



POLICY BRIEF

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS IN KARAMOJA AND TESO REGIONS; WHY DUTY BEARERS MUST CARE

September 2024

Summary

Menstrual hygiene management remains a public health concern for most women and girls in Karamoja and Teso Regions. It remains underacknowledged because it has not received the attention it deserves as it is often seen as a private matter that is seldom discussed openly, hence making it difficult for women and girls to manage their periodsⁱ. Achieving good menstrual health is not just a matter of ensuring access to menstrual products but also relies on individuals having the resources they need to participate fully in all spheres of life during their menstrual cycle. These resources include, but are not limited to, accurate information, sanitation facilities, supportive environments and accessible health-care workers trained in menstrual health disorders. Unfortunately, for most women and girls in these regions, accessing these services is still a nightmare.

Menstruation alone is still considered a taboo in the said communities. Traditions and social norms have taken center stage in creating rules that dictate managing menstruation and interacting with menstruating women. These norms usually associate menstruation to impurity which leads to shame, embarrassment and seclusion of women and girls during the cycle. During menstruation, women and girls are often isolated from social interactions, a norm that restricts their mobility. They are identified by a certain style of dressing (uniquely dull-colored thick skirts), and continue to face the challenge of finding materials (sanitary products) that could absorb the blood, compelling them to use dirty rags or thick skirts to reduce the chances of being soiled and noticed with bloodⁱⁱ.

ⁱ Kishoin Esther Elzy and others Assessment of Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Karamojong Adolescent girls in Rupa Sub-County, Moroto District, 2017

ⁱⁱ D. Heikel (UK), A. S. Irumba, et al local action with international cooperation to improve and sustain water, sanitation and hygiene services; Lessons learnt on the implementation of menstrual hygiene management in Karamoja, 2017

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Introduction

Uganda is one of the countries with the fastest-growing populations in the world, with a significant proportion being young people. Adolescent girls and young women living in rural settings of Uganda engage in unsafe menstrual hygiene practices. This is mostly attributed to limited access to appropriate menstrual products leaving them to rely on crude methods like old clothing, leaves, soil and banana fibers to manage their menstruationⁱⁱⁱ. Insufficient knowledge and skills regarding menstrual hygiene management have been linked to a negative impact on school attendance, quality of life, and enjoyment of learning for girls^{iv}, if not addressed.

Despite the above, in 2015, the Ministry of Education and Sports introduced its “Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter,” designed to halt the trend of girls dropping out of school at the onset of menstruation. In this charter, the Ministry acknowledged that menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is fundamental to the dignity and well-being of girls and women and committed to establishing a National Menstrual Hygiene Steering Committee that would be responsible for the effective coordination of MHM policies and programmes in the country^v.

Furthermore, in 2022, The Ugandan Parliament passed the Value Added Tax (Amendment) Act that exempts excise duty tax on raw materials used for menstrual products. Specifically, the Act removes tax on “the supply of sanitary towels,

iii Supra

iv supra

v Ministry of education and sports- Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter, May 2015

menstrual cups, tampons and the inputs for their manufacture^{vi}. While discussing this in parliament, Members of Parliament noted that, the exemption was meant to reduce the cost of sanitary pads and offer relief to girls especially those in rural schools who miss or drop out of school because they cannot afford the sanitary wear^{vii}.

Context

Over the past two years, with financial support from Welthungerhilfe, the Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), Straight Talk Foundation (STF) and Kiyita Family Alliance for Development (KIFAD) have been in Karamoja and Teso regions, specifically in the districts of Moroto, Napak, Amuria and Katakwi implementing a project titled Grow together, Straight talk foundation (STF) and Kiyita Family Alliance for Development (KIFAD) worked directly in communities of Karamoja and Teso regions respectively, while CEHURD focused mainly on the national level advocacy. The major aim of the project was to enable Women and Girls to articulate demands on sub-national and national levels. While implementing the project, several issues were noted that affect the realization of the right to health for mostly girls and women, which issues require urgent attention. The issues were raised through dialogues and sensitizations held by KIFAD and STF in the communities.

This policy brief provides an overview of key findings from these engagements and offers targeted recommendations to improve menstrual hygiene management among women and girls in Karamoja and Teso regions.

vi Value added tax (amendment) Act, 2022.

vii <https://www.independent.co.ug/committee-approves-tax-exemption-on-sanitary-pad-raw-materials/>

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Access to menstrual products:** Within the region, women and girls fail to access menstrual products while in their menstrual cycles. These, remain expensive to access, with pricing ranging between 2500/ to 10,000/-. Alternatively, women and girls resort to unhygienic methods, such as using soil wrapped in plastic bags or old, dirty skirts during menstruation.
- 2. Access to safe spaces during menstruation:** Schools in the Karamoja region lack sufficient facilities to support girls during their menstrual periods. These include access to clean water, disposal facilities, and safe spaces where girls can change and store their reusable

sanitary pads. It was noted that girls need comprehensive menstrual hygiene management and reproductive health education across schools. Currently, only girls in schools reached by partners have information on MHM.

3. **Menstruation is a taboo:** Cultural myths surrounding menstruation in the Karamoja region negatively affect the self-esteem of girls and women, leading to a loss of confidence and feelings of shame, embarrassment, and isolation during their menstrual cycles. In the region, for example, menstruating girls and women are prohibited from entering a kraal (cattle yard) as it is believed that their presence will cause the cows to become infertile. They are also barred from interacting with people during cultural rituals, as contact with them is thought to make others “unclean.” They are also not allowed to visit gardens during their period, as it is believed that their presence will cause the crops to wither.
4. **Absenteeism from schools:** Within the communities of Losikit and Katuyang in Napak, and Amoru and Obwokwomor in Katakwi, we noted that girls have continued to stay home during school days, especially during their menstrual period. This is because they lack resources and information to help them maneuver through the period. Given that there are 220 learning days in a year, on average girls could miss up to 11% of the learning days due to menstrual periods. This has a significant impact on girls’ school performance and overall well-being, potentially leading to increased dropout rates among girls.
5. **Early marriages/ teenage pregnancies:** Most of the young women who dropped out of school ended up in early marriages or with unwanted teenage pregnancies which raises the risks of maternal mortality and morbidities.
6. **Sexual exploitation, in exchange for pads:** We have observed that, due to poverty in the region, girls are being exploited by men who promise to buy them pads in exchange for favors. Poverty limits their ability to access information, and healthcare and increases their susceptibility to exploitation and abuse.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Investment in local production of menstrual products:** There is an urgent need for the Ugandan government to invest in local production of menstrual products. This will necessitate the government with the leadership of the Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and Ministry for Gender, Labor and Social Development, and members of Parliament to develop an investment case for Uganda on local production of menstrual hygiene products. We recommend that this investment case be piloted in the regions of Karamoja and Teso and later rolled out in other districts. This will help women and girls have timely access to free sanitary wear, information on usage and disposal, build their self-esteem and keep in school.
2. **Consider a policy on the establishment of safe spaces and incinerators in schools:** The Ministry of Education should put in place a policy on the establishment of Safe spaces and incinerators in schools; Construct boreholes in schools to allow girls access to clean water; Train school wardens on MHM; Promote programs that train teachers to make reusable pads, empowering them to teach girls in schools how to produce and use these sustainable solutions; Subsidize prices for menstrual pads and caps; Together with Ministry of Gender and social

development expand programs on making reusable pads at community level and integrate training of women in making pad in community programs.

3. **Consider menstruation a matter of national importance:** We recommend the Members of Parliament representing these regions to consider discussing this issue as a matter of national importance on the floor of parliament, pass a resolution for local production of menstrual products and allocate a specific budget for the same.
4. **Subsidize the cost of menstrual hygiene products:** The government may consider entering into an understanding with companies producing menstrual products with a view of subsidizing the costs of these products further for the benefit of girls and women.
5. **Increased funding allocation for community engagements at local levels:** We recommend that Parliament and the Ministry of Finance consider increasing the budget allocated to community engagement at the district level. This will enable better coordination within local government structures to provide accurate information to communities about menstrual hygiene management. Addressing this will help dispel taboos surrounding menstruation, fostering greater acceptance of women during their menstrual cycles and enhancing their potential.
6. **Adopt a human rights-based approach for a comprehensive WASH in Schools plan:** The Ministry of Education and Sports may consider having a list of features that are fundamental to good menstrual hygiene management e.g. initiating toilets with secure locks for privacy / changing rooms for girls while in menstrual periods, availability of soap and water in toilets, a bin or incinerator for proper collection and disposal of used sanitary materials.

CONCLUSION

Unsafe menstrual hygiene practices, driven by age, low socio-economic status, and cultural beliefs, still exist among women and girls in the Karamoja and Teso regions. Providing support to ensure that women and girls live healthy, safe, unmolested, and dignified lives is paramount. A multi-stakeholder approach to the underlying issues discussed above is important if women and girls of Teso and Karamoja regions have to enjoy their right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health as well as the right to education.

REFERENCES

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3. Kishoin Esther Elzy and others Assessment of Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Karamojong Adolescent girls in Rupa Sub-County, Moroto District, 2017
4. Ministry of education and sports- Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter, May 2015
5. Value added tax (amendment) Act, 2022.