

**PARTNERSHIPS IN THE MENSTRUAL HEALTH SECTOR: HOW DO
MISSION-DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONS COLLABORATE TO CREATE
SOCIAL IMPACT?**

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Abstract:

A lack of awareness on the importance of menstrual health in the past has led to severe societal problems arising in relation to menstruation. Menstruators around the globe deal with discrimination and social exclusion due to their period. Current developments show an increase in the interest in the topic. Mission-driven organizations in the field are engaging in broadly involving the topic into society by creating social impact through awareness-spreading. This paper investigates collaboration strategies which are applied by such organizations to create social change. The inductive multiple-case study involves Western-European organizations and provides a conceptual framework showing dependencies and relations of organization-specific aspects, collaboration strategies and the perceived social impact which is created.

INTRODUCTION

“Stigma around menstruation and Menstrual Hygiene is a violation of several human rights, most importantly of the right to human dignity, but also the right to non-discrimination, equality, bodily integrity, health, privacy and the right to freedom from inhumane and degrading treatment from abuse and violence.“

Dr. Jyoti Sanghera, Head of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013 (George, 2013:5)

In the last decades, mass consumption, the global divide between rich and poor and immense environmental pollution has led to severe environmental and social problems (United Nations, 2015). Politicians, economists and the society have recognized the urgency of taking action to prevent the disruption of the earth, as well as the life-threatening inequalities which individuals all over the globe face each day.

Environmental and societal challenges are often intertwined, which is also the case for the issue of menstruation. Around 49.6% of the worlds’ population are physically female (Richie & Roser, 2019), which means that all of them are menstruating. Social inequalities and environmental problems in relation to menstruation have been well investigated by researchers (Kirk & Sommer, 2006; Hennegan, Shannon & Schwab, 2018; Bay, 2017). Taking the environmental perspective, menstruation brings up an immense amount of plastic waste, as approximately 96% of menstruating people use single-use menstrual hygiene products (Splendid Research, 2019). In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, this ultimately leads to 75.000 – 125.000 tons of trash per year (Splendid Research, 2019). Besides the intensive environmental challenges with regards to menstruation, menstruators¹ all over the globe face severe societal problems every day. The stigma and taboo which is associated with

¹ The term menstruator includes every individual who had or still has his or her menstruation regardless of the gender identification of the individual.

menstruation decreases the social status of menstruators and leads to inequalities between menstruators and non-menstruators (Johnston-Robeldo & Chrisler, 2011). Especially in developing countries, menstruators are often not allowed to be part of their community during their period (Johnson, 2021). Because of a lack of fresh water and sanitation, menstruators refuse to go to school during their menstruation as they do not have appropriate surroundings to change their menstrual products (Cavill, Roose, Stephen & Wilbur, 2016). Additionally, young girls may lack knowledge about their menstruation, and do not know why they start bleeding (Kirk & Sommer, 2006; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2018).

Menstruation does not only lead to insecurities and problems for young menstruators, but also for grown-up menstruators whose physical constraints, such as heavy pain, are not accepted at working places (Amis, Munir, Lawrence, Hirsch, & McGahan, 2018; Medina-Perucha, Jacques-Aviñó, Valls-Llobet, et al. 2020). Plan International UK (2017) found that one in ten British girls aged between 14 and 21 years are financially not able to buy menstrual hygiene products. It was found that almost 80% of adolescent menstruators experience intense menstrual symptoms such as irregular bleeding or heavy pain but refuse to consult a doctor (Plan International UK, 2017). Due to these findings, a movement called “#periodpoverty” was initiated. This term refers to financial, social, political and cultural challenges associated with menstruation (Medina-Perucha et al., 2020). Studies in Spain confirmed the findings of Plan International UK with regards to the necessity of mental, educational and physical support of menstruators in Europe (Medina-Perucha et al., 2020). In 2021, Hennegan et al. published the first official definition of menstrual health in order to stress the urgency of the topic and provide a working basis in this field of study: “Menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle.” (Hennegan, et al., 2021: 2).

In order to solve such societal challenges, the government, the society, businesses and other organizations are needed. There is a range of organizations engaging in solving such

problems which can be referred to as “mission-driven” organizations (Brewster & Cerdin, 2018; Maretich, Emerson & Nicholls, 2016). This term is used for organizations which engage in creating social or environmental change. Such organizations can be sustainable or social businesses, as well as non-profits or associations. Environmental and societal problems, as referred to above, cannot be solved by single-actors (Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002). Due to the complexity of intertwined problems, collaborative action taken by institutions, businesses, associations and society is needed to react to existing challenges (Selksy & Parker, 2005; Tracey, Phillips & Jarvis, 2011).

When concentrating on mission-driven organizations, current literature differentiates between collaborations which are started to solve societal or environmental issues, or mandatory collaborations which are for example prescribed by the government. Mandatory collaborations often prioritize to reach an organizational goal such as profit maximization or an increase in the organizations’ reputation (Selksy & Parker, 2005), as the actors do not have the initial goal to find solutions for environmental or social challenges. Rondinelli and London (2003) claim that partnerships can generally contribute to greater corporate profitability and to the solution-finding for environmental or social problems.

During the last years, a range of mission-driven organizations in Europe have started to engage in spreading awareness on menstruation and menstrual health. It can be observed, that these organizations are collaborating with each other, for example by starting the “Menstrual Health Awareness Day” on the 28th of May. Such collaborations are often joined by a variety of organizations such as for-profit enterprises, non-profit enterprises or the government. These organizations are often led by menstruators and set new standards when it comes to communication about menstruation. While long-established companies in the field often handle menstruation as discreet as possible, marketing and communication strategies of young enterprises and NGOs are direct, and easily accessible for menstruators. One example for differences in communication strategies is the color of the “blood” used in advertisements for

menstrual hygiene products. While incumbents show a blue colored liquid when talking about the absorbing capacity of their products, young enterprises decide on showing red colored liquid, comparable to menstrual fluid.

Collaboration and partnerships in this field are important, as menstruation is affecting overall society. The existing stigma leads to discrimination of menstruators. Mission-driven organizations in the field do not only work to grow their own businesses, but also with regards to a certain societal goal. Collaborations of such mission-driven organizations may thus be a catalyst of achievements in lowering gender inequalities, unfair treatment of menstruators and the implementation of appropriate, inclusive and complete menstrual education. Hence, this paper aims at answering the question: *How do mission-driven organizations collaborate to create social impact?*

This paper focuses on organizations in the menstrual health sector which are located in Western-Europe in order to assure that the organizations are operating in comparable cultural, societal and legal surroundings. Environmental aspects are not highlighted in this paper.

According to Ebrahim and Rangan (2014), social impact is generated when a “systemic change” happens, meaning that the action taken by e.g. an organization has a broader and longer-term outcome on e.g. the society. The design of this paper does not measure the actual social impact provided by the organizations but reflects on the perceived social impact created through collaboration. The focus lies on strategies which are used by mission-driven organizations to create what they define as necessary change in order to systemically change society’s behavior in relation to menstruation and menstrual health.

This paper stresses the importance of collaborative action in the field of menstrual health and shows how organizations already collaborate to find solutions for these problems. Additionally, it investigates how cross-sectoral partnerships may contribute to the solution finding for complex and intertwined societal challenges. It helps to leave the stigma and unknowingness surrounding menstruation behind. Worldwide activism on the topic, the

invention of the “Menstrual Health Day” and the “#periodpoverty” movement show that menstruation is gaining more and more attention. Still, little research is done on the mechanisms and synergies between collaborators in the field which are already in place and need to be extended to react to the challenges ahead. By referring to different types of organizations, meaning social and environmental businesses, as well as non-profit organizations and associations, this paper uses a cross-sectoral approach to answer the research question. Processes, criteria and organizational missions are explored to deliver important insights on how to spread awareness for the topic in the future, but also serve as examples on how actors in other stigmatized fields can collaborate to increase awareness-levels of the society. Additionally, scientific insights on the role of collaborations in solving societal challenges are provided and researchers are encouraged to examine menstruation-related fields.

The paper reviews relevant literature on societal challenges in relation to menstruation followed by a summary of the current knowledge on partnerships, collaboration methods and strategies of mission-driven organizations. The methodology section describes and justifies the qualitative research approach. In depth information on the selection of appropriate organizations, data collection and data analysis are provided. The result section summarizes the main findings, followed by a discussion of the developed conceptual framework. Last, a conclusion, the studies’ limitations and suggestions for future research are made.

THEORY

This section reviews relevant literature on societal challenges with regards to menstruation. Subsequently, current knowledge on collaboration of mission-driven organizations and their ability to create social impact is summarized.

The Issue of Menstruation

As previously mentioned, almost half of the world's population is physically female (Richie & Roser, 2019). Oftentimes, menstruation is discussed in relation to topics such as gender equality (Johnson, 2021), body awareness (Kirk & Sommer, 2006), the handling of taboo topics (Meenakshi, 2019) and the access of menstruators to water and sanitation (Loughnan, Bain, Rop, Sommer & Slaymaker, 2016; Guppy, Mehta & Quadir, 2019; Cavill et al. 2016; Meenakshi, 2019). Throughout the literature, a strong relation between menstruation and discrimination can be identified. Johnson (2021) links discrimination based on race, class, gender identity and disability to menstrual discrimination and claims that whenever discrimination is observed one should as well raise the "menstruation question" to identify in which way menstruation is a factor of discrimination. Furthermore, Johnson (2021) highlights the intersectionality of menstrual justice. Meaning that discrimination which happens in relation to menstruation does not only affect cis-female menstruators, but also some transgender men and boys, as well as intersex, genderqueer and nonbinary individuals. Johnson (2021) claims the problematic situations in schools, where especially intersectional menstruators have difficulties visiting the bathrooms during their period. Problems arising in the educational context are examined by Kirk and Sommer (2006), who claim the importance of school-based programs in which young menstruators gain knowledge about their body and develop body-awareness and self-confidence. Awareness spreading and sharing knowledge on menstruation is considered an important factor when it comes to the reduction of systemic disadvantages of menstruators (Cavill et al. 2016). WSSCC and UN Women (2015) claim that most girls are poorly prepared for their menstruation, not even knowing what happens when they started bleeding. Wilbur and Huggett (2015) educated young girls on menstruation and raised awareness regardless of the gender identity. This led to a reduction of taboos, negative myths and restrictions during their period. Girls saw themselves as change agents and boys were

discussing about who had the most knowledge on menstruation among their peers (Wilbur & Huggett, 2015).

Menstruation does not equally affect menstruators around the globe (Kirk & Sommer, 2006; Johnson 2021; Aubeny, 2007). While researchers in western-countries are developing hormonal contraception opportunities for menstruators to decide for themselves if they want to menstruate or not (Aubeny, 2007), menstruators in developing countries refuse to go to school during their period as the sanitary situation is not sufficient (Bobel, Winkler, Fahs, Hasson, Kissling & Roberts, 2020). Such circumstances are often associated with developing countries, but a recent study by Plan International UK (2017) found that menstruators in the United Kingdom stay absent from school because of their period as well. This finding is not solely applicable to the United Kingdom but has been confirmed by a study conducted in Spain, that found that menstruation is a source for structural and social stigmatization and discrimination in developed countries too (Medina-Perucha et al., 2020). The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health (2018) claims that educational training on a worldwide scale is necessary to illuminate this subject and enhance a discussion which decreases the stigma and taboo associated with menstruation.

Collaborations of Mission-Driven Organizations

As previously mentioned, collective action and partnerships are necessary to solve complex challenges (Davies, 2008; Rondinelli & London, 2003; Melane-Lavado & Alvarez Herranz, 2020; Montgomery, Dacin & Dacin 2012) such as the stigma, taboo and unknowingness which surrounds menstruation. Porter and Kramer (2011) invite the idea and the benefits of shared value, where organizations not only focus on profit generation, but thrive at solving societal or environmental issues simultaneously. This helps emphasizing the role collaborations can play in solving such challenges (de Bruin, Shaw & Lewis, 2017). Partnerships and networks can serve as drivers for sustainable innovation (Melane-Lavado & Alvarez-Herranz, 2020),

improve the communication between different actors (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010) and enhance organizational learning (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Montgomery et al. refer to such organizational partnerships as “collective social entrepreneurship” (Montgomery et al., 2012: 376) and define them as “collaboration amongst similar as well as diverse actors for the purpose of applying business principles to solving social problems” (Montgomery et al., 2012: 376).

Collaborations between for-profit and non-profit organizations can achieve stronger environmental protection while increasing corporate profitability (Rondinelli & London, 2003). Improved profitability of for-profit organizations can be a motivation to engage in collaborations with non-profits (Baum, Calabrese & Silverman, 2000).

Researchers claim that actors such as the government have lost their impact, leading to other actors solving the issues which were once addressed to the government (Ashman, 2000; Klitgaard & Treverton, 2004). Hence, traditional roles and positions of the collaborating actors are reassigned (Selsky and Parker, 2005). Furthermore, Shumate and O'Connor (2010) claim that non-profit organizations have greater public trust than for example the media or the government.

Types and Goals of Collaborations

Partnerships and networks can be examined by three conditions: the type of actors, the sectors in which the actors are operating, and the aim of the collaboration. Selsky and Parker (2005) define different types of actors: business actors, which are for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations which are for example Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGOs) and governmental actors. It is claimed that collaborations can be entered by actors of either two or all of these fields (Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Collaborations can be entered by several actors of the same sector, for example a lottery of two sustainable menstrual hygiene producers, or from actors in different sectors like an

educational program on menstruation started by the government in cooperation with a for-profit organization.

The term “collective social entrepreneurship” previously introduced by Montgomery et al. (2012) defines collaborations as social movements, community cooperatives and cross-sector partnerships depending on the aim that the collaboration serves. Social movements usually open up new markets. This was for example the case for the wind energy-market (Sine & Lee, 2009). Community cooperatives are rather spreading information and can be networks of professionals, the media and activists (Montgomery et al., 2012). Cross-sector partnerships are collaborations of actors between two or more sectors, trying to solve a “complex social problem” (Vurro, Dacin & Perrini, 2010: 39). Such partnerships are considered to be altruistically motivated and are able to effectively solve societal issues (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Vurro et al. 2010).

Conditions and Hurdles of Collective Impact

Kania and Kramer (2013) define five conditions which need to be met in order to create collective impact through the collaboration of organizations. First, a “common agenda” (Kania & Kramer, 2013: 1) is necessary, meaning that all participants share the same vision and have a common understanding of the problem that should be solved. Second, a “shared measurement” (Kania & Kramer, 2013: 1) needs to be applied to assure that measurement and data collection across the participants is consistent. Third, the actors should define a “collective plan of action”, to agree on a goal of the collaboration and on collective ways how to reach this goal (Kania & Kramer, 2013: 1). Additionally, they claim the importance of open communication across the partners. Last, the importance of a separate organization which coordinates the participants and their engagement in the collaboration is mentioned (Kania & Kramer, 2013).

Although collaborations are able to create social impact, literature argues that there are hurdles and challenges with regards to building and sustaining such partnerships. Kania and Kramer (2013) stress the complexity of societal challenges, and that solutions to these challenges need to be tailor-made and cannot easily be applied to various situations. Societal challenges can be found at different levels, either locally or wider spread throughout the society. This complexity makes explicit solution finding necessary (de Bruin et al., 2017). Additionally, especially collaborations between profit and non-profit organizations are considered to be influenced by tensions and distrust (Rondinelli & London, 2003). Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006) stress that cross-sector collaborations have a high potential to solve societal challenges but are difficult to create and require a lot of engagement from the participants to be sustained.

Current literature presents different forms and participants of collaborations started in order to create social impact. Clear goal setting, mission-sharing of the participants and the actors themselves play an important role in creating social impact according to the current state of knowledge. Research on menstruation reflects the urgency and importance to engage in spreading awareness on the topic and enhance educational programs to decrease the stigma and taboo surrounding menstrual health. According to the findings on collaborations of mission-driven organizations, actors in the menstrual health sector should be able to create societal change. The previous literature review hence serves as a basis for the investigation of the concrete collaboration strategies used by organizations in the field.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The paper investigates how mission-driven organizations in the Western-European menstrual health sector collaborate to create social impact. This paper does not measure the extent to which social impact is created in reality, but the strategies developed by mission-driven organizations to create social impact. An inductive qualitative research method is used.

Collaborations of mission-driven organizations are extensively described in recent literature, but little connection is made with organizations in the menstrual health sector. Additionally, it can be observed that the menstrual health sector as well as the societal awareness on menstruation is growing during the last years. Although sufficient literature can be found with regards to menstruation in developing countries, developments in this field in western-countries are not yet explored in detail. Edmonson and McManus (2007) state, that in fields of research where there is a small amount of existing theory, a qualitative research approach is most appropriate to gather usable data. According to Rowley (2012), qualitative research is used for theory elaboration and generation. This paper elaborates theory by the development of a conceptual framework which shows the relation between organization specific aspects, criteria and goals of partnerships and strategies to create perceived social impact. Seven organizations were interviewed with regards to their partnerships and collaborations with other actors in the field. The chosen organizations were sustainable enterprises, social businesses, associations and non-governmental organizations from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Spain. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviewees agreed on the informed consent and gave their permission for the recording of the interview. With regards to the content of the interviews, they started with a short introduction of the field of interest, followed by open questions on the general mission of the firms, the types of organizations which are operating in the field as well as the process, advantages and disadvantages of collaborations. A brief interview guide can be found in Appendix A. The interviews were held in English or German. The section data analysis provides in depth information on the content and procedure of the interviews. A constructivist approach was used to code the data, matching the idea of theory building in inductive qualitative research (Chandra & Shang, 2017). The data gathered is an interpretation of what the interviewee considers to be the truth. This approach develops new theory by once more interpreting the interviewees' perception.

Selection Criteria

The selection process for the interviewed organizations was based on the following criteria: focus on menstruation or menstrual health, mission-driven organization, location. First, all of the chosen organizations have a strong relation to menstruation or menstrual health and do have the goal to generally educate on the topic. Second, the organizations are mission-driven, meaning that they either attach high value to their impact on the environment or the society. The organizational form itself was not of importance, as the paper aims at investigating cross-sectoral relationships. In the case of enterprises, a sustainability approach is for example fulfilled by using environmentally friendly resources for products or the production of reusable menstrual hygiene products. A social approach is for example fulfilled when the enterprise provides education, stresses the importance of fair treatment of workers or engages in awareness raising in developing countries. Associations and non-governmental organizations were chosen with regards to their approach to solve a problem related to menstruation as described in the theory section. Third, all of the organizations are located in Western-Europe to ensure comparable missions and challenges. Hence, it is possible to contrast and compare the gathered data because cultural, legal and societal surroundings of the organizations are similar to each other.

Data Collection and Organizations

The data was collected through interviews with employees and founders of the different organizations. Detailed information on the interviewees as well as brief descriptions of the organizations can be found in table one. The terms used in the column “Type of Organization” refer to the definition the interviewees gave when being asked to describe the organization. As the organizations as well as the interviewees are treated anonymously, the interviewees have been assigned to numbers. These numbers are used in the results section in order to refer to the interviewee who gave a certain statement.

TABLE 1
Organizations and Interviewees

Type of Organization	Location	Position of Interviewee	Description	No
Sustainable Enterprise	Austria	Founder	Produces sustainable lounge wear and warming scarfs for menstruators suffering from endometriosis.	(1)
Social Enterprise	Spain	Chief Operations Officer	Produces menstrual cups, providing cups and education on menstruation for menstruators in developing countries, using a “buy one give one” approach.	(2)
Sustainable Enterprise	Germany	Founder	Produces period underwear, bladder weakness slips and discharge panties.	(3)
Nonprofit and Social Impact Business	Germany	(1) Research Fellow	Female Health Collective aiming at ecosystem-building, advocacy promotion and knowledge sharing in the field of menstrual health.	(4)
		(2) Project Officer		(5)
Social Enterprise	Germany	Co-Founder	Produces a game in order to advocate early education about the female body and periods.	(6)
Sustainable Enterprise	The Netherlands	Founder	Produces sustainable menstrual cups.	(7)
Association	Germany	Founder	Collects donation in order to provide menstrual hygiene products for homeless menstruators.	(8)

Data Analysis

According to the findings of Leech (2002), the order of the interview questions was pleasant for the interviewee, meaning that first, not too personal and general questions were asked to not overwhelm the interviewee and create a certain level of confidence. The interviewees were

asked to describe the sector they operate in as well as other organizations working in that field. Afterwards, they were asked to describe collaborations they have had in the past, the processes of these collaborations and the goals of those. I chose to not directly mention the term social impact to ask if and how the organization aims at creating social impact. This was done to minimize the bias of the interviewee trying to impress or please the interviewer. The last third of the interviews was used to gather insights on the perceived societal challenges of menstruation. By letting the interviewees explain their point of view on menstruation and challenges in the field, it was possible to find out which problems they assume as most urgent, which relation they themselves have to these problems and who they address in order to find solutions.

I always tried to listen as attentively as possible and to communicate this to the interviewee by rephrasing parts of their answers and using gathered information (e.g. names of employees, procedures, etc.) when asking subsequent questions. I made sure that key points for data analysis were answered such as the mission of the organization, the personal opinion on challenges in the sector and in society, the aim of collaborations, the necessity of collaborations and the process of collaborations. The explicit topics discussed in the interview, or the challenges which were discussed in more detail were not influenced by me as far as possible.

Interviews held in German were transcribed with [amberscript.com](https://www.amberscript.com/), otter.ai was used for interviews held in English. Every transcript was thoroughly checked and corrected in case of any mistakes made by the transcription tools. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees for approval. The transcripts and informed consents can be found [here](#)²

Thereafter, [atlas.ti](https://atlas.ti.com/) was used to code the gathered data. The data was structured according to the Gioia Method (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012). Based on this coding, a coding tree was compiled for each of the levels (organizational, collaborative, industrial,

² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pAXxbEObo6mZhpUxwBy1wXqrIgUDZtk1ZL4sin4sEI/edit>

societal) named by the interviewees. The coding trees can be found in Appendix B. These results were eventually interpreted into a conceptual framework showing the relation between different organizational aspects, criteria and goals of collaboration and organizations' strategies to create perceived social impact. The development of this framework has, in line with the argumentation of Bell and Bryman (2011), not been linear. After conducting five interviews, a first overview on the data was explored through coding. Subsequently, first notes on a framework were developed and through the collection of more data adjusted and completed.

Reliability and validity of the data was ensured through the prevention of interviewee biases. Terms such as social impact were not explicitly mentioned to not pressure the interviewee. Additionally, given information on collaboration was checked through the website of the organizations. It was checked whether the findings are generally in line with existing theory.

RESULTS

The subsequent section presents the data gathered in the interviews. First, a summary of the information received on societal challenges with regards to menstruation is formulated. This provides an overview on the societal aspects of the topic and clarifies in which areas the interviewees aim to promote social change. Following, the data on collaboration is presented. Starting with an overview on the interviewees' perceptions of the industry, organization specific missions and named criteria for collaboration. Subsequently, goals and types of collaborations are reviewed.

Societal Challenges with regards to Menstruation

According to the interviewees, menstruators in Europe are confronted with difficulties when it comes to the general stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation, educational aspects, period poverty, governmental aspects and insufficient health services.

Interviewee (4) argues that the existing stigma around menstruation is supported by *“the general narrative [...] that your period is a bad thing.”* Interviewee (1) adds: *“Slowly, I am allowed to say that I am on my period, but I am not allowed to say that I have severe pain.”* Aspects with regards to the existing stigma are named by each of the interviewees. Interviewees (3), (4), (6), (7), (8) request a reform of the current educational system. Interviewee (6) claims: *“Our biggest challenge is early education.”* This is brought into relation with the taboo surrounding menstruation by Interviewee (7): *“In their communities, it wouldn't really work because there's such a taboo. So, education will need to come first.”*

The term period poverty is raised by two interviewees. Interviewee (2) shares the experience of a teacher in London: *“She was shocked, outraged and sad to see how many of her students in London, were going to say to her, can you please buy me menstrual products.”*

The government is frequently named as an actor in the field, but also as a source of insecurity: *“[...] where menstrual health is placed in a ministry [...] Some people place it under WASH or water or sexual reproductive health or education or health, it doesn't really have a place.”* (5). Furthermore, three interviewees claim the inappropriate taxation of menstrual hygiene products in many countries: *“We've only come to this very limited amount of products, which has still a luxury tax in so many countries. But this is not a luxury item”* (4).

Several interviewees conclude, that challenges with regards to menstruation are intertwined between different aspects of everyday life. Interviewee (2) claims: *“[...] it's seems so niche, we want them to go to school, or we want women to have access to contraceptives [...] the bleeding once a month, like half of the population or something, it seems very niche. [...] once you're into it you realize its much wider than it seems [...].”* This opinion is also confirmed by Interviewee (6): *“This is the crazy thing, I mean, it's affecting 50 percent of the worlds' population and anybody else, who is not directly affected, are partners, or are working together with menstruators each day, or have any other kind or relation to them.”*

The Menstrual Health Sector

When asked about actors in the field of menstrual health and menstrual hygiene products, interviewees mentioned the organizations summarized in table two.

TABLE 2

Organizations in the Western-European Menstrual Health Sector

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Endometriose Association Germany and Austria	x		x					
(Sustainable) Businesses producing menstrual panties	x	x	x			x		
(Sustainable) Businesses producing organic menstrual hygiene products (tampons, etc.)	x	x	x			x		
Social Media Influencer/Menstrual Cycle Coaches	x		x	x				
NGOs		x			x			
Grassroot entrepreneurs				x				
Social non-profit organizations		x	x					
Businesses producing Lounge-wear			x					
Non-profit associations (sometimes church-carried)		x				x		x
Schools						x		x
Businesses producing educational games				x				x
Authors								x
Government			x				x	x
Long-established for-profit companies producing menstrual hygiene products		x	x				x	

Additional to long-established companies, sustainable businesses that produce menstrual hygiene products are mentioned. Associations, NGOs and institutional actors such as schools and governments are named. The engagement of individuals, such as authors, influencers and coaches is emphasized too.

Interviewees do have mixed impressions of the perceived working mode in the industry, meaning the general behavior towards other organizations in the field and the awareness level of the importance of menstruation within society.

Although each of the interviewees agreed that menstrual health and menstrual education are getting more attention throughout the last years, many of them argue that their efforts are too intensively anchored in the industry, to objectively evaluate a change in the awareness level: *“I don’t even know if I can say something about it. Keyword: Bubble.”* (6). Nevertheless, Interviewee (6) claims: *“But generally, it’s obvious that the topic gets more attention, in newspapers and other media for example.”*. In this relation, Interviewee (2) mentions: *“I mean, there are so many [actors engaging in de-stigmatizing menstruation]. It’s really encouraging.”* This reflects the impression of several interviewees, who claim that organizations in the field do generally share the same mission: *“[...] but the fact that people are doing this, and that we’re all working towards advancing menstrual health for everybody, wherever you are.”* (4). Nevertheless, especially for-profit businesses stress the importance of monetary aspects and mention that not everybody is open to collaboration: *“I even think it is a little sad, that everybody says female founders should support each other. I experienced some negative things as well, and this is something that does not get communicated so often.”* (1).

Collaboration in the Menstrual Health Sector

The organizations vary in their mission, meaning that some of them have integrated the creation of social impact into their strategy, while others are implying social and environmental aspects in their work but are nonetheless dependent on generating profit. The interviews revealed an

influence of the organizations' mission on the organizations goal and subsequently on the goal of their collaborations. Interviewee (4), who is working in a social non-profit business claims: *“And our mission is [...] we envision a world where everybody has menstrual health, and female health is a priority in progressing gender equality.”* Comparable missions are also mentioned by other socially focused organizations, such as by Interviewee (2): *“Our mission, our goal is to ensure that every person that menstruates has access to products and information that allows them to manage the menstruation safely and with dignity.”* In contrast to this organization, Interviewee (7) who founded a rather profit focused enterprise says: *“And I guess the whole mission is just like innovation and making things that are really easy to use.”* It can be seen that the type of the organization is often chosen according to the goal of the organization. Rather profit oriented organizations often describe themselves as enterprises while non-profits and associations usually focus on social or environmental aspects in their work.

Based on the mission, the goal and the type of the organization, the interviewees describe the criteria they are using to decide on which organization to collaborate with. All of the interviewees claim that sharing the same mission is one of the main criteria: *“[...] you notice that you have like the same values and the same goals that you're working towards.”* (4) or: *“The context needs to fit, the target group needs to be similar, and the vision needs to match to ours. If that is the case, collaboration can only be beneficial.”* (1).

When being asked about the reasons for engaging in a collaboration, the answers can be categorized into three main reasons. Collaboration is either part of their business model, collaboration is needed because it is part of a product or a service, or collaboration is used to generate reach.

Interviewee (2), who works in an organization with a “buy one-give one” approach, need partners to teach menstruators on how to use a menstrual cup: *“We have distributed [...] 110,000 cups. And we haven't done this all ourselves, most of it has been through partners”*.

This is one of the cases where collaboration is needed in order to fulfill the business model. The same goes for organizations who do not have experts in the field of menstrual health: *“[Collaboration] is essential for us, because [co-founder] and me are no experts on periods.”*

(6). On the other hand, there are organizations such as the one by Interviewees (4), (5), whose product it is, to provide a network for people and organizations engaging in the field of menstruation: *“I would almost say that collaboration is the bread and butter [...] Because it's really the crux of everything that whether it's, [...], the [name of organization] itself, collaborating with other partners, or whether it's the [name of organization] providing a platform where people can collaborate, it's really a key function of the organization.”*. A third reason investigated for collaborations is to reach more customers. This is the case for the organization of Interviewee (1): *“And the outcome should be reach, to have more followers [on Instagram].”*

Collaboration and Perceived Social Impact

The interviewees were asked on how they think that challenges with regards to menstruation could be solved and how the organization is able to take part in creating social change.

All of the Interviewees mentioned the way of communicating as one of the main factors. Communication is defined as a key point not only when it comes to the individual communication of the organization but also when collaborating organizations address their projects to customers or the society. Interviewee (6): *“That's the exiting part, that somehow unites all of us. Communicating free of shame and progressive and that we say: hey it is completely normal to talk about periods, no need to be ashamed.”*. This is also what Interviewee (2) summarizes: *“[...] the more we have access to information [...] the more we know what's unfair, we can become consulting a lot of it.”*. Furthermore, several organizations mentioned that through themselves or their partners, education on menstruation is provided: *“[...] it seems to be inappropriate [to talk about menstruation in school], and this is not helping*

end the stigma. We always say: Unknowingness leads to self-doubt, self-doubt leads to taboos. [...] this should be stopped by early awareness-spreading.” (6). Organizations relying on profit, rather assessed their social impact indirectly. Their main objective was to collaborate with non-profits or associations in order to increase their own reach, but also the reach of the collaborating partners: *“It’s really about collecting money for them [association], and we want to generate attention for their work.”* (3).

Interviewee (4) described the current rise of awareness for menstruation as a “menstrual momentum”: *“So, I think one of the main things is that this momentum is here because people start realizing that sexual reproductive health is a valid issue that needs to be paid attention to”*. Later in the interview the Interviewee added: *“We definitely need each other. Because you are all working towards the same purpose. And that is, I think, that is the most important thing not to forget.”*

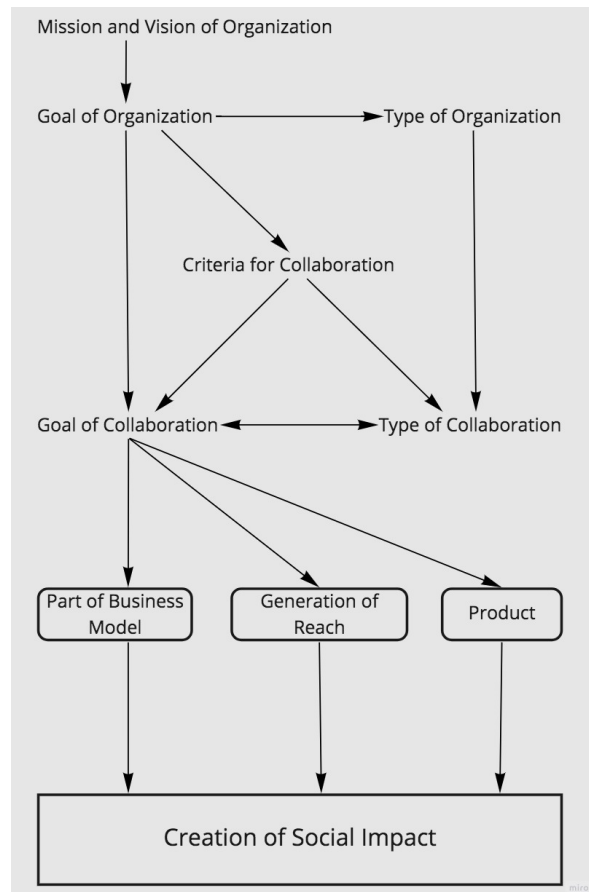
DISCUSSION

Menstruation is surrounded by unknowingness, stigma and taboo (Johnston-Robeldo & Chrisler, 2011; Kirk & Sommer 2006). It is intertwined with several environmental and societal challenges, which organizations around the world try to solve. Such challenges are mostly reasoned by a lack of education on the topic, not only in developing, but also in developed countries (Bay 2017). This leads to immense societal insecurities, ignorance towards abdominal pain, diseases, the menstrual cycle, period poverty and a variety of additional problems (Plan International UK, 2017; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2018). This paper aims to find out how collaborations of mission-driven organizations in the field of menstrual health and menstruation do collaborate with each other, to find solutions for those issues and create social impact. Seven interviews revealed a strong sense of community within the sector, as many organizations explicitly stressed that actors in the field do share the same mission: de-stigmatization of menstruation. Based on the results, the subsequent conceptual framework,

figure 1, is developed which represents the relation between individual and organizational missions and goals and the strategies to generate perceived social impact.

FIGURE 1

Strategies of Collaborations



The interviews revealed that the mission and the vision of the organization are strongly related to individual goals of for example founders. Such missions are transitioned into the organizations' goal, which have an influence on the type of the organization, as well as on the goal of future and current collaborations.

Additionally, strong missions as the ones that can be found in the menstrual health sector, do set the basis for the criteria of collaboration. Interviewees communicated clearly with which organizations they are not willing to work together due to a mismatch in their mission. The type of the collaboration, the criteria for the collaboration and mission of the organization influence the goal of the collaboration. Based on the sample, collaboration has three different

kind of goals. First, collaboration can be part of the business model, which in itself aims to create social impact. Without collaboration, the actor would not be able to fulfill the organizational mission. A second strategy is to generate reach with the help of collaboration. In contrast to the first strategy, this one is rather business focused and tries to preliminary generate marginal benefits. This strategy may have an indirect approach to create social impact, as it generally strengthens organizations which try to de-stigmatize menstruation and spread awareness and education on the topic. The third strategy is also business model related, as collaboration and networking are part of the product. Such organizations have the mission to bring people operating in the field together in order to synergize with each other and start collective action.

It can be concluded that all of the interviewees claim that they are directly or indirectly having a certain amount of social impact. As the social impact itself is not measured, it stays unknown if the perceived creation of social impact does relate to the actual amount of created social impact. Current development in the field clearly shows that there is a lot of change in the field of menstrual health which leads to the assumption that there needs to be a certain amount of social impact created by such organizations. Even main-stream media picks up on such stigmatized topics, which can be interpreted as a sign of an increase in the societal interest on menstruation. Communication is mentioned as one of the most important factors to create change. Interviewees argue, that open and honest communication is necessary to advance societal change in this field.

This paper shows that although organizations describe themselves as mission driven, financial matters can be the motivation for collaboration. This does not necessarily imply that such organizations do not see themselves as, at least, indirectly contributing to societal change. Nevertheless, social impact driven by sustainable and social businesses is limited, as governmental and educational changes are urgently needed in order to educate the society on a wider level. Additionally, actors are well aware of a certain community they keep talking to.

Meaning that there is a group of people enthusiastically engaging in the topic which does not reflect the wider society. Nevertheless, collaboration remains an important tool in the field of menstrual health in order to wider the audience and reach more people.

Conclusion

The field of menstrual health and menstruation is recently gaining more attention in society and academia. This paper provides insights into how collaboration is used within this upcoming field. It shows how important menstruation and honest communication are and stresses that there are still huge challenges ahead of us. More attention is needed in order to solve these challenges and contribute to a society where no menstruator needs to feel ashamed talking about menstruation. The provided framework is a study result which shows how mission and vision of an organization influence the chosen type of collaboration, the criteria for collaboration and the chosen strategy to create perceived social impact.

These findings are valuable for scientists as well as for the society. Mission-driven organizations as well as long-established for-profit companies can benefit from the paper. Menstruation is researched with regards to social aspects in developing and developed countries (Bay, 2017). Researchers start to argue why menstrual health is a globally important topic and papers provide information which diverse problems arise with regards to it (Bay, 2017; Plan International UK, 2017; Johnson 2021). Nevertheless, the connection of organizations and the creation of social impact in this field is rarely examined. This paper provides first insights on how collaboration in this upcoming field can work and sets a basis for future research. Mission-driven organizations can identify their, maybe unintentionally, used strategy to generate social impact. Additionally, they are provided with a framework that shows the influences of other organizational factors and collaborations. This can help navigate future collaborations and develop clear goals for these collaborations either in order to create social impact or to focus on, for example, organizational growth.

Furthermore, this paper reviews the fields in which social change is intended by organizations. It is possible to use this information as a basis in order to measure the actual social impact of an organization. Long-established companies are also invited to focus on impact generation by adapting their way of communication or re-thinking their current forms of collaborations with actors in the field.

This paper clearly shows that even in developed countries, menstruation is a stigmatized topic and a lot of work needs to be done to reach equality for menstruators and non-menstruators. These changes cannot solely be reached by mission-driven organizations. The government needs to engage in the topic, clarify its position and provide high quality education to de-stigmatize menstruation. Additionally, policies should be invented to ensure clear communication and presentation of menstruation in advertisements. Only with the help of cross sectoral partnerships and the government, it will be possible to unearth myths about menstruation and to ensure that menstruators are bleeding safe, healthy and with dignity.

Limitations

Although this paper focuses on Western-Europe, the sample size is dominated by organizations from Germany and Austria. Nevertheless, the organizations vary in their mission and type of organization, meaning that associations, NGOs, social businesses and sustainable businesses are included. Although this brings a huge variety of aspects into the paper, the individual information given per organization cannot always be supported by another organization with the same organizational form. Because of the overrepresentation of German organizations, the findings might not be applicable all over Western-Europe.

Additionally, the concrete social impact that these organizations may or may not have is not measured. Thus, it is important to mention that this paper only focuses on the perceived social impact of the interviewed organizations. Furthermore, the interviewees were not directly asked about their social impact in order to lower possible biases. A possible bias could have

been that interviewees pick up the term social impact as a motivation for their collaborations to please the interviewer, although the creation of social impact might not be one of the drivers for these collaborations. Avoiding this term does not only prevent such biases but may also lead to insufficient answers with regards to the motivation of collaboration.

Future Research

This paper can serve as a basis for the social impact measurement of organizations in the field of menstrual health. Starting from the strategies developed within this paper, future research could use social performance measurement tools to get an idea of the actual social impact generated by collaboration in this field. Additionally, it would be beneficial to survey consumers and society to examine the actual awareness-level on the topic and to find out if the current level of awareness is related to collaboration strategies.

Spreading of awareness and a wider societal focus on the topic has been applied during the last years. Investigation of why this is the case, how collaboration is part of this development and the actual extend to which the strategies presented in this paper create social impact are worth researching. As the so called “menstrual momentum” (5) just began, the current situation could serve as a starting point for longitudinal studies in the field to investigate how stigmatized fields like menstruation can be de-stigmatized and widely accepted within society. The interviewees claimed that this is what is happening at the moment, doing research now would result in interesting and important insights not only in this field of interest. Such findings could be implemented in comparable fields such as mental health or incontinence. Gaining knowledge on how to de-stigmatize such topics would not only open up new fields of research, but would also help transition to a more honest, open-minded and inclusive society.

Additionally, partnerships of associations, NGOs, social business, sustainable businesses and other actors could implement explicit strategies to solve challenges in such fields.

An actor which was frequently mentioned as being able to provide and implement solutions for challenges in the field is the government. Future research could investigate how partnerships can influence the behavior of governments and which strategies actors may apply in order to discuss successfully with government bodies, resulting in the implementation of new laws and policies which enhance e.g. gender equality.

Although internationally operating organizations are part of this paper, it focuses on the collaboration of Western-European organizations. Challenges with regards to menstruation are globally, and strongly intertwined with each other. In order to explicitly find ways to solve these problems, a global approach would be beneficial. There are networks of actors in the field of menstrual health, connecting organizations and individuals from all over the world. Insights in such wide spread international collaborations would benefit to understand how to globally spread awareness on menstrual health and menstruation and would likely also lead to in depth insights on the differences between various cultures and regions with regards to this topic.

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APPENDIX A

Interview guide

- What was your main intention when you founded [organizations name]?
Find out:
 - *Social mission or rather profit oriented?*
 - *Thrive to achieve a certain goal?*

- Can you name the types of organizations which are working in the menstrual health sector?
Find out:
 - *Who is relevant for actors?*
 - *Which types of organizations are known/less known*

- With which kind of organization have you worked together in the past?
Find out:
 - *Which Collaborations*

- When you think of the last collaboration you had with another actor in the field, how was the process of this collaboration?
Find out:
 - *Who started communication?*
 - *What was the goal of the collaboration in the first place?*

- How did collaborating with other actors influence the current state you are at with your company?
Find out:
 - *Was collaboration really necessary?*
 - *How important is collaboration and in which cases?*

- When talking about menstruation, what are the challenges that society currently faces?
Find out:
 - *How are challenges with regards to menstruation perceived*
 - *Definition of challenges*

- Do you have a vision on how to solve these issues?
Find out:
 - *Which actors are named?*
 - *Is collaboration named?*
 - *Does the organization think it could help solve the issues?*

- In relation to your company, what are you most proud of?
Find out:
 - *Better impression of the company itself*

APPENDIX B

