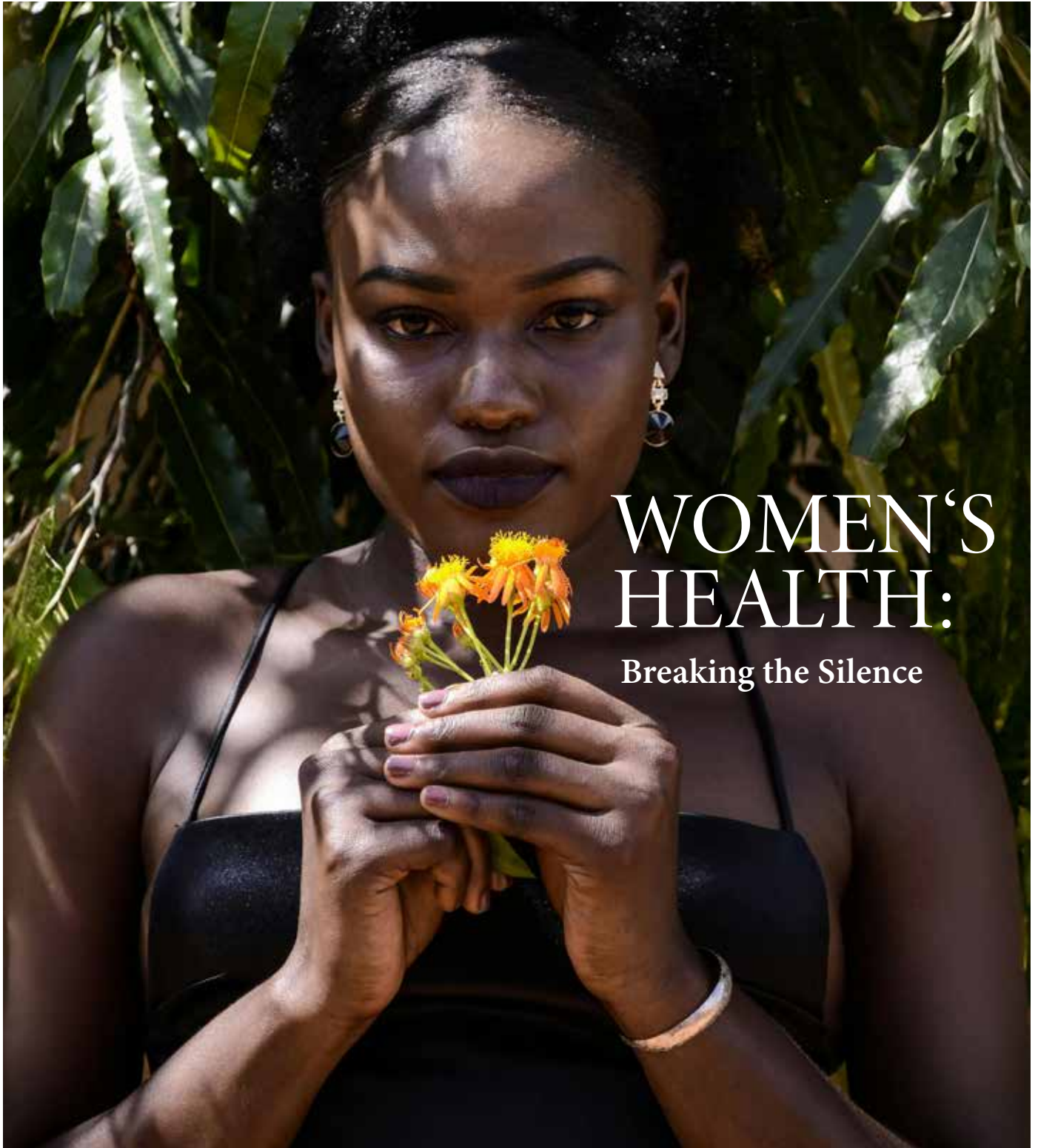


Excerpt of IWN
January 2025

International Women's News Nouvelles féministes internationales

Journal of the International Alliance of Women



WOMEN'S
HEALTH:
Breaking the Silence





Water and Pads – How Our Flagship Project Began

Menstrual health is still taboo in many parts of the world, but the Water and Pads project (WP) has been tackling the issue head-on since 2017. Ursula Nakamura, one of its founders, recounts how the initiative began—and grew into a movement spanning eight countries.

It all started with a shocking story I heard during a side event at the World Health Assembly in Geneva. Seema Uplekar from India and I were the official IAW delegates at the WHO. It was 2017, and I had recently become involved with the International Alliance of Women. The side event focused on young people making a difference in their countries. Among the speakers was a young social worker from

Nepal, who shared a harrowing account of how girls in remote villages are treated during menstruation. She described how they were banished to huts, denied proper food, and left vulnerable to snake bites and other dangers. This taboo around menstruation left them isolated and unsafe. The entire room was stunned; you could feel the collective shock. Delegates from various countries, me included, couldn't

Periods should not stop a girl from going to school.

believe such practices still existed. This moment planted the seed for what would eventually become the Water and Pads Project.

After returning home, I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd heard. I reached out to Gudrun Haupter, the IAW Convenor of Health at the time and a member from the German Women's Federation (DFR), who had experience working in Togo and Burkina Faso. I asked her if similar issues existed in other countries, and she confirmed that they might. That's when we both decided to dig deeper.

Our colleague Rosy Weiss from Austria helped us compile a list of organizations affiliated with or associated with IAW in Africa and Asia and took care of the finances. We started by sending out questionnaires to 15 IAW member organizations in Africa and Asia. We wanted to know: Is menstruation a taboo topic in your country? Do girls and women face challenges because of it? Would your organization be willing to participate in a project to address this issue?

The response was overwhelming. Eleven organizations replied almost immediately, saying, "Yes, this is a critical problem here, too. We want to help." By October 2017, just a few months later, we presented the concept at the IAW Congress in Cyprus. We had already learned that working with schools would be the most effective approach—reaching young girls before societal taboos took hold. We received the green light to move forward.

Starting with Schools

Our IAW colleagues on site had mentioned before that the project would be most impactful if we targeted schools. Adults, they found, were often less receptive to the subject. Schools, on the other hand, offered an environment where we could reach girls before menstruation became a source of stigma. Involving teachers and peers also made it easier to normalize the conversation.

In 2017 we established a Steering Group, including Lyda Versteegen, a legal expert and our president from 2010 to 2013, to guide the initiative. With their support, we began gathering reliable materials. This proved more challenging than expect-



ed. While numerous studies and doctoral theses on menstrual health existed, practical resources for grassroots education were scarce. For younger children, we secured permission from UNICEF to adapt one of their publications. For older students, we drew on Swiss Sexual Health—an organization with excellent resources—and tailored the content to reflect the realities in low-resource settings.

One thing became clear: glossy brochures featuring girls with smartphones by Swiss lakes wouldn't work. Most of the schools we partnered with lacked even basic amenities like paper, toilets, or internet access. Instead, we created simple, culturally sensitive materials in English and French. These became the foundation for our workshops and are still very much appreciated today.

A Collaborative Effort

By 2018, we were ready to pilot the project. The first workshop took place in a remote school in Cameroon, organized by our colleague Anne Pelagie Yotchou. Despite limited resources, the event was a resounding success. Photos from the session showed smiling students engaged in discussions under the shade of a tree. This pilot gave us the confidence to expand.

Our approach relied heavily on the commitment of the IAW organizations on site. These were not just any partners—they were well-established, led by women with advanced education and deep ties to their communities. We didn't need to teach them how to manage projects; instead, we focused on equipping them with the tools they needed to succeed. Since the start, each IAW-organization has been asked to submit a detailed budget and report, along with photos documenting their activities. This



What started as a single story has grown into a movement that's making a tangible difference in the lives of thousands of girls.

transparency was crucial for maintaining trust with sponsors and ensuring the project's credibility.

Adapting to Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unexpected hurdles. Schools were closed, and in-person activities were suspended. But the women involved in our project demonstrated incredible creativity and resilience. They pivoted to other forms of community support, such as sewing masks, distributing hygiene supplies, and educating villagers about COVID-19 precautions. These efforts earned them immense goodwill, which has strengthened their relationships with local communities.

We also faced logistical challenges, such as the cost and complexity of printing and distributing materials. Initially, we printed the brochures in Switzerland and shipped them to participating countries. However, this proved costly and inefficient. Over time, our IAW colleagues found local printers who could produce the materials at the same cost, allowing us to use our limited funds effectively.

We also experimented with providing reusable sanitary pads. While this idea had potential, it came with its own set of difficulties. Access to clean water for washing the pads was limited in some areas, and finding affordable, high-quality materials was a persistent issue. Despite these setbacks, the project sparked interest among our IAW colleagues. So in 2024, Anne Pelagie Yotchou from Cameroon started with a pilot project, where CEFAP seamstresses produced 1,000 reusable pads. These were distributed among three IAW-organizations BAWUFAG, CEFAP and RENATA. Producing pads might also generate small-scale income opportunities.

Small Details, Big Impacts

One of the most rewarding aspects of the project has been witnessing its unintended benefits—like teachers proudly post about “Water and Pads” on their personal Facebook accounts.



Heidi Bodmer, Goma Bastola from Nepal and Ursula Nakamura at our annual meeting in September 2024 in Bulgaria



I've seen how proud they are to showcase their participation, even if all they have is a basic phone with limited internet.

Even in conservative regions, where we feared resistance, the project has been met with surprising acceptance. Parents, particularly mothers, appreciate the education their daughters receive, noting that it boosts their confidence and helps protect them from early marriages and unwanted pregnancies. “Thanks to this knowledge,” one parent remarked, “our daughters can focus on their studies without fear or shame.”

Looking Ahead

Today, Water and Pads operates in eight countries across Africa and Asia, including Cameroon, DR Congo, Togo, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Pakistan, and India, supported by ten local organizations. Each year, we raise money to sustain the project. Every cent goes toward covering essential expenses, from renting transport to providing snacks for participants. None of the women involved earn a salary—their dedication is purely voluntary.

As we look to the future, our goal is to further institutionalize the project, ensuring its sustainability even as new challenges arise. We've learned that flexibility and trust are key. By empowering local IAW organizations, we've built a network capable of adapting to diverse circumstances while staying true to the project's mission.

It is incredibly gratifying to see how well we can work together worldwide. In addition to IAW accountant Antonia Lavine, the local IAW colleagues have played a crucial role in shaping the entire WP project. This is extremely important for Heidi Bodmer and me as WP coordinators.

When I think back to that side event in Geneva, I'm struck by how far we've come. What started as a single story has grown into a movement that's making a tangible difference in the lives of thousands of girls. And that, to me, is the true measure of success.

Protocol recorded by Kerstin Loeffler



Edah Gondwe Chimya is our new acting Secretary General

A pioneer for menstrual health education and gender equality

The Water and Pads (WP) Project introduced me to Edah Gondwe Chimya from Zambia, whose dedication has been instrumental in advancing menstrual health management in remote schools.

When the IAW Water and Pads Project launched in 2017, we conducted surveys among our IAW colleagues in Africa and Asia, asking: Would it be a good idea to teach menstruation

health management in remote schools?

Edah, the Executive Director of the Zambia Alliance of Women (ZAW), was one of the first to embrace the project and quickly became deeply involved.

Edah's work began with outreach to Chibwe School. She visited the school, documenting the institution and its surroundings—set in a rather barren landscape. Despite internet

connectivity challenges, Edah managed to send the images via WhatsApp—on New Year's Eve 2018, no less!

In October 2019, Edah and her team from ZAW held their first Water and Pads event at Chibwe School. As with all participating organizations, ZAW submitted a detailed report and photos to confirm the event for sponsors. Edah provided an informative report along with lively photos of schoolchildren sitting in the shade of a large tree, listening to talks about menstruation from the ZAW team and their teachers.

Edah also encouraged a student, Olipa, to present the Water and Pads Project in English, recording the moment on video. To this day, we can see how confidently Olipa explains menstruation health!

Since then, ZAW has organized annual Water and Pads events, pausing only during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative has since expanded to Dzikomo School. The 2024 event was particularly exciting, as Edah's eldest daughter, Musonda Chimya, a graduate engineer from the Copperbelt University, joined the effort. Musonda shared her experience as the only girl in her engineering class, emphasizing the importance of self-esteem and challenging gender stereotypes.

Balancing Work and Family

Edah's contributions extend beyond the Water and Pads Project. At our annual meeting in Bulgaria last September, some of us had the chance and pleasure to meet her in person. We were delighted by her readiness to take on the demanding role of Acting Secretary General for IAW.

Edah's professional and personal life reflects her commitment to equality and education. She and her husband have six daughters, all with ambitious career goals. Edah herself holds a degree in economics and a master's degree in business administration. Since joining ZAW in 2010, while expecting her fourth child, she has successfully balanced family responsibilities with her role as Executive Director, leading ZAW's efforts to promote gender equality in Zambia.

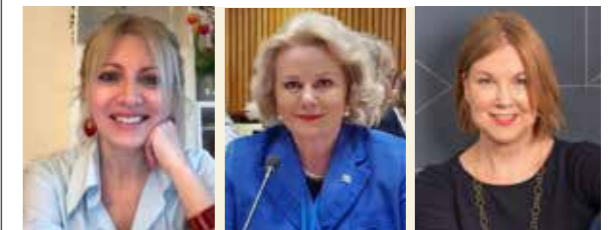
It is a tremendous opportunity for the International Alliance of Women to have Edah, with her wealth of knowledge, skills, and gentle sense of humor, stepping into this important role as Acting Secretary General. Wishing you continued success, Edah!



Ursula Nakamura from Switzerland is a registered nurse and coordinates the Water and Pads Project.



Edam's daughter Musonda (left) at the Water and Pads event at Dzikomo School



Inside IAW

Board member **Dr. Sibylle von Heydebrand** (center) from Switzerland has been appointed Executive Vice President. Sibylle is a Swiss lawyer and proven expert on political rights. She is also main representative of the IAW to the United Nations in Geneva, representative of the IAW and financial auditor to the NGO CSW Geneva and representative to UNESCO in Paris (see below).

Good news also from Paris – we have a new team at UNESCO: **Dr. Marilena Longobardi** (left) from Italy, **Dr. Sibylle von Heydebrand** and our editor **Kerstin Löffler** have been appointed as our representatives at UNESCO with Kerstin serving as main representative.

International Women's News

Nouvelles féministes internationales

Journal of the International Alliance of Women

International Women's News is an open Forum for information and opinion on matters of importance to women. It is published by the International Alliance of Women. Items for publication in English should be sent to our Editor, Kerstin Löffler – iawiwn@womenalliance.org

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Vous pouvez facilement effectuer un paiement en utilisant le système de paiement en ligne sur notre site web. Pour ce faire, veuillez vous rendre sur <https://womenalliance.org/become-a-member/> et suivre les instructions.

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Published by: International Women's Alliance represented by the President Alison Brown | Editor: Kerstin Löffler | Layout: Katrin Hoffmann |

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