



'Dignified Menstruation for Ending Child Marriage' – Fourth International Virtual Conference on Dignified Menstruation

Thursday, 8th of December, 2022 - Organised by Viluthu – Centre for Human Resource Development
in partnership with the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM)

Conference Concept Paper and Notice Calling for Abstracts

1. Background¹

World over, menstruation has been treated through generations as an issue of taboo and inconvenience, bound by cultural, religious and economic implications. Despite menstruation being a natural part of every menstruating person's life, societal structures, which are, at most times patriarchal, have limited the individual's right to freedom through archaic notions relating to limits placed on safe and dignified menstruation. From the 'pink taxes' in the Western world to the menstruation huts in Africa and Asia, menstruating people have been often left disadvantaged with their safety and wellbeing being sacrificed to satisfy cultural norms and economic models that operate within a sphere of ignorance and indifference towards menstruating people of all ages. Being prevalent across the globe and with particular commonness in the global south, menstrual discrimination continues to disrupt the equality in the treatment of women and their human rights.

a. Menstrual Discrimination,² Power, and Patriarchy

Discrimination based on menstruation has become prevalent in all corners of the world. As an average menstruating person spends three to eight years menstruating,³ this natural biological function has been exploited to provide grounds for patriarchal structures to discriminate against menstruators throughout their lifetime. Being excluded from physical activities, education, employment, and even household chores, menstruators are often victimised through gender inequality stemming from myths, stigmas, ignorance, and disinformation about menstruation.⁴ Apart from this, menstruation also provides a valuable tool for patriarchal systems to exercise power on women and girls. Misrepresented as an indicator of adulthood, readiness to bear children and marriage, patriarchal power stemming out of menstruation and associated stigma is imposed on women to limit their intellectual growth, freedom of movement, right to practise religious beliefs and limit all freedoms, equality in treatment, and thus limiting their agency. Menstruators are often subject to patriarchal control through period shaming,⁵ dependence of males to acquire hygiene products, lack of economic independence and controlled access to service providers.

b. Battling Child Marriages

Despite being prevalent in South Asia and Africa, addressing child marriages has become a global priority, as the phenomenon has been observed across countries and in specific communities that normalise such practices as part of their culture and beliefs.⁶ While not receiving adequate intervention at both local and international levels, preventing child marriages require extensive outreach advocacy work in the form of training to multiple stakeholders, strengthening legislation and policy, the provision of resources and psychosocial interventions. Systematically, menstruating persons, in particular women and girls, are discriminated to convince of a feigned inferiority compared to men and symptomatically, menstruating persons limit their activities during menstruating days to avoid facing social

¹ More information can be found at https://dignifiedmenstruation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Tool-Kit-DM-day-2022_Final_27-09-2022-FINAL-1.pdf

² **Menstrual Discrimination** refers to taboos, shyness, shame, stigma, restrictions, abuses, violence, deprivation from resources that are associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators (girls, women trans men, queer) and all people born with an uterus and ovaries. Menstrual Discrimination has been practiced everywhere across the globe with different names, forms and magnitudes. It is a type of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and a violation of human rights. It is complex and multifaceted. (Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation, 2019).

³ UNFPA, <https://www.unfpa.org/menstruationfaq>

⁴ Garg, S. Anand, T. Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4408698/>

⁵ Lese, K. M. Padded assumptions: A critical discourse analysis of patriarchal menstruation discourse, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1104&context=master201019>

⁶ The global campaign to end child marriages globally is almost a century old. Initiatives in India resulted in the codifying of law under The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 (also adopted as domestic law by Bangladesh and Pakistan, post-independence) has been a frontrunner in setting legal precedent to legislation banning child marriage in South Asia and across the world.



stigma. Such systematic and symptomatic examples are both diverse and alarming in relation to the advancement of education, family life, labour force participation, and mobility amongst menstruating persons. Exclusionary perceptions and practices reinforcing menstrual discrimination at home, school, and community drive women and girls into early or child marriages⁷ often to be left abused, victimised and discriminated in their lifetime. Such cycles of ill-treatment are passed down through generations and communities, unless disrupted through advocacy and efforts to prevent child marriages.

A research paper published by the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation in 2022, found that child marriage is a complex issue that warrants a holistic approach for its prevention, and such prevention is only possible by identifying and addressing menstruation as a key driver of child marriages. Dialogue and advocacy at multiple levels including at homes, schools and communities is needed to raise awareness of dignified menstruation and the prevention of child marriages so as to make the “concept of dignified menstruation becomes an integral part of socialization processes and community building.” The findings also highlighted the need to recognise and study menstrual discrimination as an integral part of the global discourse on human rights that is reflected on international human rights treaties and mechanisms.⁸ Apart from such are the health implications that arise through poor menstruation care. The lack of hygienic products, the unawareness of hygienic practices and waste disposal have given rise to serious health implications for menstruating persons.⁹ This has put the lives of many at risk and particularly the ones of young adults in the global south who do not have adequate access to healthcare facilities or advice. In relation to other menstruating persons apart from women and young girls, the stigma associated with their gender and sexuality acts as a double burden on top of the taboos associated with menstruating, as access to care products or sexual and reproductive health services are limited by means of difficulties in affirming gender identity.

Insufficient menstruation care has been a catalyst for child marriages, particularly in the global south. Coupled with period poverty, such inadequate care has disproportionately disadvantaged girls of school going age. While acting as an obstacle to receiving education sans distractions, due to the lack of sanitary products and facilities, poor access to them compels girls to not attend school during menstruation days even in developed countries.¹⁰ Similarly, one in ten girls in sub-Saharan Africa misses school at some point during their period.¹¹ The reaching of menstruation age by girls compel parents to consider the marriage of young girls to manage household costs, prevent potential sexual predators approaching girls, amongst other reasons. Considered as an indication of reaching maturity, parents burden girls with additional gendered household responsibilities in preparation of marriage, with the start of menstruation. Withstanding such factors, parts of the global south such as South Asia account for some of the highest rates of child and teen marriages in the world with 45% of all women aged 20-24 years reporting being married before the age of 18.¹² As illiteracy and the lack of education enables manipulation, exposure to SGBV and reliance on males for survival, the provision of uninterrupted education, especially concerning sexual and reproductive health can be a key tool in battling child marriages. Instances as above are often influenced by menstruation, and education could empower young girls to continue to better their prospects, detaching themselves from traditional gendered roles and norms. Both period poverty and education affects the correlation between menstruation and child marriages in multifaceted ways. Societal constructs that discourage the intellectual development of menstruating persons, and limits to their access to sanitary products affects nearly 500 million people worldwide.¹³ The implications of such have lasting impacts on generations of menstruating people whose hardships are normalised and sustained through taboos, patriarchal structures, and indifferences towards facilitating the provision of sexual and reproductive healthcare.

⁷ GSCDM, Tool Kit: International Dignified Menstruation Day, https://dignifiedmenstruation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Tool-Kit-DM-day-2022_Final_27-09-2022-FINAL-1.pdf

⁸ GSCDM, Isn't Menstrual Discrimination a Driver for Child Marriage? <https://dignifiedmenstruation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Menstrual-Discrimination-Child-Marriage.pdf>

⁹ Majeed, J. et al. Menstrual hygiene practices and associated factors among Indian adolescent girls: a meta-analysis, <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-022-01453-3>

¹⁰ Kuhlmann, S.D. et al, Period Product Insecurity, School Absenteeism, and use of School Resources to Obtain Period Products among High School Students in St. Louis, Missouri, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10598405211069601>

¹¹ UNFPA, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/turning-point-girls-and-womens-menstrual-health-africa>

¹² UNICEF, Child Marriages, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/child-protection/child-marriage>

¹³ World Bank, Menstrual Health and Hygiene, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/menstrual-health-and-hygiene#countryexamples>

The diverse and crosscutting nature of menstrual discrimination and its impacts, the prevention of child marriages and the need for avenues to improve dignified menstruation are justified owing to such negative impact it has on the lives of menstruating people.

2. Rationale

Recognising that menstrual discrimination presents an imminent threat to the growth and development of menstruating persons, their human rights and safety, the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation has spearheaded the Dignified Menstruation movement to free all menstruating persons from forms of discrimination, violence, and stigma stemming out of menstruation. The coalition strives to provide a common platform for all the beneficiaries and stakeholders to voice concern, emerging trends, ideas, and solutions on the subject matter through mediums such as this conference.

a. The Role of Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation

Identifying that menstrual discrimination is a key driver in child marriages is essential to taking action on ending child marriages. Being an issue of concern particularly in the global south, ending menstrual discrimination and child marriages have been at the forefront of Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation's activities. The nexus between child marriages and menstrual practises in specific geographic areas have been highlighted frequently by the coalition,¹⁴ including at multilateral forums such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It is with this enduring vision that Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation has collaborated with Viluthu – Centre for Human Resource Development, Sri Lanka, to host its fourth international conference on Dignified Menstruation. Drawing inspiration from previous discussions on timely topics such as the 2021 conference on Dignified Menopause,¹⁵ both the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation and Viluthu hopes to continue the advocacy work to positively contribute to the discourse on dignified menstruation, menstrual discrimination, and ending child marriages. The international conference is hoped to set the foundation for future action of dignified menstruation and ending child marriages with renewed and new alliances between partners of the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation sharing experiences, expertise, lessons, and best practices with each other and participating stakeholders. The coalition's 12-point call for action and declaration adopted at the second International Workshop on Menstruation in Nepal acts as the guiding light for championing dignified menstruation in all future activities.

b. Viluthu's Journey to End Menstrual Discrimination and Child Marriages

Being a founding member of the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation since its inception in 2019, Viluthu has a long record for fighting for gender equality, women's, and human rights in former conflict areas of Sri Lanka. For the purposes of effectively engaging with the youth, women and encouraging community action, Viluthu nurtures and maintain an extensive network of community led advocacy groups who also act as an important channel in identifying social issues at grassroots levels. Keeping dignified menstruation at heart, Viluthu has actively mobilised its grassroots level networks to engage in community led action to end menstrual discrimination and child marriages. Implemented in 2021, in 12 districts throughout the island, community led action to raise awareness on relevant subject matter was capped off with informative sessions involving Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation staff. Viluthu has also spearheaded the establishment of 'Youth Voice for Dignified Menstruation, Sri Lanka Chapter' with a large membership base comprising of members from all genders and communities. Viluthu also operates a trilingual social media accounts to support youth and contributors to showcases their efforts in promoting dignified menstruation in the island.¹⁶ The increase in social acceptance to discuss dignified menstruation, especially amongst youth,¹⁷ and positive responses by local governing bodies following successful lobbying by Viluthu has inspired the organisation to continue its ongoing action, some of which that will be reflected upon at the conference.

¹⁴ GSCDM, Isn't Menstrual Discrimination a Driver for Child Marriage? <https://dignifiedmenstruation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Menstrual-Discrimination-Child-Marriage.pdf>

¹⁵ GSCDM, Dignified Menopause Conference, <https://www.dignifiedmenopause.org/>

¹⁶ Dignified Menstruation Sri Lanka Chapter, <https://www.facebook.com/DignifiedMenstruationSriLankaChapter2020>

¹⁷ Ceylonmirror.Net, <https://www.ceylonmirror.net/64049.html>

Post pandemic, social, economic, and political dilemma,¹⁸ growing conservatism amongst some segments of the community have shown the potential to upset the gains made relating to dignified menstruation and ending child marriages. The surge in teenage pregnancies, teen marriages and sexual assault targeting women and girls¹⁹ have all indicated the urgency for renewed action to tackle such calamities. Hence, Viluthu has increased its efforts to prevent child marriages taking place in the island, while identifying the role menstrual discrimination play in such phenomena.

3. Objectives

- Establish and acknowledge the direct link between menstruation and child marriages for future action.
- Broaden the discourse on dignified menstruation and multi-level action needed to ensure such through networking, alliance building, and advocacy.
- Explore in depth, associated phenomena in terms of health and gender implications to account for a vast range of menstruating persons and their problems.

4. Thematic Areas

- Dignified menstruation amongst young children, youth, and boys (including awareness and safe practises)
- Menstrual hygiene, including products and taxation, waste management and disposal practises, education, physical resources and climate justice²⁰
- Menstrual discrimination, economic development and political participation
- Dignified menstruation and the law, domestic provisions and international instruments, FGM, child marriages, and discrimination
- Dignified menstruation at school, during pandemics, disasters and conflict (with special reference to refugees and migrants) and LGBTQI community.
- The role of activists, CSOs, media and academia in promoting dignified menstruation, the importance of problem identification, advocacy and urgent intervention

5. Desired Thematic Outcomes²¹

- Establish dignified menstruation and eliminating menstrual discrimination as global priorities (acknowledging its cross cutting nature), to attain gender equality, ensure human rights of menstruators and attain sustainable development goals (SDGs).
- Build global momentum on dignified menstruation and related cross cutting themes.
- Utilise networking, alliance building, and advocacy to further dignified menstruation and eliminate menstrual discrimination.

6. Participants, Beneficiaries, and Stakeholders

- Women, Children, LGBTQI and all Menstruating Persons
- Healthcare Professionals and Service Providers
- Young boys and Men, Relevant Government Ministries, Authorities, and Policymakers Champions and Promoters of Dignified Menstruation, Women's Rights Organisations, Academics and Undergraduate, Postgraduate Students of relevant Disciplines, International Organisations and Donors

¹⁸ Centre for Poverty Analysis, Gender and COVID 19 in Sri Lanka. Gendered Impact of Covid-19 Outbreak-From a Sri Lankan Perspective, <https://www.cepa.lk/blog/gendered-impact-of-covid-19-outbreak-from-a-sri-lankan-perspective/>

¹⁹ UNFPA, Responding To The Needs Of Women And Girls During Covid-19, https://srilanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/240521_unfpa_ar_2020_print_ready_0.pdf

²⁰ **Climate Justice** and dignified menstruation are correlated in the context of how menstrual practices are affected due to water scarcity, environmental pollution (including the promotion of environmentally friendly products and practises), the systematic impact of environmental disasters on menstruators, the role of poverty caused by climate events and accessibility to menstrual services and products during such events.

²¹ **Physical Outcomes:** conference papers, joint statement/policy brief, specific and focused targets and action plans, publication and dissemination of presented conference papers, keynote speech, outcome document and discussion points, media conferences, interviews, media appearances and conference promotion and outreach (prior to and after the conference).

7. Abstract and Research Paper Guidelines, and Selection

a. Language, Word Limit, Referencing and Formatting

- Abstracts should be 300 words long (main body). Submissions should include writer and organisation bio, country, time zone (GMT) and contact details.
- Formatting for abstracts should be same as for the research papers (See below).
- Abstracts and papers should be formatted using Times New Roman font with 1.5-line spacing, justified alignment, size 12 font for main body, size 14 (bold) font for main headings, and size 12 (bold) font for subheadings.
- All submitted abstracts/papers should be written in clear and coherent English (British or American), Tamil, or Sinhala.
- Each paper should be 2000 words long (Excluding diagrams, footnotes and references).
- All referencing and citations should be done using the APA (7th Ed.) style (Mandatory only for academics, university students and researchers).

b. Submissions, Registration, Closing Dates, and Selection Panel

- All abstracts should be submitted in PDF and MS Word formats via email to research@viluthu.org email address with a copy CCed to dignifiedmenstruation2019@gmail.com on or before the 6th of November 2022 (Refer Section 9 for specific deadlines and timeline).
- Submitted files should have the authors' names with initials, organisation, and the paper title in the file name.
- The abstracts will be reviewed and assessed by a selection panel comprising of academics, researchers, and officials from Viluthu and the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation.
- The authors will be notified upon their selection to author research papers along with further instructions and will be given 14 days for submission of completed papers.
- Time slots will be available for presenters who wish to submit pre-recorded presentations to be played at the conference, with the option to present live at the conference.
- All participants will be communicated on how to register online and gain access to the Zoom link for the live conference. Viluthu and GSCDM social media pages will also broadcast the conference live.

8. Conference Outline (Tentative)

- The one-day conference held virtually on the 8th of December (international day for dignified menstruation) will be conducted under three sessions and will be available to view and participate online.
- The panels for the sessions will be determined giving prominence to various stakeholders as follows with themes divided accordingly:
Session One: CSOs, other organisations, activists and government officials
Session Two: Academic, legal and healthcare professionals
Session Three: Youth and local advocates, special focus on community research methods.
- Each Panel will consist of a moderator and four presenters, who will make presentations for 20 minutes, followed by a 30-minute discussion and a Q&A session.
- A prominent invitee involved in works related to the conference theme will deliver a keynote address during the opening of the conference with remarks followed by the chief guest and the organiser.
- Presentations are allowed in English, Sinhala and Tamil languages (official languages of Sri Lanka), with real time translations provided in the three languages at the conference venue and for online participants.

9. Breakdown of Timeline and Deadlines (Tentative)

- Dissemination of concept note and call for abstracts: 30th of October, 2022
- Submission of abstracts: 6th of November, 2022
- Selection process: 6th to 11th of November, 2022
- Confirmation of selection to submit research papers and present at the conference: 11th of November, 2022
- Submission of completed research papers: 24th of November, 2022
- Submission of PowerPoint presentations, video recordings and other material: 28th of November, 2022
- Presentation recording, rehearsal and briefing: 30th of November, 2022
- One-day conference: 8th of December, 2022

10. Organisations and Partners

a. Viluthu – Centre for Human Resource Development (Host and Main Organiser)

Viluthu is a not for profit organisation operating in Sri Lanka since 2003 with the prime focus on working with war affected communities and vulnerable women from former conflict areas. Operating under the principles of creating an inclusive and socially cohesive society that practices participatory democracy and adheres to gender equality, economic, social justice and equitable development, Viluthu seeks to enhance women and youth participation in policy discourse and provide a platform to the marginalised groups for such purposes. Viluthu has been an active contributor to the works of Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation, implementing advocacy and outreach programmes relating to dignified menstruation in the island.

b. Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (Key Supporting Partner)

GSCDM operates with a mission to dismantle institutional, structural, interpersonal, and social oppressive systems in place affecting menstruation, individuals who menstruate, and their ability to access basic inalienable human rights, critical resources to lead happy, and healthy lives, and obtain dignity. Led by Radha Paudel Foundation, GSCDM carries out evidence based advocacy, training, and research at local, national, and global level in focusing on dignified menstruation for prevention of VAWG and VAC and the promotion of human rights. In 2020, GSCDM conducted a three days international workshop on Dignified Menstruation concluding with a 12 points call for action to champion dignified menstruation. GSCDM has worked with a number of partners locally, regionally and internationally, with a particular presence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and the Philippines, to promote dignified menstruation and to prevent menstrual discrimination. The coalition had made representations at a number of international forums on women's rights including at the UN Commission on the Status of Women and spearheaded the creation of the International Dignified Menstruation Day. Throughout the years, GSCDM has conducted conferences, seminars, and outreach work to promote dignified menstruation across the globe and has built an extensive network of likeminded organisations to support its endeavours.

11. Contact Details

Please use the below given contact details for all communications relating to this concept note and the conference.

Viluthu - Centre for Human Resource Development

Address: 27 A, Maheswary Road, Colombo – 06, Sri Lanka

Telephone: 0094112506272, 0094766604542 - 0094773769213 (WhatsApp active)

Email: research@viluthu.org

Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation

Address: Secretariat Office, Radha Paudel Foundation, Putalisadak Chowk, Near to Shrestha Photocopy, Kathmandu, Nepal

Telephone: 009779849596298 (WhatsApp active)

Email: dignifiedmenstruation2019@gmail.com