

## Washing the pads clean requires a lot of water

By Caroline Ariba

It was a task alright, but a welcome one. Instead of the disposable sanitary pads, I would try out the re-usable pads. This was to see if indeed the re-usable pad, an option often suggested to Uganda's needy girls, was the better one. It is after all what many call the cost-effective choice.

I had to have an open mind, as I latched onto the packet of two pads: for the day and night. The pads, pink and bigger in size each had a button (some have strings) to be fastened. If hygiene is what they were going for, the colour pink, was indeed the perfect choice.

The pad, also a cotton-wool-like fabric, had just the perfect fluffiness to erode any discomfort. In fact, day one was child's play; it felt like sleeping in clean sheets, all the flow got sucked in. But that was day one, or the beginning of day one.

These pads, I would soon learn, are not meant for a hot day, especially if it is a heavy flow. It might have been psychological, but four hours later, I started to feel like I reeked of blood. Maybe the chemicals in the disposable pads often camouflaged this; maybe it was all in my head. "At-least these are chemical-free," I told myself. I decided it was all in my head and soldiered on, at least for the next four or so hours.

"What if I was a school girl in Uganda's average 150-student-classroom?" I wondered. What if it felt like I reeked of fresh blood and had to stay squashed in a tiny space with all these people?

That worry would soon be gone, as I started to feel the friction of the pad against my skin. It was not pleasant, but it felt like something was clinging onto me, and just a little bit uncomfortable.

I will not deny there were times it felt like the whole pad bunched up in the middle and that it might fall off. In fact, when I checked, I found that the centre of the pad had twisted to the side and I had to re-position it. Sometimes it felt like it was poking from the back as I walked and feared to walk past anyone. That too, I would soon learn was in my head! Despite this, I did not stain anything, in-fact, the pads are reliable in that regard.

The biggest problem came with washing! It was half a basin of water, another half, then another and another, before the blood faded out. It took an equivalent of a 20 litre-jerrycan of water to wash out all the blood.

Then came the task of rinsing the soap off the cotton, to ensure it was chemical-free and safe for the next use. That took about 10 litres, and that was after being extremely economically. It could have passed with less, but it did not feel clean enough, or free of the soap chemicals that experts warn are not safe for female hygiene.

It got me thinking of Uganda's rural girls, with a water per-capita of about 12 litres. Would that pad have been washed clean? What if it was a dark coloured fabric, will it not be hanged to dry reeking of blood? How on earth could she sustain this washing for nearly one week?

Even though the Uganda Bureau of Statistics states that seven of every 10 rural households have access to clean water, what about 3-5km trek to fetch it?

Not that washing pads is their only worry, no! Water and sanitation advocate, The Water Project, recently found that in 70% of households in 45 developing countries, women and girls are responsible for water collection. How many trips to the water source would those be? If they want through half the cramps and body weakness I endure every month, how will they fetch that much water? How would they even manage that distance?

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What about those that have to pay sh200 to access water in urban areas? Who will buy the excess jerrycan for them? What if the period came during a water shortage when jerrycans go for up to sh500? What if this girl came from the 19% living on less than a dollar a day?

"This is the better option," I told myself. The average price of disposable sanitary pads is about sh3,000 and yet these could cost about the same and yet could be re-used.

As I hanged my pad out to dry, the look from the neighbours was disturbing. Those who recognised it, found it disturbing and I noticed no one wanted to hang anything next to that spot. But that was the only place that had the amount of sunshine I needed to dry the pad and keep any and all bacteria away.

How many teenagers can do that, I mean how many do care what the neighbours would think? What if it rained, would it dry in time for the next use? What a challenge fellow girls go through, with the only available solution of the re-usable sanitary pads!