

“protect, respect, remedy”

Call for Input regarding the Working Group’s Report on the Gender Lens to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

Response paper from Save the Girl Child Movement

Save the Girl Child Movement (SGCM) is a registered Zimbabwean trust that provides free sanitary wear to its beneficiaries who are adolescent girls in rural and peri-urban areas of Zimbabwe. SGCM was established with the aim that its multi-pronged interventions including mentorship and social and behaviour change communication will improve its beneficiaries educational outcomes.

This response paper answers the question, *In what ways do women experience the impact of business-related human rights abuses differently and disproportionately. Please provide concrete examples in the context of both generic and sector- or region-specific experiences of women.* It focuses on the issue of menstruation and what has been referred to as “sanitary dignity” in the South African context as a gender business as a gender-specific business-related human right that make women’s experience of the workplace different to that of cisgender men. Some have argued that on account of the ‘catamenial’ disorders that are symptomatic of pre- or post-menstrual syndrome (PMS), e.g. dysmenorrhea and migraines it may be more advantageous to suppress menstruation than to undergo it (Coutinho & Segal, 1999). Nevertheless, women are still expected to attend work and perform at the same productivity levels as men even when suffering from these catamenial disorders.

In 2016, Zambia’s Ministry of Education issued its *National Guidelines for Menstrual Hygiene Management* (MoE, 2016). Zambia furthermore passed a law granting female employees the right to take “one day off work each month”. Also in 2016, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in China entitles women two leave days if they are unable to work because of dysmenorrhea and other PMS symptoms. In June 2017, South Africa’s Department of Women published the first draft of the *Sanitary Dignity Policy Framework* (DoW, 2017) targeted at making sanitary wear accessible to indigent girls and women. In April 2018 the Scottish Parliament passed *Ending Period Poverty* bill which makes free sanitary wear access in public schools, colleges and universities (Lennon, 2017). We see that menstruation – an issue once concealed from the public sphere – is growing increasingly States reflect this aspect girls’ and women’s well-being and ‘well-becoming’; not only in the school but in the work place by introducing laws to mitigate the negative impact that menstruation may have on the productivity of women and girls.

Similar to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Good Policy and Practice in Health Education Booklet on *Puberty Education and Menstrual Management*, SGCM recommends that a Guidelines should be established for Menstrual Hygiene Management in the Workplace. These should address such as the cost of sanitary wear and underscore the prioritisation of women’s health. Kantartzis and Sucato (2013) found that women who suffer from headaches or migraines during menstruation opt to treat this with the combination oral

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contraception, “[b]ecause one of the precipitants of cyclic headache is thought to be the drop in estrogen which occurs prior to menses” (Kantartzis & Sucato, 2013:133). A study found that by increasing the duration of an extended menstrual cycle, with the intensity of headaches (Sulak *et al.*, 2007). Condoms are subsidised by many States globally and yet in the case of consensual sex, one can elect to abstain from sexual intercourse. With menstruation, unless one can afford contraceptives, it is not possible to elect to suppress menstruation. Drawing from documents such as the South African Department of Water and Sanitation’s policy of 2017 *National Norms and Standards* the Working Group’s Report on the Gender Lens to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights could include “menstruation consideration[s]” (DWS, 2017) and recommendations such as free sanitary wear dispensers in workplaces. A ‘decent society’ is one in which planning for social quality ensures that business-related human rights are equal for men and women alike (Abbott & Wallace, 2016). So should a women begin menstruating and not have the hygiene and sanitary products she needs, these should be easily accessible and available in the workplace. Thereby affording her dignity in such times and not causing extraneous interruptions to her productivity as may have to go home or to an a facility or amenity where she can access what she needs.

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