

Menstrual Discrimination: A Dormant but Critical Gap in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

Submission for the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation 30

I. Introduction

A. Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation

Founded in 2019, the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) is a survivor-led international coalition headquartered at the Radha Paudel Foundation in Kathmandu, Nepal. The Coalition seeks to reform and transform the global narrative on menstruation by moving beyond the conventional, biomedical framing of menstrual health and hygiene management. Instead, it advocates for a holistic, life-cycle, human rights approach that places dignified menstruation at the center of menstrual and other human rights discourse, recognizing menstruation as intrinsically linked to power and patriarchy in all diversities.

In alignment with its transformative vision, GSCDM established International Dignified Menstruation Day on 8 December, strategically positioning this within the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This timing is both symbolic and strategic, as it underscores the Coalition's assertion that menstrual discrimination constitutes a pervasive yet underrecognized form of GBV and a direct violation of fundamental human rights.

With a membership network comprising over 90 non-governmental organizations across diverse regional and socio-political contexts, GSCDM engages in research, policy advocacy, webinars, trainings, publications, conferences and other global activities. It fosters dialogue and collaboration between actors in both the Global South and Global North, contributing to the broader WPS by promoting menstrual dignity as a critical yet overlooked dimension of gender justice, peacebuilding, and inclusive representation.

B. Menstrual Discrimination

Menstruation is not merely a periodic biological event but constitutes a continuous, life-cycle experience that profoundly shapes the lives of approximately 4.06 billion individuals, representing 49.72% of the global population as of 2024.¹ While an estimated 1.9 billion people are of reproductive age and actively menstruating, menstrual discrimination transcends the act of menstruating itself, impacting individuals across the entirety of their lives.

Menstrual experiences are not confined to cisgender women and girls; they also affect transgender men, non-binary individuals, and all those born with ovaries and uteri, collectively referred to here as menstruators. These individuals exist in all their diversity and are found

¹ UNFPA. "State of World Population Report 2023: Menstruation and Reproductive Health Statistics." United Nations Population Fund, New York.

across every sector of society: from corporate boardrooms to agricultural fields, from academic institutions to refugee camps, and from densely populated urban centers to climate-vulnerable and conflict-affected regions.

*Menstrual discrimination is an umbrella term that includes silence, taboos, shame, stigma, restrictions, abuses, violence, and deprivation from services and resources associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators.*²

Globally, menstruation is considered dirty, impure, and a state of weakness with various forms, names, and magnitudes, transcending all socio-political boundaries, regardless of class, caste, topography, and educational, economic, or political status.³ The depth of this phenomenon is reflected in its linguistic presence alone - with over 5,000 euphemistic expressions known globally.⁴ In Asia, certain communities enforce menstrual seclusion, food restrictions, restrict participation in public activities, including religious activities, etc. In North America and Australia, menstruators report decreased participation in the workplace and professional activities, along with reduced concentration during menstruation due to the internalized status of shame and anxiety about maintaining secrecy around their menstrual status and the impact of menopause.⁵ Studies also indicate that many restrict social activities like swimming and exercise due to fears of blood leakage and subsequent teasing.⁵ Similarly, in European countries like Germany, menstruators also express shame about purchasing menstrual products and feel restricted in their participation in routine domestic and academic activities.⁵ Even in Nordic countries, traditionally associated with greater gender equality, menstruators report modifying their daily routines, avoiding physical activities, and experiencing heightened consciousness about their clothing choices during menstruation.⁵ Across various African regions, menstruators face restrictions related to food consumption, bathing practices, crop harvesting, vegetable consumption, access to water sources, etc.⁵ Many communities also impose limitations on using shared water sources, toilets, and participating in religious activities. In Latin America, discriminatory beliefs lead to dietary restrictions during menstruation, including prohibitions on milk products, pork, and avocado, along with interactions with plants.⁵ Additionally, menstruators report experiences of being secluded from domestic activities, sun exposure, and social engagement, etc.⁵

As such, menstruation functions as a biological tribal marker that has been historically weaponized to create social hierarchies. Through this lens, menstruators have been systematically categorized as losers, weaker, inferior, and impure compared to non-menstruators, who are positioned as winners, superior due to their absence of menstruation. This categorization extends beyond simple biological differences to serve as a foundational element of gender stereotypes across cultures, communities, and institutions. These false narratives and associated discriminatory practices, which manifest through a sophisticated

² Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation. (n.d.). Dignified menstruation, from <https://www.dignifiedmenstruation.org/>

³ Paudel R., 2020. Dignified Menstruation, A Practical Handbook.

⁴ Paudel, R. (2024). Menstrual stories: An anthology from the Global South. GSCDM.

network of socio-political controls ranging from explicit to implicit forms of violence, help in constructing and maintaining unequal power dynamics between menstruators and non-menstruators.⁴

C. Menstrual discrimination plays a vital role in the construction of gender stereotypes, systemic inequalities, and patriarchal power structures that are the drivers for conflict and injustices.

As highlighted above, irrespective of the Global North or Global South, menstruators and non-menstruators begin internalizing discriminatory menstrual perceptions and practices from an early age of 6-9 years.⁴ For menstruators, this inherited knowledge systematically erodes their sense of peace, autonomy, agency, and self-worth. They begin to internalize messages that cast them as losers, weaker, inferior, and inherently disadvantaged. Simultaneously, non-menstruators absorb and adopt feelings of being winners, superior and powerful over menstruators, creating a deeply ingrained socio-political hierarchy. This dynamic becomes self-perpetuating, constructing and reinforcing patriarchal cultural and political norms. This is how the menstrual discrimination resulting from menstrual and gender stereotypes serves to maintain unequal power structures and systemic inequalities, including invisible conflict and injustices in a vicious cycle.⁴

D. Dignified Menstruation

Dignified menstruation is a transformative, inclusive, holistic, human rights-based, life cycle framework that envisions a world where all menstruators live free from any form of menstrual discrimination at home, school, community, workplace, and everywhere.¹

The framework confronts and challenges how discriminatory menstrual practices function as systemic tools of oppression, deliberately constructed to create and enforce gender stereotypes to maintain patriarchal power structures and hierarchies across societies. It exposes how deeply embedded socio-political beliefs, religious restrictions, and institutional barriers operate simultaneously and systematically to suppress menstruators' state of peace and justice, and fundamental human rights, thereby perpetuating and reinforcing power imbalances between menstruators and non-menstruators. Through this critical lens, the framework reveals how seemingly disparate forms of menstrual discrimination collectively serve to maintain systems of social control or invisible conflict, injustices, and menstruation based subordination.¹

II. How and Why: Menstrual discrimination is a dormant but critical gap in the women, peace and security agenda.

A. The power structures and systemic inequalities constructed and reinforced by menstrual discrimination changed the landscape of conflict globally

The feeling of being a loser, weaker, inferior, disadvantaged, and vulnerable is not only societal or non-menstruator's perceptions but also deeply entrenched among menstruators themselves as a construct shaped by menstrual discrimination. Globally, by and large, the casual factor for power relations and patriarchy pointed to class, ethnicity, religion, poverty, education, or geopolitics. Therefore, the global efforts are focused on eliminating the gender-based violence, improving the SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights), participating in the table of peace, electoral and constitutional reforms, climate justice, economic initiatives, and everywhere. Unfortunately, globally, the progress is so nominal in comparison to efforts and investments, and has always remained as a gigantic battle. As a systemic causal factor for power structure and patriarchy, the menstrual discrimination is the primary and invisible contributing factor behind every conflict, the bedrock of every intervention around peace, justice, and human rights. It has continuously remained as a key influential factor across all interventions in conflict, and post-conflict situations. Therefore, globally, menstruators are marginalized and experiencing climate crises and disasters, pandemics, AI and cyberattacks, systemic deprivation from essential services such as healthcare, education, agriculture etc., and are continuously subject to rape, forced marriage, sterilization, slavery, pregnancy, displacement, HIV, poor SRHR (sexual and reproductive rights), etc. Thus, the landscape of conflict has evolved beyond traditional warfare or the absence of war is not peace anymore.

B. Menstrual discrimination is not only the cause and result of SGBV, including child marriage, but also the causal factor for invisible conflict and injustice.

To be straightforward, the UN categorized the four (sexual, physical, emotional and deprivation of services, and resources) forms of sexual and gender-based violence (1993). Even in simple calculation, an individual menstrual discriminatory practice often spans multiple categories, more than two. For example, when menstruators are restricted from harvesting crops, this constitutes both emotional violence and deprivation of resources and services. This pattern extends to health outcomes; chronic conditions like anemia among menstruators are often misattributed to menstruation itself rather than recognized as the result of continued nutritional deprivation due to discriminatory menstrual practices.

Through the lens of the role of menstrual discrimination in power structures and inequalities, the whole category of SGBV is also an outcome of menstrual discrimination. Both systemic and symptomatic impacts of menstrual discrimination are applied across all forms of SGBVs.

For instance, let us examine child marriage. Systemically, as a menstruator, she is not counted as an equal as her even her young brother. Symptomatically, discriminatory menstrual norms disrupt approximately five days each month for learning/educational opportunities through various practices: requiring early wake times, restricting food access, limiting educational materials, enforcing separate seating arrangements, interrupting educational participation, taking forced or unpaid leave in vocational training, etc. This amounts to roughly 60 days, or two

months, of disruption annually.⁵ This results in an increase in absenteeism, leading to an increased risk of educational failures/school dropout, to voluntary/forced/early child marriage.⁷ In this case, she destroys her inner peace countless times, and constantly faces disputes with her family, school, and authority. Despite this significant impact, menstrual discrimination in peace, justice, and human rights has been overlooked as a key driver of child marriage in global intervention strategies over the past six decades.⁷

C. The underlying barrier for participation in peace, politics, and others is menstrual discrimination.

In addition to the systemic impact of menstrual discrimination as mentioned earlier, in many cultures all around the globe, menstruators do not have access to kitchen or dining table during menstruation. The kitchen or dining table is a primary unit of peace dialogues and parliament. The profound exclusion of them, eventually makes them hesitate or be afraid to take the lead role in various committees in their respective village, e.g., local peace committees. The other forms of menstrual restrictions are playing constantly, e.g., touching men or religious leaders or books is not allowed during menstruation in many cultures. Therefore, they abstain from such participation by making excuses, and avoid speaking publicly because they consider themselves inferior, or subordinate of non-menstruators. Such exclusion, directly and indirectly, profoundly affected almost every sector of society but they are not account for because of not realizing the gravity of the impact of menstrual discrimination. Often, menstruators avoid sports due to fear of leaking and stigma including in the global north. Likewise, over 70% of farmers in the agriculture sector are women who are excluded from planting or harvesting crops, vegetables, and fruits in many cultures across the globe. Similarly, the over-century advocacy for decent work, or equal pay, or SDG 8, does not address the discrimination related to menstruation and menopause. Menstruators are expelled from work or asked to take forced unpaid leave in many garment factories (GSCDM, 2025). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 70 % frontline workers were women and some of them were forced to take contraceptives to omit menstruation.⁶ Even now, the women's representation is nominal in parliament, and often they encounter with various forms of GBV. Whatever the field we talk about, be it peace or politics or agriculture or sports or hospitals or security or corporate sectors, or anywhere, menstruators are systemically excluded due to menstrual discrimination, and they live in profound invisible conflict within themselves, with authorities, and with the state due to the lack of acknowledgement of the impact of menstrual discrimination.

D. Misinterpretation of Menstrual Discrimination and Mislead Women, Peace and Security

The UN and other international communities categorized menstrual practices as discriminatory alongside other 'traditional harmful practices' such as witchcraft accusations, breast stoning,

⁵ Paudel, R., Shah, N. J., & Ahmed, T. Isn't Menstrual Discrimination a Driver for Child Marriage?

⁶ Paudel, R., Regmi, A., & Adhikari, M. (2020). Missing the menstruation amidst COVID-19. *Advances in Women's Health and Care*, 3(2), 309. Retrieved from <https://researchopenworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AWHC-3-2-309.pdf>

living goddess or female genital mutilation, etc. This classification fails to capture both the scope and inherent complexity of menstrual discrimination. This mischaracterization is particularly concerning for three key reasons. First, menstruation affects approximately half of the world's population, making its direct impact far more widespread than its current classification suggests.⁷ Second, menstrual discrimination manifests in various forms and degrees across different cultures and regions worldwide rather than being limited to a single practice.⁴ Third, the term "Chhaupadi" itself has been misappropriated; it simply means "menstruation" in the local Achhami language of a few districts of west Nepal rather than referring to discriminatory practices. Furthermore, often, the media, donors, and NGOs use widely publicized cases of fatal snake bites in huts as a sole example of menstrual discrimination in Nepal; however, this is a misinterpretation and an assumption that misleads the global interventions for menstrual equity. Such fatal cases are a result of the failure of the state to protect fundamental health rights and the right to education rather than being solely attributed to discriminatory menstrual practices. This characterization diverts attention from the broader systemic issues and state responsibilities at play, further compounding discrimination against Nepal.

The global menstrual movement focused on five days of menstruation through menstrual products or toilets instead of dismantling the menstrual discrimination for sustained peace, justice, and human rights. And the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) policies are globally neglecting the menstrual needs and priorities of menstruators⁸, whose peace and security are heavily compromised.

E. Menstrual discrimination is missing in SRHR, LGBTQIA+, disability, and humanitarian and climate disaster discourses

The discourse around reproductive justice, and SRHR, consistently neglects both the scope of menstruation and the impact of menstrual discrimination. This systematic exclusion is evident in major policy frameworks, from the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) and Beijing Platform for Action (1995) to the WHO SRHR strategy (2019), though menstrual dignity is fundamental to achieving SRHR.⁹ Even recent developments, such as the WHO statement modification at the 50th Session of the UN Human Rights Council (2022), fail to explicitly recognize the global scope of menstrual discrimination, instead limiting the focus primarily to menstrual health.⁶ This oversight has profound implications. Menstruators who are socialized to accept discriminatory menstrual practices and internalize perceptions of being

⁷ McAllister, J., Amery, F., Channon, M., & Thomson, J. (2025). Where is menstruation in global health policy? The need for a collective understanding. *Global Public Health*.

⁸ Bruinvels, G., Burden, R., Brown, N., Richards, T., & Pedlar, C. (2016). The prevalence and impact of heavy menstrual bleeding (menorrhagia) in elite and non-elite athletes. *PLoS ONE*, 11(2), e0149881.

⁹ Wilson et al., "Seeking synergies: understanding the evidence that links menstrual health and sexual and reproductive health and rights," *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 29, no. 1 (2021)

"weaker" or "inferior" struggle to advocate for their sexual and reproductive rights. This conditioning undermines their ability to refuse unsafe sex, negotiate safe sexual practices, make autonomous decisions about family planning and contraception, or access safe abortion services.⁶ Eventually, they are forced to live in invisible conflict.

Likewise, menstruators with disabilities face stark challenges in maintaining body autonomy, accessing menstrual education, and exercising the right to menstrual dignity. They are subjected to forced sterilization and non-consensual pharmaceutical menstrual suppression, particularly affecting those with intellectual disabilities.⁴ The UN CRPD (2006) and other related policies do not address menstrual discrimination as one of the underlying barriers to disability rights.¹⁰

Furthermore, the menstrual movement's primary focus on women and girls as default menstruators reflects a limiting gender binary perspective. This exclusion of transgender, queer, and non-binary individuals' experiences and challenges compromises their fundamental rights, including peace and security.^{11, 4, 6}

To date, the global policies and programming (GR 37) around humanitarian support, and pandemic or climate disasters are confined to management of five days of bleeding instead of unveiling the gravity of menstrual discrimination.

F. Menstrual discrimination missing across SDG, human rights and peace building discourses

Out of the 17 SDGs (2015), menstrual discrimination serves as a systemic and foundational barrier to achieving at least 9 goals: Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Health), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Goal 8 (Decent Work), Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption), and Goal 16 (Peace and Justice) compromise the achievement of this 2030 agenda.⁴

As exemplified above, menstrual discrimination is a total violation of human rights, transcending all social, geographical, and temporal boundaries. The impact of menstrual discrimination practices is multiplicative; a single discriminatory practice cascades into more than four violations of human rights. For instance, a common discriminatory practice of exclusion from harvesting agricultural products is a total violation of one's right to dignity, equality, freedom, mobility, health, participation in society, and more.⁴ These violations compound and reinforce each other, creating systemic barriers that affect every aspect of menstruators' peace and security.^{8, 4} Likewise, the policies, programs, and campaigns around WPS, from local to UN,

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly. (2019). Rights of persons with disabilities: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities (A/74/186).

¹¹ Rydström, K. (2020). Degendering menstruation: Making trans menstruators matter. The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies, 945-959.

deliberately missed to acknowledging the impact of menstrual discrimination. In other words, these are focused on traditional warfare while having no peace.

III. Recommendations

Based on the systemic impact of menstrual discrimination outlined above, we respectfully propose the following key elements for consideration in the Committee's GR of WPS:

- A. Recognize menstrual discrimination as an underlying root cause of gender stereotypes, systemic inequalities, and patriarchal power structures:** This biological marker has been systematically weaponized to create hierarchies that infuse every aspect of social, economic, and political life, including within the WPS agenda. Attempts to achieve gender equality and dismantle patriarchal structures without directly confronting and addressing menstrual discrimination are fundamentally flawed, akin to pouring water on sand; such efforts dissipate without creating lasting change. Only by recognizing and addressing menstrual discrimination as the bedrock of gender-based oppression can we make the foundational changes necessary to achieve lasting gender equality, transform patriarchal power structures, and build sustained and inclusive peace and security.
- B. Affirm menstrual discrimination as a form of SGBV and acknowledge its role in perpetuating other forms of GBV:** Menstrual discrimination undermines individuals' autonomy, informed consent, and ability to resist unsafe advances. Therefore, the integration of Dignified Menstruation into all policies and programmes to eliminate SGBV, prevent child marriage and HIV, and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights is urgent and important.
- C. Endorse December 8th as International Dignified Menstruation Day, as the 14th day of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign:** This date, celebrated globally by the GSCDM for the past six years, serves as a crucial marker to acknowledge the systemic role of menstrual discrimination in perpetuating SGBV and in undermining peace and security worldwide. Recognition of this day would amplify global awareness and action against menstrual discrimination as a fundamental human rights violation and a driver of structural violence in all settings.
- D. Integrate the Dignified Menstruation framework into policies and programmes related to disability rights, LGBTQIA+:** Allocate targeted resources to address the compounded discrimination experienced by menstruators with disabilities, who require accessible and inclusive technologies such as tactile materials (e.g., Braille) and other assistive tools to manage menstruation with dignity. It is equally essential to ensure access to appropriate menstrual products, particularly for individuals who rely on caregivers for daily support. Moreover, it is recommended to recategorize menstrual

frameworks to use inclusive language "menstruators" and "non-menstruators" rather than traditional binary gender classifications. This approach ensures recognition of and response to the diverse needs and lived realities of all who menstruate, including transgender men, non binary individuals, and gender non-conforming people.

- E. Incorporate the impact of menstrual discrimination into disaster response, humanitarian action, pandemic preparedness, and climate justice policies:** This ensures that the needs and priorities of menstruators are addressed from the outset during planning, response, and recovery phases. Such integration is essential to prevent discrimination in access to logistics, medical care, sanitation, and other vital services, whether the menstruators are survivors of crises or serving as frontline responders during emergencies for assuring the peace and security. Apply a Menstrual Dignity Lens, "Menstrual Talk, Dignity First," across Taxation, Product Accessibility, and WASH within the WPS. These interventions must go beyond addressing physical needs to also challenge menstrual discrimination. The promotion of Dignified Menstruation-friendly products-based on the "3 Ps" framework (Person, Planet, and Pocket) along with inclusive WASH infrastructure, is essential to enabling for empowerment, participation, and protection of women and girls in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, reinforcing the core pillars of the WPS.
- F. Redefine menstrual discrimination as a primary human rights violation, rather than subsuming it under the category of "Traditional Harmful Practices":** It should not be merged with practices such as son preference, dowry, accusations of witchcraft, or female genital mutilation, etc. Rather, these harmful practices often emerge from or are reinforced by underlying discriminatory menstrual norms. Menstrual discrimination should be established as a distinct, systemic issue within the CEDAW framework. Furthermore, the term 'Chhaupadi,' which simply means "menstruation" in the local Achhami language of Nepal, should be discontinued in international discourse. Instead, the term "menstrual discrimination" should be used when referring to any discriminatory perceptions and practices related to menstruation, as it more accurately reflects the global and systemic nature of this human rights violation and avoids reinforcing stigma or misrepresenting local cultural contexts.
- G. Incorporate the Dignified Menstruation framework across all GESI policies, child rights frameworks, and educational curricula:** This should include integration from primary education through to graduate-level training in medicine, nursing, and public health. The internalization of menstrual discrimination begins in early childhood and continues to shape gender norms and power relations throughout life. Without addressing menstrual discrimination at this foundational stage, efforts to challenge and dismantle gender stereotypes, and their impact on peace and security will remain incomplete.

H. Integrate dignified menstruation into SDGs programming, human rights, and WPS discourses: Menstrual dignity is a fundamental prerequisite for progress across multiple SDGs, including those related to poverty eradication, health, education, gender equality, decent work, climate action, and peace. Menstrual discrimination must be recognized as a systemic human rights violation that intersects with and compounds other rights violations. Integrating the principles of dignified menstruation across all sectors and levels of governance will strengthen the effectiveness and inclusivity of development and peacebuilding interventions. Menstrual dignity must be firmly positioned at the core of the discourse of the policy of human rights and peace.

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