



Decreasing menstrual poverty

Overview of the menstrual hygiene issue

Access to hygiene is part of the corpus of human rights (UN 2010). It is estimated that **40% of the world's population does not have access to personal hygiene**. Providing access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for the entire population, without discrimination, is an obligation for all governments. Understanding menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) in the context of human rights requires a holistic approach to the human rights of women and girls. **The biological fact of menstruation, the need to manage menstruation, and society's response to menstruation are related to the human rights of women and girls and gender equality.** The World Health Organization and UNICEF, in recent years, much attention has been paid to menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) which includes the management of menstrual hygiene and wider systemic factors, but in many countries, including **Western Balkan counties and Moldova there is no systemic approach that will include advocacy and policies.**

There are many reasons for inequality in MHH, such as lack of menstrual information, poor sanitation infrastructure, and the fact that menstrual hygiene management products are often unavailable or expensive.

Poor menstrual hygiene management can lead to a wide range of negative consequences, including health, psychosocial and educational consequences. Lack of menstrual hygiene management products affects girls' education by absence from school 2-4 days per month. Considering that menstrual products are not luxury but health and personal hygiene products, their taxation should be minimal or none. Furthermore, providing a monthly free MHM package for all girls involved in the regular education process can contribute to an equal opportunity for education, and is a step towards eradication of menstrual poverty.



Gender equality relevance

The objective of the **menstrual hygiene advocacy is to establish equality of women and men in access to hygiene as part of the core of human rights by reduction of the menstrual hygiene products' tax rate.** Using GRB tools we improved the access to MHM products for women and girls thus contributing to the right to safe water, sanitation and hygiene are the basis for achieving good health and gender equality.

As menstrual hygiene products are a necessity and not luxury goods and making them free can give girls equal opportunities to education, to women equal opportunities to work and quality of life, but also reduce the burden on the family budget.

The initiative contributes to implementing gender responsible budgeting declared in political will of processes on local, municipal and national level. The initiative contributed to a society without tax discrimination since menstrual hygiene should not be considered a luxury; it also assists in the prevention of gender-based violence in emergencies by having safe, well-located water collection points and safe, well-lit toilets comfortable for women and girls and facilities for MHM and free distribution of products for MHM. It improved the status of women also in ensuring that women and girls have an equal role in designing, managing and monitoring WASH-related issues, which can be a strategic practice for gender mainstreaming, empowering women and girls to simultaneously improve WASH outcomes.

Regional impact of the advocacy

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

March 2022, the Prime Minister of Sarajevo Canton (KS) Edin Forto announced that at the beginning of the 2022/2023 school year in every high school in KS, free sanitary pads will be provided.

Our grantees, **TPO foundation** successfully conducted and published the first comprehensive research on menstrual poverty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on the economic aspects of menstrual poverty and trying to influence public universities to adopt policies which would direct a part of the budgets for dealing with this issue. This groundbreaking study, titled **"How Much Does It Cost and How Much Does It Hurt?"**, has shed light on the socio-cultural and economic challenges faced by women and girls. The research findings have sparked vital conversations and paved the way for impactful initiatives aimed at addressing menstrual poverty across the country.

Our sub-grantees **Udruzenje zena Maja Kravica**, along with Udruzenje zena Priroda Bratunac succeeded in their advocacy campaign to include gender responsive criteria in the allocation of public funds in Vlasenica Municipality, particularly in terms of agricultural subsidies. The Municipal Assembly adopted the **"Program of Subsidies for the Development of Agricultural Production in Vlasenica from the Municipal Budget 2024"** and allocated 90.000 BAM for these purposes, with priority being given to women owners of agricultural businesses and property, young persons, and veterans. The Municipality has already started with the implementation of this Program, with public calls for greenhouse production packages published, while the second call will include procurement of seeds of crops specific for this region.



Kosovo:

Our subgrantee *EcoKosWomen* organized the regional conference “*Our bodies are not a taboo. Period.*” on May 28, 2024, at the premises of Klan Arena (Pristina). This regional conference brought together key stakeholders from the four countries (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Institutions, national and municipal authorities, international organizations, civil society and the private sector engaged in discussions relating to menstrual hygiene and menstrual hygiene in different aspects related to education, justice and economy.

North Macedonia:

Our subgrantees *Journalists for Human Rights* with research and analysis of the problem of menstrual poverty through the use of gender responsive budgeting tools within the project together with representatives of the targeted ministries, and then in cooperation with them, we made an analysis of programs and indicators from a gender aspect, which showed what other information, processes and changes should be made to avoid tax gender discrimination in relation to this issue. **JHR used the tool for Gender Sensitive Policy Assessment to see how the reduction of the tax rate will affect the family budget in aspect of products for menstrual hygiene management.**

With the help of the tool for gender budget efficiency analysis we collected data on the effect of reduced VAT on MHM products. By summarizing the results of research and analysis we prepared a report on gender responsive policy assessments, used to **advocate for lowering the tax rate from 18% to 5% and implementation of the recommendations, through meetings with social stakeholders and the targeted ministries**, along with strong media campaigning and public mobilization.

Thanks to our lobbying, the VAT has been reduced from 18% to 5% for the sale of menstrual products.

Montenegro:

Women Action (Ženska Akcija) is an active organization in Montenegro focusing on various gender issues, including menstrual hygiene. Led by Slavica Striković, Women Action has been involved in promoting gender equality through various initiatives. One of their key activities is to improve menstrual hygiene management, which aligns with broader gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) practices. They work on analyzing gender-specific expenditures and advocating for policies that support women's health and hygiene needs. **Similar to the case of North Macedonia, thanks to the GBWN advocacy in December 2022 there was a legislative change and from January 2023 Montenegro has been taxing menstrual products at a rate of 7%, instead of the previous 21%.**

Serbia:

Serbia has also reviewed its policies regarding menstrual products. As of now, there are discussions and proposals to reduce the VAT on sanitary products, although specific changes in legislation are still under deliberation. In Serbia there is an **ongoing petition on the VAT reduction of menstrual hygiene products:**

<https://peticije.kreni-promeni.org/petitions/smanjiti-pdv-na-proizvode-za-menstrualnu-higijenu>.

Gender Knowledge Hub held recently a meeting on the project “*Menstrual Justice: Together to Reduce Menstrual Poverty*”, at which the results policy papers on the topic of menstrual poverty, cost analysis of the proposed solutions and experience from the work with women were presented.



Success factors



The main success of the menstrual hygiene advocacy is that **gender tax discrimination is also a political issue, within parliamentary and municipal processes** of achieving gender equality, and implementation of gender responsible budgeting.

Main obstacles



- The main obstacle to implementation of the practice in the area of gender tax discrimination is that the GRB is not well implemented in the Western Balkan region and the Republic of Moldova, **although all municipalities have a gender perspective in the budget the topic of menstrual hygiene/ menstrual poverty is still perceived as a taboo.**
- Additionally, budgeting issues are processes that demand constant pressure to move it up the chain of decision making and finish with changing or amending laws.
- As a network, we use gender responsive budgeting as a tool to investigate the situation, to analyze the problem of gender tax discrimination and to give recommendations for changes in the direction of its eradication, but it requires a lot of **ongoing effort and advocacy.**



Gender Budget Watchdog Network
for a gender equal region



Financing for gender-based violence SOS lines and shelters for violence against women

All Western Balkan (WB) governments have ratified and/or adopted into their legal frameworks the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (known as the “Istanbul Convention”). By ratifying the Convention, states are obliged to have a national SOS helpline available and accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as stated: Article 24 - Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helplines free of charge to provide advice to callers, confidentially or with due regard for their anonymity, in relation to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention. All countries consider combating and eliminating violence against women a top political priority. It is also a priority considering the prevalence of gender-based violence and femicide. According to the report prepared by the regional network for addressing violence against women in 2020, there were 55 femicide cases in the WB Region based on the media sources, so the number could be even higher. Laws and policies in several countries define actions needed.

GBWN approach

The Gender Budget Watchdog Network (GBWN) performed an analysis in which we attempted to identify state funds allocated for SOS helplines in accordance with their obligations. Data was collected by GBWN members in the respective countries from the responsible line ministries (usually ministries for social policy or welfare) and from WCSOs and women’s networks that provide SOS helpline services. Data were compared with GREVIO findings. From the perspective of GRB watchdogging, an important question is the availability of data and possibility of determining the amounts allocated for combating gender-based violence. Limited resources impact the quality and comprehensives of service.

The states need to support shelters with continuous funding in order to effectively strengthen the specialized support services for victims/survivors from all groups and child victims and witnesses of violence. One of the important requests in GRB is transparency and accountability of governments to women and WCSOs, therefore, on top of appropriate financial and human resources on preventing and combating gender-based violence, governments should ensure availability of data about allocated funds. Overall, investing in SOS lines dedicated to addressing GBV is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic approach to fostering safer, more equitable societies for everyone.

SOS lines / operators only give directions to women what to do, in a form of directions for adequate reporting to police and locating nearest shelter centre if needed so, instead of offering full package of service, including interventional psycho-social assistance.



Advocacy successes/GBWN impact:

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH)

Here were doubled allocations for safe houses and organizations leading SOS lines. The Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Policy has published a Public Call for the allocation of funds to non-profit organizations working on the implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence. These funds, in the total amount of 1,000,000 BAM, are intended for providing social care and support to victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

In Kosovo:

The state budget foresees, constructing a shelter for women who have suffered violence in Ferizaj/Uroševac. The budget for the Victim Protection and Assistance Office also has increased, as recommended, by €120,503 (41%) compared to 2023, which can contribute to improved protections for survivors of gender-based violence. Additionally, an SOS telephone line was foreseen by the new State Protocol for the Treatment of Cases of Sexual Violence, as for the moment Kosovo doesn't have an SOS hotline.

In Albania:

The economic assistance for victims of domestic violence has increased significantly. The budget for social protection programs guarantees the support of over 64 thousand families, part of the economic assistance program, where about 45% of the beneficiaries are women victims of violence. For women and girls, victims of violence, or single-parent families, support with social housing will continue. The cost for social housing for 850 women and girls of the category defined by law will be ALL 47,562,600, calculated as a proportion of the two main products of the schemes.

Main challenges:

- Gender responsive budgeting remains insufficiently used tool;
- Very **minimal data related to the state funding of SOS helplines** is publicly available.
- WB countries and Moldova **lack codes or methods within budget systems to accurately track allocations and spending on SOS helplines, including funding for Women' CSOs providing these services** for the state. This likely contributes to inaccurate and inefficient budgeting for this legally required service, which also affects the quality of services provided.
- **Lack of funding for support services, legal aid and awareness campaigns** aimed at changing attitudes and social norms that perpetuate violence against women and other genders.



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