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**Follow-up and implementation of the Vienna Declaration
and Programme of Action**

Written statement* submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 August 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Integrating Menstrual Health into Human Rights Frameworks: A Call for Global Action and Gender Equality

Recognition of Ongoing Efforts

We commend the Council for its commitment to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, which continues to serve as a global cornerstone for advancing human rights. The integration of the human rights of women across the United Nations system is a significant achievement, and the Council's annual discussion on gender perspectives is a vital platform for addressing the unique challenges women face.

The reports A/HRC/57/65 and A/HRC/57/66, which detail the activities of NHRIs and the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, provide valuable insights into best practices and the progress made in promoting gender equality. However, as these reports suggest, much work remains to be done, particularly in ensuring that women's health issues are fully integrated into human rights agendas.

Menstrual Health as a Human Rights Issue

The Council's unwavering commitment to integrating a gender perspective throughout its work, as mandated by resolution 6/30 is commendable. The critical role of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and the ongoing efforts to implement resolution 51/31, underscoring the importance of adhering to the Paris Principles in promoting and protecting human rights globally is appreciable.

It is requested that Menstrual health also needs to be taken seriously. It is not merely a personal or medical issue; it directly impacts the ability of women and girls to participate fully in society. The traditional system of passing knowledge from one generation to another in personal matters such as menstruation in some cultures has broken down with modernity, nuclear family and dependency on State and education systems. But stigma and reluctance to be open in State systems leads to widespread misinformation, inadequate healthcare, and significant barriers to education and employment. This lack of awareness and open discussion can prevent early diagnosis and treatment of severe health conditions such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and other menstrual disorders, which can have long-term impacts on women's health and well-being.

The Human Rights Council's focus on integrating a gender perspective into all its mechanisms provides an essential framework for addressing these issues. However, it is crucial that menstrual health be explicitly recognised within this framework as a critical component of women's rights. The stigma surrounding menstruation often leads to the exclusion of women from decision-making processes, further entrenching gender inequality. These barriers need to be broken, and the right of women and girls to access accurate information, receive appropriate healthcare, and make informed decisions about their bodies must be upheld.

The Role of NHRIs in Promoting Menstrual Health

National Human Rights Institutions play a critical role in advancing women's rights, including the right to health. The Paris Principles emphasise the importance of NHRIs being accessible to all, which includes addressing the specific needs of women and girls. The reports presented at this session highlight several best practices from NHRIs around the world, demonstrating innovative approaches to promoting gender equality. However, there is a need for greater emphasis on women's health, particularly menstrual health, within these efforts.

We urge NHRIs to take a leading role in breaking the silence around menstruation and advocating for policies that ensure menstrual health is included in national health agendas. This includes promoting comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, providing access to menstrual hygiene products, and supporting research and data collection on menstrual health issues. Furthermore, NHRIs should work to ensure that healthcare providers are trained to recognise and treat menstrual health conditions effectively and that women and girls have the confidence and knowledge to seek care when needed.

Pluralism and Menstrual Health

In advocating for menstrual health, it is essential to adopt a pluralistic approach that respects and incorporates the diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts in which women live. The Sikh tradition, which emphasises the equality of all individuals and the importance of caring for one's body as a divine gift, aligns with the broader human rights framework that views health as a fundamental right.

A pluralistic approach to menstrual health must recognise and respect cultural differences while helping to reduce barriers to women's health. For example, in some cultures, menstruation is surrounded by myths and taboos that can lead to harmful practices, such as excluding women from public life during their menstrual periods. Addressing these issues requires culturally sensitive strategies that engage communities in dialogue, challenge harmful practices, and promote positive attitudes towards menstruation.

Education and Awareness: Key to Overcoming Barriers

Education is a powerful tool in overcoming the barriers to menstrual health. We call on the Human Rights Council to support initiatives that provide comprehensive, culturally appropriate menstrual health education. Such education should not only inform women and girls about their bodies and health but also empower them to speak openly about menstrual health issues without fear of stigma or discrimination.

Moreover, it is essential to involve boys and men in these educational efforts. By raising awareness among all members of society, we can challenge the taboos and myths surrounding menstruation, fostering a more supportive environment for women and girls to express their health needs openly and without shame.

Global Collaboration and Best Practices

The Human Rights Council can play a critical role in facilitating the exchange of best practices and supporting global collaboration to address menstrual health. The reports presented at this session highlight the successes of various NHRIs, and we encourage the Council to build on these examples by promoting the integration of menstrual health into broader human rights initiatives. This includes encouraging states to adopt policies that ensure menstrual health is recognised as a critical component of women's rights and gender equality.

Call to Action

In conclusion, the Sikh Human Rights Group calls on member states, NHRIs, and the Human Rights Council to:

1. **Prioritise Menstrual Health:** Recognise menstrual health as a critical aspect of women's health and include it in human rights frameworks and national health agendas.
2. **Promote Comprehensive Health Education:** Support initiatives that provide culturally sensitive, comprehensive menstrual health education, empowering women and girls with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their health.

3. Ensure Access to Healthcare: Advocate for policies that ensure women and girls have access to the healthcare they need to address menstrual health issues, including diagnosis and treatment of menstrual disorders.
4. Foster Global Collaboration: Encourage the sharing of best practices among NHRIs and support global collaboration to address menstrual health as a human rights issue, with a focus on culturally sensitive approaches.

By taking these steps, we can break the silence around menstruation, address the health needs of women and girls, and advance the cause of gender equality worldwide.
