

Report: Breaking Taboos and Raising Awareness International Day of the Girl Child Webinar

Background

Menstrual health is a fundamental aspect of human rights and public health. However, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), especially those who are part of adolescent young key populations (aYKP) groups—especially young trans people—continue to experience poor menstrual health as a result of a lack of access to menstrual products, lack of education, ongoing taboos, and stigma around menstruation.

According to a 2023 study by UNICEF, adolescent girls in the Asia-Pacific region reported feeling uninformed about menstruation and unsure how to care for their body.¹ These barriers are even more prevalent for AGYW and aYKPs in rural areas and become exacerbated in crisis situations. These issues shine a spotlight on the importance of promoting good menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) among AGYW and aYKPs.

Youth LEAD is the regional network of Asia Pacific that empowers young key populations (YKPs) through Leadership, Education, Advocacy, and Development. Youth LEAD works in 19 countries, to empower YKPs to advocate for their needs and improve young people's involvement in community, national and regional HIV programming processes.

Y-PEER Asia Pacific Center (Y-PEER AP) is a network of youth-led organisations and youth advocates that promote young people's Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) through Peer Education and other innovative approaches. In the Asia Pacific Region, Y-PEER AP has been working closely with more than 15 National Networks, partner organisations, CSOs, and government bodies focusing on issues linking HIV and young people's SRHR.

In commemoration of International Day of the Girl Child on 11 October 2024, Youth LEAD and Y-PEER AP, in collaboration with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation's (AHF) Girls Act Programme in the Asia-Pacific, aims to conduct a webinar entitled '**Breaking Taboos and Raising Awareness**' to demystify some myths, unpack cultural taboos, and promote menstrual health and hygiene for AGYW and aYKPs, especially in rural areas and during crisis situations.

The objectives of the webinar are as follows:

- Create a safe space for dialogue on menstrual health and hygiene for AGYW and aYKPs
- Raise awareness on menstrual health and hygiene, especially the barriers that AGYW and aYKPs face in rural areas and during crisis situations
- Emphasize the importance of youth leadership and engagement in addressing menstrual health and hygiene for young people
- Highlight the policy changes and specific needs of YKPs for Menstrual Hygiene and other SRHR needs

Breaking Taboos and Raising Awareness

The webinar will be held on Zoom hosted by Youth LEAD on **Tuesday, 11 October 2024** from **13:00 to 14:30 Bangkok time (GMT +7)**. It will be livestreamed on Facebook through Youth

¹ UNICEF EAPRO (2023). *Menstrual Health in East Asia and the Pacific: Regional Progress Review*. United Nations Children's Fund, Burnet Institute and WaterAid, Bangkok.

LEAD and YPEER AP’s pages. The Zoom meeting will be recorded with verbal consent of the participants and speakers.

Topic: Commemorating International Day of the Girl Child Webinar
 Time: Oct 11, 2024 01:00 PM Bangkok

Webinar video can be access here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n34N0zHZTKk>

3. Webinar Structure and Content

The event was conducted via Zoom and livestreamed on Youtube. Key speakers included:

1. Ikka Noviyanti (Youth LEAD Regional Coordinator) opened the webinar, emphasizing the need for open discussions on menstrual health.
2. Dr. Chhim Sarath (Asia Bureau Chief, AHF) introduced AHF’s mission and highlighted the importance of comprehensive sexual education.
3. Dr. Ung Kim Heang (AHF Regional Testing and Prevention Manager) presented facts on menstrual hygiene and debunked common myths, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

Key areas discussed in Dr. Kim’s presentation included:

- The global scale of menstrual stigma and its adverse impact on AGYW.
- AHF’s interventions such as the Girls Act program, which empowers young women through education and health services, and initiatives like period underwear donations and sanitary pad dispensers in schools.

Speaker of Panel Discussion:

	Name and Organization	AGYW/aYKP Group
1	Shinta Dewi, Girls Act	AHF Girls Act Leader, Bali , Indonesia Adolescent girls
2	Maria Iqbal Shah, Y-Peer Pakistan	Young women
3	Bella Aubree, Inti Muda Indonesia	Young trans community
4	Sandip Kumar Paul , Y-Peer Bangladesh	Young men

Panel Discussion Highlights

1. Key Barriers for Young Women and Girls in Indonesia

The panel discussion included representatives from various youth networks, each addressing menstrual health issues from unique perspectives.

Speaker: Shinta (Indonesia)

- **Lack of Education and Awareness:** Limited access to accurate information leads to confusion and fear for many girls. A 2015 study found that one in six Indonesian girls had no prior knowledge of menstruation before their first period.
- **Taboo and Stigma:** Menstruation is often viewed as a taboo subject, preventing young women and girls from receiving essential health guidance from parents and teachers.
- **Financial Constraints:** In rural areas, low-income families struggle to afford sanitary products, leading girls to use unsafe alternatives.

- **Lack of School Facilities:** Many Indonesian schools lack clean toilets, water, and sanitary disposal options.
- **Emergency Situations:** During crises like the 2018 Lombok earthquake, women and girls faced severe difficulties in accessing menstrual products and hygiene facilities.

2. Regional Challenges and Priority Issues

Speaker: Maria (Pakistan)

- **Impact of Climate Change:** Disasters like floods exacerbate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) issues. Economic hardships during crises sometimes result in practices like "moonst brides," where girls are married off due to the inability of families to manage menstrual hygiene costs.
- **Lack of Education on Menstrual Health:** Many young girls lack knowledge about menstruation, leading to mental health challenges and trauma.
- **Cultural and Religious Stigmas:** Menstruation is considered unclean, especially in Muslim communities in Pakistan, affecting women's ability to engage in cultural and religious activities.
- **AAAQ Model (Accessibility, Availability, Acceptability, and Quality):** Pakistan and other South Asian countries fall short on the AAAQ model concerning menstrual health services.

3. Menstrual Health Issues for Trans Men

Speaker: Raham (Indonesia)

- **Security and Safety:** Trans men in Indonesia face stigma and discrimination, with basic activities like using public restrooms becoming stressful due to scrutiny.
- **Lack of Suitable Menstrual Products:** Options like menstrual cups are uncomfortable for some trans men, as they may cause gender dysphoria.
- **Societal Discrimination:** Discriminatory laws and societal stigma lead to mental health challenges and isolation.

4. Involvement of Men and Boys in Menstrual Health (Bangladesh)

Speaker: Sandip

- **Crisis Situations:** In rural Bangladesh, monsoon season often cuts off villages from resources, making it difficult for young girls to access sanitary products.
- **Cultural Taboos:** In rural areas, menstruation is highly stigmatized, and open discussion is avoided due to superstitions.
- **Advocacy for Government Support:** More efforts are being made to involve the government in addressing menstrual health issues, especially in marginalized communities.

Key Areas of Need

1. Access to Affordable Menstrual Products

- Youth advocates noted the need for accessible and affordable menstrual products for young people, particularly in rural areas. Economic barriers often force young girls and women to resort to unsanitary alternatives like cloth and leaves.

Recommendations: Government and NGOs can implement subsidy programs or distribute free menstrual products in schools and community centers to ensure equitable access.

2. Comprehensive Menstrual Health Education

- Comprehensive education should cover not only the biological aspects of menstruation but also hygiene management and psychological support. This education should create a supportive environment where menstruation can be discussed openly and stigma-free.

Recommendations: Schools and NGOs should provide training programs that engage both genders to foster a supportive environment for girls. Governments should integrate menstrual health education into school curricula and public health policies.

3. Safe Spaces for Discussion and Support

- Many young people lack safe spaces to discuss menstrual health and related issues like mental health and trauma resulting from societal stigma. Initiatives such as the "Me For Myself" campaign by YPEER Asia Pacific are providing these safe spaces.

Recommendations: More programs should be developed to offer youth safe environments to talk about menstrual health, with a focus on normalizing these discussions and reducing stigma.

4. Policy and Program Inclusion for Transgender and Non-Binary Individuals

- It's essential to adopt a more inclusive approach, acknowledging the menstrual health needs of transgender men and non-binary individuals. Inclusive language and policies, such as using the term "assigned female at birth," can help make menstrual health services accessible to all.

Recommendations: Governments and NGOs should ensure that menstrual health programs and resources are inclusive of all individuals who menstruate, including transgender and non-binary people.

5. Emergency and Crisis Management

- During crises, access to menstrual products and hygiene facilities becomes even more challenging. Advocates stressed the need for menstrual health to be included in disaster preparedness plans.

Recommendations: Governments and NGOs should collaborate to incorporate menstrual health supplies in emergency response kits and provide adequate facilities in crisis-affected areas. This would include private sanitation facilities and clean water in shelters and schools.

6. Data Collection and Research

- Limited data on menstrual health in South Asian countries hampers effective policy-making. More research is needed to understand the specific needs of young people in different regions.

Recommendations: Governments and NGOs should invest in research and data collection to assess menstrual health needs accurately and develop targeted policies.

Conclusion

The webinar provided a critical platform to address menstrual health challenges and fostered an inclusive, educational, and supportive dialogue on the topic. The recommendations from this event underscore the need for collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and communities to address menstrual health issues comprehensively and inclusively.

By addressing both practical and policy-level challenges, Youth LEAD, Y-PEER AP, and AHF have set a foundation for future efforts to empower AGYW and aYKPs across the Asia-Pacific in managing menstrual health with dignity and respect.

Annex: Agenda

Sl. No.	Time	Agenda	Remark	Facilitator
1	13:00-13:05 (5 mins)	Opening	Welcome and Opening Remarks Overview of the Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ikka Noviyanti, Regional Coordinator, Youth LEAD Sangeet Kayastha, Regional Coordinator, Y-PEER AP Dr. Chhim Sarath, Asia Bureau Chief, AHF
2	13:05-13:15 (10 mins)	Facts and Data	Overview of Facts on Menstrual Hygiene in the Asia-Pacific	Ung Kim Heang, Regional, Testing and Prevention Manager, AHF
4	13:15 - 14:00 (45 mins)	Discussion	<p>Menstrual Health and Hygiene for Young People</p> <p>Panelists will discuss MHH issues for young people, following the guide questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the key barriers on MHH for young people in the Asia-Pacific, especially those in rural areas/during crisis situations? 2. What are the available services and information in your country related to MHH? 3. What do young people need from communities/NGOs/governments/ etc. to improve their MHH? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leo Villar, Communications & Project Officer, Youth LEAD

			<p>4. What solutions would you suggest to help improve MHH for young people? At the personal level? Community level? National/Policy level?</p> <p>Panelists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young Women • Young Adolescents • Young Trans People • Young Men/Other YKPs 	
6	14:00-14:15 (15 mins)	Q&A	<p>Open Floor Session</p> <p>Participants in Facebook Live can share their thoughts or questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leo Villar, Communication s & Project Officer, Youth LEAD
7	14:15-14:30		(Buffer time in case of extension)	
8	14:30	Closing	Closing	Youth LEAD