

Statement submitted by FEMM Foundation

The Fertility Education and Medical Management (FEMM) Foundation is a knowledge-based health program for women inspired by women's right to be informed participants in their own healthcare and to make voluntary decisions based on options, information, and understanding. The Foundation is dedicated to health education, medical research, and to improving reproductive health care to advance women's health.

According to the United Nations Population Division, the global average median age is 30 years old. Half of the 8 billion people in our world are over this age and the other half is below it. There have never been so many young people in the history of our planet. With this in mind, it is essential to prioritize the fertility awareness education of adolescent girls and adult women as it empowers them to understand how their bodies work, it helps them become informed participants in their healthcare, and it calls for a redefinition of the standard of care. This fertility awareness education, already provided by organizations like FEMM, is a key component to fostering healthy societies where women are empowered to reach the highest level of their reproductive health and where medical systems are designed to prioritize this.

Fertility awareness education empowers women and girls by teaching them how their bodies work. This means learning about the reproductive system, which launches conversations about how menstruation fits into a woman's ovulation cycle. Talking to girls about their periods and teaching them to pay attention to their biomarkers, such as their cervical mucus patterns, empowers them for life to recognize the normal and abnormal signs of their bodies. Fertility awareness education normalizes conversations about periods and biomarkers among teenagers, within households and with doctors.

FEMM provides fertility awareness education to teenagers and adult women. teenFEMM and teenMEN are programs for schools and/or health centers covering how to chart health and hormones (for girls), changes in puberty, healthy cycles (for girls), the creation of new life, emotions, and lifestyle habits for a healthy body. After a teenFEMM class, one middle school girl said, "I feel confident because now I really understand how my body works." FEMM instructors also have specialized courses to provide this information to adult women.

Fertility awareness education helps women and girls become informed participants in their healthcare. Research shows that women and girls who are keeping track of their ovulation cycles are able to detect health problems early. Precocious or delayed puberty, for example, are linked to endocrine abnormalities. Conditions that alter ovulation during adolescence will only worsen if there is no correct diagnosis. Thus, the Committee on Adolescent Health Care of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Committee on Adolescence of the American Academy of Pediatrics have issued an opinion which recognizes the role of menstruation as a vital sign for girls to detect possible underlying medical problems and opines that charting the menstruation cycle is useful practice for them.

FEMM's programs are giving women and girls the vocabulary and tools to talk to their doctors about their endocrine system and thus contribute to their own preventative care. Aside from the courses mentioned previously, the FEMM App is available free of charge for both Apple and Android devices. Women who use the FEMM App can track their observations and symptoms to better understand their bodies and health. Just as each woman is different, so are her observations and experiences, which is why the app is completely customizable and available in multiple languages such as English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Hungarian, with Croatian, Italian, and Polish versions currently in development. Women can track as much or as little as they would like, adding specific symptoms and biomarker observations. The app provides insights into what a woman is

experiencing in her cycle, flags potential health concerns, connects women with medical professionals for treatment, and easily exports women's charts in a simplified format to show a doctor.

Once women and girls receive fertility awareness education, the result is that they have higher standards for their health care. Women often accept irregular bleeding, pain, depression, mood swings, acne and weight gain, as normal symptoms, not realizing that these are often signs of underlying hormonal imbalances and abnormalities which can affect women and girls' long-term overall health, sometimes irreversibly. Even when women do seek medical care, most health care providers and programs struggle to diagnose them and often can only treat the symptoms. Empowered with fertility awareness education, women and girls become advocates for health systems that better serve their needs, calling for more doctors that have specialized knowledge of endocrine medicine to be able to prescribe real solutions to fertility problems and hormonal imbalances, instead of merely resorting to "band-aid" solutions. These women and girls become advocates for medical systems, insurance policies, and government health policies that prioritize women's endocrine health as the key, but currently underfunded factor, to achieving the highest standard of women's reproductive health.

FEMM is building this movement to redefine and elevate the standards in women's health care. Aside from empowering women through education, FEMM's Medical Management program is training doctors around the world to understand how they can incorporate the information from a woman's charts to paint a picture of her overall health and incorporate this knowledge into an effective diagnosis. FEMM has developed better diagnostic criteria to identify conditions that are currently treated mainly at the symptomatic level and instead proposes treatments that go to the root of the issue. FEMM researchers are even discovering links with conditions not typically considered related to reproductive health like coronary heart disease and Type 2 diabetes which are linked to abnormal ovulation followed by irregular cycles. FEMM is working with hospitals (most recently in Tanzania) to incorporate protocols to routinely gather information about women's endocrine health and determine appropriate responses and diagnoses.

As the world recovers from Covid-19, acknowledges the global setbacks to achieving the 2030 Agenda, and identifies the most pressing needs of the largest population of young people it has ever seen, the time could not be more appropriate to prioritize fertility awareness education, in particular for adolescent girls and young adult women. This knowledge empowers them to understand how their bodies work, it helps them become informed participants in their healthcare, and it urges them to join the movement for a redefinition and elevation of the standard of care for women.

FEMM is actively working to elevate these standards and empower women and girls. We call on governments to allocate health and education funds to educate women about fertility awareness. We call on ministries of health around the world to work with us to train doctors and to work with hospitals to integrate this essential knowledge into their standards of care. Clearly prioritizing fertility awareness education in policy is a concrete step to help women and girls achieve the highest level of reproductive health possible, while having a visible impact on the attainment of the SDGs by 2030.