

EDITORIAL

Let's borrow a leaf from Kenya on sanitary pads

Kenya, like Uganda a year ago, is in the election season and is expected to go to the polls on August 8 to elect a new president. In the midst of a very busy and hectic campaign period, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta last week signed into law amendments to the country's education act which among other things require that "free, sufficient and quality sanitary towels" must be provided to every girl registered at school, as well as providing "a safe and environmental sound mechanism for disposal".

The issue:

Sanitary pads for school girls.

Our view:

Several proposals and calls have been made to ensure that Ugandan girls go to school without the interruptions of the menstrual cycle such as government partnering with manufacturers to provide "free" or "low cost" alternatives.

More than 10 years ago, Kenya scrapped taxes on sanitary products in an effort to make them more affordable but even this move was not sufficient. Women and girls still find them expensive, which implies they are kept away from school.

One can easily, and partly, correctly so, argue that Mr Kenyatta's decision to sign into law provisions was politically motivated and has nothing to do with his caring for the plight of the girl child. Other arguments are that the law will not be implemented or it is very expensive for a country like Uganda with other urgent priorities.

But of what good is politics without principles, without service delivery and keeping promises?

Past studies, however, show "dropout and low completion rates for girls persist in Uganda, and absenteeism and quality of education are being affected by the start of menstruation, a lack of ability to manage it, as well as other issues related to puberty. To foster gender equality and accelerate girls' full and equal participation and retention in primary schools."

While campaigning in 2015, President Museveni promised that his government would give free sanitary pads to adolescent girls.

However, the First Lady Janet Museveni, who is also the Education minister, told Parliament early this year that government does not have the money to fulfill the pledge; triggering criticism from Opposition politicians and some civil society organisations. Angered by the "betrayal" Makerere University researcher Dr Stella Nyanzi used social media to attack the First Family which has since landed her in legal battles with the state.

Uganda does not necessarily have to do what Kenya has done but overtime, several proposals and calls have been made to ensure that Ugandan girls go to school without the interruptions of the menstrual cycle such as government partnering with manufacturers and scientists to provide "free" or "low cost" alternatives.

Alternatively, like in Kenya, a bill can be drafted, debated, passed and signed into law to bring to life President Museveni's promise in the best way possible.

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