



# Menstrual Health: A Critical Cornerstone of Community and Climate Resilience

## Introduction

Menstrual health (MH) affects nearly half of the global population for up to 40 years of their lives, and is increasingly recognised as an essential element of gender equality and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Nonetheless, MH is under-researched, under-acknowledged and underfunded, and millions of women, adolescent girls, and gender-diverse people who menstruate struggle to achieve it. Effective interventions are needed across contexts to improve MH and the associated outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

### In Brief

- **MH equity is hindered globally** by lack of awareness, poor product access, inadequate facilities, lack of options for safe disposal, harmful gender norms, gender inequality, and insufficient support.
- **Climate change exacerbates MH challenges** through water scarcity, water pollution, supply chain disruptions, and infrastructure damage.
- **Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is crucial for MH**, but cross-sectoral collaboration and a stronger systems approach are needed to resolve underlying problems.
- **Linking MH to climate resilience can unlock climate finance** for WASH initiatives and improve MH outcomes.

# Bridging menstrual health, climate resilience and inclusive WASH

Globally, connections are increasingly being drawn between climate resilience, WASH and MH. While this is an emerging area of exploration, growing numbers of organisations and actors are seeking to make MH central to the global dialogue around climate change. Climate change is a threat multiplier for women, girls and gender-diverse people.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, advocacy for a gender-equitable climate change response should include MH as one of several ways to meet women and girls' needs in the design of international and domestic policies and climate intervention financing.

Menstrual health practitioners understand that MH is intrinsically linked to environmental issues, with climate change exacerbating women's and girls' existing vulnerabilities and undermining already inadequate systems and infrastructures.<sup>3</sup> There is also increasing understanding among women's rights groups that climate change and climate-related disasters will continue to affect the health of women and girls. This is especially the case in relation to access to essential WASH infrastructure and services, as well as access to health services that are responsive to their sexual and reproductive health needs.

Three key reasons why menstrual health, WASH and climate change are interlinked:

1. **Disposable period products can overwhelm weak waste management systems, causing blockages and environmental degradation.** Incineration of menstrual waste reduces air quality and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs); landfill disposal also generates GHGs.<sup>4</sup> Improper disposal of non-recyclable and non-biodegradable period products pollutes waterways, increases microplastic pollution, blocks sewerage systems and harms soil quality, problems magnified by climate change.<sup>5</sup> While reusable period products seem sensible, they depend on reliable and clean water supplies for laundering, as well as infrastructure and norms that support drying in the open. Biodegradable period products are gaining ground, but also depend on safe disposal mechanisms with circular economy approaches.
2. **Displacement, interruptions in supply chains and resulting limited availability reduce access to period products.** Access to period products is (inevitably) low for systemically marginalised populations, exacerbating existing inequalities. Hard-to-reach locations, such as Pacific Islands, are most likely to suffer from weak supply chains and lack of local suppliers.
3. **Increasingly frequent extreme weather events reduce or destroy access to clean water sources and sanitation facilities.** As climate change continues to create severe weather patterns, essential and clean water sources are retreating. Too little water (droughts) or too much and/or polluted water (storms and flooding) can make it more difficult to access clean water and WASH facilities to manage periods hygienically and with dignity.

To meet their MH needs with dignity, women, girls, and gender-diverse people require access to clean water, sanitation facilities, safe disposable methods and appropriate MH products. However, water sources, WASH facilities and supply chains that enable sound MH are being affected and/or disrupted by climate change. Increasing the ability of people who menstruate to manage their menstruation on their own terms will enable them to be more resilient in the face of shocks and stressors. Climate-resilient WASH is a critical enabler of women and girls' ability to achieve MH.

<sup>2</sup> L Kuhlmann, 'Embracing the Flow: The Right to Menstrual Health as a Response to Climate Change Impacts in South Asia', *Seattle Journal of Technology, Environmental & Innovation Law*, 2023, 14(1):4, <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1056&context=sjteil>

<sup>3</sup> E Moore, *The Effects of Climate Change on the Menstrual Health of Women and Girls in Rural Settings within Low-Income Countries*, Columbia University, 2023, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/bqyy-vh75>

<sup>4</sup> Global Menstrual Collective, *Climate Change & MHH Overview: Climate Change & Menstrual Health & Hygiene are Interlinked*, Global Menstrual Collective [web resource], June 2024, accessed August 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Water for Women Fund (WfW), *Making the case for MHH and climate resilience*, WfW [website], 27 May 2024, accessed August 2024.

## Investing in menstrual health is investing in climate resilience

An essential component of climate resilience is community resilience. Women and girls are members of all communities, yet their MH needs are often neglected or ignored. Inability to safely manage MH is a key barrier to their participation in both community life and climate resilience efforts. Building community resilience is not just about the presence of adequate infrastructure and services but about the health, well-being and participation of individuals. Investing in MH is an investment in climate resilience, because reducing MH inequity empowers women, girls and people who menstruate in the following ways.

- **Meaningful participation in education, work, and social activities.** Access to safe and hygienic period products and facilities means women, girls and gender-diverse people are better able to manage menstruation and stay healthy. This leads to improved educational outcomes, increased economic opportunities, and greater participation in social and political life, including the resilience to withstand and adapt to the economic and social impacts of climate change.
- **Improved physical, reproductive and mental health outcomes.** Poor MH can lead to infections, reproductive health complications, and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Access to safe, culturally appropriate, and desirable period products and WASH facilities means that people who menstruate are less likely to experience health problems that increase their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, such as malnutrition and infectious diseases. Climate-related displacement reduces access to menstrual supplies, forcing longer use or overuse of products, increasing the risk of urinary and reproductive tract infections.<sup>6</sup> Further, safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management (MHM) supports coping strategies to deal with the stress and anxiety associated with climate change-related hazards and disasters.
- **Improved security and safety.** Climate change leads to significant displacement of populations and disruptions to social services that disproportionately affect women and girls, exacerbating their already vulnerable sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Climate change can force populations to migrate and live in shelters or inadequate housing, making managing MH particularly challenging.<sup>7</sup> During displacement, women and girls are at risk of gender-based violence as they use temporary WASH facilities and/or seek reproductive or MH supplies in volatile contexts.<sup>8</sup> Safe, accessible and menstrual-friendly WASH facilities that are resilient to climate impacts can reduce these very real risks.
- **Greater gender equity.** When women, girls and gender-diverse people can manage their menstruation safely and with dignity, they are better able to exercise their rights and choices. Choice and bodily autonomy are central to healthy people and resilient communities, and resilience building in communities is an important enabler of managing and adapting to climate hazards and shocks.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#), UNFPA [website], 29 May 2023, accessed August 2024.

<sup>7</sup> UNFPA, [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#).

<sup>8</sup> UNFPA, [Menstrual health and the climate crisis](#).