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**OPED BY HON. EMMA THEOFELUS ON THE OCCASION OF THE
COMMEMORATION OF THE MENSTRUAL HYGIENCE DAY 2021**

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Menstrual Hygiene is a Reproductive Health Right- Ensuring Girls and Young Women have affordable access

Menstruation is a biological function as routine as sleeping or breathing and is a normal and natural part of a woman's life. Yet, as normal as it is, menstruation is stigmatised around the world. The lack of information about menstruation often leads to damaging misconceptions and discrimination and can cause girls to miss out on normal childhood experiences and activities. Menstruating women and girls in low-income settings, are faced with an even bigger challenge in the form of the lack of access to sanitary products and hygiene facilities to manage their periods, this is commonly known as **Period Poverty**. This lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can often mean that women and girls have considerable difficulties in going about their lives during menstruation.

Over the last few decades, there has been a rise in activism to fight against period poverty, but also to promote education about reproductive health. At the same time global conversations have been initiated to challenge the dominant cultural narrative of menstruation as something that is 'shameful', and 'dirty'. These initiatives are starting to bear positive results. Several countries around the world have abolished or reduced sales taxes on sanitary products, with Kenya being the first country in the world to abolish tampon tax in 2004. Other countries including Canada, Australia, India, Colombia, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Nigeria, Uganda, Lebanon, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Trinidad and Tobago have either zero-rated sanitary products or subsidizes local manufacturers of these products.

In 2018 the United Nations (UN) reported that the shame, stigma, and misinformation that surround periods can lead to serious health and human rights concerns. In this regard the UN declared menstrual hygiene an issue that affects public health, gender equality, and human rights. For these reasons, the UN has added menstrual hygiene to the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, a 15-year plan for sustainable social and economic development that creators believe can help end poverty, hunger, and lack of access to healthcare. Nevertheless, one of the defining moments in the movement to reduce period poverty, is the landmark piece of legislation that was voted unanimously in the Scottish parliament in 2020, making Scotland the first country to allow free and universal access to menstrual products. Closer to home, Namibia has zero-rated sanitary pads starting April 2022.

However, these efforts to end period poverty are still not enough. The lack of affordable menstrual hygiene products continues to have a negative impact on women and girls around

the world. It is estimated that for 12.8 per cent of women and girls living in poverty worldwide, continue have limited options for affordable menstrual materials. In Africa alone, it is estimated that one in ten girls don't have access to any type of sanitary towel, which can cause them to miss school and cause them to be 70% more likely to have reproductive tract infections. This is an appalling reality and calls for urgent actions from relevant authorities.

The most effective way to act, is to increase the availability and affordability of menstrual hygiene products, as well as to raise community awareness of the issue. Various national and international initiatives have distributed free or subsidized menstrual hygiene products to increase availability. However, whereas this strategy can be used in the short term to quickly improve community access to menstrual hygiene products, it would be far more sustainable to work to ensure an affordable and consistent supply of the reusable menstrual hygiene product(s) of choice. This can be accomplished through private sector development, by collaborating with local suppliers and supporting the supply chain, as well as investment to overcome key bottlenecks and technical assistance required to produce an effective yet low-cost product where necessary. Once the supply side for sanitary products has been secured, education can be used to build the demand side. In this regard, targeted, culturally sensitive education – for both men and boys – should be undertaken with an aim to reduce stigma and increase understanding of the use, benefits, and cost effectiveness of menstrual hygiene products.

As legislators who champion all reproductive health issues, we are obliged to call on our fellow members of parliament to endorse all bills which are tabled in parliament which are in line with the above-mentioned objectives. These include those aligned with the **International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)** as well as those regarding the sustainable funding of **Universal Health Coverage (UHC)**, as these policies ensure the end of period poverty, permanently! In Namibia the removal of 'Tampon Tax' became a reality in 2021 effect in the next financial year, however we know this is only the first step in reaching our end goals, as articulated by the UN's 2018 resolution. Advocating for national programs which are designed to deliver on access and availability of reproductive health products, is another key action members of parliament can take, in achieving our joint objectives. The UNFPAs National Supplies Partnership program is a good example of such, providing initial support for governments to get these programs going.

The Scottish parliament has showed that Governments, through their legislative branch can be a progressive force in the fight against period poverty. Governments around the world should emulate the example of Scotland by enacting legislations enabling free supply of sanitary products to women and girls in disadvantaged communities. It is worth noting that the lack of access to sanitary products not only hinder women and girls to actively participate in community life, but it also has ripple effects on the economic development of communities and countries. Hence the theme of this year's Menstrual Health week 2021: **"It's time for Action"**.