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East Asia and Pacific Menstrual Hygiene Week 2021 **Webinar Report**

21-27 May 2021

**We need to step up action and investment
in menstrual health and hygiene now!**

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Webinar Report*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Menstrual health and hygiene are integral to improving health for billions of people around the world and achieving the SDGs. The last decade has seen growing awareness of menstrual health and hygiene, with governments, civil society, and businesses understanding the challenges and opportunities that support to this area of girls' and women's lives can bring.

The past few years have seen recent advances in menstrual health and hygiene particularly in the East Asia & Pacific region. In 2016, a regional review of MHM titled Supporting the Rights of Girls and Women through MHM in the East Asia and Pacific Region was commissioned to summarize progress regionally and by country, and present good practices and opportunities. Since this time, many organizations in the EAP region have experiences and lessons from designing and supporting menstrual health and hygiene programmes such as those supported through the Government of Australia's Water for Women fund.

There have been new guidelines and tools for programme design and implementation, as well as advances in global and programmatic monitoring. Multiple coordination groups have been initiated at the global, regional and national level, such as the Pacific Menstrual Health Network. And, as of May 2021, a new global definition of the term 'menstrual health' has been published, menstrual health is defined a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle.

Taking stock of these accomplishments across the four 'pillars' of programming to deliver on the promise of safe and dignified menstrual health and hygiene for girls, it is clear there are both exciting new development and persistent challenges that are not addressed. These thematic pillars – with an underlying foundation of a strengthened enabling environment – require action from multiple sectors in coordination or collaboration rather than by WASH actors alone. The challenges and new developments are summarized below.

The three webinars addressed:

Webinar 1 Leaving no one behind	Webinar 2 Digital knowledge and skills	Webinar 3 Accelerating action and investment
21 May	24 May	27 May

This report captures key insights and discussions from the three webinars.

The webinars were attended by more than 250 participants from more than 20 countries, including participants from Africa, East Asia and the Pacific and Europe. The events provided a forum for development partners, the private sector, civil society, and United Nations agencies to share their knowledge and experience on MHM.

New developments and persistent challenges

Social support



End to menstrual stigma and discrimination

Girls from excluded or marginalized groups – such as religious and ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, or girls with disabilities – face additional stigma, and their experiences are not always well understood.

Knowledge and skills



Girls and women learn to manage menstruation

Remote and digital learning has taken on new urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in opportunities to reach girls with information online. Yet these platforms must be safe and provide high quality information in a girl-friendly format.

Facilities and services



Girls and women use gender-responsive WASH facilities

Calls to 'reinvent the toilet' and apply principles of user-centred design have not always resulted in improve services for girls, easier O&M, and better integration of menstrual waste into overall waste and resources streams.

Materials



Girls and women use appropriate and affordable menstrual materials

Increasing availability of options for girls presents an opportunity to shape markets for menstrual hygiene materials to be higher quality, apply circular design principles, and support women's economic inclusion.

Enabling environment

Despite the importance of MH in girls' lives, success to generate sustained attention and ability to mobilize funding and financing for MH across multiple sectors has been limited.

2. Webinar Series

2.1 Webinar 1: Reaching everyone: who is left behind?

Date: Friday 21 May 2021 | **Time:** 1-2.15 PM Bangkok Time | **Number of people joining:** 71

Agenda and presenters:

- **Introductory remarks:** Evariste Kouassi Komlan, Regional Adviser, UNICEF EAPRO
- **Menstrual health and hygiene in East Asia and the Pacific:** Looking back and looking ahead: Chelsea Huggett, WaterAid & Brooke Yamakoshi, UNICEF EAPRO
- **Who is being left behind and why? Learning from the challenges of menstruators across the region:** Chloe Morrison World Vision Vanuatu; Sandrine Benjimen UNICEF Vanuatu; Chelsea Huggett on behalf of WaterAid country teams
- **How can we reach everyone? Panel discussion on good practices:** Chloe, Sandrine, Chelsea, and Lieve Sabbe UNICEF EAPRO moderated by Brooke Yamakoshi
- **Closing remarks:** Rosie When, Chief Executive, WaterAid Australia

Summary of discussions: The first webinar in the series put a spotlight on those menstruators who risk not being reached by menstrual health and hygiene information, facilities and services with a focus on people with disabilities, emergency-affected people and transgender menstruators. The webinar also aimed to give an overview of progress made towards expanding access to MHH in the East Asia and Pacific region by highlighting key milestones and achievements from 2016 to 2021.

In his opening remarks, **Evariste Kouassi Komlan, Regional WASH Adviser at UNICEF EAPRO**, highlighted three key considerations: 1. We cannot achieve MH at scale without a bigger partnership including the private sector 2. Reaching people who are being left behind such as people with disabilities, marginalised groups 3. Inclusiveness.

The first presentation by **Chelsea Huggett, Equity and Inclusion Specialist at WaterAid Australia**, highlighted the progress in the East Asia and Pacific region since the publication of the last regional synthesis report in 2016 (Supporting the Rights of Girls and Women through Menstrual Hygiene Management the East Asia and Pacific Region). The focus and action have primarily been placed on schools, but with notable attention and achievements in shifting to market-led solutions, often women-led enterprises. In the EAP region, the WASH sector has been driving progress in both service delivery and at the macro-level enabling environment or ecosystem. Overall, there has been a shift in how organizations work together, sharing knowledge and information. Despite this, certain groups are not reached by traditional development programmes because of specific deprivations or vulnerabilities.

Chloe Morrison, Strategy/Program Quality Director at World Vision Vanuatu, presented the results of a survey carried out in Vanuatu with the VSPD and Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association (VDPA) to uncover unmet WASH needs of people with disabilities. She noted that cultural taboos about menstruation are widespread and internalized in Vanuatu and were found across urban and rural areas, in people with and without disabilities. There was no difference in the beliefs of people with or without disability but taboos impacted people with disabilities (PwD) more negatively as PwD are twice as likely to miss out on social activities while menstruating. Ms Morrison highlighted that the role of men and boys in addressing cultural beliefs and taboos is fundamental for long-lasting change. There is a need to tailor

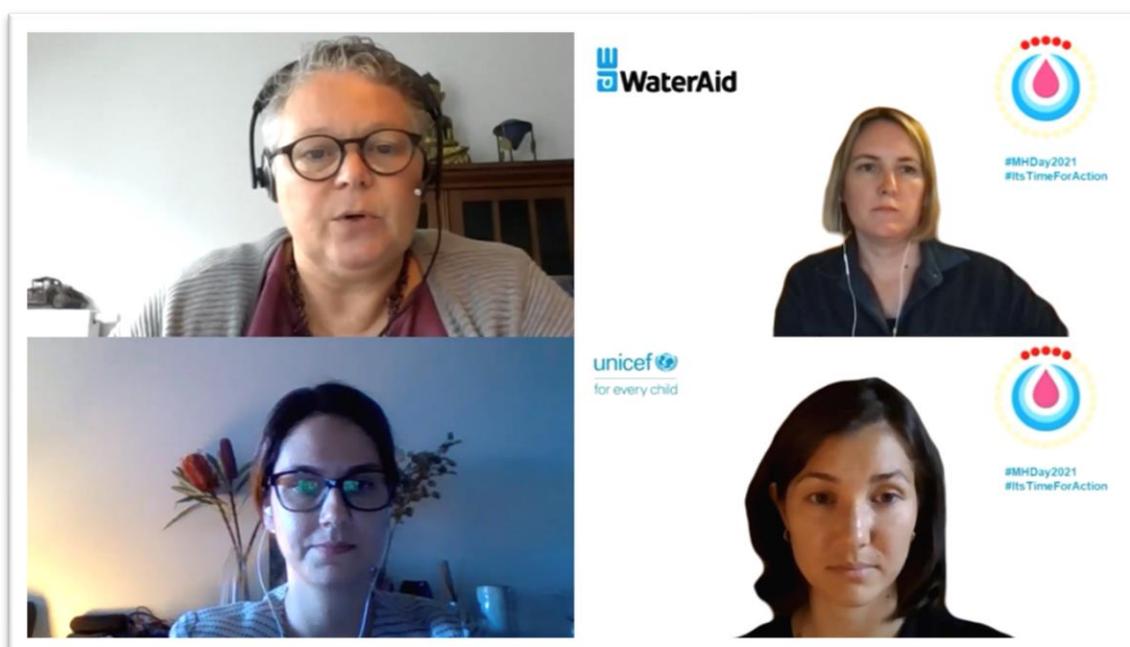
programs to different impairment types.

Sandrine Benjimen, WASH officer at UNICEF Vanuatu, highlighted the challenges people who menstruate following Tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020, which included: lack of access to sanitary materials including underwear and sanitary pads in evacuation centres; lack of access to private or safe toilets, to safely dispose materials, and limited privacy for women in evacuation centres; and lack of access to private showers and bathing facilities in temporary transit settings. In response, the Vanuatu WASH Cluster is integrating MHH into policies and guidelines.

Though few studies have been done in the region, **Chelsea Huggett** presented menstrual health barriers for transgender men who menstruate drawing on consultations done by WaterAid in Timor-Leste, including:

- Marginalization, exclusion and discrimination in their daily life which prevents them from access the most basic services.
- Sometimes, lack of safety to participate in consultations, resulting in less attention to their needs.
- Lack of access to adequate MHM and infrastructure and services particularly in men's bathrooms, and lack of period products that can be accommodated in men's underwear.

A panel discussion with the presenters followed moderated by **Brooke Yamakoshi, WASH Specialist at UNICEF EAPRO**. Panelists focused their interventions on how to make positive changes to have an impact on those that are being left behind.



Lieve Sabbe, Programme Specialist, Children with Disabilities at UNICEF EAPRO, described the elements of best practices in WASH and MHM programmes:

- Communication: inclusion of images of PwD in mainstream communication showing that PwD are part of the society, and they also menstruate; produce easy to read documents; include the carers of people with disability.
- Physical accessibility: ramps, how to calculate space in the restroom, access to the handwashing facilities. Work with a checklist. Put in place a feedback mechanism that is accessible to PwD.

- Collaboration: collaborate with special schools not only mainstream schools. Principle of meaningful participation with organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and engagement throughout the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects.

On addressing a question regarding plans of the education sector to address the cultural taboos through the school curricula, Chloe Morrison, Strategy/Program Quality Director, from World Vision Vanuatu, noted that teachers did not feel confident talking about menstruation because they have not had any formal training to teach menstrual and personal hygiene.

To conclude the panel, panelists were asked, “**How can change happen?**”

- For Lieve Sabbe, change can only happen if all actors are working together with OPDs at the ground level as service providers. At the government level, policies must be inclusive of PwD who menstruate. Targeted efforts are required, including in research and data collection, to further influence policy and enforce communication strategies. Ms Sabbe urged participants to think about the RAMO differently: RAMP = RESEARCH and data disaggregation; ACCESSIBILITY of communications, venues, services; MAINSTREAMING disability from the design phase throughout; PARTNERSHIP with OPDs, Out of School groups, Suppliers.
- Chelsea Huggett, Equity and Inclusion Specialist at WaterAid Australia, remarked that change has to be inclusive, urging participants to remember the “nothing about us without us” slogan of the disability rights movement and ensuring that excluded groups are intentionally included in policies and programmes.
- Chloe Morrison, Strategy/Program Quality Director, World Vision Vanuatu, noted that change is possible with a coordinated effort from all actors to be overcome and suggested adding MHM to the core of all WASH programming.

In her closing remarks, **Rosie When, Chief Executive at WaterAid Australia**, reiterated the need to pause and reflect on how to better help those people that are being left behind. There is a momentum being gained on MHM and now it is the time to commit to new actions for a more inclusive MHM for all.

Resources shared by presenters:

- UNICEF (2019). Guidance on menstrual health and hygiene <https://www.unicef.org/documents/guidance-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>
- UNICEF (2019). Guide to menstrual hygiene materials <https://www.unicef.org/documents/guide-menstrual-hygiene-materials>
- UNICEF (2020). MHH monitoring guide (v1) <https://www.unicef.org/documents/guidance-monitoring-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>

Resources shared in the chat box:

- James Cook University Australia, ‘Creating healthier futures in Solomon Islands’, <https://www.jcu.edu.au/this-is-uni/health-and-medicine/articles/creating-healthier-futures-for-girls-in-solomon-islands>, accessed 21 May 2021.
- BMC Women’s Health, ‘Making of a Strong Woman’: a constructivist grounded theory of the experiences of young women around menarche in Papua New Guinea, <https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-021-01229-0> , accessed 21 May 2021.

2.2 Webinar 2: Digital knowledge and skills during COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic world

Date: Monday 24 May 2021 | **Time:** 1-2.15 PM Bangkok Time | **Number of people joining:** 87

Agenda and presenters:

- **Opening:** Chelsea Huggett, WaterAid
- **The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality:** Maria Holtsberg, UN Women Asia Pacific Regional Office
- **Menstrual health and hygiene and COVID-19:** Brooke Yamakoshi, UNICEF EAPRO
- **Philippines: #MeronAko campaign:** Marysol Balane, UNICEF Philippines
- **Oky period tracker app:** localisations and deployments around the world: Gerda Binder, UNICEF EAPRO
- **Building digital solutions for and with girls: UNICEF GenderTech toolkits:** Alexandra Tyers-Chowdhury, UNICEF
- **Closing:** Ina Jurga, International MH Day Coordinator, WASH United

Summary of discussions: This webinar discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls and women's ability to manage their menstrual health, and demonstrated the opportunity of digital platforms to reach girls and women with critical information during the pandemic and in the new post-pandemic world. Digital platforms are opportunities to consult with girls and reach them directly with MHH learning opportunities during the pandemic. The #MeronAko campaign in the Philippines and the Oky period tracker app (currently deployed in Mongolia and Indonesia) were two examples shared of using digital platforms and local partnerships to reach girls at scale. The presenters stressed the need to consult with girls to understand their digital realities and co-creating solutions for good tech development.

To begin, **Maria Holzberg, Regional Humanitarian and DRR Adviser at UN Women Asia-Pacific Regional Office**, discussed the impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality. She showed that disease outbreaks affect women and men differently, exacerbating existing inequalities for women and girls and other marginalised groups. The pandemic reversed the limited progress in gender equality and women's empowerment in every sphere: social protection, economy, health. More girls and women are pushed into extreme poverty, are facing an increase in violence, having GBV services disrupted and disrupted contraceptive services leading to unintended pregnancies. Women are in the frontline of the pandemic: nurses, cleaners, etc. Specific needs for PPE, menstrual hygiene needs were overlooked on the overall response, as was mental health and psychosocial support. Tech and infrastructure are the enablers to cope with shocks by providing remote access to goods and services, and address health concerns. However, women and girls have less access to technology and innovation, including mobile phones.

To show how a blended digital and in person campaigns can be effective in shifting norms around menstruation, improving gender relations and improving access to knowledge and skills, **Marysol Balane, WASH officer with UNICEF Philippines, presented the #MeronAko** ("I have" in Tagalog) campaign, which was started in 2018. Some of the key issues in the Philippines were that teachers, especially males, felt ill-prepared to talk about menstrua; girls felt ashamed of having their period; poor WASH conditions that posed significant challenges; deprioritization of WASH facilities; and the efforts government unsustainable

and limited. The #MeronAko campaign focuses on a gender inclusive and interactive approach to learning delivery. It was piloted in 4 schools in 2018 and now it is expanding to 350 schools. They are also developing modules for parents and children with regards to MHM #MeronAko distance learning package to encourage communication between parents and children.



During the Q&A, the panellists were asked how to make sure to create inclusive and open space for all children –including boys. Boys were included in the discussions about MHM and were also trained as peer educators to involve them in the conversation. This is where they learned how to support girls during their periods and not to tease them. A further question also focused on the inclusion of boys when teaching menstrual health. Including boys in menstrual health education is key to make them understand menstruation is a normal process and to lessen discrimination against girls during their periods as well as to help reduce the stigma and shame surrounding MHM.

To share her knowledge and insights on designing MHH solutions for girls and with girls, **Gerda Binder, Gender Regional Adviser at UNICEF EAPRO**, introduced participants to OKY, a girl-centred mobile period tracking app. OKY, a fun name that was chosen by the 400 girls who helped create and design the app, focused on making menstruation information easy and accessible for girls. The outcome was a lightweight app that works offline, downloadable via QR code, easy to navigate and offers an individual cycle tracker and period predictions. The idea is to deploy and localise OKY in other countries, therefore, OKY's code and content is open sourced. In each country, an interested partner who's aligned to Oky's standards and principles can enter an agreement with UNICEF and then can start the localisation and deployment process.

Alexandra Tyers-Chowdhury, Consultant at UNICEF Innovation section, emphasized the importance of building digital solutions for and with girls. There is a large global gender digital divide on access to digital technology, women and girls are less likely to use the internet, and have lower levels of digital literacy. UNICEF GenderTech tools focus on building digital solutions with a gender lens. The 1st tool focuses on how to build digital solutions for women and girls' reality by developing a digital product that work for

women and girls, provides practical advice, step by step suggestions, best practices. The 2nd tool centres on co-creating with women and girls and the 3rd tool is aimed at how to include women and girls in user testing, identify any challenges and issues users found. Ms Tyers-Chowdry stressed the need to include women and girls to ensure they can benefit from the digital tools they helped create.

Resources shared during the webinar:

- UN Women, 'Unlocking the lockdown: The gendered effects of COVID-19 on achieving the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific', <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/unlocking-lockdown-gendered-effects-covid-19-achieving-sdgs-asia-and-pacific>, accessed 24 May 2021.
- UN Women, COVID-19 and gender data resources, <https://data.unwomen.org/COVID19>, accessed 24 May 2021.
- Oky, Period Tracker app, <https://okyapp.info/>, accessed 24 May 2021.
- UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific, Oky Period Tracker App for girls, explainer video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA_HsuCphP8, accessed 24 May 2021.
- UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific, GenderTech Toolkit: Building digital solutions for, with, and by girls, <https://www.unicef.org/eap/innovation-and-technology-gender-equality>, accessed 24 May 2021.
- Menstrual hygiene Day, Global Campaign video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3eSaFFjEfY>, accessed 24 May 2021.
- Menstrual Hygiene Day, <https://menstrualhygieneday.org/>, accessed 24 May 2021.

2.3 Webinar 3: Action and investment for menstrual health and hygiene

Date: Thursday 27 May 2021 | **Time:** 1-2.15 PM Bangkok Time | **Number of people joining:** 92

Agenda and presenters:

- **Opening remarks:** Marcoluigi Corsi, Deputy Regional Director, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific
- **Learning from MHH work across the region:** Abigail Tevera, UNICEF Pacific; Chelsea Huggett, WaterAid Australia; Getrudis Mau, UNICEF Timor-Leste
- **How to invest in MHH?** Lucy Wells, PacificRISE; Brooke Yamakoshi UNICEF
- **Panel discussion: Innovation and women's entrepreneurship in MHH** Varangtip 'Rung' Satchatippavarn, Ira Concept Thailand; Tingga Dewi, Perfect Fit Indonesia; Audrey Tangonan, Sinaya Cup Philippines)
- **Closing:** Gerard Cheong, Assistant Director Water Section, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Summary of discussions: The third and last webinar of the series focused on stepping up action and investment in menstrual health and hygiene. The webinar began with examples of positive change through policies and programmes in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and PNG. With examples of progress in mind, the next presenters focused on how to increase funding and financing for MHH with a focus on non-traditional financing instruments such as the Pacific Menstrual Health Trade Finance Vehicle and opportunities to use circular economy financing for MH. The webinar ended with a panel discussion of women entrepreneurs and innovators from Southeast Asia, exploring the barriers and enablers in the menstrual hygiene market and the work of social enterprises in the region.

In his opening remarks, **Mr Marcoluigi Corsi, Deputy Regional Director at UNICEF EAPRO**, noted that despite the challenges that still remain to be truly inclusive of all children – including children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups – and the gender disparities exacerbated by COVID-19, there are many opportunities to advance MHH in East Asia and the Pacific. Three highlights include: 1) Reaching children across the region using digital platforms such as Oky, 2) Thinking beyond the traditional ways of mobilising resources to bring more funding to unmet needs 3) Mobilizing the power of young people’s innovation and creativity.

Three cases were presented of progress in policy and programmes delivering results for girls around the region.

Abigail Tevera, WASH Specialist at UNICEF Solomon Islands presented strengthening the enabling environment for menstrual health and hygiene in schools in Solomon Islands, which faces many barriers to MHH. While the *“Supporting the Rights of Girls and Women through Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM): 2016 regional review”* found good progress on government leadership, it found no progress in teacher training and teaching and learning materials on MHM. As a result, UNICEF’s support focused on strengthening policies, monitoring, capacity and coordination for MHM as a part of WASH in Schools support to the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development. UNICEF is also advocating for the allocation of budgets for MHM in schools under school-based management.

Chelsea Huggett, Equity and Inclusion Specialist at WaterAid Australia, presented the evidence and learning from the ‘Keeping Girls in School’ Project, implemented in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste from 2017 to 2021, which aimed to combine hygienic management of menstruation alongside sexual and reproductive education. The project worked on disability-inclusive and girl-friendly WASH facilities and services; comprehensive sexuality education – working alongside government partners; and strengthening the local market of reusable menstrual products. The key recommendation to develop holistic MH solutions is that it requires cross-sectoral partnerships and increased investment.

Presenting on MHH progress and support in Timor-Leste **Getrudis Mau, WASH Officer at UNICEF Timor Leste**, highlighted the social support provided to teachers and parents to destigmatize menstruation and support children to attend school during their periods; the development of materials on MHM; and the support to develop adequate WASH facilities for girls and boys, including children with disabilities. Despite the progress achieved, she noted the insufficient investment.

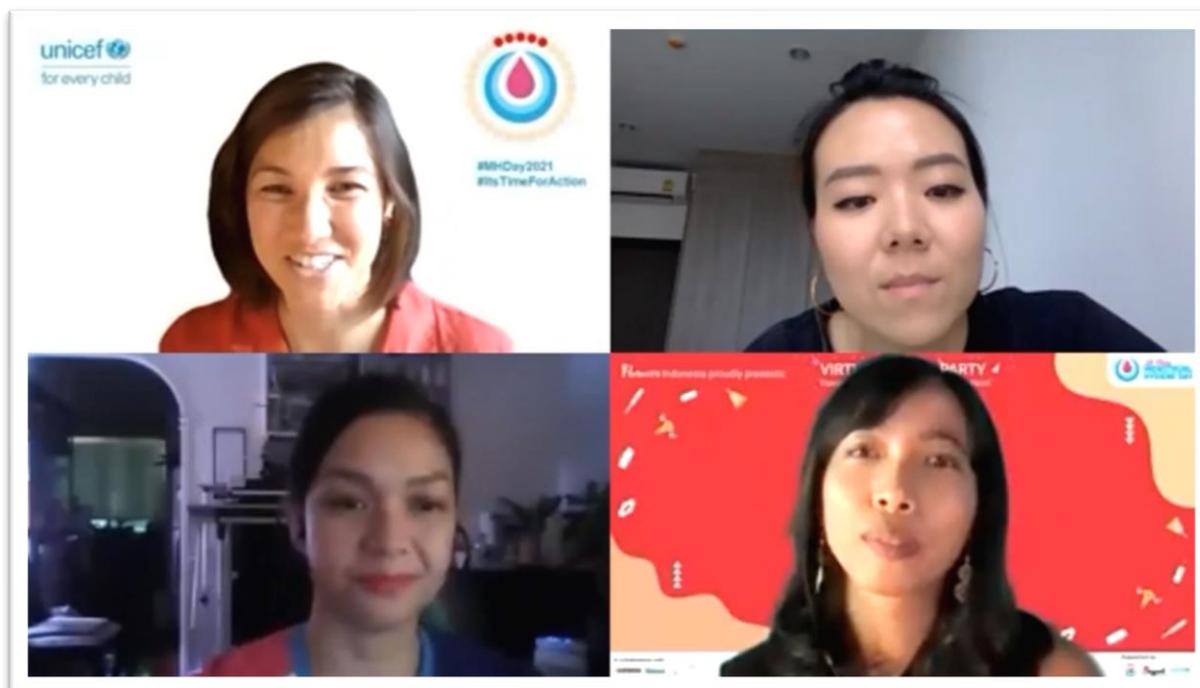
With examples of progress in mind, the next presenters focused on how to increase funding and financing for MHH with a focus on non-traditional financing instruments.

Lucy Wells, Facility Services Manager at PacificRISE, presented the [Menstrual Health Trade Finance Vehicle](#). Through a participatory process, PacificRISE and small menstrual hygiene material enterprises in the Pacific worked together to design the vehicle with the aim of reducing costs and improving the reliability of supply of key fabrics used to make reusable pads in the Pacific. Trade finance introduces a third party to a transaction to reduce the payment risk for the supplier and the supply risks for enterprises. The trade finance vehicle is an intermediary between the buyer and the seller to provide up-front payment to the seller and allow the enterprises to pay for the goods only once received. As enterprises make and sell their products, they repay the trade finance vehicle.

Brooke Yamakoshi, WASH Specialist at UNICEF EAPRO, presented the results of a study done by the Criterion Institute and UNICEF exploring innovative finance as a means of improving investments in menstrual health in the EAP region. She highlighted the financeable aspects of MH and noting the tools that could finance those aspects, including revolving loan funds and financing MH innovation through the circular economy investments.

The last session of the webinar consisted of a panel discussion with three women entrepreneurs from Southeast Asia.

- **Rung Satchatipavarn, founder of [Ira Concept](#) from Thailand**, started her biodegradable pads business after seeing that people in rural areas in the country have no access to basic sanitation, lack adequate facilities to clean reusable products such as cups and reusable pads and a barrier to understand how to use these.
- **Tunnga Dewi, the founder of [Perfect Fit](#) from Indonesia**, noted that people who menstruate face several challenges in Indonesia, including limited education about bodies and sexuality, PerfectFit, first grant-funded and now a social enterprise, was born to support women, girls and trans to have a better period experience through access reusable pads.
- **Audrey Tangonan, founder of [Sinaya Cup](#) in the Philippines**, was trying to reduce coffee cups waste when she stumbled upon reusable menstrual cups and decided to start a menstrual cup company in the Philippines. Working on a “buy one, teach one” model, Sinaya Cup focuses on the reproductive health, preparing the mindset to shift to using cups, and provides leadership women empowerment sessions.



All three entrepreneurs have social and environmental goals for their companies. They are committed to reducing menstrual waste by creating products that reduce environmental impacts, and by partnering with others to support awareness-raising campaigns for consumers. The three panellists demonstrated the shift in the region towards more women-led ‘femtech’ companies that provide new products for people who menstruate while at the same time educating users to remove the social stigma and misinformation that surrounds menstrual health.

To close the webinar series, **Gerard Cheong, Assistant Director Water Section at the Government of Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**, highlighted the progress that has been made since 2013, noting how the conversation around MHH has shifted, becoming more complex but with a clearer direction. Change is happening and it is unstoppable, the power and dynamism of women is shown in how they work within the context of their countries to find solutions.

Resources shared during the webinar:

The launch of the WaterAid evaluation report took place on Friday 28 May 2021, additional information can be found here: WaterAid, Keeping girls in school through improved menstrual health: Insights from Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea, www.washmatters.wateraid/blog/menstrual-hygiene, accessed 27 May 2021.

3. Conclusions and way forward

The webinar series highlighted momentum and continued progress in the region, through country level and regional efforts achieved over the past five years. It also highlighted remaining gaps that WaterAid and UNICEF and partners continue to call on actors and investors in the region to progress.

Key areas for action include:

- Building the evidence base: Refreshing regional research and data, to not only inform policy and programmes as menstrual health practice evolves, but also to monitor progress and measure change.
- Increasing investment: The webinar series demonstrated successful actions and initiatives that are scalable but are lacking adequate investment. Solutions need to be holistic and multi-sectoral, calling for increased and sustainable investment.
- Inclusive solutions: Ensuring no one is left behind remains a critical focus, as menstrual health solutions are scaled. People who menstruate must be at the centre of all solutions.
- Supporting women-led enterprises: Menstrual health can be an opportunity to support both expanded choice for menstruators and women's economic empowerment.



Did you celebrate MH Day in your country?

Share your images and bracelet pictures with Ina Jurga, International MH Day Coordinator, at info@menstrualhygieneday.org or ina.jurga@wash-united.org