

#LetsTalkPERIOD is reaching millions

Cooperating with influencers to break down menstruation taboos empowers young women around the globe

GIZ Gender Competition 2024 Submission (GE 1 project category) by GIZ's Sector Programme "Water Policy – Innovation for Resilience". In cooperation with Support to the Health Sector Strategy (S2HSS) Nepal; GIZ Albania; Task Force "WASH Social Franchising" (sector network MEN-REM); Study Expert Fund Advancing Girls Rights and Menstrual Health/Hygiene, Philippines; Global Programme on Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience; Water and Energy Cluster Zambia; Initiative for Sustainable Agricultural Supply Chains and the GIZ Staff Initiative MenstruAction.

1. Promoting gender equality

Although half of humankind goes through it, every month, for a considerable portion of their lives, menstruation continues to be a taboo subject in societies worldwide. GIZ health, water and WASH in Schools projects in Nepal, Albania and the Philippines – together with local partners and networks – have been working with local influencers to change this. Meanwhile, what they started has become a global social media impact campaign under the hashtag #LetsTalkPERIOD. By August 2023, more than ten million people have been reached and had engaged with the campaign's empowering messaging about menstrual health.

The infographic features a background image of a group of young women in school uniforms sitting outdoors. Overlaid on this is a Facebook post from Keki Adhikari (@officialkekadhikari) showing her in a red top. Below the post are three circular icons: a thumbs up, a speech bubble, and an eye. To the right is a stylized white icon of a woman's torso with a red heart over the pelvic area. The text on the infographic includes the campaign name, Nepali text, and statistics.

#Nepals Menstrual Movement
महिनावरी सम्बन्धि नेपालको अभियान
SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN NEPAL 2021-2023

facebook
Keki Adhikari
@officialkekadhikari
Starts@ita

250 000 REACTIONS
20 000 COMMENTS & SHARES
5 MILLION VIEWS

KEKI ADHIKARI
ACTRESS, PRODUCER,
GOODWILL AMBASSADOR,
INFLUENCER WITH
1.5 MILLION FOLLOWERS

The initial collaboration with a young Nepali influencer quickly went viral nationwide and served as model for corresponding campaigns with local influencers in Albania and the Philippines. Meanwhile several partner countries in Africa are keen to join the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign as well and, with GIZ support, Zambia and South Africa will soon get started.

Recognizing the power of local influencer-led social media campaigns, GIZ's Water Policy programme in close collaboration with the health programme in Nepal have been encouraging German-supported projects in other countries to adopt this approach. The water programme in Albania was happy to adopt it for its gender-sensitive water, sanitation and hygiene activities at local schools. In 2022, they invited Fatma Haxhialiu, a popular Albanian TV host and influencer with 240,000 followers on Instagram (a substantial following in a country with only 2.9 million people) to front a national #LetsTalkPeriod campaign, combining the sharing of specially produced advocacy videos with live discussions with students and teachers. And this worked! A short video clip Fatma posted on Instagram on the first day of shooting went viral right away with nearly 4,000 'likes'.

Fatma's frank and positive approach to talking about menstruation and the taboos surrounding it has encouraged women and girls across Albania to share their own experiences. One woman wrote

'When I got my cycle in the 6th grade my father asked my mother to not send me to school anymore: She is a grown-up woman now, they said. I am 28 years old today. Since that day in 6th grade I have never again set foot in a school.'

Over 300 women and girls have shared menstruation-related private messages with Fatma. Several of them who grew up in rural areas echoed the experience of having to leave school when their menstruation started, sometimes followed by forced early marriages. Others talked about the painful experience of being called names when they menstruated. All were grateful for the opportunity to break the silence.

The #LetsTalkPeriod campaign led to Fatma being invited to TV and radio talk shows to discuss MHH challenges. In response many Albanian women have joined the campaign with its symbolic five red dots, sharing campaign posts, creating related artwork and asking Fatma for a follow up. By November 2023, the campaign has reached more than three million people via social media, radio and TV formats.



What is the context?

Approximately 1.9 billion women and adolescent girls menstruate each month. Especially in low- and middle-income countries it is difficult for girls and women to practice adequate menstrual hygiene because they are frequently either ill-informed about menstruation or lack access to appropriate sanitation infrastructure and menstrual management supplies as these are often not available or unaffordable. Menstruation is also still a taboo almost everywhere in the world, as it is in our campaign countries Nepal, Albania, the Philippines, and Zambia, but also in Germany. Considering the large number of adolescent girls and women affected by issues around Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) or Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), the topic has received increasing attention at the global level from a variety of actors.

The goal of the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign has therefore been to break social and cultural taboos by normalising 'periods' as a healthy biological process and an important part of the everyday life of all persons who menstruate. Open and informed conversations about menstruation are encouraged and myths and misconceptions countered. Most importantly, the campaign contributes to gender equality by creating conditions that allow all menstruating persons to pursue their education, their careers and their work without any risks of menstruation-related stigma or exclusion, including by ensuring that, wherever they are, they have access to menstrual products as well as clean toilets and water.

But how can we reach young people on a broad scale to increase their knowledge of sensitive issues related to menstrual health as well as their reproductive and sexual health and rights? On which channels do they communicate and who do they listen to? When the colleagues of the Support to Health Sector Strategy (S2HSS) project in Nepal reflected on these questions, the idea was born to work with local influencers to bring the topic of menstrual health out into the open. Local influencers have a direct link to their audience. They know how to reach their communities and which cultural sensitivities they need to respect. When it comes to issues like menstrual health and hygiene, it is essential to strike the right tone, also on social media.

Influencer-led social media campaigns can instigate important debates and even catalyze social change. However, to have this effect, one needs to find influencers who already have a large following and whose engagement for the campaign comes across as credible and authentic. And this worked in these three cases:

- In Albania, well-known TV presenter Fatma Haxhialiu is fronting the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign. More than three million people have watched her campaign videos on social media so far – quite an achievement in a country with a total population of under three million. As a consequence, she was invited to several major Albanian TV and radio shows where she also talked about #LetsTalkPERIOD.
- In Nepal, the social media campaign #NepalsMenstrualMovement with the popular influencer Keki Adhikari reached more than a million people in Nepal - a resounding success for MHH advocacy.
- In the Philippines, a cooperation with influencer couple Kathleen Paton (Miss Eco International 2022) and Kirk Bondad (Mister World Philippines 2022) was launched in 2023 with more than two million reached so far. The social media engagement will further strengthen the efforts of the Department of Education – supported by GIZ's Fit for School – that have reached already 27 million learners in the Philippines with information on MHH, aiming to keep girls in school – the whole month, every month.

The campaign is starting to radiate to Germany as well: The prelude to this was the visit to Germany of our Nepalese Goodwill Ambassador, Keki Adhikari, in February 2023, who, among other things, spoke out for more openness in dealing with the topic at meetings with the secretariat of the global Menstrual Hygiene Day and drew attention to the unfortunately still difficult situation in her home country (see also very recent article in The Guardian of 11.8. "Teenage girl dies after being forced to stay in a 'period hut' in Nepal").

Another important next step is to get more men involved. As role models for boys and men, the idea is that they make it easier to talk openly and tackle prejudices. Inspired by #NepalsMenstrualMovement, successful singer Prakash Saput joined forces with Keki Adhikari and posted a music video on his YouTube channel. In the video, he powerfully describes the stigmatization that girls face during menstruation. Since it was uploaded in December 2022, 2.8 million people have watched the video. Keki Adhikari continues to use her voice and platform to support girls and women, for MH Day 2023 in a short film with fellow actor Dayahang Rai on the Menstruation Bracelet.

2. Gender as a quality feature of our work

GIZ's commitment to gender equality, reflected in initiatives like #LetsTalkPERIOD, has been widely acknowledged, not just by its clients and partners but by the international public as well. The nominations for the World Health Organization's "Health for All" Film Festival for the "Special Prize on Health Innovation" (2022) and "Special Prize on SRHR" (2023) are a concrete demonstration of this recognition. Three video clips were also part of the Official Selection at the Women Deliver Arts & Film Festival 2023. The Nepali short film has won the "Best Women Film Award" at the Nepal Cultural International Film Festival 2022 in the presence of the Cultural Attaché of the German Embassy Kathmandu.

An abstract explaining the #LetsTalkPERIOD approach was selected for the "Dignified Menstruation Day Conference 2022" in Sri Lanka – and virtual presentation with a very rewarding recognition by the moderator Archana Patkar (Senior Independent Advisor to the Equality and Rights for All Practice at UNAIDS, Geneva):

"I really love the humor in all the messaging that asks us to basically just accept it, just as a fact of life. Don't make a big deal, just accept it. Know about it, learn how to manage it and move onto bigger things – using this as an entry point for women empowerment and gender equality. So kudos to you for that!"

The results of the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign speak for themselves and have inspired the Ethiopia component of the Global Programme on Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience to successfully adapt the approach to reach its objective to improve "the situations of people at risk of malnutrition – especially women of childbearing age and small children..." – with a famous Ethiopian singer.

Furthermore, the #LetsTalkPERIOD approach has been included as a core component of the sector network MEN-REM's Task Force "WASH Social Franchising", which aim was to transfer the successfully implemented approaches from Albania to Jordan. Through the mission to Jordan in September 2023, we managed to include recommendations and suggestions into the official FMB mission for the new phase and restructuring of the GIZ water cluster towards a more gender-transformative implementation.

3. Implementing feminist core principles

Promoting menstrual health embodies central principles of feminist development policy: it reinforces the rights of girls, women, and other menstruating persons to physical integrity, education, and workplaces free from stigma- or hygiene-related barriers. In doing so, it reduces gender-specific discrimination and contributes to a just, inclusive society where the dignity of all, regardless of gender, is respected. #LetstalkPERIOD challenges engrained gender stereotypes, aiming to transform underlying social norms, structures, and power dynamics.

Working with local social media influencers has proven effective in dismantling menstruation-related taboos. Through their reach on various social media platforms, they can make the campaign's messages accessible to broad audiences, across age groups, genders, ethnicities and socio-economic situations. Empowering local Goodwill Ambassadors, local cinematographers and local camera teams to run the campaign will ensure that it is grounded in local experience, “from the partner country for the partner country”.

By encouraging people of all ages, including boys and men, to start talking about menstruation and women's and girls' menstruation-related needs and rights in a positive and affirmative way, the social media campaign #LetsTalkPERIOD supported by German development cooperation strengthen women's and girls' **rights** and **resources** and ensure that their menstrual needs and rights are **represented** in the public discourse.

4. Cooperation

The #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign has always thrived because of the cooperation between a sector- and a bilateral programme and their partners. Bilateral programs bring local insights, while the sector program mainstreams the initiative within German Development Cooperation and globally, expanding its reach. The cooperation helps to position local champions / Goodwill Ambassadors on a “Global Stage”. For instance, Fatma Haxhialiu represented #LetsTalkPERIOD at the Stockholm World Water Week 2023.

The success of #LetsTalkPERIOD, reaching over ten million people, has prompted its extension to more countries where GIZ operates. In the ongoing efforts, the first concept for the #LetsTalkPERIOD campaign Zambia has just been finalized, and active discussions are currently underway with the Zambian Women's Football Team for the campaign. As athletes often become role models who inspire others to overcome challenges, they can address societal taboos through sports. Female football players, in particular, have already often encountered and triumphed over obstacles, discrimination, and unequal opportunities. Their stories of resilience, determination, and the ability to surmount challenges are already serving as inspiration for individuals navigating adversity, encouraging them to persist and pursue their goals.

This expansion demonstrates the global impact of the gender-transformative approach initiated in Nepal, emphasizing the normalization of menstruation as a crucial issue worldwide – and in Germany. There has already been a first contact with the German Football Association (DFB) and o.b. Germany to discuss how to collaborate with them in finding ways to link their #letstalkperiods campaign with the German National Women Soccer Team to our work in our partner countries on the African continent.

In November 2023 #LetsTalkPERIOD also collaborated with the GIZ Instagram channel @ichwillfair for some stories and reels around menstruation for the more than 10,000 German speaking followers as well as for the podcast “Vom Feld ins Regal” – in all activities linking the work in the partner countries and on global level with the situation in Germany.

In conclusion, the collaborative efforts between a sector and different bilateral programs, as well as partnerships with influential figures like Keki Adhikari, Fatma Haxhialiu and other local influencers, exemplify the campaign's success in promoting gender equality and dismantling menstruation-related taboos. With over ten million people reached globally by August 2023, the campaign's empowering messaging on menstrual health has fostered open conversations and challenged societal norms. As the initiative expands to Zambia and other partner countries, it continues to inspire change and amplify its impact on a global scale.

Watch the #LetsTalkPERIOD Trailer (2:18 mins): <https://youtu.be/ivsRgYGMhnE?si=FIM9PqTLFfn7Q9Tt>