Days for Girls (2008– ) [1]

By: Santora, Emily Keywords: menstrual hygiene management[2] Days for Girls [3]

In 2008, Celeste Mergens founded the organization [4] Days for Girls to address obstacles impeding women’s and girls’ access to sustainable hygiene and health education by enlisting volunteers around the world to construct reusable menstrual hygiene products for girls in low-income countries. Mergens founded Days for Girls in the US in 2008 after learning that an orphanage she was working with in Kenya did not have resources for girls to manage their menstrual cycles. She provided those girls with reusable sanitary pads, and later that year, she decided to provide Days for Girls Kits, or DfG Kits, that volunteers from around the world made for women and girls in parts of the world lacking access to menstrual hygiene products. By 2012, Mergens launched chapters across the United States to allow volunteers to hand-sew the DfG Kits, and by 2019, the organization [5] expanded to include chapters in Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Uganda. Days for Girls provides women and girls with education and resources necessary to manage menstruation [6], which can help reduce the instances of absenteeism for girls in schools and reduce the risk of contracting infectious diseases.

Menstruation is a process that occurs in females approximately every twenty-eight days, although every twenty-one to forty days is normal, too. During menstruation [7], endometrial tissue, or tissue that lines the inside of the uterus [8], and blood are expelled through the vagina [9]. In order to manage menstruation [10], women and girls need knowledge of how menstruation [11] occurs and access to menstrual hygiene products like sanitary pads, tampons, or menstrual cups. Yet, in many low-income countries, education and resources are limited, and women and girls are unable to properly manage menstruation [12]. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, or UNICEF, millions of women and girls around the world lack access to those necessities that are central for menstrual hygiene management. Poor menstrual hygiene may increase school drop-out rates and the risk of infectious diseases.

Mergens founded Days for Girls in 2008, and as of 2021, she remains the chief executive officer of the organization [4]. Mergens is a humanitarian specializing in global sustainable development. After she received her Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, in 2005, Mergens worked with an orphanage housing 400 children in Nairobi, Kenya. She was motivated to start Days for Girls after she left Nairobi, when the aftermath of the 2007 Kenyan presidential election led to violence and left approximately 500,000 people displaced throughout the country. The Days for Girls website states that as a result of that violence, the population of children at the orphanage that Mergens had worked with increased to 1,400. In 2008, Mergens sent an email to the orphanage asking how the girls there managed menstruation [13]. The orphanage responded that the girls did not have the resources to manage their menstrual cycles, and instead the girls sat on cardboard in their rooms for the duration of menstruation [14]. After learning this, Mergens reports that she was inspired to start Days for Girls.

Thus, Mergens initially launched Days for Girls in 2008 with a goal to combat obstacles impeding women and girls’ access to hygiene and health education by providing menstrual hygiene products. According to Mergens, at the time of the organization’s founding in 2008, people in low-income countries like Kenya did not widely discuss the importance of menstrual hygiene and often lacked the resources for women to appropriately manage their period. So, she began to develop ways to provide menstrual hygiene resources for the girls at the Kenyan orphanage. For her first project, Mergens supplied disposable sanitary pads to girls. However, much of Nairobi lacks clean water, hygiene, and sanitation facilities, meaning those girls did not have an adequate waste disposal method to get rid of the sanitary pads. In response to those obstacles, Mergens instead developed a reusable sanitary pad that girls could wash and reuse for years. To produce those pads, Days for Girls chapters enlisted volunteers in the US to hand-sew the reusable pads, which cost ten US dollars to make. According to the organization [4], the volunteers purchase their own materials or can organize local fundraisers to raise money to purchase supplies. As of 2021, Days for Girls has also received funding from a number of companies, foundations, and private donors, including Revlon and The Honest Company.

To address girls’ major needs, Mergens decided to create the DfG Kit to provide women and girls in low-income contexts with reusable menstrual hygiene supplies. After twenty-nine edits to the DfG Kit, Days for Girls unveiled a final product. The DfG Kit includes two pairs of underwear, two reusable pads with wings that secure around the underwear, eight reusable liners, soap and a washcloth for cleaning, instructions for how to use the DfG Kit, and a transport bag to carry and wash used pads and liners. According to Days for Girls, volunteers hand-sew the pads and liners, which last for three years, using brightly colored fabrics in order to hide stains from menstrual blood. Also, the pads and liners look like a washcloth rather than traditional, western iterations of menstrual hygiene products. That allows women and girls to wash the products in public without feeling embarrassment or shame. The organization [4] delivers the components of the DfG Kit inside a drawstring bag.

As of 2021, Days for Girls provides four versions of the original DfG Kit, including the Portable Object of Dignity, or POD, the DfG POD plus, and a Heavy Flow DfG Kit. The POD is a smaller version of the DfG Kit, which includes one reusable pad and two
Poor menstrual hygiene management may increase the risk of girls dropping out of school or contracting infectious diseases due to a lack of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities necessary for changing sanitary pads during menstruation according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO. Days for Girls aims to address those issues by providing access to their DfG Kits. According to a study in India, twenty-three percent of girls dropped out of school after they began menstruating. Likewise, in Ethiopia, a study found that fifty-three percent of girls studied missed school days during their periods, and girls who did not use sanitary pads were over five times more likely to miss school than their counterparts. So, providing those materials for menstrual hygiene, like sanitary pads, soap, and a bag to wash the reusable materials inside of, may help prevent girls from missing school.

While Days for Girls has helped to provide menstrual hygiene products and health education to women and girls in low-income countries, critics like Chris Bobel, a professor at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Massachusetts, have disagreed with Days for Girls and other MHM advocates’ approaches. In her book *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South*, Bobel argues that the approach Days for Girls and other advocates use of providing discrete menstrual products may reinforce the notion that menstrual hygiene management should be hidden from society. Bobel holds that menstrual hygiene products, while a necessity, should not reinforce the stigma that menstruation is private, rather she argues that women and girls should learn that menstruation is a normal physiological process. Furthermore, Bobel critiques MHM advocates like Days for Girls for acting as though Western countries have the answers to problems faced in other parts of the world when there is still significant stigma surrounding menstruation in those countries. Lastly, Bobel criticizes MHM advocates for overly focusing on distributing menstrual products themselves, rather than aiming to solve larger problems such as access to clean water and general menstrual education that girls in low-income countries need.

Nonetheless, Days for Girls continues to provide menstrual hygiene products and education necessary to manage menstruation to women and girls in low-income countries. Proper menstrual health management may help address girls’ absenteeism in schools and reduce the risk of infectious diseases by promoting menstrual hygiene.

Sources
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