I

n many Ugandan communities, several myths, taboos and beliefs are associated with menstruation. These have compounded efforts to publicly discuss menstruation or menstrual hygiene. References to menstruation such as ensonga (Uganda for issue) point to attitudes that show unwillingness to discuss menstruation.

Uganda’s Ministry of Health and World Vision Uganda conducted a study in 2014 to ascertain the level of female absenteeism during menstruation and understand how this instils in girls in charge of WASH at Plan national programme manager by boys, once she soils her menses.

In Uganda, it is common for movements during their menstruation. It is Time for Action. Not only does it emphasise the urgency of this public health issue, but it also highlights the transformative power of improved menstrual hygiene, to empower the world’s women and girls and unlock their economic and educational opportunities.

According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC) 2013 findings, lack of information and gender-friendly facilities at school, coupled with negative attitudes, contributes to girls missing out on approximately 10% of school time in Uganda. IRC further indicates that menstrual hygiene is still being considered a secluded issue, culturally not talked about in public, yet it contributes to girls missing one to three days of primary school per month; eight to 24 days per year and 11% of schooling missed due to menstrual periods.

The report also indicates that this is contributed to by a range of issues, among which are lack of gender-friendly latrines, lack of privacy, shared latrines among boys and girls and, sometimes, teachers.

Change in attitude key for menstrual management

By Andrew Masinde

References to menstruation among primary schools in Uganda, it is common for nicknaming a girl bleeding cow by boys, once she soils her dress.

Samuel Andrew Kiiza, the national programme manager in charge of WASH at Plan International, says this instils a lot of fear and shame, which culminates into continued school absenteeism during periods and, sometimes, dropping out.

Findings by Women Action Front (WAF) suggests that in Uganda, the fear of soiling contributed to 55% of girls missing school during their menses.

According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC) 2013 findings, lack of information and gender-friendly facilities at school, coupled with negative attitudes, contributes to girls missing out on approximately 10% of school time in Uganda. IRC further indicates that menstrual hygiene is still being considered a secluded issue, culturally not talked about in public, yet it contributes to girls missing one to three days of primary school per month; eight to 24 days per year and 11% of schooling missed due to menstrual periods.

The report also indicates that this is contributed to by a range of issues, among which are lack of gender-friendly latrines, lack of privacy, shared latrines among boys and girls and, sometimes, teachers.

Baseline study

A baseline study conducted in three districts in Uganda by WAF in 2013 revealed that lack of pads contributes to a lesser percentage (2%), compared to discomfort (51%) and 16% due to lack of water.

The above challenges motivated Plan International Uganda to introduce the menstrual hygiene management (MHH) programme over the last four years in the four districts of Lira, Kamuli, Tororo and Abeporgoi. The four-year programme is aimed at increasing access to cost-effective sanitary products for the effective management of menstrual hygiene.

According to Kiiza, to realise this goal, the programme adopted multi-dimensional approach to galvanising MHM, focusing on private partnership to improve access to pads, income-generation and improved MHM-related knowledge,” he says.

Kiiza says good menstrual hygiene is crucial for the health, education and the dignity of girls and women.

Plan International started by improving the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the different stakeholders to appreciate that menstruation is normal and natural.

Plan International also works together with different government departments of health and education, teachers, health workers, community health workers, drama groups, religious leaders and school management committees.

These are trained and oriented on menstrual hygiene management as training of trainers and later engaged in training of schoolgirls and schoolboys, awareness creation within communities through dialogues, community theatres and radio talk shows. This has created a reliable human resource (local actors) to drive scale out of MHM,” he says.

According to Kiiza, the programme also embedded provision of sanitation facilities to complement the other activities.

“The facilities are girl-child friendly, offer convenience and privacy for girls during their menses. They are installed with a burning chamber to facilitate safe disposal of used pads. This has provided an enabling environment for girls to effectively manage their menses and continue in school for girls,” he explains.

Justine Nakwala, the Plan International Uganda communications manager, says in a bid to ensure improved access to affordable hygienic pads, Plan International opted for a public private partnership approach with AFripads. A social enterprise engaged in the production and sale of the reusable pads through established Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA) members.

Nakwala explains that local women groups are also trained in making reusable pads.

Kiiza says access to pads has also increased. This is attributed to the partnership with Afripads.

“We are now able to reach out to women and girls with reusable pads, plus reaching out to other men, boys, girls and women beyond Plan International’s operation through the civil society organisations oriented and trained on MHM,” he says.

The skill development has also enabled girls and women to make pads for use and have been joined by men and boys, who either make pads for sale or for sisters and their mothers at home.

The programme has seen 65 government officials, 3,845 girls and 2,197 boys trained in MHM.

A total of 139 local women groups that make reusable sanitary pads have been created.

Challenges

Kiiza says the low income among households impedes many rural adolescent girls and women from accessing hygienic and affordable sanitary pads.

The purchase of the pads depends on mostly good crop harvests, which enables households to sell part of their produce to acquire other household items, including the pads.

Menstrual hygiene management requires a holistic integrated approach to improve knowledge, attitude and practices within communities, coupled with provision of pads and the gender-friendly WASH facilities.

Unless the issues surrounding culture and the knowledge gaps are dealt with, it will take long before reaching the required impact. A single initiative implemented in isolation will not translate into impact.
By Andrew Masinde

S

That they were sick.

Would return to school, claiming

Many girls choose to stay home.

Dirty rags tacked in their panties,

Wrapped around their waists and

Sitting in class all day with sweaters

Of their peers or the discomfort of

Soiling their dresses in the eyes

Than risk the embarrassment of

Boys, who often mocked them.

Many girls from poor

Backgrounds countrywide suffer

From such challenges, forcing them
to drop out of school because of

Fear of embarrassment during

Menstruation, since they cannot

Afford sanitary pads.

Research findings

A research done by Eve Puffer,
a former postdoctoral fellow,
shows that it is common for girls
to engage in transactional sex or
seek out a boyfriend to help pay
for pads or other needs, like school
fees. If a girl becomes pregnant, it
is likely she will drop out of school
ever for.

According to the research, for
every 10 pupils who join Primary
One, only about three make it to
Primary Seven. Of the three in
Primary Seven, most of the time, it
is just about one girl.

Gloria Drakamute, a senior
woman teacher in one of the
schools assessed, says it was
common for girls to absent
themselves from school every time
they were in their periods.

This, she says, was because of
the high poverty rates in some of
the villages. The parents could not
afford the cost of disposable pads.

“A packet of disposable pads
costs about shs3,500. So, buying
them every month is too expensive.
Some parents can afford, but
because they believe that
menstruation is an abomination
and therefore should not be talked
about in public, hence girls suffer
silently,” she says.

Another senior woman teacher,
Lovina Audrey Wankya, from
Achilet Primary School, says rather
than risk the embarrassment of
soiling their dresses in the eyes
of their peers or the discomfort of
sitting in class all day with sweaters
wrapped around their waists and
dirty rags tucked in their panties,
many girls choose to stay home.

She adds that later, the girls
would return to school, claiming
that they were sick.

According to Wankya, one of
the senior women teachers who
was trained, she made sure that
she mobilised girls in groups and
started training them on how to
make re-usable sanitary pads. She
also involved boys because they
were the ones who were mocking
girls whenever they were in their
periods.

According to her, unlike the
disposable pads that can only be
used once, re-usable ones can be
used for a period of one year, if they
are maintained hygienically. She
revealed that today, boys no longer
mock girls, instead they support
them.

The boys also help with collecting
water for the girls, such that they

This absenteeism often led to
a decline in their performance.
Eventually, many would drop out
of school, increasing the likelihood
of them getting pregnant or getting
married at an early age;” she
explains.

She adds that because they are
unable to afford proper sanitary
pads, many girls resort to other
inappropriate materials, like old
clothing, toilet paper and banana
fibre, to absorb the menstrual flow.

Plan support

However, to try to solve part of
this challenge in schools, Plan
International Uganda, with funding
from National Post Lottery through
Plan International, the Netherlands
decided to train girls on how to
make re-usable sanitary pads.

Also in partnership with Afripads,
a private sector organisation, which
deals in factory made reusable pads,
the “So Sure” pads were distributed
to some schools, sales agents within
communities and shops.

The aim of this was to increase
access to hygienic and affordable
sanitary pads to girls in schools,
so that they manage menstruation
with dignity and attend school, even
during the menstrual period.

In 2014, Plan International Uganda,
invited senior women teachers from
selected schools in the districts of
Kamuli, Tororo and Lira, who
underwent a training
on menstrual hygiene and making
reusable sanitary pads. After
the training, they were supported
with some materials for the start, to roll
out the training to other pupils in
schools.

According to Wankya, one of
the senior women teachers who
was trained, she made sure that
she mobilised girls in groups and
started training them on how to
make re-usable sanitary pads. She

A drama group using community theatre to raise awareness about the folly of stigmatising girls who are going through their menstrual periods. Photos by Andrew Masinde
Plan International has also supported the construction of gender-friendly latrines in schools.

**Boys and parents join drive**

Fred, not real name, a pupil in Primary Six at Achilet Primary School, said before the trainings, he did not know that they are supposed to support their sisters and girls.

He says most times, he used to laugh at girls who were in their periods. However, after the training, he supports them by offering to train other girls in making reusable sanitary pads, a skill he learnt after attending the training. He says nowadays, both parents make reusable pads for their children and the surplus, they sell to others who cannot afford disposable pads.

Thirty-year-old Harriet Lugose, a resident of Achilet A village in Tororo district, says before the community was introduced to making reusable sanitary pads, they would spend a lot of money on buying disposable pads. According to her, this was not sustainable, hence many parents ended up failing to buy pads for their daughters.

However, after receiving the training, parents now make pads for their girls and also make some for sale.

"Plan International greatly helped us because girls were dropping out of school, because of lack of pads," she says.

Since 2014, Plan International Uganda has been conducting training for senior women teachers on menstrual hygiene management and making reusable pads. Initially, Plan International Uganda, in partnership with Days for Girls, a not-for-profit organisation, conducted a training of trainers for a select group comprising teachers, nurses and health educators, who in turn have been training other teachers and pupils in schools.

To date, about 198 schools have benefitted from the trainings, mainly targeting school health clubs and senior women teachers. Over 80 senior woman teachers and education activists have been trained as trainer of trainers in making menstrual hygiene management.

Through peer-to-peer approaches, such as drama, debates and health awareness sessions, these clubs continue to pass on the knowledge and skills to other children within the schools.

Justine Nakwala, the communications manager at Plan International Uganda, says it was expensive to keep on buying disposable pads for the girls.

"That is why we decided that they make reusable pads for themselves, such that they do not depend on donations. This has worked wonders," she says.

Nakwala says besides making pads, Plan International also had a mission to empower women and girls and the community at large, through business, innovation and opportunity.

"We want girls in school to complete their studies," she says. She adds that despite free access to primary education in Uganda, still many rural girls absent themselves from school, during their menstrual period.

"This is a big barrier to the academic performance of the girl-child, her retention in school and her ability to achieve secondary and tertiary education," she says. Nakwala says with the introduction of the re-usable pads, many girls now have access to a product that allows them to manage their periods effectively and hygienically.

"They are no longer disturbed by the discomfort and infections, uninhibited by the humiliation that previously kept them out of the classroom," she says.

Joyce Shilla Adong, a P6 pupil at Nyem Nyem Primary School in Tororo district, says before the menstrual hygiene management project, she faced many challenges whenever she was in her periods.

Since her parents could not afford pads all the time, this meant she had to miss school whenever she was in her periods.

"I used to perform poorly in class because I would absent myself from school for up to a week, during my menstrual period. When Plan International Uganda introduced the making of reusable pads in our school, that changed," she says. She adds that since being introduced, she has no more problems of being absent from school.

"I can now make them for myself and also for my siblings. My father sometimes gives me some money for buying materials and the training is done by our senior woman teachers," Adong says.

She says they were taught how to use the pads, how to clean and keep them safe so that she does not contract diseases, as a result of poor hygiene. Since then, she stopped dodging school. She now offers support to other girls in her community on how to make and use reusable pads.

**Benefits of the pads**

Juliet Athieno, the senior woman teacher of Nyem Nyem Primary School, says the pads have improved on the retention of the girls in the school.

"We could have at least two to five girls absenting themselves for at least four days. No teacher has time to offer remedial lessons for absentees. This meant that catching up would be hard for these girls. Today, there is no excuse, girls can make their own pads and readily made reusable ones like “So Sure” are available,” Athieno says.

"Some girls have introduced the project to their parents who are making big money from them," she stresses.

Sarah, a Primary Seven pupil, says, after learning how to make reusable pads, she introduced the idea to her mother, who is a tailor. The mother now makes them for sale. She says her mother uses the money from the sale of sanitary pads to buy scholastic materials for her and her siblings.

**How it is made**

According to Wankya, the pads are made using cotton cloth and a piece of soft blanket that is inserted in the middle of the cloth to absorb the menstrual flow. A piece of polythene paper is then inserted at the base of the soft blanket, to stop any flow, just in case it escapes through. The pad is then sewn with a needle and threads, before putting press buttons that are used to hold the pad onto the knicker.

The pad has a part called a hot zone, which absorbs blood and then the pockets, where the hot zone is isolated, leaving the middle white zone exposed. The pocket also has wings where the press buttons are placed and they are used to hold the pad on the knickers.

"The pad is made using soft materials. It is for this reason that the pads are comfortable. They have no chemicals added to preserve them. It is just natural material," Wankya explains.

She further explains that the pad is made in such a way that when it is full, it is removed carefully and after, soaked and washed. Then dried under the sun. The pad is also supposed to be ironed to kill all bacteria.

"All that the girls need are four pieces of reusable pads for a full year. The pads are very healthy if the user follows the right procedures. We always teach the girls to keep the pads in a place where the user will not forgot about them. We give them the technical support and the rest is by parents and the school.

The project also supports infrastructural developments within target schools, such as the construction of gender-friendly latrines for girls. These latrines have washrooms to meet the specific needs of the girls during menstrual periods.

NEW VISION, Tuesday, May 28, 2019
Keeping refugee girls in school

By Andrew Masinde

G

race, not real

name, is a P5 pupil at Ayilo II Primary School in Adjumani district. Grace says whenever it was her menstruation period, she would go back home, simply for fear of being mocked by her schoolmates, especially boys. Her parents, who are refugees from South Sudan, are unemployed, so they could not afford to buy her sanitary towels.

Whenever Muzalifa went to school without the pads, she could not play or even walk around.

"I was always forced to stay home and rip off some piece of cloth to use," she says.

Asbenteemis

Alice Victorta Vaka, the senior woman teacher at Barakala Seed Secondary School, says many students used to miss school every time they were in their periods. She says some parents could not afford to buy pads because they are expensive, while others were just not bothered.

"Menstruation was looked at as something that was secret. Therefore, anyone who was in her periods had to stay home," she says.

Vaka explains that being refugees, her parents depend on food rations. Therefore, getting money for buying pads is a challenge. "This was affecting many pupils, because they would miss lessons for days. It would be hard for them to catch up with other students," she says.

One parent who preferred anonymity said as the Dinka tribe in South Sudan, blood is regarded as a normal and natural thing.

That is why it is a taboo for them to wash the pads in water, to remove the blood. It is for the same reason why many refugee girls were shunning re-usable pads.

"If you use the pad, you are supposed to clean it in water, I see the blood. I am not used to seeing blood in my culture," said one of the girls in the refugee settlement.

According to Hamid Amin, a headteacher in Barakala, the fear is shared among Ugandans and refugees alike, resulting into many of them not wanting to use the re-usable pads.

"Instead, they buy disposable pads or they decide to stay at home, until they are through with the periods," she says.

This continued until last year, when Plan International Uganda, with funding from Global Affairs, started distributing both re-usable and disposable sanitary pads to over 2,000 girls in 10 schools both in refugee communities and among the host community schools, in the Bidibidi zone 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Mary Maliko, a case management officer at Plan International Uganda, says the girls in refugee settlements and those in host communities, were suffering a lot, hence necessitating an urgent solution. She explains that the programme was mainly to benefit girls between 12 and 24 years.

"In co-ordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/the Office of the Prime Minister and the WASH partners, Plan International has distributed over 5,000 re-usable and low-cost sanitary towels to girls both in the host and the refugee community schools.

"The re-usable sanitary pads support girls to continue with their studies during their periods. The girls now have a sustainable method to handle their menstruation," Maliko says.

Anita (not real name) adds that re-usable pads are cheaper than disposable ones because they can be used again. The intervention, she says, has greatly improved on her school attendance and performance.

She further says that with the knowledge and skills acquired from the training of re-usable pads, she can now make re-usable sanitary pads with the available resources for her sisters and her classmates, who cannot afford to buy disposable pads.

Grace says because of the sanitary pads, she no longer has to stay at home during school time, because of menstruation periods and urged other girls to embrace menstruation as a normal and natural thing.

Maliko points out that progress is being realised as Ugandan and South Sudanese girls learn more about menstruation and gain better access to affordable and effective methods of handling their periods. She requested parents and guardians to support girls during menstruation, since in some communities, parents shun talking about it.

"With support from donor agencies, we are continuing to support the girls with both re-usable and disposable sanitary pads, to ensure that menstruation does not become a barrier to their education." Maliko explains that the pads are made using cotton material, with a baby plastic/baby urine mat that is inserted in the middle of the cloth, sewn using a needle and threads, before putting press buttons that are used to hold the pad onto the knickers.

The pad has a part called a hot zone, which absorbs blood and then the pockets, where the hot zone is inserted, leaving the middle white zone exposed. The pocket also has wings were the press buttons are fitted and they are used to hold the pad on the knickers.

"The pad is made using soft materials that is why they are very comfortable. They have no chemicals added to preserve them. It is just natural material," she explains.

Jilda, a senior woman teacher, adds that a metre for the cotton material goes for approximately sh12,000 and a metre of tetrone used to make the pockets is about sh15,000. A metre of polythen/baby urine mats goes for sh13,000 and all the materials.

To make six pieces of the re-usable handmade pad, one will use one metre of Poplene, half metre of Tetrone, one metre of baby urine mats/baby plastic, two metres of baby blanket and six middle-sized buttons.

"We give them the technical support and the rest is done by parents and the students," she says.

The project also supports infrastructural developments within target schools, such as construction of classrooms, incinerators, dormitories, staff houses and VIP latrines.

Maliko added that the menstrual challenge is one of the many causes of school dropouts and early marriages/pregnancies in Uganda.

You and I can do something to curb these vices. The time is now. Are you ready to start the journey?