



Towards Sustainable Menstrual Health Management in Tanzania

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For any girl or woman in the world periods can be a struggle. In Tanzania, lack of hygiene products and potable water, sanitation facilities and waste collection systems, along with deeply rooted taboos makes the menstrual cycle even harder. Poor Menstrual Health Management in Africa has shown to impact both physical and mental health, school performance and attendance, and the environment – key factors relevant for achieving a number of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

What is Menstrual Health Management?

Menstrual Health Management (MHM) means giving women and adolescent girls clean menstrual management materials to absorb and collect blood, that can be changed in privacy, as often as necessary for the duration of the period, access to soap and water for washing the body as required and access to facilities to dispose of used materials.



Key Facts about Menstruation

Globally, on any given day, 300 million women and girls menstruate. In many parts of the world, menstruation and blood are seen as taboos and can cause menstrual shaming.

Many women and girls lack access to safe menstrual products

- Because of poverty and lack of access to commercial menstrual products, the majority of girls across rural Sub-Saharan Africa use traditional materials such as rags, old clothes, pieces of mattresses, pieces of cardboard and even leaves to absorb menstrual blood.
- In Tanzania, 91 % of rural shops do not sell disposable menstrual pads and even if they are available, buying them is stigmatised and culturally sensitive.

Menstruation impacts girls and womens' mobility and activity

- Cultural stigmas around menstruation limits what girls and women can and cannot do while menstruating. In rural Tanzania, restrictions prohibit menstruating girls from fetching water, cook, wash dishes, touch certain plants or pass through planted farms.

Menstruation impacts girls' school attendance and their opportunity for equal education

- More than 98 million girls are out of school across the world.
- In Tanzania 48 % of school girls miss school due to menstruation. This has negative repercussions on their educational performance.
- Girls often stay home on average 2-4 days during their period because of cramps, lack of access to safe menstrual products and embarrassment.
- Several studies indicate that girls are generally the best performing students in school but when they get their first period their academic performance often drops significantly.

Poor Menstrual Health Management impacts economic growth and development

- The World Bank estimates that limited education opportunities for adolescent girls cost countries over 30 trillion dollars in lost productivity and earnings.

Poor Menstrual Health Management leads to higher health and environmental risks

- Many schools have poor standard of toilets, and lack water and soap as well as bins for disposing used pads. This means that many girls cannot sustain their personal hygiene while at school and are forced to use their products longern – risking getting vaginal infections and contributing to environmental pollution from unsafe disposal methods.



Break the silence!

Raising awareness and educating girls and women as well as teachers, boys, brothers and husbands about menstruation is key for changing norms and attitudes. But knowledge is not enough, girls also need access to affordable, safe and sustainable menstrual products.

About the Study

In a Menstrual Health Management pilot study in 2017 researchers from Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS) and University of Dar es Salaam assessed the cultural acceptability and management challenges of different menstrual products among adolescent school girls in rural Tanzania. Together with the local organisation Maji Safi working in Shirati, in the region of Mara, a trial of three types of menstrual products were examined: the menstrual cup, disposable sanitary pads and washable fabric pads. Each product was tested for three months by three groups of 30 girls between 11 and 18. Prior to the trial a baseline of existing conditions and challenges facing girls, including a survey with 175 schoolgirls, 11 focus group discussions and key informant interviews with teachers, matrons and health practitioners. Girls participating in the study was educated about how to use and handle the different products during their period prior to the study.



Menstrual products used by many females in rural Tanzania: traditional cloths, pieces of mattresses, paper, used leaves, cardboard, old corncobs, cotton.

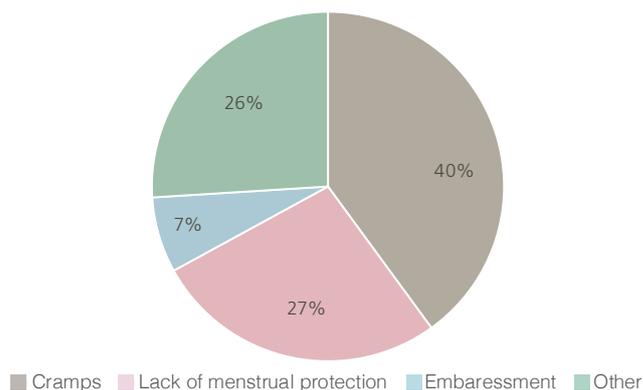
Results and Findings

The findings from this pilot study reinforces results from Menstrual Health Management research from across the global south which highlight that poor Menstrual Health Management is a combination of poor access and affordability to safe menstrual products and prevailing taboos surrounding blood that makes menstrual management both difficult but also ridden with shame.

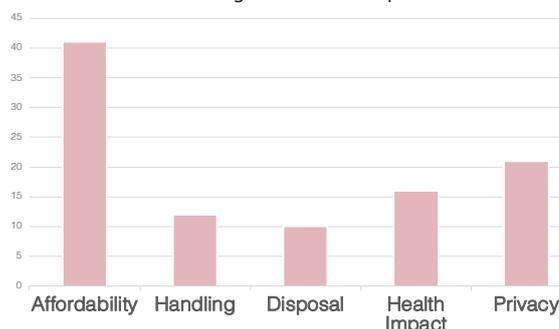
In the pilot study it was evident that the state and conditions of the school WASH facilities also posed a significant barrier to sustain a good standard of hygiene during menstruation and this is a key factor to why many girls stay at home during their periods. It also showed how important it is to understand the interlinkages between different sustainability challenges, such as lack of water and sanitation, poverty, gender inequality, poor health and education and how improvement in one can turn into a virtuous spiral for others.

We found that the menstrual cup was perceived as most positive among the girls. We believe that the menstrual cup can truly make a difference for girls health and opportunities for education and has tremendous potential to improve the sustainability of future Menstrual Health Management in Tanzania. Although it is clear that the menstrual cup is the most sustainable menstrual product, it may not be the product that every female prefer. After all every woman have the right to choose what menstrual product that is best for her. But to do so every menstrual option needs to be available, accessible and affordable to all. To get there Menstrual Health Management in Tanzania and across the African continent must be improved and scaled up.

Reasons for missing school



MHM challenges with current practices



Comparisons of Menstrual Products

MENSTRUAL CUP

Advantages

- Collects large amounts of blood safely over long periods of time – up to 8 hrs before having to be emptied
- Enables girls to remain in school during menstruation, despite lack of proper school WASH facilities
- Increases mobility and participation outside the home
- Builds confidence and empowers them, no naming and shaming as the cups do not smell or leak
- Reduces the risks of vaginal infections as management barriers are fewer
- Produces less waste than any other menstrual care option, thereby reducing costs and time for waste management
- Eliminates clogging of pits, septic tanks and waterways, thereby averting flooding and transmission of diseases
- The cup lasts for up to 10 years, making it an environmentally friendly menstrual care option
- Saves money in the long term and promotes responsible consumption

Disadvantages

- Initial cost of the cups are high, possibly rendering them unaffordable to many unless subsidised
- Cups are still a novelty product across the Global South and not readily available on the commercial market
- Requires clean water and boiling possibilities for rinsing and disinfection during use
- Requires education about how to insert and manage prior to use

WASHABLE FABRIC PADS

Advantages

- Soaks up blood well
- Comfortable to wear
- Environmentally sustainable as it uses degradable organic materials such as cotton.
- Cost efficient as it only requires 2-3 pads per year

Disadvantages

- Requires clean water, soap and boiling possibilities for hygienic washing
- Requires direct sunlight to dry and sanitize the pads after washing
- Existing menstrual taboos inhibits safe drying of fabric pads outdoors

DISPOSABLE PADS

Advantages

- Readily available compared to other menstrual products
- Easy to wear
- Users feel clean
- Demand for them is high because it is linked to modernity

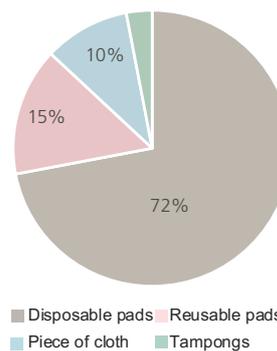
Disadvantages

- Continuous costs makes disposable pads costly over time
- Potential leaks, especially when not changed often
- Many pads are disposed of in pit latrines and pour flush toilets
- Due to the contents of disposable pads they do not breathe, so itching skin is common
- Embarrassment linked to lack of disposal facilities and being forced to keep used pads in bags
- Exposure to dangerous smoke from burning disposable pads

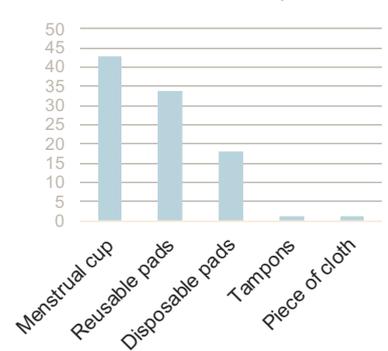


Menstrual products compared in the study; the menstrual cup, reusable pads and disposable pads.

Menstrual products used



Preferred menstrual care option



Recommendations on How to Improve Menstrual Health Management

Preventing and Stopping Menstrual Shaming

- Talk about menstruation with both boys, girls, men and women everywhere
- Show that menstruation is a natural biological function of human beings

Facilities and Management

- More available clean toilets with doors in schools and public areas
- Unlimited access to clean water and soap to ensure proper hygiene
- Bins for disposal of menstrual products in all toilets and development of sustainable waste management systems

Education

- Mandatory information about menstruation in school curriculums
- Compulsory training in Menstrual Health Management for health practitioners

Menstrual Products

- Increased distribution of safe menstrual products that absorb and collect blood in rural and urban areas
- Make reusable pads and menstrual cups available as an Menstrual Health Management option
- Reduce the cost of menstrual products to make them affordable to all
- Improve the quality of menstrual products to lower their environmental impact

The Impact of Sustainable Menstrual Health Management on the SDGs

1 NO POVERTY



Improving Menstrual Health Management helps keep girls in school which could cut the number of people living in poverty around the world by half.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Access to safe and clean menstrual products for all, decreases the ailments and diseases linked to menstruation and improves the health and well-being of millions of females in Africa.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



By providing proper Menstrual Health Management, we can eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to quality education for women and men.

5 GENDER EQUALITY



By improving Menstrual Health Management, we can put an end to menstrual shaming and empower women to reclaim their dignity and confidence, a necessity to achieve gender equality.

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



Access to clean water and equitable sanitation is crucial for girls and women's menstrual hygiene and to avoid diseases.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Improving Menstrual Health Management in the work environment enables women to work during their period, vastly increasing their chances for decent work.

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



By improving safe handling and disposal of used menstrual products, clogging of pit latrines and flush toilets will be reduced, and air, water and soil pollution will decrease, contributing to sustainable cities and communities.

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



To ensure sustainable Menstrual Health Management, we must ensure responsible chemical and waste management, sustainable use of natural resources, and sustainable consumption.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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