

African Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Fellowship Programme

2018-19 Research Fellowship on Menstrual Hygiene Rights

Call for Applications

Menstrual hygiene is a basic human right. Without access to accurate information about menstruation and adequate sanitary wear, not only do girls miss school when they have a period, they suffer stigma, stress, shame, embarrassment, [confusion and fear](#).

Lack of access to sanitary wear and decent sanitation jeopardise the rights of girls and women to equality, dignity, health and education. The taboos and myths associated with menstruation also have negative consequences for the self-esteem, confidence and mental health of millions of girls and women in Africa and elsewhere.

In recent years, there has been a focus on increasing access to information and sanitary wear as a way of retaining girls in school. One approach has been provision of free disposable sanitary wear and another the production and distribution of reusable sanitary wear. Such initiatives have had [some positive results](#) but they do not address the full range of challenges related to attitudes to and [experiences of menstruation](#).

For example, distribution of free disposable pads is only benefitting a small proportion of girls and women who need them; it does not allow for choice and disposal has negative effects on the environment. Reusable sanitary wear is also not available to scale, requires consistent access to clean water and soap, hygienic conditions for drying and a supportive social environment (ie absence of stigma).

It is important to ensure that everyone who needs sanitary wear is able to access affordable, reliable, comfortable and sustainable products every month. Provision of pads by Governments and NGOs in Africa is a welcome initiative. However, access to sanitary wear should not be a matter of discretion or charity. Girls and women should be able to choose products that suit them. Many of the products available are not comfortable, effective or discreet. Most are damaging to the environment, due to the use of plastics, chemicals and water in their production, the time the materials take to biodegrade, or the water and soap used to clean them.

Dignity, equality and health

Attitudes towards menstruation and the provision of sanitary wear demonstrates the low priority given to girls' and women's basic rights. Individuals forced to use unsuitable products (such as grass and rags), or to withdraw from daily activities, cannot enjoy their rights to dignity, equality and health.

School attendance

Lack of access to sanitary wear helps to reproduce gender inequalities in access to education. Poverty coupled with low levels of SRHR education can exacerbate girls' risk of sexual exploitation when they reach puberty. There is no large-scale, up-to-date data on the number of school days lost to menstruation in [South Africa](#) or the [continent as a whole](#). Solutions need to be based on evidence and experience.

Sanitation

In order to maintain personal hygiene, whether using disposable or reusable pads, girls and women need reliable access to adequate clean water and cleaning products. Most of the girls and women who struggle to access sanitary wear also live in water-scarce communities. Millions do not have basic sanitation. Efforts to realise menstrual health rights need to factor in the [issue of water and sanitation](#).

Environmental impacts

Most sanitary products used are considered 'disposable'. That means they are thrown away. 'Away' means in landfills. About 90% of the materials used to make sanitary pads and liners include polyethylene, polypropylene and polyacrylate super absorbents. Pads and tampons may be marketed as 'biodegradable' but the length of time they take to fully break down or decompose could be up to 1000 years. If a product does not fully break down, the resulting 'microplastics' can pollute the environment including soil and ground water. Use of disposable sanitary pads produces around 150 kilograms of sanitary waste per person in a lifetime.

Costs and benefits

The market for sanitary products is massive and growing. Giant corporates already make a fortune from sanitary products and are aggressively marketing them in countries where access is low. While girls and women who cannot afford their products might benefit from free or sponsored pads, if governments or donors are buying them, even at a subsidised rate, it is only commercial companies that make profits. As noted, the cost to the environment is also high.

Sustainable solutions

A socially, environmentally, economically just solution is needed to the violation of the rights to equality, dignity, education and health that are caused by lack of decent sanitary wear.

Such a solution will ensure access to a choice of sanitary products that are effective, comfortable, acceptable to users, and economically and environmentally sustainable.

The AIDS Foundation of South Africa, in partnership with the Gateway Health Institute, with support from the Embassy of Sweden in Zambia, is pioneering the development and production of a sanitary pad that meets all these criteria.

Naturally Free is a project to produce and test sanitary pads that are designed to be comfortable to wear, to be leak-proof and discreet, contain only natural fibres and are fully compostable within 8 -12 weeks. They are also locally produced, contributing to skills development and creating work opportunities, primarily for women.

Evidence for advocacy

The Naturally Free project incorporates a research study to document and evaluate the process and the product. The AIDS Foundation and Wits University are launching the African Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) Research Fellowship Programme to generate evidence for advocacy for SRHR. The first Fellowship (2018-19) will be awarded to a candidate who has the skills and passion to undertake research on the effectiveness and acceptability of the Naturally Free sanitary pads.

Post

Research Fellow (12 months)

Responsibilities

The Research Fellow's primary responsibilities will include:

- Developing criteria for the selection of study sites and recruitment of participants
- Co-designing the research tools
- Writing the protocols for the study
- Preparing and submitting the application for ethical approval via Wits
- Assisting in the briefing of participants, the administration of a cellphone-based baseline survey and feedback mechanism, and monitoring of the feedback
- Conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with participants
- Review and analysis of data
- Liaison with Gateway Health Institute on written and video documentation of the process.
- Contributing to a report and recommendations to support advocacy for further research and development or scale up of the project as a model for a social franchise.

The successful candidate will be expected to co-author publications in academic journals from the data produced by the project.

Person specification

Essential

- Demonstrated commitment to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), and/ or gender inequality, and/or violence against women and girls;
- MA in humanities or social sciences/MPH or MSc with equivalent experience;
- Experience of conducting and analysing quantitative and qualitative research;
- Demonstrated experience in working on social development interventions;
- Experience of working in Sub-Saharan Africa;
- Excellent writing skills in English, including evidence of ability to communicate research results to diverse audiences;
- Excellent coordination skills;
- Ability to operate effectively within a diverse, multi-disciplinary team.

Desirable

- Previous experience and knowledge of SRHR and the barriers to realising menstrual health rights;
- Previous experience organising stakeholder feedback meetings;
- Experience of working with civil society networks;
- Experience conducting research with girls and women.

Accountability

The post holder will dually report to the SRHR Advocacy Manager at the AIDS Foundation and through them will be accountable to Dr Thobeka Nkomo in the School of Human and Community Development at Wits University.

Salary and conditions of appointment

The appointment will be Durban-based, full-time for 12 months, to start as soon as possible.

Remuneration will be within the Grade 9 band on the Wits academic salary scale.

The successful candidate will access the RINC (research incentive) funds to enable them to present the research findings at conferences.

The successful candidate will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

All candidates must have permission to work in South Africa.

All other AIDS Foundation standard terms and conditions apply.

Application process

Please submit the following to recruitment@aims.org.za using the subject line 'Research Fellow':

- a) A Letter of Application describing your motivation for applying for this Research Fellowship and summarising the skills, experience and qualifications you would bring to this post
- b) Your Curriculum Vitae
- c) A testimonial from an organisation or an academic institution engaged in SRHR work supporting your application
- d) A copy of your ID or passport
- e) Copies of proof of qualification.

Deadline for applications

All applications for this post must be received via e mail no later than **midnight on 8 June 2018**. Late applications will not be considered.