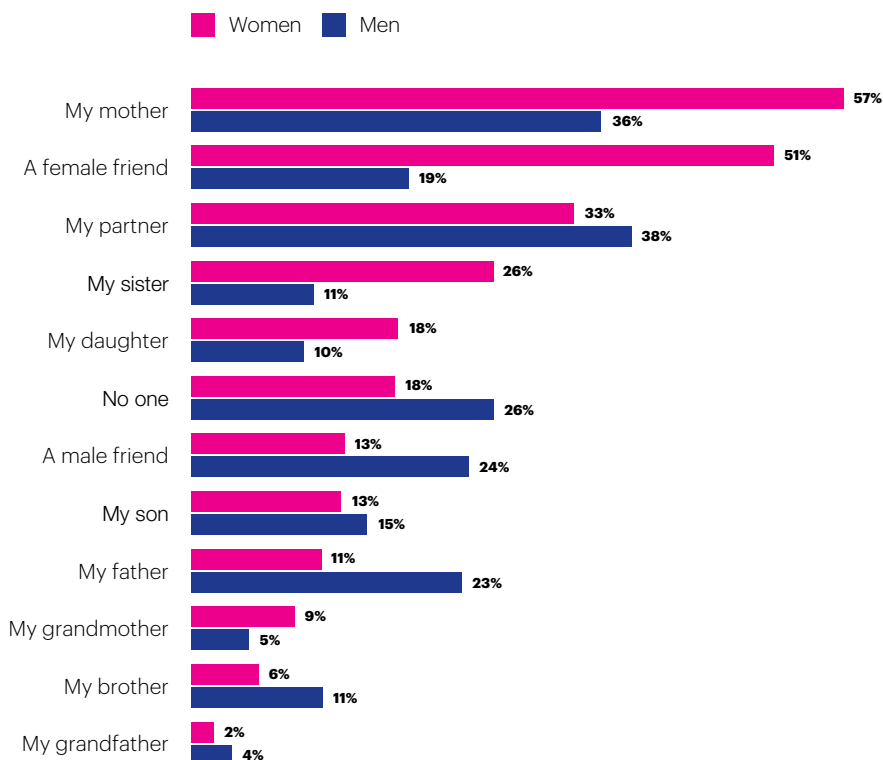
Social norms and taboos guide not only how we talk about hygiene, but also to whom. The Hygiene Matters Survey confirms that hygiene is in many ways still seen as a “female domain”.

For both men and women, the Hygiene Matters Survey shows that when we do talk to someone about personal hygiene, our talking partner is more often a woman than a man. For women, a majority have talked to a female friend or their mother, whereas fewer have discussed it with their partners. Looking specifically at menstruation, the survey shows that almost seven in ten women have never talked about it with their partner, despite it being a monthly occurrence for adult women.

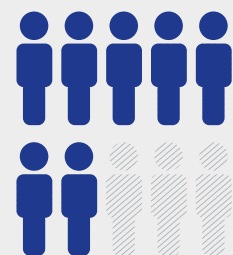
Regardless of speaking partner, men also talk about matters connected to personal hygiene to a lesser extent than women. One in four men surveyed even say they never talk to anyone about issues connected to personal hygiene at all.

Hygiene Matters Survey 2016/17

Have you ever talked about matters connected to personal hygiene with any of the following people you know?



7 in 10



Women have never
talked about menstruation
with their partner



Breaking the silence

Norms and taboos are strong forces. However, compared to tangible challenges such as installing toilets or ensuring access to sanitary products, we do not need a lot of financial resources to address them: all we need to do is break the silence. By limiting how and to whom we talk about hygiene, we allow taboos and stereotypes to persist. In contrast to many other areas of development, when it comes to breaking taboos, walking the walk is all about talking the talk.

In the case of menstruation, silence allows myths and taboos to persist, and stands in the way of knowledge being passed along to new generations of women. The Hygiene Matters Survey shows that less than one in ten fathers and two in ten mothers in the surveyed countries have ever discussed menstruation with their daughters.

“Menstruation, menopause and incontinence are milestones in the human life cycle,” says Archana Patkar, Program Manager at WSSCC. “Let’s talk about them and facilitate practical solutions to replace age-old silence, shame and fear with understanding, pride and dignity.” Engaging more men and boys in conversations about hygiene and how we manage it in the family and society is a good starting point. WSSCC’s experiences working with men on menstruation show that once the silence is broken, men are committed and eloquent advocates and change agents.

Hygiene Matters Survey 2016/17

People who have talked to their daughter about menstruation:

