



Menstrual Management

Questions

Menstruation can be a source of fear and stress for young girls. According to UNICEF, one in ten Kenyan girls does not attend school during her period, and many girls drop out of school after the onset of menstruation because they lack materials to manage the flow of blood. To assist these girls, SWASH+ partners asked the question: What are the obstacles to effective menstrual management in schools in rural Kenya?

Research

Emory University conducted three focus group discussions with 24 female students in standard 7 and 8 in three rural schools. Students were asked how they felt about their periods and how they managed their periods. Researchers also conducted interviews with a health patron and schoolteacher on what behaviors they noticed in students during menstruation and whether or what measures the school had taken in response. Finally, a brief, impromptu discussion took place with approximately 53 parents regarding whether and how they talk about menstruation with their children.

Findings

Students were very eager in focus groups to discuss this topic.

Female students said *menstruation is best discussed with older sisters, a sister-in-law or best friend*. These women are most likely to explain how to use sanitary napkins and/or give money to purchase them.

Periods are not usually discussed with mothers, casual friends or teachers due to the culture of silence surrounding this topic. One teacher noted that mothers often point out that they had been given no instruction or materials for menstrual management and do not feel obligated to help their daughters. Complicating this situation, mothers were described as among the least supportive in terms of procuring sanitary napkins.

There are several methods reported by students for managing one's period and avoiding embarrassing situations. A common remedy is to stay at home, leave

school or drop out of school. Other coping mechanisms include wearing many layers of dark clothes. Girls added that when they have their periods they try to be the last person to leave a classroom in case their clothing is stained.

The most frequently-cited material used to absorb menstrual blood is cloth although it is not considered very effective. Blood often leaks through the cloth, a bloodied cloth can slip out of panties and fall on the ground and, finally, a bloodied cloth smells bad. Girls reported sanitary napkin use but also said that the napkins are sometimes unaffordable and unavailable.



Fear and shame are often cited as emotional responses to having one's period, particularly for the first time. "The girl with her period is the one to hang her head," said a standard 7 student in Kamunda, and another added: "Children and boys will make fun of her."

Confusion or misconceptions surround this topic. Several girls reported believing the myth that intimacy with boys during one's period leads to pregnancy. "Your parents may advise you not to be close to boys during your period," said a grade 7 student. "You may get pregnant."

Recommendations

These findings suggest that several actors can play an important role in menstrual management.

- Government: Raise the profile of menstruation as a barrier to education.
- Corporations: Open lines of communication with feminine hygiene product manufacturers to discuss their future role in sanitation facility provision and affordable hygiene products in menstrual management.
- Maternal Figures: Discuss menstrual management with daughters.
- School: Create gender-differentiated classes that discuss reproductive health (e.g. Gender-specific body changes).

Based on the **SWASH+ Final Impact Evaluation by Emory University's Center for Global Safe Water**.

SWASH+ is a five-year applied research project to identify, develop, and test innovative approaches to school-based water, sanitation and hygiene in Nyanza Province, Kenya. The current and previous partners of the SWASH+ consortium are CARE, Emory University, the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, the Government of Kenya, the Kenya Water for Health Organisation (KWAHO), and Water.org (formerly Water Partners). Visit us online at www.swashplus.org.