

Reusable pads: An option for keeping girls in school

Menstruation is a big issue affecting many school-going girls causing some to drop out of school in worst case scenarios. One solution is for girls to acquire reusable pads that are affordable and can last a long time.

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Every child has a right to education but lack of safe menstrual hygiene solutions are often a barrier to many girls especially in the rural areas where some families cannot afford to buy sanitary pads every month.

As a result, some girls drop out of school when they start menstruating because they have no pads.

In some schools, some girls wrap a sweater around their waist during their period because often they are teased when their uniforms get soiled with blood and this is one of the most embarrassing moments, according to Benaleta Namata, a pupil at Bwesa Primary School in Kalungu District.

"We usually use old clothes as pads but they easily get soaked so the uniform gets stained. You would not want such an embarrassment to happen, so you stay home," she says.

This is what majority of menstruating girls in rural Ugandan schools face every month. A girl who misses school for about four days a month will perform poorly, get frustrated and eventually drop out of school.

No money for pads

Last year, Education minister Janet Museveni while appearing before Parliament's Education Committee, told Members of Parliament that government did not have money to provide sanitary pads for school-going girls as had been promised by President Museveni during his campaigns in 2016.

But menstruation is not a onetime occurrence and a packet of pads on average costs Shs4,500 which most rural families may not afford, there is need for a permanent solution.

According to Ann Nakabiri, an activist at Remnant Generation, involving boys to nurture girls is very important.

"It would be very productive if the boys are sensitised on the matter so that they can understand that menstruation is a normal and natural happening for the girls. This would bring



Pupils of Oci Primary School in Ajla Sub-county display their locally-made sanitary pads at their school recently.
PHOTO BY CLEMENT ALUMA

them to stop scorning menstruating girls," she says.

Finding a solution

Last year, gender activist and Makerere University researcher, Dr Stella Nyanzi, started the Pads4GirlsUg campaign to advocate for school-going girls to be given free sanitary towels. She used her Facebook page to collect donations of sanitary towels. The cause has however been shelved.

In 2008, Dr Moses Kizza Musaazi of Makerere University came up with a way to make affordable sanitary pads from papyrus reeds which are now widely on the market. Dr Musaazi now helps girls and women in refugee camps in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement (Kyegegwa District) produce MakaPads all of which are bought by UNHCR for distribution to all refugee women and girls throughout Uganda.

Hygiene

Although some question the cleanliness of reusable pads, Dr John Mulwanya, a gynaecologist in Kayunga Hospital, says, "Reusable pads are safe if properly washed with soap and plenty of water then dried in under the sun."

Sometimes women are disgusted by washing blood but Janet Khakasa, a Senior Four student at Nabisunsa Girls' School, says she does not find any problem with washing her own blood. She singles out the 'So Sure Pads' which she has used for about two years.

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AMOUNT IN SHILLINGS THAT A PAIR OF REUSABLE SANITARY PADS COSTS.

A student needs three pairs of reusable pads which can be used for more than a year. The pads are able to hold for up to eight hours for normal flow and have a storage bag where I can comfortably keep a used one.

"Washing my pads was uncomfortable at first because I am in a boarding school and I feared what other students would say since most have disposable pads. After some time, I was convinced that my parents were saving on this and I felt free to wash the pads. Actually they do not take long to dry," says Khakasa.

A pair of So Sure reusable sanitary pads goes for Shs7,000 and according to Gertrude Emojong of Afripads there are no chemicals added in their manufacture. "The reusable pads are a great relief to the parents because buying the monthly disposables will cost about Shs4,500 a packet. The reusable pads last for more than a year," says Emojong.

Some people think washing menstrual blood is disgusting but just like washing a soiled panty or sheet, and you have to wash it, so are the reusable pads.

CAMPAIGNS

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