



To mark the International Women's Day, *New Vision* will profile individuals and community-based organisations that are transforming women's and girls' lives.

When Mary Obele conceived the idea of making reusable pads for school girls in 2014, she did not know that it would spread beyond Busia, writes Egessa Hajusu

Obele uses reusable pads to keep Busia girls in school

In the small village of Buyengo in Dabani sub-county, Busia district, lives a woman who has drastically changed lives of many girls. Her name is Mary Obele.

For years, Buyengo village and the neighbouring areas have been dogged by domestic violence and school dropouts, especially girls.

According to Sowali Kamulya, the Bukedi regional Police spokesperson, Busia and Pallisa district top in domestic violence in the sub-region. He says on average, four cases of domestic violence are reported to the Police daily. Last year, over 500 cases were reported in Busia alone.

Reason for dropouts

One of the reasons that keeps girls out of school is the stigma they suffer during menstruation.

Faced with such a situation, Obele who was the Buyengo village secretary for women affairs, teamed up with her children and started making reusable pads which they distributed to girls at no cost. The raw materials she used for making pads were hers and her children's clothes. With time, other women also started giving her cotton and contributing sh500 each to buy PVC papers (raw materials for making pads) from Kenya.

She was joined by three other women who would meet every afternoon and sit under a mango tree to make the reusable pads.

Obele, who had dropped out of school due to menstruation-related challenges, detests the same thing happening to school girls.

"I was fed up of being ridiculed because of menstrual challenges, so I dropped out of school," she says, adding that she wants to save school girls from ending up pregnant or in early marriages.

In the beginning, Obele did not have any training in making pads, but made them in a basic way using old fabrics.

Forming and organisation

One day, her son, Erick Omondi, a Uganda Red Cross Society volunteer, decided to research about the process of making reusable pads on the Internet. Using online information, Omondi trained himself and the group thereafter. He also started



Obele training pupils how to make reusable sanitary pads in Busia district. Photo by Egessa Hajusu

menstrual hygiene classes for girls and boys through the Alliance for Sustainable Health and Wealth in Africa (ASHWA), a community-based organisation, which has championed her dream.

"Menstrual hygiene is ASHWA's main focus," Obele says, adding that of 3,000 girls, women and boys in the districts of Busia, Namayingo, Jinja, Mukono, Entebbe as well as others from refugee camps in Pakwach and Yumbe have been trained in menstrual hygiene by ASHWA.

The trainings

The trainings, Obele says, provide people with detailed information on

menstruation. The boys are also told never to stigmatise girls in their periods.

According to Obele, they also train teachers and boys in upper primary classes. This, he notes, has enabled school girls to adequately prepare for menstruation.

The training has enabled many people to learn how to make pads using cotton, fleece and PVC paper.

The girls are taught how to manage their emotions and keep themselves clean during menstruation. They have also been taught how to wash and dry the pads.

The free distribution of pads to school girls has reduced the rate of absenteeism and saved

girls from early marriages.

Omondi, who is the executive director of ASHWA, says although the problem has not been completely solved, there has been a mindset change.

He says fathers in the area nowadays buy pads for their daughters. Menstrual hygiene which could not openly be discussed is now talked about freely.

Unique intervention

According to Omondi, ASHWA has achieved a lot without any external help. It raises funds from volunteers to make pads and give them to school girls and women at no cost.

He says the pads have reached almost every

FACT BOX

- Lack of pads during menstruation is one of the leading causes of school dropouts among girls in Uganda.
- Lack of pads exposes school girls to unscrupulous men who lure them into sex using money. Many are defiled as a result.

household in the district and changed lives positively.

Obele says menstruation hygiene should be everybody's responsibility. She says every young girl in the country should be taught how to make reusable pads.

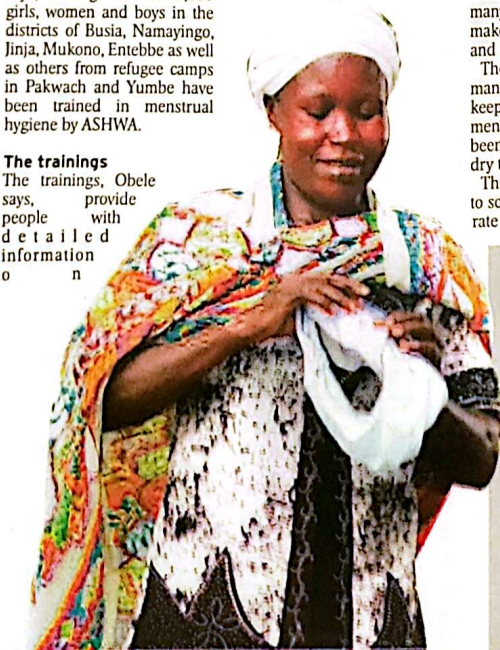
Best moment

The group's best moment came in close contact with President Yoweri Museveni when he visited their district during the National Population Day celebrations in 2014. The President and his aides to engage the girls and take their details.

Challenges

Obele says most schools lack hand washing and changing facilities. Most girls in the area use bushes and pit latrine change pads, which expose them to infections.

Obele says she sometimes feels bad when she cannot buy pads to every girl due to the group's capacity. The group has to use the little money collected from volunteers to buy raw materials, transport and distribute the pads. She says the group needs a machine to make more



Obele notes seeing girls drop out of school because of lack of sanitary pads

What residents say about Obele

Mary Ajambo, teacher at Buyengo Primary School

The supply of free pads in schools has improved the performance of girls and their relationship with teachers, especially when it comes to menstrual issues. Girls talk to their teachers whenever they are faced with menstrual challenges.

Florence Taaka, a teacher at Main Focus Primary School

The number of girls who passed last year's Primary Leaving Examinations in division 1 and 2 doubled and one of the reasons was the provision pads. Pads give girls a peace of mind in class. The free pads also protect girls from men-

struation which would have given them money to buy them.

Innocent Oluka, senior teacher

Training has made boys and male teachers respect and support girls which has reduced stigma in school.

Wilberforce Namwamba, senior education officer Busia

The district is still grappling with how to retain girls in school although ASHWA is helping to solve the problem. Menstruation is one of the reasons girls drop out of school. Any slight which affects the dignity of the girls is enough to make that child to drop out of school.