

Need to make access to sanitary pads a right

To many girls across the country, access to sanitary towels is a luxury, thus making their menstruation periods a nightmare.

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Musa Bukenya looks at me lazily as we delve into a number of issues related to the girl child.

But between the conversation, I am drawn to a feeling of agitation that rotates around a laissez-faire attitude with which government handles girl-child issues that ought to be handled better.

His is a focused concern, especially of an age-old dilemma - lack of sanitary towels - that continues to be a problem for young girls across Uganda.

For instance, he points out that the campaign pledge where President Museveni promised to distribute free sanitary towels to school girls should be expeditiously handled to save young girls the agony of what to many passes for a torturous menstrual cycle.

Beyond the campaign pledge, Bukenya, 32, a journalist by training feels that citizens must get involved to mitigate an age-old problem and it is from here that he is distributing free sanitary towels to disadvantaged primary school girls in the district of Amuru, Nwoya, and Omoro in northern Uganda.

"I feel I have been part of finding a solution for this issue but I got shocked when this matter became a big campaign factor reaching to an extent of becoming a presidential pledge," he says.

Human right

Access to sanitary towels, Bukenya says, is not a privilege but rather a human right that every woman must enjoy because the lack of it has the potential to not only cause diseases but have long term societal effects.

"I cannot watch young girls drop out of school because they lack sanitary towels," he says, stressing that a number of young girls drop out or miss school because of failure to handle menstrual periods.

The menstrual cycle, especially among young girls comes with stigma and the failure to properly handle it can be a source of animosity which might have long term implications.

Many blame this on poverty but Bukenya has reservations and emphasises that "we need to create awareness so that everyone gets it that sanitary towels are a necessity for young girls".

"We cannot continue to talk about gender equality if we don't handle this age-old issue," he says.

Bukenya draws his passion from circumstances under which his mother was killed by his step father in a domestic brawl when he was still a young boy in Rakai district.

Born in Rakai District, Bukenya narrates how his mother, Medinah Namayanja, was allegedly killed by his step-father.

"She (my mother) died because of domestic violence. I watched her die helplessly. So since then I have been



Bukenya hands over sanitary towels to pupils of Acet Primary School in Omoro District recently. PHOTOS BY CAROLINE AYUGI.

so drawn to women. That is why I try to help them where I can," he says.

Much of Bukenya's childhood was spent in Lugo Orphanage in Luwero District where he would vend ground nuts to pay school fees for his primary and secondary school education.

At university, Bukenya sold second hand clothes in Owino Market to raise tuition to pay for his diploma in journalism.

In 2005, while working with Star FM, he was deployed to work on a story in northern Uganda in an Internally Displaced Persons camp and the situation dismayed him.

The suffering of such women, he says, triggered memories of his mother which prompted him to set

Future plans

Although the organisation is facing challenges in regard to financing, there plans to widen the scope of support to at least five schools in Omoro, Gulu, Amuru and Nwoya districts in the next financial year.

The organisation also plans to liaise with sub-county authorities with a plan to set up plants in different sub-counties as well as training girls on how to make sanitary towels for easy access.

Also, there are plans to develop adult literacy programmes, micro loans and establishing access to women justice centre to develop women leadership programmes. Through this, Bukenya, believes, women, if there is focused and resilient programming, are likely to benefit and is a channel through which they can be empowered.



Bukenya displays some of the sanitary towels that are made under the project.

up a non-governmental organisation through which he would help to uplift the girl child in Uganda.

Through this NGO, Voluntary Action Network (Van), Bukenya planned ways to reach out to rural women by offering socio economic leadership and education programmes to empower them.

He started out with volunteer programmes where he would train women to make paper beads and it is from here that he was connected to a number of organisations such as

Women's Global Empowerment Fund that has since 2009 supported his activities.

In 2014, Van was recognised by Barclays Bank Uganda for uplifting the life of rural women in northern Uganda and the cash award was injected in research under the Healthy Periods Initiative (HPI) project.

The HPI project, which makes sanitary towels, has been running for one year and is currently at research and testing level but with low capacity production.

The sanitary towels named 'Lucky Girl' are made of fluff pulp and polythene and are produced in 60 packs with each containing eight pieces.

Sixty per cent of the towels are given to school girls in Olwal Primary School in Amuru District, Anaka Primary School in Nwoya District, Acet and Lapiny-Oloyo Primary schools in Omoro District.

Some of the products, which make up about 40 per cent, are sold in bulk to SOS Children's Villages in Gulu, a charity programme that looks after orphans and disadvantaged children.

What beneficiaries say

Josephine Aling, a senior woman teacher at Acet Primary School has been a beneficiary and says the project has helped a number of girls to stay in school with relative comfort.

"Since the introduction of the project we have had minimal complaints of girls soiling their uniforms because we give them sanitary towels on a monthly basis and to cater for any emergencies," he says.

Agenorwot Naume, 16, a Primary Six pupil at Acet Primary School is another beneficiary who has since said goodbye to homemade sanitary pads (made of cloth) that her mother used to make for her.

"I used to use folded pieces of clothes," she says, highlighting the difficult that young girls have to bear during menstrual periods.

The programmes, according to Roseline Okumu, the Acet Primary School head teacher, has saved them a lot of trouble and there is minimal absenteeism.

However, this has not been without challenge as many people are yet to get trust in the product.

"People here take long to believe in things made by Ugandans. Much as you may have a quality and cost effective product, they don't believe that anything good can be made here," he says. Additionally, taxes on imported raw materials are high, which makes it next to impossible to make a low cost product.

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BUKENYA'S AGE. HE FEELS THAT ISSUES OF THE GIRL CHILD HAVE BEEN TREATED LIGHTLY.