



The Hygiene and Health Report 2023-2024

Advancing Health and Well-being

Through Care, Prevention, and
Gender Equality

Breaking Barriers to Well-being


The future of health and well-being is at a crucial turning point. The convergence of multiple global crises has shown us how important hygiene and health are for the resilience of societies.

Every day, we reach more than one billion people with Essity's leading hygiene and health solutions. With this reach comes great responsibility and also an opportunity to drive change. We constantly strive to break barriers to hygiene and health and push towards improved well-being for individuals and societies. Through this Hygiene and Health Report, we aim to contribute to that change and inspire further progress in the global hygiene, health, and well-being dialogue.

This year's report draws on the expertise of a variety of leading voices in health and hygiene. We place the spotlight on three critical areas. Namely, the care economy which looks into the resilience of care systems and how to improve the quality of care. We address the need to harness prevention to be prepared for future global health threats. Lastly, we focus on the necessity to invest in women+'s' and girls' health and well-being, while also engaging men and boys.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals and the forthcoming high-level discussion pertaining to health at the UN-level serve as essential frameworks in setting a roadmap towards a more healthy and inclusive future. By setting priorities and shaping effective policies and regulations also at national level, change can be further encouraged.

Now, more than ever, it is time for a multitude of actors, including businesses, policymakers, academia, to jointly take steps towards a future that prioritizes the well-being of individuals and societies. Join us in the discussions and actions for change.



Magnus Groth
President and CEO, Essity

About the Report

Essity's Hygiene and Health Report aims to contribute to the global hygiene, health, and well-being dialogue through sharing knowledge and insights, anchored in current and forthcoming global agendas. This report is the latest edition in a series of reports that Essity has published since 2008 on the pivotal role hygiene and health plays for the well-being of individuals and for the progress of societies.

This year's report highlights three main themes where there is progress but also a need for collective actions. The right actions can raise hygiene and health standards, creating value for individuals and society, and contributing to economic, social, and human development. The themes are:

- **The care economy** section of this report focuses on the resilience of care systems and how to improve the quality of care for all stakeholders. It addresses social structures, norms, and equality aspects of the care economy as well as the care investment gap.
- The **prevention for preparedness** section addresses how to sustain beneficial hygiene behaviors and the prevention focus developed during the pandemic. It also focuses on health equity, the role of innovation in hygiene and health, the link to antimicrobial resistance and broader aspects related to prevention and preparedness from societal and community perspectives.
- The section **Investing in women+'s and girls' health and well-being** focuses on gender equality and applies a barrier-breaking approach to menstrual health, continence care, perimenopause, and menopause. It also highlights the need for transformative action.

Each section includes references to new research, interviews, insights, and proposals for solutions to drive progress and address challenges. To spur further dialogue and collective action, each section concludes with a few examples, suggested solutions and importantly "calls to action."

Essity global surveys

A part of the resources for the report are Essity's global surveys on Hygiene and Health in 2022 and the International Menopause Insight Study concluded in 2023.

The Global Hygiene and Health Survey from May 2022 explored the future of well-being, gaps between behavior, knowledge and attitudes on well-being experiences concerning health and hygiene, outlining barriers and solutions throughout the life cycle.² A total of 15 246 people across 15 countries responded to the survey.

The international menopause survey was conducted in two phases between September 2022 and February 2023. In total, 16,000 people participated in the survey, including women+ who had not yet knowingly entered menopause and women+ who had experienced or were experiencing menopause, in eleven countries across the globe.³

The care economy

Recognizing the indispensable value of care for individuals and societies. This drives progress on SDG 3: Good health and well-being, SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation, and SDG 5: Gender equality, while also advancing towards SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth as well as SDG 12, 13 and 15 respecting progress on sustainable consumption, climate action and life on land.

Prevention for preparedness in hygiene and health

Proactively investing in hygiene, sanitation, and other preventive measures to mitigate infection risks and foster resilient health-care systems. This commitment generates shared societal value, propelling progress towards SDG 3: Good health and well-being and SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation, while respecting progress on sustainable consumption, climate action and life on land in SDG 12, 13 and 15.

Women+'s and girls' health and well-being

Prioritizing investments and shining a spotlight on health and well-being equality to bridge the gender health gap, driving progress in health and hygiene for all, and advancing SDG 3: Good health and well-being, SDG 5: Gender equality, and SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation, while respecting progress on sustainable consumption, climate action and life on land in SDG 12, 13 and 15.

Report Interviews

The report has derived knowledge from interviews with leading voices⁴ within the outlined areas.



Chidi King

Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Branch at the International Labour Organization (ILO)

Chidi King is an experienced legal and policy advisor on issues regarding equality and non-discrimination. Chidi King and the ILO are working towards creating a sustainable care economy that promotes health and well-being for all. This involves raising awareness about the care economy and its workforce, including both paid and unpaid care workers, while advocating for gender equality. Chidi King is a leading voice in hygiene and health and a key source of inspiration for the care economy chapter of this report.

“Care is vital to us as human beings, to our development, and to the sustainability of our planet. Recognizing the value of care contributes to creating healthy, equitable, and sustainable societies. The care economy is also a huge potential employment generator. It is crucial to invest in decent jobs in the care economy, decent jobs that create value for society,” says Chidi.



Michele Cecchini

Head of OECD program of work on Public Health

Within public health, the OECD works towards promoting better policies for better lives. This includes looking for best practices across countries and making the economic case for scaling up the role of prevention in health systems. Michele Cecchini argues that governments can save money and lives by having longer-term perspectives on healthcare and by investing in prevention and enhanced readiness in society. Michele Cecchini is a leading voice and key source of inspiration for the prevention and preparedness chapter of this report.

“We are increasingly moving from looking at economic cost to a broader concept of well-being; this includes calculating the return on investment of scaling up prevention activities and making prevention play a greater role in health systems” says Michele.



Photo credit: Yara Cavazos

Anahí Rodríguez

Founder of Menstruación Digna Mexico

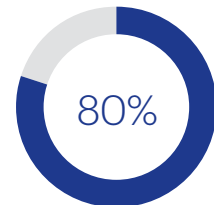
Menstruación Digna, a Mexican civil-society organization, plays a vital role in raising public awareness of menstrual health and period equity. Anahí Rodríguez, the founder of Menstruación Digna, stands as a prominent advocate for menstrual health. She argues that investing in comprehensive measures that increase access to menstrual health for women and girls in all their diversity advances gender equality, economic growth, and sustainable development, paving the way for a future that is more equitable and sustainable for all. Anahí Rodríguez is a leading voice and serves as an inspiring source in the chapter about investing in the health and well-being of women and girls in this report.

“Promoting menstrual health increases accessibility of menstrual products, ensures that women and girls in all their diversity have information to make decisions about their health, and breaks barriers to the stigma surrounding menstruation,” says Anahí.

Snapshots From the Report

The care economy

80% of care provision comes from family members, and two-thirds of all people globally will become caregivers at some point in their lives.⁵



Joint action is needed to elevate the significance of care in society. A shift is needed from seeing care investments as costs, to truly acknowledging the substantial returns that care yields in personal well-being, societal and environmental benefits as well as in economic returns.

Businesses have a pivotal role in introducing new innovations that support caregivers and care recipients. Sustained investments in innovative technology are needed to address the care economy's challenges, but it is equally important to ensure that these innovations receive ongoing funding.

Healthcare systems are under pressure due to, among other reasons, demographic shifts and an increasing need for care, while the number of caregivers is declining.⁶



There is a need to better acknowledge the contributions of caregivers who dedicate their time, skills, and empathy to support others. There needs to be a greater focus on making these contributions visible and listening to the needs of patients and persons receiving care as well as professional and family caregivers.

More than 425 million people worldwide live with incontinence. If incontinence was a country, it would be the third largest country in the world.⁷



Implementing a person-centered approach to care where we listen, respect and place the individual needs and preferences of the person receiving care at the center is essential in improving the quality of care and care outcomes. To make this happen, the person receiving care needs to be at the center of decision-making with tailored support that also enables active participation in the care journey.

Prevention for preparedness

There are no official global numbers, but within the EU it is estimated that workplace absenteeism due to illness costs 2.5% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product).⁸



For effective prevention of illness, essential hygiene and health measures are crucial. These measures should be integrated into a core prevention agenda to promote health, well-being, and preparedness for pandemics, looming crises like AMR, and other health threats. Boosting preventive actions such as hand hygiene and by prioritizing innovative solutions, in areas where infection prevention is needed, saves lives, keeps people healthy, reduces healthcare costs in the long term and improves productivity.

Globally, the lack of access to basic hygiene services is a key contributor to the spread of infections and disease.⁹ This has many root causes, including limited access to handwashing facilities, poor sanitation, insufficient cleaning, and a lack of hygiene education.



Concerted efforts are needed to close the gaps in hygiene, cleaning, and sanitation infrastructure, including securing access to clean water, safe, clean, and private hygiene and sanitation facilities, as well as sustainable surface cleaning. A shift in mindset is needed to prioritize preventative healthcare strategies.

Hygiene tends to be seen as everyone's responsibility and lacks a clear home in policy. It is key that clear ownership is established and that the profound societal value that is associated with hygiene practices is recognized.

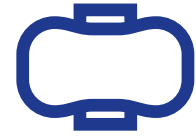
AMR is a silent pandemic and poses a significant threat to public health, as it risks making previously curable illnesses life-threatening. In a report from the United Nations, it is estimated that drug-resistant diseases could cause 10 million deaths annually by 2050.¹⁰



To make a real impact in the fight against antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a multistakeholder approach is needed. Stakeholders at local, national and global level, need to work together to establish and implement hygiene and health practices, guidelines and standards, supported by education and training. A relevant example is antimicrobial stewardship in wound care, which should be incorporated in care standards and practices, included in trainings for care givers and prioritized in financing and usage.

Investing in women+'s and girls' health

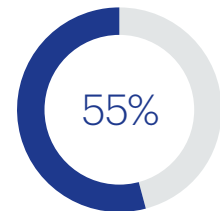
At least 367 million children globally have no sanitation services in their schools, which creates barriers to achieving good menstrual health.¹¹



By closing gaps in access to menstrual health education, clean water and appropriate sanitation facilities, and menstrual products, access to education and jobs are improved later in life, whereby contributing to economic development both at the individual and at a societal level.

Taking action and building on progress already made in promoting environments that engage men and boys in menstrual health can drive progress in gender equality and promote equitable views on gender.

The lack of information about menstruation is a global issue and increases the stigma around menstrual health. In Essity's Global Hygiene and Health Survey from 2022, only 55% of respondents claimed to be knowledgeable about menstruation.¹²



To ensure menstrual health, women+ must have access to accurate information on the menstrual cycle as well as affordable and appropriate menstrual products, and a supportive environment without embarrassment or shame.

Policymakers have the opportunity to reform menstrual health education by addressing the needs of women+ and taking into account considerations of inclusion, disability, and accessibility. Educational tools and materials that embrace inclusion can play a vital role in shaping perceptions of menstrual health and breaking the stigma associated with menstruation.

In 2025, an estimated 1.1 billion women+ worldwide are expected to experience one of the phases associated with menopause. However, menopause is often surrounded by stigma and overlooked in different parts of society, for example in the workplace.¹³



Life changes, and as it does, it becomes necessary to establish provisions in health and social care to support individuals in navigating these changes. Menstrual health, menopause, and incontinence need a place within policy agendas – both at a global level and more specifically at a national and local level.

Raising awareness and ensuring an environment that is inclusive to the needs and experiences of women+'s related to menopause as well as all other phases of life, is key to the well-being for women+. This is best achieved in consultation with women+, by listening to what women+ need to feel supported and safe in any setting.

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The Care Economy



The care economy

The care economy plays a crucial role in society in accelerating overall health and well-being as well as in shaping and creating resilience. The global demographic shift, with a rapidly growing older population, increases the need for care, and places pressure on an already strained care economy. Yet there is an opportunity for new practices and innovation within the care economy to make a big positive impact. More people will be able to look after themselves at an older age and the demand for care workers will also increase, including both professional and family caregivers. At the same time the financing of public healthcare systems is impacted by more elderly people in need and potentially fewer younger

people in the work force. Globally, countries are witnessing a care gap, meaning there is a deficit in the number of caregivers compared to the growing number of people in need of care. If not addressed properly this deficit can create an unsustainable global care crisis and increase inequalities.¹⁴

Smart investments in care and preventive measures will not only strengthen the resilience of healthcare systems and contribute to more sustainable and better care as well as better health and well-being for persons receiving care and caregivers but also strengthen societies' capacity to recover after disasters and crises.¹⁵



The care economy encompasses direct care activities, such as nursing an ill partner or feeding a baby, and indirect care activities, such as cleaning, cooking and so on. Whether paid or unpaid, direct, or indirect, care work is vital for human well-being and economies and is yet to receive adequate attention in policy formulation.

/ **Chidi King**, Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Branch at the ILO

Recognizing the value of care

Recognizing and investing in care in a smart way creates value for society, as it contributes to better health and well-being for both care recipients and caregivers. According to UN Women, the care economy contributes to poverty reduction, elimination of inequalities in socio-economic status, and sustainable and inclusive growth.¹⁶ However, the social and economic value that care creates is still not recognized to the extent that it deserves. A shift in mindset is needed; from seeing care investments as mere costs to recognizing them as valuable investments that generate tangible returns in terms of personal well-being and patient outcomes, as well as public health-, societal- and economic progress.

By acknowledging and prioritizing the value of care, societies can foster an environment conducive to inclusive and equitable growth. This could contribute to creating a society where individuals have equal access to opportunities and resources necessary for health and well-being. Securing

the right and best care for individuals increases independence and improves health outcomes. On the individual level, acknowledging the value of care fosters physical, mental, and emotional health. Individuals who experience quality care are more likely to possess higher self-esteem, improved coping mechanisms, and greater life satisfaction, ultimately leading to an enhanced quality of life.¹⁷

Care is a fundamental human rights component. According to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, every individual has the right to access healthcare, education, social protection, and active participation in public life.¹⁸ In order to uphold these rights, there is a need to foster a care economy that is rooted in human rights principles, responsive to gender disparities, inclusive of individuals with disabilities, and sensitive to the diverse needs of different age groups. Promoting a care economy that considers the diverse care needs of different individuals is essential for ensuring the health and well-being of all.



SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Investing in care in a smart way creates value for society, which is essential to ensure good health and well-being for both caregivers and persons receiving care. This drives progress in SDG 3.





What are the returns of investing in the care economy?

- Investing in the care economy fosters a more inclusive and equitable society that benefits the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the overall economy. This sets the foundations for stronger and more sustainable long-term economic growth.¹⁹
- Investing in accessible quality care allows individuals to participate fully in the workforce, contributing to productivity and economic stability.²⁰
- Investing in care solutions and preventive measures strengthens the resilience in healthcare systems, which could increase overall health outcomes and avoid looming crises or speed up recovery after crises.²¹
- Investing in care jobs will increase the general health and well-being of the population while also promoting gender equality, as women make up over 70% of the care workforce.²²

Making invisible work visible and valued



The care economy is a huge potential employment generator. It is crucial to invest in decent jobs in the care economy, decent jobs that create value for society.

/ **Chidi King**, Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch at the ILO

A major societal challenge in the care economy is that there are areas where work often goes unnoticed and undervalued. Yet these invisible contributions are the backbone of our communities and economies.

Contributing to making invisible work visible and valued is key to accelerating equity in health and well-being, for individuals as for society. This includes driving approaches that recognize, empower, and value people providing care - both professionally and within a family, in the great variety of caregiving roles. Next to caregivers, it also includes recognizing the value of work provided by cleaning staff and facility managers and enabling access to innovative solutions that strengthen these professions. By bringing the often-hidden roles within the care economy into focus, we recognize the immense effort and skill that is required to perform them. By doing so, we can move towards a more inclusive and resilient society that honors the diverse range of work performed within the care economy and that creates value for economies and societies.

Valuing and recognizing care, expanding care infrastructure with smart and value creating solutions, as well as rebalancing



care work responsibilities contributes to economic growth and therefore also to SDG 8: Decent work. A stand-out factor that is common to all types of care work is that women are overrepresented in care-giving roles. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed a gender-responsive and rights-based approach to public policy in the care economy, the so called 5R framework. This stands for *recognize, reduce, redistribute, and reward* unpaid work and guarantee care workers' *representation*. The framework contains several policy measures that are designed to create "a virtuous circle mitigating care-related inequalities, addressing the barriers preventing women from entering paid work and improving the conditions of unpaid caregivers and care workers and, by extension, of those cared for."²³

The ILO estimates that more than 16 billion hours (about 1,800,000 years) are spent on unpaid care work every day across the globe, corresponding to approximately 9% of GDP globally.²⁴ According to UN Women, this figure can be as high as 39% in certain countries. Recognizing the value of care and the needs within this sector, structural as well as individual, could help facilitate further investments, which would have long term benefits for society as a whole.



SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth. Recognizing and valuing care as a vital sector of the economy, expanding care infrastructure, and rebalancing paid and unpaid work responsibilities can contribute to economic growth, and therefore SDG 8.



The crucial role of family carers

Family caregivers are a vital part of the health care system. They often need to balance or choose between caregiving responsibilities and other obligations, primarily their paid jobs. While the frequency and intensity of the caregivers' responsibilities differ, support is often limited or not available. A distinct trend of so called "re-familialization" of the care economy is taking place, where the responsibility of care required from family members increases. This is in part due to an increase in the number of co-morbidities as we live longer, along with an increase in the need for home care. Re-familialization accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, as overloaded healthcare systems led to an increased need for informal care. There are now concerns that this increase has been normalized. Without adequate support in place for caregivers, this becomes a paramount challenge with a range of consequences for caregivers, care receivers, and for society at large.

Caring for one's loved ones often provides joy and self-satisfaction, yet it is also well documented that a family carers'

physical and mental health is affected the responsibility of taking care of a relative.²⁶

Working family caregivers often experience stress and guilt about having to leave their jobs even temporarily to take care of relatives. Many family caregivers take on jobs that are below their level of education or experience to work fewer or more flexible hours. Family caregivers run a bigger risk of leaving their jobs in the paid economy. Once the need for caregiving is over, it is often challenging to re-enter the labor market.²⁷ In the paid care economy, a large portion of jobs are considered low status, with low pays and limited social protection or benefits. Often, they are also physically and/or psychologically demanding.²⁸

Increased societal awareness of family caregiving could make it easier for caregivers to reach out for the support, education, and training available. This would in turn help family carers to find the right balance between providing care and other activities.



When my wife became incontinent, I was unprepared for the practical aspects of looking after her, although I had been her caregiver for a long time. When searching for knowledge, there was no information or training available. When talking to other caregivers in a comparable situation, we discovered that we were all facing the same problems. To support family caregivers and bridge the knowledge gap, policymakers should take a proactive approach in making information and training available on continence care.

Trevor Salomon,
caregiver for his wife with Alzheimer's and incontinence.

Caring for someone with incontinence

Many caregivers, especially family caregivers, experience a knowledge gap in caring for a family member with incontinence. Family carers may not be used to managing incontinence, so it is essential to provide practical support, training, and information on continence care.

Moving from unplanned care to planned care by using digital solutions eases the burden for family caregivers and working caregivers, increases quality of life of and reduces healthcare costs. To enable this, providing the right products and the right digital solutions is vital. An example of a digital solution that can support caregivers is the TENA SmartCare Change Indicator. It notifies caregivers when absorbent products need changing. This provides peace of mind for the carer, minimizes risk of intrusion, leakages, and skin irritation for the receiver of care and ensures that changes are made only when needed, reducing unnecessary waste.

When used correctly, this type of innovation has shown not only to significantly reduce leakage (40%) and the number of manual checks between changes (16%), it also enhances the well-being of people with incontinence (60%) and alleviates the worries of caregivers for their loved ones' comfort (71%).²⁹



SDG 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Driving innovation in sustainable and environmentally friendly products that improves quality of life and independence of people receiving care contributes to sustainable development and SDG 12.



Improving quality of care

Due to the demographic changes with an aging population in growing need of care, the care economy across the world is facing resource challenges. To respond to these challenges, a person-centered approach to care could be adopted, involving listening to, and partnering with people receiving care to improve the quality of care. A person-centered approach could for example involve public health initiatives focusing on individual responsibility through a systematic approach to self-care.³⁰ According to the WHO, self-care eases the strain on healthcare systems as it empowers individuals, families, and communities to promote and maintain their own health.³¹

There are several benefits of self-care, for individuals, for society, and to health systems:

- Self-care **frees up care staff resources**, as patients are able to cater for their needs without the help of a carer when provided with self-care solutions.
- **Restored dignity and improved quality of life** due to being in control and making own decisions.
- Self-care is often the **most cost-effective solution** in the long term, and it allows people receiving care to live longer at home and live more independently.

Sustainable continence care is about promoting self-care for as long as possible. When that is no longer possible, it is about increasing care efficiency by having care delivered on time, efficiently, ergonomically, comfortably, and with dignity for both the person with incontinence and their caregiver. It is also about taking responsibility to reduce environmental impact by using a step-by-step approach through the optimal use of resources and designing products for a circular society where less goes to waste and more is recycled and reused.



It is time to care for others, time to be able to perform at work, and most crucially, time to look after oneself.

/ **Chidi King**, Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Branch at the ILO

Enabling people to live more continent lives

Currently, more than 425 million people worldwide live with incontinence.³² If incontinence was a country, it would be the third largest country in the world. As populations grow older, millions more will experience incontinence in the future. The growing number of people living with incontinence puts pressure on caregivers and healthcare systems. It is therefore important to start by focusing on how people can be as continent as possible combined with innovative solutions that support their needs, including empowering people receiving care through self-care. Self-care for people with incontinence is made possible by, for example, timely toilet visits, and using absorbent hygiene products where fitting does not require help from others.

Industry and policymakers play a key role in enabling people with incontinence to live dignified and active lives by making education and information on continence care and self-care available. According to Essity's Global Hygiene and Health Survey from 2022, only 36% of respondents state that they are knowledgeable about incontinence, indicating a significant knowledge gap.³³

Transforming continence care through person-centered care and innovation

Addressing the increasing demand for care and the decreasing number of caregivers (the care gap), requires innovation in the care economy. New and innovative ways to perform care duties, as well as innovative new products and solutions and more effective services with digital health technology can not only generate better patient outcomes and increased capacity in care systems, but also assist professional and family caregivers and provide increased quality of life to care receivers.

Person-centered innovation can improve quality of life for people living with incontinence and has positive outcomes for health professionals. Digital Health Technology (DHT) plays a significant role in promoting self-care in sustainable continence care.

Innovative DHT products like TENA SmartCare Identifi uses a pad with built-in sensors to record a person's voiding pattern for 72 hours to help make a personal toileting and containment plan. This plan consists of individually timed assisted toilet visits and containment products. The solution saves costs and improves quality of life for people living with incontinence by creating person-centered toileting assistance schemes and recommending the right absorbent product and adjustment of care routines.³⁴ From a self-care perspective, this solution increases independence and creates a dignified continence care experience. Moreover, the solution also ensures that available resources, such as time and product budgets, are utilized in the best possible way, leading to less impact on the environment in terms of waste and CO₂ in use. Due to the reduction in consumption of containment products and product leakages, resulting in less laundry, there is up to a 15% reduction in CO₂ in use.

This innovation was tested in a clinical trial conducted with nursing home residents in 2023.³⁵ Key findings of the study show that the use of a standardized assessment for toileting and containment needs, based on sensor technology, can significantly reduce the 'total absorption' (number of pieces * absorption capacity) used during a 24-hour period. The study also showed that the total cost of night pads used was reduced, and benefits in terms of quality of care for residents were reported.

Person-centered care is about listening, respecting, and placing the individual needs and preferences of the person receiving care at the center, which is essential to improving the quality of care and care outcomes. To make this happen, the person receiving care needs to be at the center of decision-making with tailored support that also enables active participation in the care journey.

Promoting value-based care

The purpose of care in the care economy is to improve health and quality of life for people cared for at a sustainable total cost level. Healthcare systems need to generate value both for individuals and for society at large.

Because of the increased pressure on healthcare systems, it is more important than ever to recognize that the value in healthcare comes from the right combination of quality and cost. If society wants the value of care to remain constant or increase, one must think conceptually about relevant patient outcomes, and how these outcomes can be achieved or improved in the most cost-efficient way.

To address these challenges, the way care is purchased and delivered needs to change. Value Based Healthcare (VBHC) is one way to do this. It is a collaborative, needs-based approach that applies to a variety of patients and spans over payers, providers, the industry, and society, with the goal to achieve better outcomes in a cost-efficient way.

Value-based healthcare (VBHC) requires:

- A **holistic evaluation** of patient, carer, care providers, and payers' needs, along the entire care pathway, while also addressing societal needs at large.
- An **optimized care pathway** with the **support of relevant products** that optimizes outcomes that matter to patients and different stakeholders. This improves the effectiveness and efficiency of care delivery.
- A **shift towards total cost from "price per product"-thinking**, to ensure optimal use of available resources.

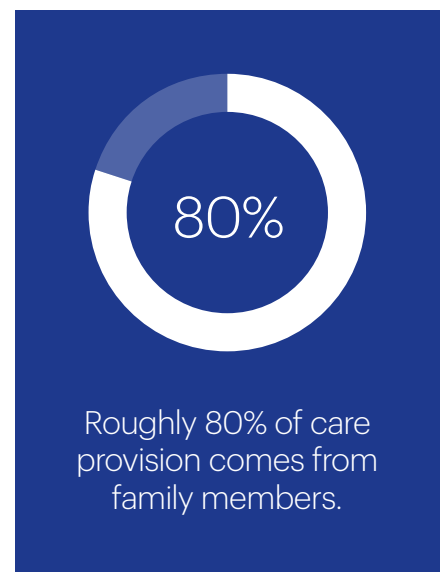




Innovation as an enabler for a better care economy

One example of an area in which innovation is needed is in continuously increasing knowledge among the growing number of family carers. Roughly 80% of care provision comes from family members, and roughly two-thirds of all people globally will become caregivers at some point in their lives.³⁶

Despite these figures, the vast majority of family caregivers have no health-care related training. In addition, many family carers do not recognize themselves as such and do not seek training or external support even when it is available. Digital solutions can help family carers to keep track of and monitor their care duties, facilitate access to knowledge and training about their roles and rights as carers, and can contribute to positive health outcomes by individualizing care. Leveraging digital tools to support caregivers' work improves care conditions for the care receiver, alleviates stress and mitigates the negative aspects of caregiving on healthcare systems and economies. Increased societal awareness of family caregiving will make it easier for caregivers to reach out for the support, education, and training available.



Calls for action within the care economy

- **Recognize and value care:** Joint action is needed to elevate the significance of care in society. A shift is needed from seeing care investments as costs, to truly acknowledging the substantial returns that care yields in personal well-being, societal and environmental benefits as well as in economic returns.
- **Make care work visible:** There is a need to better acknowledge the contributions of caregivers who dedicate their time, skills, and empathy to support others. There needs to be a greater focus on making these contributions visible and listening to the needs of patients and persons receiving care as well as professional and family caregivers.
- **Invest smarter and enable new care innovations:** Businesses have a pivotal role in introducing new innovations that support caregivers and care recipients. Sustained investments in innovative technology are needed to address the care economy's challenges, but it is equally important to ensure that these innovations receive ongoing funding.
- **Promote person-centered care:** Implementing a person-centered approach to care where persons receiving care are listened to, respected and where their personal needs and preferences are front, and center is essential in improving the quality of care and care outcomes.

To make this happen, the person receiving care needs to be at the center of decision-making with tailored support that also enables active participation in the care journey.

- **Promote self-care (where possible):** Public health initiatives can help support independence and allow for individual responsibility by prioritizing and more systematically approach self-care options - empowering people who receive care. One such example is to support people to strengthen continence by making innovative solutions for self-care more easily available and accessible and making education and information on continence care available both to carers and to care receivers.
- **Promote value-based care solutions:** By placing patient needs and outcomes at the core, person-centered care is enabled and facilitates the adoption of innovative solutions and approaches. In this approach, diverse stakeholders collaborate from the outset, engaging in innovation and care model development. Such early collaboration enables a flexible and customizable procurement process that prioritizes genuine value for patients, providers, and society.



Prevention for
Preparedness in
Hygiene and Health

Prevention for preparedness in hygiene and health

Prevention helps save lives and facilitates equity and equality. Prevention measures including access to basic hygiene services are as essential for health systems and societies as they are for individuals. They help safeguard public health, minimize the spread of disease, and contribute to overall health and well-being in society. Prevention forms the bedrock for good health and well-being but also for preparedness to pandemics and other global disruptive health events. A solid prevention agenda is therefore key to healthy societies as much as it is to an overall preparedness to pandemics and similar responses.

There are significant beneficial societal and health outcomes and financial savings that can be unlocked by shifting to more proactive mindsets in society and our health systems.

Access to basic hygiene services at home or in public spaces is vital in terms of prevention. Investing in prevention through appropriate hygiene measures and services throughout society to ensure that communities and individuals are better prepared is key. Currently, more can be done to protect society from preventable ailments. This will have considerable impact on people's well-being as well as for equality, and society's productivity. Prevention for preparedness refers to policies and programs that aim to

proactively make health systems more effective, resilient, sustainable, and economical.

Throughout the world, access to essential hygiene infrastructure is a key challenge. If zooming in on healthcare facilities, the WHO reports that as many as half of the healthcare facilities across the world lack basic hygiene services with water and soap or hand sanitizer rub in their restrooms. As many as 3.85 billion people use these facilities. If access to basic hygiene services is not in place, people are placed at greater risk of infection, including the 688 million people who receive care at facilities with no hygiene services at all.³⁷

Within prevention and preparedness, there is a need to assess the necessary measures to embrace and enhance prevention. This includes behavioral changes in society going forward, how health systems can be strengthened to keep our societies healthy, and how to effectively respond to future challenges such as pandemics, including the silent pandemic of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). International cooperation is vital to exchange and raise knowledge and awareness, to identify measures and best practices for enabling health and well-being in everyday life, and to prevent global health threats. At the same time, the cost of reactive healthcare must be examined and compared to proactive and preventive societal measures.



SDG 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Prevention and preparedness drives progress to achieve several of the goal's targets.



SDG 6. Ensure availability and sustainability of water and sanitation for all. Access to proper, safe, and dignified sanitation facilities and clean water is a cornerstone of preventative care. Ensuring that everyone has access to clean water and safe sanitation will reduce the incidence of water-borne disease and limit infections, driving progress to SDG 6.



The importance of behavioral changes and preventive actions

An important starting point for reducing the spread of infections is behavior change, both on the individual level and as a wider society. Good hygiene practices form the foundation for efficient prevention – allowing better well-being and health by preventing diseases from spreading through physical barriers and cleanliness.

As discussed in the previous Hygiene and Health Report, an overuse and misuse of antimicrobials along with a lack of access to basic hygiene services have led to the emergence of AMR, a significant threat to public health as it risks making previously curable illnesses life-threatening.³⁸ At the same time, preventive measures such as hand hygiene, environmental cleaning and innovative solutions - whether in a health care setting or at home - needs more emphasis in fighting AMR.

The human cost of AMR is staggering. It is calculated that drug-resistant diseases could cause 10 million deaths annually by 2050.³⁹ The cost of AMR to the economy is also significant. In addition to death and disability, prolonged illness results in longer hospital stays, the need for more expensive medications, and financial challenges for those impacted.

Building a lasting culture of hygiene practices

On the individual level, there is work to be done to ensure that good hygiene practices are followed both in society at large and within healthcare systems. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of practices like good hand hygiene, coughing and sneezing etiquette to prevent disease spread. While the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that it is possible for populations to temporarily adopt good hygiene practices, it must be recognized that lasting behavioral changes take time. It is also vital that hand hygiene fatigue, with rigorous hand hygiene routines seen as unnecessary and ignored, must not become the norm. To do this, a holistic strategy is required that incorporates education, follow up, feedback, communication, and infrastructure improvements.



First, the necessary pre-requisite of access to hygiene services, materials and infrastructure must be met. During the pandemic, the use and production of hand sanitizer skyrocketed. It is equally important to secure access to basic hygiene products such as soap, clean water, and hygiene products, especially in places where they are most urgently needed, according to Michele Cecchini, responsible for the OECD program work on Public Health.

Education and hand hygiene training must also be made available to society at large. These efforts need to be advanced in all countries globally – many adults have not received any new information about hand hygiene since early childhood, according to Michele Cecchini. Since new habits take time to form, they must also be reinforced using supportive messaging and information, and training must be repeated. Feedback is also an important aspect of reinforcing new hand hygiene habits but is often a difficult component to implement. Repeated training, however, offers a good opportunity for this. Here, innovations that make hand hygiene training more interactive combine easy access to training with real-time feedback to help establish good practices.

There is a need for continuous engagement to ensure good hand hygiene practices become lasting. Such a behavioral

change is not easy to implement but would have wide-ranging positive impacts on society's well-being.

Infection prevention and fighting antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

Global health has climbed higher on the political agenda in recent years, partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There are a number of key global health moments in the coming years where the global community are addressing Universal Health Coverage, tuberculosis, Pandemic Prevention Preparedness and Response, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, and AMR.

It is understood that combatting antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and prioritizing infection prevention best practices in society in general as well as in healthcare facilities, including strengthening infection prevention, are integral to keeping societies healthy and preventing disease and future pandemics. An increase in the use of antibiotics will have long-term health implications which are yet to be fully understood. Robust infection prevention is one essential key in combating AMR. The threat arising from avoidable and untreatable infections is too significant to ignore. It requires coordinated action involving multiple stakeholders across different areas of antimicrobial resistance.⁴⁰

Misuse and overuse of antimicrobials comes in many shapes and forms, notably feeding livestock antibiotics to fatten them, overprescribing antibiotics, and taking antibiotics to treat viral infections. To combat AMR, a One Health⁴¹ approach is needed, which involves collaboration between human, animal, and environmental health sectors. This approach has been endorsed by the World Health Assembly and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Moreover, AMR makes it more difficult to prevent healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). These are infections that patients can get while being treated for another condition while in a healthcare setting. More than 70% of bacteria causing HAIs are resistant to at least one of the drugs most commonly used to treat them.⁴² To address this and prevent AMR, infection prevention through the WHO recommended Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures are crucial as they minimize the spread of infectious diseases in healthcare settings and in the wider society.⁴³ Practices include hand hygiene, personal protective equipment (PPE), environmental cleaning, and appropriate waste disposal.

Infection prevention is crucial in reducing infection spread in society and in healthcare settings. Hand hygiene is the most effective infection prevention measure,⁴⁴ achieved through washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand sanitizers, as appropriate. It is vital that awareness and understanding of the cost-effective role that prevention can play in the fight against AMR is increased: The average nurse uses hand sanitizer approximately 100-150 times per

day, which in many cases falls short of what is required to be considered best practice⁴⁵.

Wearing personal protective equipment, such as face masks, gloves, gowns, and eye protection, can also minimize the risk of exposure to infectious agents, as can cleaning and disinfection, as well as proper disposal of infected waste. These procedures should be tailored to the type of pathogen most present in a given context and the area being cleaned. Education and training on infection prevention measures are essential for compliance and requires constant action from a broad range of stakeholder groups ranging from policymakers to facility managers and cleaning staff, and in healthcare settings health workers, patients, and visitors.

Failure to adhere to infection prevention measures can have severe, even deadly consequences, highlighting the need for quality healthcare delivery through infection prevention practices. Given the key role that healthcare workers have on the frontlines of infection prevention, they must be part of the discussion on its implementation. Across the world, concerted efforts need to be made to attract, retain, and train this vital resource in public health⁴⁶.

Given its importance as a preventative measure to combat both HAIs and AMR, it is crucial that infection prevention education begins early and reaches all layers of society. Educating young children on the role of hand hygiene and the importance of breaking the chain of infections is a clever way to incorporate an IPC mindset early on.

Virtual reality can be used to improve hand hygiene training, for example, by visualizing and providing real-time feedback.





Within both healthcare systems and society, hand hygiene is the most effective IPC measure.

There are also new and innovative ways to improve infection prevention by using technology to improve the rigor and efficiency of hygiene standards in environmental cleaning. Sensors and artificial intelligence (AI) can, for example, be used to predict where there has been the most activity, and alert cleaning services to be extra diligent in those areas. Virtual reality can also be used to improve hand hygiene training, for example by visualizing and providing real-time feedback.

In healthcare settings a great challenge is related to environmental cleaning, where only 55% of facilities assessed by the WHO reported having cleaning records for floors and horizontal work surfaces. Environmental cleaning is crucial to reduce health risks which can contribute to development of AMR.⁴⁷ Training staff with responsibility for cleaning floors and work surfaces is key.

Cleaning staff needs access to continuous training, provision of the necessary materials, and supervision as part of a broader approach to infection prevention within healthcare facilities, according to the WHO.⁴⁸

In the context of wounds and bacterial colonization, AMR

can contribute to delayed healing and represents a major challenge for patients and clinicians. General hygiene measures should continue to be the first line of defense. When it comes to the treatment of an infected wound, antibiotics should be used with care and can often be avoided in local application through the use of non-medicated dressings with bacterial binding actions.

The fight against AMR will remain a joint multistakeholder effort between healthcare professionals, medical societies, innovative companies, health associations and politicians alike, keeping and putting patients' needs in the center. The awareness of the dangers of AMR and critical measures and interventions to limit its spread are the first steps on this journey.

In 2021, WHO member states agreed to establish a global framework for international cooperation to enhance global health security and combat future pandemics. This presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen health systems, improve societal well-being, and address crucial preventive measures, access to basic hygiene services, and solutions for reducing AMR.

Promoting better policies for better lives



Michele Cecchini is responsible for the OECD work on Public Health. He drives the work on promoting better public health policies for better lives, which includes identifying best practices across countries and making the economic case for scaling up prevention policies within health systems.

“We are increasingly moving from looking at economic cost to a broader concept of well-being; this includes calculating the return on investment of making the change to a more prevention-based health system”, he says.

Michele Cecchini describes the Covid-19 pandemic as a potential turning point when it comes to infection prevention and control.

“Many lessons were learned, including discovering how badly prepared we were for a global pandemic, and how big the gap between what we thought we could do and what we actually could do was”.

He goes on to describe how quickly those lessons are likely to be forgotten unless governments keep up investments in preventive measures, including to ensure that good hand hygiene practices are not discarded.

“Health literacy is very important. People can live healthy lifestyles but if they don’t have access to very basic things such as soap, water, and clean facilities, then there is no way that the situation will improve”.

This is particularly pressing for low- and middle-income countries. Improving access to basic hygiene infrastructure and materials should be a top-priority for such countries going forward. Especially given the interconnected nature of our world, and that diseases do not respect borders, this is an area in which high-income countries should continue providing assistance.

The OECD is supporting the G7 and the G20 as well as the European Union in their work to advance and implement better prevention policies. In concrete terms, this means providing countries with the evidence to implement effective and cost-effective One Health policies to tackle emerging public health threats such as antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

Regarding the cost and return on investment of implementing proactive health systems for AMR, it has been calculated that across OECD countries in Europe, North America, and Australia, the cost of a comprehensive package to tackle AMR would amount to about \$2 per person annually, a small figure given the scale of healthcare budgets. According to Michele Cecchini, a significant amount of the resources needed to fight AMR are already existing within the healthcare system, but these resources are used to patch holes rather than address the root causes.

“When it comes to certain public health issues, money is sometimes spent trying to dry the water on the floor rather than to turn off the tap”.

Michele Cecchini points out that, in certain cases, governments could see a return on investment within a year, if things are done properly and healthcare resources are directed to solving the issue as opposed to just treating its symptoms. There is a clear argument for redirecting resources to a prevention approach.

The OECD is well positioned to access public health and care data and to examine the related policies that would serve governments, economies, and societies. Prevention in society is a key tool policymakers have at their disposal to keep societies healthy, increase the well-being of citizens and thereby decrease healthcare costs.



Covid-19's estimated cost:
\$12.5 trillion globally⁵⁶

Highlighting the economic value of prevention for preparedness

In light of economic downturns and austerity measures, it is important to focus on the broader value created for society through a total cost calculation, including societal costs. Investment in prevention for preparedness should generate value both for individuals and for society at large. It generates a considerable economic and societal value to health and well-being, which is challenging to quantify.⁴⁹ Given the strain on healthcare systems and budgets, it is important to think of long-term benefits available. This requires a value-based approach where the best health outcomes are in focus.

An example of long-term financial planning for healthcare budgets can be a change in attitude to pandemic management. More pandemics are likely to occur in the future⁵⁰, driven by many different factors such as climate change, animal husbandry, and urbanization. Investing in prevention measures can help achieve better health outcomes and reduce infections and pandemics, thus reducing the cost required to manage these. Prevention measures such as education, limiting deforestation, and ensuring access to

clean water, sanitation, and hygiene products cost between \$10.3 billion and \$11.5 billion per year, which is much less than the cost of pandemic preparedness, amounting to around \$30.1 billion per year⁵¹, both of which are negligible in comparison to Covid-19's estimated \$12.5 trillion cost globally⁵².

In addition to being a cost-effective approach, investing in prevention and more resilient health systems can result in increased productivity and less pressure on social insurance systems. When illness is reduced, less of the labor force is made absent, either through sick leave or for caregiving, leading to increased productivity and economic growth.⁵³ It is estimated that workplace absenteeism due to illness costs the European Union 2.5% of its GDP,⁵⁴ and that workplace presenteeism, whereby ill workers go to work despite being ill, also leads to significant costs.⁵⁵

Investing in prevention as a key element for preparedness as laid out in this chapter has broader societal benefits beyond just savings.

Calls for action in prevention for preparedness

- **Boost the prevention agenda:** For effective prevention of illness, essential hygiene and health measures are crucial. These measures should be integrated into a core prevention agenda to promote health, well-being, and preparedness for pandemics, looming crises like AMR, and other health threats. Boosting preventive actions such as hand hygiene and by prioritizing innovative solutions, in areas where infection prevention is needed, saves lives, keeps people healthy, reduces healthcare costs in the long term and improves productivity.
- **Hygiene as a policy area:** Hygiene tends to be seen as everyone's responsibility and lacks a clear home in policy. It is key that clear ownership is established and that the profound societal value that is associated with hygiene practices is recognized.
- **Access to basic hygiene products:** Concerted efforts are needed to close the gaps in hygiene, cleaning, and sanitation infrastructure, including securing access to clean water, safe, clean, and private hygiene, and sanitation facilities, as well as sustainable surface cleaning. A shift in mindset is needed to prioritize preventative healthcare strategies.
- **Up-scaling health systems to include prevention:** The Covid-19 pandemic brought to light the need for stronger preparedness in health systems, including increased investments in preventive measures. Concerted efforts are needed to close the gaps in hygiene and cleaning and sanitation infrastructure, including securing access to clean water, safe, clean, and private hygiene, and sanitation facilities, as well as sustainable surface cleaning. Increasing attention is also needed on infection and antimicrobial surveillance in order to enable early intervention. Surgical site infection surveillance is already having a positive impact on reducing infection rates, here, adoption needs to increase. A shift in mindset is needed to prioritize preventative healthcare strategies to address these gaps.
- **Invest in knowledge and training:** For hygiene and other prevention measures to have lasting impact, there is a need to elevate action on knowledge, skills, implementation and follow up. Making effective and engaging training available to healthcare professionals, cleaning staff and caregivers is key to strengthen prevention measures. This includes investing in educational campaigns, workplace training, and messaging reinforcing best practices, such as proper hand hygiene, wound infection prevention and smart environmental cleaning.
- **Invest in preventing AMR within the One Health approach:** To make a real impact in the fight against AMR, a multistakeholder approach is needed, where governments, healthcare providers, academia, civil society, and businesses collaborate across all relevant sectors. Working together at local, national and global level to improve infection prevention measures and establish guidelines, supported by education and training, and to emphasize the cost-effectiveness of prevention is key.

A relevant example is antimicrobial stewardship in wound care, which should be incorporated in care standards and practices, included in trainings for care givers and prioritized in financing and usage.

- **Mobilize partnerships to step up prevention and innovation for future health needs:** To enable technical development, innovation, digital solutions, and research that aims to optimize the use of resources in prevention and preparedness, there is a need to step up collaboration across sectors and mobilize partnerships. To effectively combat challenges like AMR and HAIs, it is crucial for healthcare institutions to not only address immediate needs but also to invest in long-term solutions based on prevention. To further prevent AMR, there is a need to ensure that AMR forms an integral part of wider healthcare training.

Investing in Women+'s and Girls' Health and Well-Being



Placing the spotlight on equality in health and well-being

The future of health and well-being for women and girls⁵⁷ is at a crucial turning point. The convergence of multiple crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change, has deepened societal inequities and worsened women+'s possibilities to lead healthy lives. For example, closure of schools during the pandemic resulted in increased caregiving responsibilities for many parents, in particular women+. This, in combination with the economic instability compounded by the cost-of-living crisis, has left many women and girls without access to their right to health and essential services around the globe.⁵⁸

Decades of research shows the direct and indirect benefits of investing in women+ and girls' health and well-being.⁵⁹ Prioritizing women+'s health does not only represent investing in the well-being of individual persons, but also benefits the health and prosperity of communities and promotes social and economic development. It contributes to making progress towards several SDGs and provides unparalleled returns on investment in improving society's overall health.⁶⁰

Placing the spotlight on equality in health and well-being drives progress towards achieving health and well-being for all.⁶¹ Applying a gender focus requires prioritizing investments in women+'s and girls' health, increasing knowledge and awareness to break stigma, and engaging men and boys in all their diversity in women+'s and girls' health. **Consider the following:**

- When **governments and businesses** position women+'s health issues as central to decision making, they can enact long-term sustainable change that facilitates health and well-being for all.
- Prioritizing women+'s and girls' health, **through alignment with the SDGs**, will bring productivity increases across generations, leading to positive and sustainable economic development.⁶²
- When **menstrual health is defined as complete physical, mental, and social well-being** in relation to the menstrual cycle, from menarche to menopause, multiple **women+'s health outcomes are better understood and can be strengthened.**
- **Menstrual health as part of the curriculum in schools** increases understanding by both girls and boys - in all their diversity, and also enables access to education for girls, which opens more options for jobs later in their lives. Each additional year of schooling can boost a girl's earnings as an adult by up to 20%.⁶³

Menstrual health is defined as complete physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to the menstrual cycle.⁶⁴

Women+

Not everyone who menstruates is a woman and not all women menstruate. Inclusive language is imperative in helping create a world free from stigma. That is why the term 'women+' will be used in this report. The term does not detract from those who identify with the term 'women', but the addition of the '+' sign is intended to capture the full range of people who menstruate. In certain cases, the term 'women' will be used, such as when referring to research that only includes cis women⁶⁵ or does not differentiate based on gender identity.

Promoting equitable ideas about gender drives progress on women+'s health



Engaging men and boys in women+'s and girls' health leads to better access to healthcare services, more equity and consent in relationships, and more equitable decision-making at the household level. By engaging men, we mean deliberately reaching them with messages about how they can be allies and supportive of the health needs of girls and women+, from media campaigns to reaching them in waiting rooms, to parent education.

Gary Barker

President and CEO of Equimundo

Ideas about gender are closely linked to women+'s and girls' health. Engaging men and boys as allies and addressing stereotypical attitudes and behaviors about gender are crucial drivers for meaningful progress towards gender equality.

According to the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), carried out by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Equimundo in 2022, young men are more likely to hold inequitable views about gender than older men. This is persistent with the recent era of backlash against the progress of gender rights.⁶⁶

At the same time, views and attitudes on gender vary significantly among younger men, providing an opportunity for change where needed and to shift gender norms by building on progress already made. Research shows that gender-normative societal expectations are often imposed on children from an early age, and because of these expectations, boys are not always given the space to fully develop their relational and emotional skills. These norms can sometimes negatively impact boys' and young men's views on gender equality.⁶⁷ Different stakeholders,

such as policymakers, communities, and businesses can play a role in building inclusive environments that foster healthy views on gender and that involve men and boys from diverse backgrounds around women+'s health and menstrual health to drive progress.

Engaging influential individuals who shape the environments where boys and young men grow and develop is crucial to promoting positive change. Creating spaces for discussions around gender norms and menstrual health with parents, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, healthcare workers, and others who impact men and boys' daily lives enables progress.⁶⁸ By working together, these individuals can address underlying societal norms and create safe and supportive environments that promote constructive dialogues and gender norms that can help break barriers to women+'s overall health and menstrual health in particular. There is an opportunity to build resilience and courage for men to use their voice positively and stand up for women+ in situations that may feel awkward and to break traditional norms. Ultimately this enables better health outcomes for all.⁶⁹

5 GENDER
EQUALITY



SDG 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Engaging men and boys, in all their diversity, on menstrual health issues to increase their knowledge and understanding, creates environments that foster healthy views about gender norms, increases gender equality, and reduces the stigma surrounding menstrual health.⁷⁰ This drives progress to achieve SDG 5.

Progressing menstrual health

Menstrual health is essential to realize health and well-being globally, and to drive progress towards gender equality and human rights.⁷¹ To achieve menstrual health, women+ must have access to accurate information on the menstrual cycle as well as access to clean water, sanitation facilities, affordable and appropriate menstrual products, and a supportive environment without embarrassment or stigma.⁷² These pillars of the menstrual health definition,⁷³ will provide freedom to live and fully participate in life for girls and women+. Globally, women+ face obstacles in accessing menstrual products, whether in Sweden, Kenya, the US, or India. This limits their ability to attain menstrual health. In the US, a study from 2019 estimates that 64% of menstruators had difficulties to access menstrual products due to stigma, the cost of products, or lack of education.⁷⁴ Moreover, in India, nearly 23% of young women and girls drop out of school every year because of a lack of available menstrual products or access to sanitation facilities.⁷⁵



SDG 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Menstrual health issues such as lack of access to menstrual products can have a significant impact on health and well-being, it can force women+ to use unhealthy materials such as rags or cloths. This can lead to infections and other health conditions. Improving access to quality and sustainable menstrual products and adequate information on menstruation can improve the health and well-being of all, therefore also contributing to SDG 3.



SDG 6. Ensure availability and sustainability of water and sanitation by all. Access to proper, safe, and dignified sanitation facilities and clean water is crucial for menstrual health. This also includes end open defecation by paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. Ensuring that all women+ have access to water and sanitation facilities that are safe and allow for the safe disposal of menstrual products drives progress to SDG 6.



Bridging the knowledge gap

Making accurate and inclusive information about menstruation available is essential to bridge the knowledge gap around menstruation across genders. For many women+, menstruation is associated with shame or even fear. According to the World Bank, the lack of adequate information about menstruation has perpetuated stigma across generations, leading to misconceptions and negative attitudes, shaming, and even gender-based violence.⁷⁶ Moreover, the stigma surrounding menstruation creates further barriers to achieving menstrual health.⁷⁷

The lack of information about menstruation is a global issue and increases the stigma around menstrual health. In Essity's Global Hygiene and Health Survey from 2022, only 55% of respondents claimed to be knowledgeable about menstruation. Moreover, conversations about menstruation tend to be confined to groups of women+ and rarely addressed by men. The same study also reveals that only 40% of fathers have ever talked about menstruation with their daughters, and the number is even lower for conversations with their sons.⁷⁸

There is a need for age-appropriate menstrual health education and information that addresses gender, age, disability, and culture and in formats that are inclusive and easily accessible to people in all their diversity. Reforming menstrual health education and information addressing this variety of aspects, while targeting all genders, is a way forward to close the knowledge gap. Making educational tools and information on menstrual health inclusive can shape perceptions about menstruation and break barriers of stigma and shame surrounding menstruation.



SDG 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Since women make up over 70% of the care workforce, investing in decent care jobs with living wages, social protection, and good working conditions promotes gender equality, which contributes to SDG 5.

Businesses also contribute to promoting inclusive menstrual information. There are many examples and one is Essity's knowledge platform Mundo Saba Teens, launched in Latin America in 2020. The platform aims to provide guidance around menstrual health and puberty to girls and boys, teachers, and parents. It reached 113,000 people in 2022. Teaching children from a young age and their closest adults about menstrual health can shift the mindset from menstruation as something shameful to breaking the stigma.

Investing in research on women's health

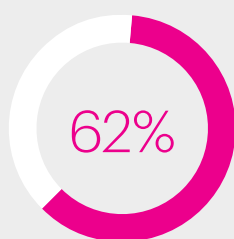
As addressed in the previous Hygiene and Health reports,^{79,80} investing in research on women's health is important to increase the availability of data that can contribute to identifying barriers to health and well-being. Data can increase knowledge and awareness about women's health and can help policymakers to make and prioritize necessary investments to improve health and well-being, thereby driving progress in gender equality. Moreover, easily accessible data also empowers women to make informed decisions about their health, especially since there is still a general lack of knowledge about the impact of menstruation on health and well-being. Findings from Essity's research initiative #Periodsomnia highlight a striking difference in sleep when it comes to sleep quality among women when on their periods, shedding light on one aspect of women's health that needs further attention.

Ensuring access to menstrual health in schools

Ensuring access to menstrual health in schools can increase girls' access to education, opening more options for jobs later in life, thus increasing contributions to the economy.⁸¹

However, at least 367 million children globally have no sanitation services in their schools, something which creates barriers to achieving good menstrual health.⁸² Difficulties managing menstruation is a source of distress and discomfort and a barrier to good menstrual health and to education which can compromise social well-being.⁸³ The lack of menstruation infrastructure in schools, combined with stigma, leads to girls worldwide missing between 10-20% of school days yearly. This means that, on average, girls miss a whole month of school every year, placing them on an unequal footing with boys. The knowledge and skills that girls miss during these days are challenging to catch up with in the future.

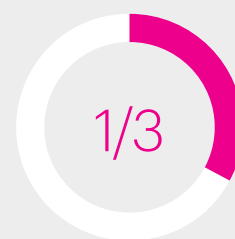
Investing in and providing menstruation infrastructure that offers privacy, access to water, soap for handwashing, and appropriate waste bins, increases girls' participation in schools and boosts their confidence during the time of their periods. There could be several reasons for girls to drop out of school, of which one is the lack of access to menstruation infrastructure.⁸⁴ According to the World Bank, girls who drop out of school have limited employment opportunities and often marry and begin bearing children early, further reducing their options for earning an income.⁸⁵ School completion increases girls' earnings, their employment rate, and a nation's GDP. A 2020 study from Citi Global Insights and Plan International found that emerging economies can boost their GDP by an average of 10% if all girls complete secondary school by 2030.⁸⁶ Moreover, a study by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative from 2018 shows that women with secondary education could expect to make almost twice as much as those without education, and women with tertiary education almost four times as much.⁸⁷



62% of women+ experience worsened sleep when on their periods



Women+ lose around 5 months of sleep due to poor sleep during their periods over their lifetime



One third of women+ are kept awake during their periods by the fear of blood-stained sheets

Everyone has a role in increasing access to menstrual health

In the last decade, there has been a notable shift in how menstruation is perceived. According to the UNFPA, there is increasing recognition that menstrual health is integral to gender equality and human rights and that it should be prioritized across all settings of life, including schools, workplaces, homes, and public spaces.⁸⁸

Policymakers are increasingly taking action to improve menstrual health on a national level. Countries such as India, Kenya, and South Africa have implemented policies to educate adolescents about menstrual health, de-stigmatize menstruation, and facilitate access to quality menstrual products. Countries such as Spain, Japan, and Indonesia offer menstrual leave for individuals who experience pain during their periods. Many governments (both national and local) run programs to facilitate free access to menstrual products through schools and educational institutions or in public spaces. Additionally, Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, and Namibia, to name a few examples, have also reduced or eliminated taxes on menstrual products and in different ways promote period equity.

Collaboration and partnerships that involve policymakers, businesses, academia, and other advocates for women's health is essential to improve access to menstrual products. Combining various perspectives creates opportunities to make smart investments, breaks barriers to menstrual health and well-being, and facilitates global and local dialogue. An example of a business partnership that addresses access to menstrual products is the Pads on a Roll collaboration between Essity and start-up company Egal.⁸⁹ Pads on a Roll offers free period products on a roll with a bathroom in-stall option. By placing dispensers inside bathrooms, the pads are accessible when and where they are needed.⁹⁰ Such initiatives increase accessibility to menstrual health.

Businesses play a key role in driving innovation and bringing solutions that increase access to menstrual health to the market. One example is the Essity brand Libresse's Tork dispenser. The dispenser is a solution that offices, schools, and other facilities can install in bathrooms or other spaces.⁹¹ It ensures that women and girls, in all their diversity, have access to menstrual products, which is an important contribution to menstrual health.



Libresse's Tork dispenser





Driving progress toward the SDGs by increasing the access to menstrual products

Access to safe, high-quality menstrual products with more sustainable alternatives and improved disposal methods, can have a positive impact on the environment while supporting menstrual health.^{92,93}

Businesses play an important role in driving innovation in sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions. In a program conducted by Modibodi and Plan International in Laos in 2022, reusable period underwear was distributed to 4,450 girls in rural Laos to improve their access to sustainable menstrual products. The program found that the cost-effectiveness of using reusable products in poor areas with restricted access to menstrual products and poor waste disposal options increased girls' confidence and improved health and well-being.⁹⁴



SDG 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

SDG 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Finding sustainable solutions for today's problems is essential when considering the threat of climate change. Innovation in sustainable, reusable, and environmentally lover impact menstrual products contribute to SDG 12 and 13, and sustainable development.

A case of advocating for dignified menstruation and period equity



Photo credit: Yara Cavazos

In 2019, Anahí Rodríguez founded Menstruación Digna Mexico, a civil-society organization that aims to put period equity on the public and political agenda and raise awareness of menstrual health challenges.

Menstruación Digna's work includes making national data on menstrual health available to help policymakers and institutions to design programs to promote period equity. To make data on menstrual health available, Essity, Menstruación Digna Mexico and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), conducted the first National Menstrual Management Survey in Mexico in 2022. The study shows that while progress has been made, women and girls still lack access to menstrual health to a large extent. Moreover, 15% of women and girls in Mexico do not have access to adequate infrastructure to manage their menstruation. However, there are strong reasons to believe that further progress will happen. The survey showed that 90% of the people surveyed said that menstruation is something natural that should not be frowned upon.

"We need to keep speaking up and addressing the challenges that women and girls face during their periods. It

is incumbent upon governments to push for period equity and provide every person with the right to menstruate in a comfortable, safe, healthy, and dignified way," says Anahí.

Mexico has recently seen significant developments within period equity, as the government is now strongly in favor of advancing this agenda. Since 2019, Menstruación Digna has been campaigning to increase access to non-stigmatizing information on menstrual health. The inclusion of non-stigmatizing information about menstruation in schools has been successful in the State of Michoacán, to name one example. This initiative sparked a movement that ultimately led policymakers acting and passing legislation that has helped increase access to menstrual products in Mexico from 2022.

"Our approach was to start a conversation about period equity, educate people, and mobilize civil society. We are proud of what we have accomplished and hope our efforts will inspire others to take action on issues they are passionate about and fight for what is right.", says Anahí.

Raising awareness of menopause in all settings of life

Physical and mental health needs are continually changing throughout women+'s lives - from the onset of menarche to the transition through menopause. Addressing these changes is crucial to ensure health and well-being for all.

In 2025, an estimated 1,1 billion women+ worldwide are expected to experience one of the phases associated with menopause. Perimenopause, menopause, and postmenopause are natural stages in the menstrual cycle experienced by most women+.⁹⁵ Essity's global study on menopause from 2022, highlighted several misconceptions surrounding fertility, sexuality, and aging. Moreover, the study showed that half of post-menopausal women+ think that the menopause is a stigmatized subject.⁹⁶ There is a significant knowledge gap with only 20% of women+ feeling informed about menopause and the impact it has on women+'s bodies, and 61% of women+ going through menopause reported not encountering any campaigns addressing menopausal symptoms.⁹⁷ Accessing accurate and timely information about the menstrual cycle, including the different stages of menopause, is important for ensuring menstrual health and breaking stigma.⁹⁸

Businesses and policymakers can play an important role in bridging the knowledge gap and breaking the stigma

around menopause by raising awareness of the issue and ensuring support for women+.

One example of such business initiatives is Essity's global e-commerce platform Issviva, launched in 2022, which provides solutions and products for women+ in different stages of menopause. Forums are available on the platform, where users can seek expert advice, share personal experiences, and learn from others.

When going through perimenopause, menopause, and postmenopause, women+ often experience physical and emotional symptoms such as anxiety, migraines, discomfort, and difficulty sleeping.⁹⁹ Although these symptoms often have a significant impact on women+'s everyday lives, most workplaces do not have strategies in place to support persons affected. Policies that support women+ at work, such as raising awareness to close the knowledge gap, opens for dialogue that can increase well-being.¹⁰⁰



Whilst perimenopause and menopause only affect women+ directly, it actually impacts everybody. The more society, businesses, and policymakers can understand and support women through the challenges that come with menopause, the better things will be for everyone. Value is created when eradicating stigma by providing information and raising awareness of the stages of menopause and implementing menopause policies in the workplace.

/ **Dr. Zoe Williams,**
physician, and TV personality

Calls for action to increase gender equality in health and well-being

- **Place the spotlight on women+’s and girls’ health:** Life changes, and as it does, it becomes necessary to establish provisions in health and social care to support individuals in navigating these changes. Menstrual health, menopause, and incontinence need a place within policy agendas – both at a global level and more specifically at a national and local level.
- **Increase access to menstrual health:** To ensure menstrual health, women+ must have access to accurate information on the menstrual cycle as well as affordable and appropriate menstrual products, and a supportive environment without embarrassment or shame.
- **Engage men and boys:** Taking action and building on progress already made in promoting environments that engage men and boys in menstrual health can drive progress in gender equality and promote equitable views on gender.
- **Focus on schools and education facilities:** By closing gaps in access to clean water and appropriate sanitation facilities as well as menstrual products, policymakers can help improve access to education and jobs later in life, thus contributing to economic development both at the individual and at a societal level.
- **Reform menstrual health education and information:** Policymakers have the opportunity to reform menstrual health education by addressing the needs of women+ and taking into account considerations of inclusion, disability, and accessibility. Educational tools and materials that embrace inclusion can play a vital role in shaping perceptions of menstrual health and breaking the stigma associated with menstruation.
- **Raising awareness and addressing menopause needs:** Raising awareness and ensuring an environment that is inclusive to the needs and experiences of women+ related to menopause is key to well-being for women+ anywhere in society. Moreover, this is best achieved in consultation with women+, by listening to what women+ need to feel supported and safe in any setting.



Appendix

The following persons have been interviewed in the process of writing this report:

Anahí Rodríguez, Founder, Menstruación Digna Mexico

Chidi King, Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Branch, ILO

Dr. Zoe Williams, Physician, and TV personality

Trevor Salomon, Caregiver for his wife living with Alzheimer's

Gary Barker, CEO, Equimundo

Michele Cecchini, Head of OECD program of work on Public Health

Joana Vicente, Senior Lecturer in Health Sciences, Linnaeus University

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Opinions expressed in the report are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the organizations to which the persons interviewed are affiliated to, nor of the organizations' stakeholders.

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