

Days for Girls (2008-)

In 2008, Celeste Mergens founded the organization 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 expanded to include chapters in Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Uganda. Days for Girls provides women and girls with education and resources necessary to manage menstruation, 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, endometrial tissue, or tissue that lines the inside of the uterus, and blood are expelled through the vagina. In order to manage menstruation, women and girls need knowledge of how menstruation 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. 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. 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. 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. 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, 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 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 reusable liners, and the DfG POD Plus includes two reusable pads and four liners. As is the case with the DfG Kit, the Days for Girls volunteers hand-sew the POD and DfG POD Plus. Also, the POD packages are smaller and more discreet, which protects women and girls from feelings of shame and embarrassment about menstruation by allowing them to more easily conceal their hygiene products. Volunteers hand-sew the Heavy Flow DfG Kit for women and girls with heavier menstrual blood flow, so the volunteers construct reusable pads and liners to be more absorbent.

Additionally, Days for Girls also provides a separate Menstrual Cup Kit that includes a washcloth, soap, a bag to clean the supplies inside, and a menstrual cup, or a reusable, rubber cup that inserts into the vagina to collect menstrual blood. However, many societies in low-income countries do not accept menstrual cups as widely as they accept sanitary pads. In low-resource countries where there is a lack of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene, menstrual cups may put women and girls at a higher risk of contracting infections if the product is not sanitized correctly. Also, according to medical researcher Penelope Phillips-Howard, menstrual cups may not be acceptable in some cultures, as the insertion of a menstrual cup into the vagina can be associated with a girl losing her virginity.

In 2012, Days for Girls launched its first global chapter in Zimbabwe, which taught women and girls in the country how to hand-sew and distribute their own DfG Kits. Prior to the implementation of Days for Girls, those women and girls in Zimbabwe often used materials such as cotton wool and leaves, because according to Zimbabwean human rights activist Miriam Mufaro, they had to pay high taxes for sanitary pads. In 2014, the Zimbabwean government required that women pay a twenty percent duty tax to import sanitary pads into the country and an additional fifteen percent sales tax, which makes sanitary pads inaccessible to Zimbabwean citizens lacking the financial means to afford them. Additionally, those materials are not absorbent and spoil clothing with menstrual blood stains. Stained clothing can lead women and girls, especially those in schools, to feel ashamed and embarrassed.

Days for Girls held workshops to train fifty individuals from Zimbabwe how to hand-sew their own pads and liners, as well as provide menstrual health education, to teach other women in their respective rural communities. After the participants were trained to be Ambassadors of Women's Health, two individuals reached out to twenty-seven schools throughout Zimbabwe, and trained fifty students how to sew the pads and liners and teach those students about menstrual hygiene. According to Days for Girls, those fifty students could train and teach 8,000 additional students.

By 2019, Days for Girls had provided more than one million women and girls in 100 countries with access to menstrual health hygiene products and education. Individual chapters allowed an increased number of women and girls to learn how to hand-sew their own pads and liners, like

the women and girls in Zimbabwe . Mergens earned the 2019 Global Hero Award from Global Washington for her work providing access to menstrual hygiene resources and education to women and girls in Africa. As of 2021, Days for Girls has mobilized over 70,000 volunteers in chapters throughout the world to hand-sew DfG Kits or help provide menstrual health education to women and girls.

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.

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