

Tackling period poverty and stigma through innovation, education

Access. Menstrual Hygiene Day highlights the importance of menstrual care, and raise awareness about the issues faced by those who don't have access to menstrual products.

BY JOAN SALMON

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Every month, according to UNICEF, 1.8 billion women worldwide menstruate.

Out of that number, approximately 500 million women struggle to access menstrual products or suitable facilities to manage their periods.

Accessing menstrual products is just one of a complex set of challenges contributing to period poverty. Worldwide, cultural taboos and societal stigmas continue to impact the health, dignity, and well-being of girls, women, and others who menstruate.

In humanitarian crises, these factors intensify, with a lack of privacy, basic materials, and safe sanitation facilities exacerbating feelings of shame, fear, and isolation.

For those with physical or intellectual disabilities, the difficulties multiply, and their voices are often left out of discussions on menstrual health needs in emergencies.

Today, the world commemorates Menstrual Hygiene Day with a drive to take action against period poverty. This year's theme is 'Together for a period friendly world'.

According to UN Women, although menstruation is a natural and healthy process, it interrupts the lives, rights, and freedoms of millions of women and girls who cannot afford or access menstrual products, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, and lack education and awareness to manage their menstrual health and hygiene.

In 2020, Scotland became the first country to provide period products free of charge, including reusable options. Other countries following suit include Kenya, Uganda, Australia, Canada, Colombia, India, Jamaica, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr Robert Kwesiga, secretary general of the Uganda Red Cross Society, reveals that about five million girls in Uganda lose at least 18 percent of their annual school time each year due to a lack of sanitary pads.

Many girls, who lack access to sanitary pads, are forced to stay home during their periods to avoid the stigma associated with staining school uniforms with menstrual blood.

Mr Ismail Mulindwa, the director of Basic and Secondary Education in the Education ministry, says in rural areas, girls become house-



Hundreds of millions of people lack access to menstrual products and adequate facilities for menstrual health. PHOTO/FILE

bound and are forced to sit over a hole dug in their mud floors until the menstrual flow ends.

"School-going girls who get blood on their clothes are often teased by teachers, boys, or other girls, and this has been reported as a significant cause of school dropout for girls," he says.

In areas such as Karamoja, women do not use any padding during their periods.

"So a woman or girl in their periods will sit, create a small hole for the blood, and later cover it with sand before moving to another spot and doing the same. They also use long skirts for cleaning themselves, which is unhygienic," says Ms. Bernadette Ojao, proprietor of Wabibi Pads.

Ms Ojao notes that almost 65 percent of girls and women are unable to meet menstrual health needs, which go beyond pads to include items such as underwear, water, soap, and a place to bathe.

The need for help in menstrual hygiene in Uganda is immense, with

some resorting to using soil and polythene bags.

Ms Ojao was motivated by her own experiences to provide affordable reusable sanitary towels. Her mother could hardly afford pads, prompting her to use cloth as a substitute. This inspired her to venture into making reusable sanitary pads.

"At school, my mother used old clothes in the house to make sanitary towels for me. In other instances, I used toilet paper because it was very cheap and handy, but it had its disadvantages of disintegrating and insufficient padding. What started as a desire to help myself has grown into a community initiative," she says.

Ms Majorie Atuhura of Gejja Women's Foundation was inspired to act after interacting with girls who dropped out of school in Bulyasi Village, Mpigi Town Council.

For those who can afford them, disposable towels cost between Shs3,000 and Shs3,500 per pack, with a monthly requirement of about two packs, costing Shs6,000 to Shs7,000, or Shs84,000 annually. However, not everyone can afford this. To foster affordability, the Gejja Foundation team makes reusable sanitary towels and distributes some for free.

"We provide girls and women with a reusable sanitary pad kit containing two pads, a cotton knicker,

mosquito repellent soap, and a storage bag," says Ms Atuhura.

They work with partners such as Mercy Corps under the Girl Project to extend menstrual hygiene items to communities.

Ms Ojao emphasizes the benefits of reusable towels, which can last up to two years. They advise NGOs and parents to buy reusable towels, as they are more cost-effective in the long run.

Awareness is a major component of addressing menstrual hygiene. Ms Atuhura and her team are training both females and males about menstruation, breaking taboos, and the stigma associated with periods. This effort includes providing a 4,000-liter water facility at Gejja Women's Centre for nearby

schools and communities.

However, the cost of raw materials remains a challenge in making reusable pads.

To address this, Ms Ojao and Ms. Atuhura have trained women and girls in five districts on how to make these pads, creating employment and a sustained supply of pads for sale while equipping communities to create their menstrual hygiene solutions.

Ms Ojao highlights the environmental impact of menstrual hygiene.

Disposable sanitary towels pose disposal challenges as they are not biodegradable, causing environmental problems. In contrast, reusable towels are made of cloth, making them environmentally safe.

1.8
BILLION WOMEN
AND GIRLS
MENSTRUATE

MENSTRUAL HEALTH

Poor menstrual health and hygiene undercut fundamental rights for women, girls and people who menstruate, worsening social and economic inequalities. Insufficient resources to manage menstruation, as well as patterns of exclusion and shame, undermine human dignity. Gender inequality, extreme poverty, humanitarian crises and harmful traditions can amplify deprivation and stigma.

According to United Nations Population Fund, there is wide agreement on what people need for good menstrual health. The essential elements such as safe, acceptable and reliable supplies to manage menstruation, privacy to change materials, facilities to safely and privately wash; and information to make informed choices. Comprehensive approaches that combine education with infrastructure and with products and efforts to tackle stigma are most successful in achieving good menstrual health.



Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung



ACTION 4 HEALTH UGANDA'S MENSTRUAL HEALTH CAMPAIGN EMPOWERING BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS IN MITYANA DISTRICT



Action 4 Health Uganda (A4HU) is a non-government organization whose mandate is to empower young people in Uganda to enable them to effectively address issues related to Sexual Reproductive Health, economic status, as well as poverty alleviation through holistic health and development. Action 4 Health Uganda, through the TeamUp Uganda program is revolutionizing menstrual hygiene management among the youth in Mityana and Kassanda Districts by sensitizing them about menstruation hygiene management (MHM). A4HU through the TeamUp Uganda program is engaging 40 schools in Mityana and Kassanda districts with Information, Education, Communication, debating, and drawing competitions where both boys and girls are involved. These have allowed for the debunking of the myths and misconceptions around menstruation among both boys and girls as well as their teachers and caretakers. The program is co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW), Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung, and Siemens Stiftung, and implemented by three local partners: Action 4 Health Uganda, Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung, and Whave Solutions.

The boys are now more aware that menstruation is a fact that every girl experiences and not a taboo that they should not associate themselves with. Lubwama Francis, a Senior Two student at Nakwaya Secondary School adds, "I can now freely help a girl during her menstruation without judging her thanks to the information provided by TeamUp Uganda." Francis Magala, a Senior Five student at Nakwaya Secondary School in Kikandwa Sub-County of Mityana District also shares, "I once helped a female student to get painkillers when she was experiencing menstrual cramps." Paula Namubiru, a Senior Three student at the same school remembers a day when she got her period while at school and stained her skirt. "A boy offered me a sweater to tie around my waist such that the menstrual blood stain would be covered." she shares.

Female students shared how there used to be a sense of shame when they experienced their period for fear of being embarrassed when seen carrying sanitary pads or if their outfits got stained by blood. This has now changed thanks to the sensitization by the TeamUp Uganda project. The girls are now alert about their menstrual cycles which helps them to be prepared with the required menstrual hygiene products such as sanitary pads. "I can now carry sanitary pads in my bag without fear of being made a laughingstock by the boys," says Joan Jovia Nambalirwa, a Senior Five student at Nakwaya Secondary School.

Claire Nakyejwe, a Senior two student at St. Kizito Secondary School also remarks on how she has learned to count her safe days and "be prepared for my periods."

"I have learned to take care of my menstrual hygiene thanks to TeamUp Uganda. I did not know how to properly maintain it in the past," shares Agnes Namuyaba, a Senior Two student at St. Kizito Secondary School.

The school administration has also not been spared by the wave of awareness. Mr. Nambale Yefusa, the Director of Studies at St. Kizito Secondary School and the Patron of the Youth Club at the same school shares, "TeamUp has brought awareness about Sexual Reproductive Health and Menstrual Hygiene Management to our students. We have noticed a reduction in the number of pregnancies among female students. They now know the dangers of early pregnancies and the need to wait to start families. There is also reduced absenteeism among female students who are now more confident to attend school even during their menstruation periods. Even when they are absent, it is due to other factors exclusive of menstruation. The boys are also now more responsive in helping girls during menstruation."

There has also been a positive response to handling menstrual hygiene in schools as noted by Mildred Kabasinguzi, the Senior Woman at Nakwaya Secondary School in Kikandwa sub-county of Mityana District. "Before the training given to us by TeamUp Uganda, the administration would take long to respond to our requests for disposal buckets where girls could drop their used sanitary pads. Now, they respond quickly, which has helped maintain proper menstrual hygiene and protect the environment." The school also provides sanitary towels and soap to help the girls maintain proper menstrual hygiene. The administration has also changed how menstrual hygiene products are distributed to the students as the Senior Woman teacher, Ms. Mildred Kabasinguzi adds, "I always kept the sanitary pads in my office but now, I give them to the students who distribute them to their fellows when in need."

A4HU also utilizes the Youth Truck, a multi-media tool on wheels, to screen MHM videos in schools. "Before, teaching children about menstruation was hard because we did not have the right tools. But now, with The Youth Truck, it is like a new world of learning, the truck helps a lot, and it shows things in a way that makes learning fun," remarked Mr. Derrick Kasirye, Deputy Head Teacher and Science teacher at Bakijulula Primary School in Mityana District.

"After watching the MHM video, I felt inspired to speak up about periods. I started helping my friends stay clean and feel confident during their periods." a Primary Six pupil aged 12 years narrated.

The program has also spearheaded the formation of Youth Clubs in these schools to further disseminate information to the students and their communities. The Youth Clubs are a medium through which students can organize debates, health talks, and dramas on sexual reproductive health and menstrual hygiene management. Peter Lumu, a Senior two student at St. Kizito Secondary School in Banda, Mityana District shares, "I have learned to be confident by participating in debates on Menstrual Hygiene Management." It is through such initiatives that TeamUp is helping to bridge the gap in Menstrual Hygiene information, especially in such remote areas as Mr. Nambale observes.

Betty Namuli, the Headmistress at St. Kizito Secondary School, Banda, Mityana District appreciates TeamUp

Uganda for their efforts in sensitizing students and teachers on sexual reproductive health and menstrual hygiene management. She says, "In my eight years at this school, no student had ever come to me for sanitary pads until recently. Students now know that menstruation is a normal part of life and that they should not be shy about it."

Menstrual Hygiene Management is crucial in helping female students stay in school, even when experiencing their menstrual periods. No girl should be left behind and communities must transform their opinions and practices toward menstrual hygiene management for girls in and out of school.

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Pupils of Kabayenga Primary School, Mityana watching a video on MHM



A student of St. Kizito Secondary School, Mityana debates on Menstrual Hygiene Management



Students of Bujubi Secondary School, Mityana District during a debate session on Menstrual Hygiene Management

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-Lubwama Francis, a Senior Two student at Nakwaya Secondary School.



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