



Towards Sustainable Menstrual Health Management in Tanzania

POLICY BRIEF FROM LUND UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABILITY STUDIES | 2018

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, most females 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 prohibit menstruating girls in rural Tanzania from fetching water, cook, wash dishes, touch 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.
- Prior to menarche girls are the best performing students in school, when they get their first period their academic performance drops significantly.

Poor Menstrual Health Management impacts economic growth and development

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

Poor Menstrual Health Management leads to higher health risks

- Poor standard of toilets, lack of water and soap and bins for disposing of used pads in schools – reduces girls ability to sustain their personal hygiene – risking vaginal infections.

Poor Menstrual Health Management leads to environmental pollution

- Unsafe disposal methods and poor waste management leads to air, water and soil pollution and clogging of sanitation systems.



Break the silence!

Raising awareness and educating girls and women as well as teachers, boys and men 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 pilot study 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 the rural area of the Mara region, Tanzania. Together with the local organisation Maji Safi, a trial of three types of menstrual products were examined: the menstrual cup, disposable sanitary pads and washable reusable fabric pads. Each product was tested for three months by three groups of 30 girls between the age of 11 and 18. The menstrual challenges facing girls were also examined in a survey with 175 schoolgirls, and through 11 focus group discussions and interviews with teachers, matrons and health practitioners. Prior to testing the different products the girls were also educated about how to use and handle them.

Results and Findings

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

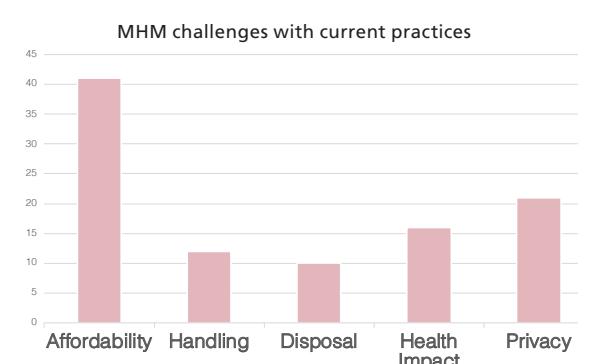
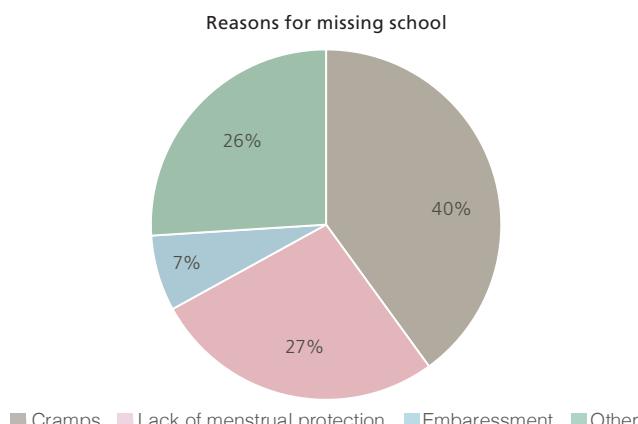
The study showed that the state and conditions of the school WASH facilities also posed a significant barrier to sustain a good standard of hygiene during menstruation, which is a key factor to girls staying home during their period.

The study found that the menstrual cup was perceived as the most preferred menstrual option among the girls because of its multiple benefits. The potential for the menstrual cup to make a difference for girls health and education is tremendous. The cup also has the ability to have a positive impact on other sustainability challenges such as water and sanitation, waste management and gender inequality.

Although it is clear that the menstrual cup is the most sustainable menstrual product, it may not be the product that every female prefers. After all every woman has 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. Therefore Menstrual Health Management in Tanzania and across Africa must be improved and scaled up.



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



Comparisons of Menstrual Products

MENSTRUAL CUP

Advantages

- Collects blood safely 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
- The cups do not smell or leak and therefore reduces shaming
- Reduces the risks of vaginal infections
- Produces no waste, thereby reducing costs and time for waste management
- Eliminates clogging of pits, septic tanks and waterways, averting flooding and transmission of diseases
- Lasts for up to 10 years, making it an environmentally friendly menstrual care option
- Saves money in the long term

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 safely

WASHABLE REUSABLE 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

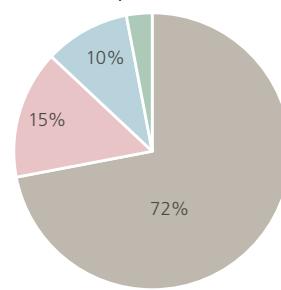
Disadvantages

- 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
- The material of disposable pads do not breathe, hence itching skin is common
- Lack of disposal facilities forces girls to keep used pads in their bags while at school
- Exposure to dangerous smoke from burning disposable pads
- Possible soil, air and water contamination from burying and burning disposable pads

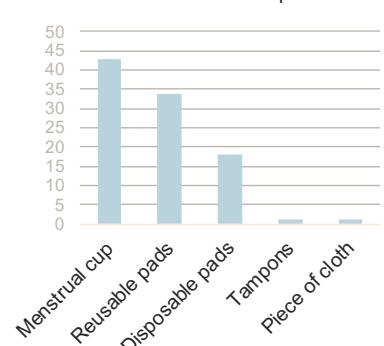


Menstrual products compared in the study; the menstrual cup, reusable pads and disposables pads.

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

Improved and sustainable Menstrual Health Management will impact the SDGs by:

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	Decreasing the ailments and diseases linked to the use of unsafe menstrual products and management – improving female health and well-being.	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	Enabling women to work during their period – vastly increasing their chances for decent work
4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	Keeping girls in school and eliminating gender disparities in education – ensuring equal access to quality education for boys and girls.	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 	Decreasing clogging of sanitation systems and environmental pollution – contributing to sustainable cities and communities.
5 GENDER EQUALITY 	Empowering females to reclaim their dignity and confidence – contributing to achieving gender equality.	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	Reducing the amount of chemicals and natural resources used in production and promoting sustainable consumption.
6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 	Providing better menstrual hygiene facilities – reducing diseases linked to poor water and sanitation.	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

First and foremost a big thank you to Bertha Mhepela for all her hard work. Secondly, our deepest gratitude to the staff and pupils from Tai Secondary, Katuru Secondary, Obwere Primary and Sota Primary in Shirati who participated in the study. Without their courage and honesty this study could never have been done. Thirdly, we want to thank Maji Safi staff for all their assistance during data collection and in helping us disseminate the research findings to the local community. Last but not least, thank you Ann Åkerman for all the exceptional photography and Cecilia von Arnold for the beautiful layout.

Funding for this research has been supported by the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA) through the collaborative capacity building program ‘Sustainable Sanitation in Theory and Action’ (SUSTAIN) in partnership with University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography; The Monthly Cup who subsidized the menstrual cups tested in the study.

CONTACT:

Dr Sara Gabrielsson (PI SUSTAIN), Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), Lund University
E-mail: Sara.Gabrielsson@lucus.lu.se www.lucus.lu.se