

**THE PAD PROJECT
2023 YEAR IN REVIEW
IMPACT REPORT
INEQUALITY RELATED TO
MENSTRUATION**

According to “**Rita Marque Mbatha**” the Founding Director of Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation:
“If men had period pains or gave birth the issue of stigma and period poverty would be rare if non-existent”

Poverty and inadequate reproductive and sexual health education has untold debilitating consequences on the well-being of the girl child. The unfortunate part is that it affects their attendance in school. Access to sanitary pads has a negative effect on the girl child and most the girls testify to the use rags and newspapers to stem their periods. Girls in particular from the rural areas and low income communities often suffer the shame of staining their uniforms because of failure to access proper sanitary pads.

MENSTRUAL HEALTH EDUCATION OUR MISSION

Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation in partnership with International Alliance of Women are passionate about making a difference in the lives of the girl child. Educational material provided by the International Alliance of Women are material to ending period stigma and how to react in cases of violence and requisite information which is empowers the girl child.

WHAT WE DO: DISTRIBUTION SANITARY PADS

In our quest to reduce period poverty in Zimbabwe we distribute sanitary pads whenever resources are available. The outcome of reproductive health education and monthly donation of sanitary pads whenever finances are available contributes greatly to the health of the girls and regular school attendance. Educating the girls on menstrual health challenges reduces stigma and shame associated with menstruation. The booklets donated by International Alliance of Women have greatly assisted young girls



who are now comfortable to manage their bodies and menstruation because the booklets delves into the issues which are never discussed publicly.

ENTERING WOMANHOOD & ABCs OF BEING A GIRL BOOKLETS

The booklets **ENTERING WOMANHOOD** and **ABCs OF BEING A GIRL** are proving to be resourceful since some of the participants are seeking clarification on some of the things they would have read and even educating others.

To stimulate interest amongst people in communities about our programs it is very crucial to try to talk as much about issues that directly affect them which are relevant to the topics being discussed which are covered in the booklets.

The booklets provided by IAW encompasses the following important information:

- Awareness to communities with the informative booklets. Increasing awareness about **ENTERING WOMANHOOD** and **ABCs OF BEING A GIRL** are key in cascading information on menstruation.
- The booklets begin by defining the term menstruation and also describes body parts, rape, harassment, and other unwanted sexual touching. The booklets also delve into the issues of sexually transmitted infections and explains in simple terms the danger of leaving an infection untreated. The victim of rape should approach support and counseling after the traumatic experience.
- In conclusion, the notes partly provided SWISS SEXUAL HEALTH¹ kindly provided the International Alliance of Women with copyright of selected contents from their prestigious booklet “He-Les Miss!”² The booklets are written in simple English and are easy to understand.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE HEALTH MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS A PROJECT OF INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN IN CONJUNCTION WITH WOMEN’S COMFORT CORNER FOUNDATION

On the 16th of August, 2023 Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation hosted a National Conference on Transforming Menstrual Health Management in Primary and Secondary Schools. Amongst two hundred and three (203) invited guests there were discussions with high level leaders, communities, women and girls to advocate and create awareness among public on improving Menstrual Hygiene Management. The two sets of booklets were distributed to attendees. This was a unique gathering where the disabled girls were also represented. Stakeholders’ involvement in Menstrual Health Management Conference will be assessed be collected from the stakeholders who have expressed interest in working with Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation.

The conference was prompted by the extensive research wherein the outcome indicated that girls resort to using **unhygienic, unsafe** materials during their menstruation

1 <https://www.ippf.org/about-us/member-associations/switzerland>

2 <https://www.sante-sexuelle.ch/shop/fr/pour-adolescent-e-s/he-les-miss--a-parti-de-12ans>



due to a plethora of reasons including inability to purchase pads.

PARTNERS

Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation’s partnership with International Alliance of Women has triggered a notable increase on school attendance and awareness on issues relating to menstruation care. Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation has also been invited to cascade education to young mothers/school drop outs who are less than 18 years old. Some girls are only 15 years old but are already mothers. As Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation we are very grateful for the support we receive from International Alliance of Women because menstrual equity is coming to fruition. This wonderful gesture is instrumental in the empowerment of the girl child in Zimbabwe.

COMMENTS BY THE NATIONAL YOUTH CO-ORDINATOR

The networking with International Alliance of Women during implementation of the Pads Project has impacted positively on the girl child’s rights and as a result such partnership improved confidence of beneficiaries. Networking made work easy on the day and beneficiaries value Pads Project implemented at their area by the International Alliance of Women and cascaded by Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation.

SCHOOLS VISITED

- Domboramwari High School
- Epworth Secondary School

- Gemini Galaxy Rural Community School
- Kids Are Kids Junior School
- Masenya Primary School
- Mzilikazi Secondary School
- Muguta Secondary School
- Prince Adonai High School
- Young Africa High School

In all school visited we distributed a set of **ENTERING WOMANHOOD** and **ABCs OF BEING A GIRL** to all the attendees and where we run out of booklets we had some printed. The demand for booklets is huge.

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

Women’s Comfort Corner Foundation focused on menstrual hygiene awareness, the menstruation process, and issues concerning the disposal of menstrual pads. Issues of the environment are of paramount importance and proper disposal of sanitary pads is key in the protection of the environment.

In some cases menstrual periods in particular girls with irregular periods, menstruation can start anytime. Accidents happen – a heavy flow, an early arrival, or lack of access to affordable menstrual protection. No one should have to deal with the shame, embarrassment, lack of access, or financial burden that are often unfortunately associated with menstruation.

This project is the most impactful student service that has been introduced in schools materially in the rural

areas and encompasses schools in town where there are disadvantaged school children. Period poverty is in decline in schools which we have visited and donated sanitary pads as a result confidence abounds and school attendance is on the rise.

LESSONS LEARNT

School children have burning issues that need intervention WCCF has created a platform for the discussion of the said issues. Networking with the Principals of the Schools helps Women's Comfort Corner to reduce challenges of accessing schools.

COMMENTS MADE BY SCHOOL CHILDREN

TESTIMONIALS

The participants in the program have positively commented as follows:

Chido a 14 year girl said "I am happy to be invited to the conversation café where there is a discussion on menstrual health where girls living with disability are never invited. We feel isolated as most programs and NGOs do not invite us to any discussions taking place in the communities. Invitation of girls with disabilities will make us feel that we are part of the community that we matter and our period are similar to those of what is described as "normal" people"

Chido was outspoken and participated without any barriers that hindered equal participation with other students. For a girl who had just turned 14 and had never attended a similar

meeting was testimony that she was wise beyond her age.

Roltah a Senior Prefect stated as follows: "The period project has positively affected my life— the stigma for periods and the symptoms of it has always made me super anxious talking about it. Having an open discussion about periods and having free tampons and pads has helped me with my anxiety about this all."

Andrew a 15 year old student doing form 3 thanked Women's Comfort Corner Foundation inviting and accommodating boys. This project has given opportunities to learn what the girls go through and support them when they need help. Menstrual health education will help us cascade the education at our homes and in the community.

One Viola a seventeen years old in summary had this to say, "There is need to teach girls from 10 years or 11 years. She narrated a story on how she spoiled her school uniform when she commenced her menstrual periods at a tender age of 10 years old. She was shamed and humiliated and in telling this story she is hoping that no child would go through that horrible experience which she went through and thus advocating for the menstrual education to be taught from an early age"

OTHER ISSUES DISCUSSED

- We addressed the issue of menstruation.
- We discussed topics like changes at puberty, self-esteem, child abuse, sexual crimes, periods and sports, pain and sexually transmitted diseases.





Our goal is to drastically reduce proliferation poor menstrual hygiene. Physical health risks is intricately associated with reproductive and urinary tract infections. It's an injustice for people to live without basic sanitation which is also a violation of dignity. A deliberate decision has been made to engage girls living with disability because they lack access to resources and facilities which is material for proper menstrual hygiene. Most of them averred that they were unseen/unheard. It is important to invite the girls living with disabilities to attend workshops or events which will be taking place in schools or in the communities. Sadly, social stigma around menstruation plays a negative factor in the increase of period poverty and its impact is more pronounced in the lives of girls living with disability. Rags which are not washed properly cause serious bacterial infections mainly bacterial vaginosis (BV) and Urinary Tract Infections.

Through education and community service, we hope to end the stigma and period poverty and in the ongoing campaign to persuade Governments to provide menstruators with the adequate resources they need to have a safe and healthy period. Community health and care are vital as we work together to re-imagine menstrual and reproductive health equity.

MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT IN THE RURAL AREAS USE OF UNHYGIENIC CLOTHS AND NEWSPAPERS DURING MENSTRUATION

Women's Comfort Corner Foundation Focus also focused on two schools in the rural areas mainly in the rural areas we visited Gemini Galaxy Rural Community School and Mansenya Primary School in Binga.

- We are keen on training volunteers as they have access to other girls and women in the community so that knowledge is imparted.

TRAINING AND CREATION OF PARTNERSHIPS

- Creation of partnerships with community based organisations and key community leaders, helps to enhance the multiplier effects for information disseminated.

LESSONS LEARNT

Trained volunteers are playing a critical role in cascading menstruation information to wider community.

DRAMA PERFORMANCES AND ROLE PLAYING

To make the lessons interesting Women's Comfort Corner Foundation uses drama and role playing performance.

We encourage volunteers already attached to other organisations to talk more about the pads project as well as refer cases to WCCF that need our intervention. We also realised that there is a great need to conduct more sessions targeting girls since they remain a marginalised group in society

PERIOD POVERTY – PERIOD OF SHAME

Period poverty exists but is grossly ignored. There are no sanitation services to manage menstrual cycles. In the rural soap in the toilets is equated to being a luxury. Low income and ongoing drought believed to be associated with climate change has escalated period poverty.

In the rural areas there is rampant use of old unhygienic pieces of clothes. We introduced the issue of Menstrual Health Management in the rural areas where there is limited information on menstrual hygiene management. The searing information brought to our attention during our visit was that the girls who have access to water and soap wash the pieces of cloth used during menstrual periods but are shy and embarrassed to hang them outside to dry and on some occasions have to re-use the cloth whilst wet. Inevitably, most school girls reported suffering from reproductive tract infections. The girls have no choice but to resort sadly resort to unhygienic methods.

For those who have no soap they simply wash out blood and re-use the wet cloth. Due to this unhygienic scenario, there are a lot of consequences regarding the menstrual hygiene.

It is the norm that financial dependence is on the male in particular fathers and brothers. Culturally, menstruation can only be discussed with the mother. Women's Comfort Corner Foundation is happy to submit that the changes are taking place and the previous beliefs are no longer sustainable. Girls are shy to request for money to buy sanitary pads in circumstances in cases where pads are available and parents are able to buy.

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL TABOOS AROUND MENSTRUATION

The commencement of menstruation can be alarming as there is a crude assumption that one is ready to be married and be a wife at a very young age. Sexual abuse comes into play because on commencement of periods the girls are seen as grown-ups. Girls also complained about the issue of

painful cramps during menstruation and lack of access of tablets which cost USD1 but were not affordable. During the period of menstruation women and girls are not allowed to cook and thus making it an open secret to neighbours that they are on menstruation.

LESSON LEARNED DURING EDUCATIONAL TRIP

Failure to access menstrual hygiene disempowers girls and women. No access to cash is an obstacle for proper menstruation hygiene and a barrier of women empowerment. The two schools visited have no menstrual hygiene management facilities.

The interest in Women's Comfort Corner Foundation educational tour in a plethora of schools was palpable. The students including the boys were eager to learn, the teachers were ready to adopt proper menstruation hygiene management. Taboos around menstruation are an obstacle to girls' development and welfare and Women's Comfort Corner Foundation is dismantling the taboos. The enthusiastic teachers are eager to disseminate the information. Women's Comfort Corner Foundation is breaking the silence and taboos are destroyed.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The most important submissions from most attendants is the teaching of early reproductive health education and adequate school at all schools. Human rights is a requisite factor in the dignity of the girl child. Failure to access sanitary pads and being forced to use dirty, unhygienic rags or newspapers infringes on the fundamental rights of girls and women. In short, it is degrading the girls' dignity. Governments have a duty to preserve the dignity of women and the girl child.



SANITARY PADS FOR SEX

Why are condoms free and sanitary priced out of reach for the girls and women? Why the discrimination? The disparity is fueling the need for the girls feeling compelled to have sexual relations in private or face the humiliation of staining school uniforms after failure to access sanitary pads. It is acutely painful that girls are forced to engage in sexual relations solely to access sanitary pads. Quid pro quo sex for pads generally takes place in communities where poverty is rampant. For girls to be involved in unprotected sex in order to buy a pack of sanitary pads is a crying shame. The painful result in this scenario is that the girls who have sex for pads mostly have unprotected sex. Early child marriages result from the unlawful and illegal action of quid pro quo, the desperate girls are infected with a range of diseases which exacerbates the miserable life which they already find themselves embroiled in.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Women's Comfort Corner Foundation made significant steps in deconstructing stigma around menstruation. On distributed questionnaires the participants stated that they now appreciated and understood issues surrounding health and education as articulated by Women's Comfort Corner Foundation. Although appreciative of the sanitary pads provided the participants decried lack of continuity of the practice because they had no one to turn to and would unfortunately continue to use the cloths/rags after exhaustion of the sanitary pads provided to them. The barriers of proper menstrual hygiene management is real and this program needs to continue.

Priority ought to be given to menstrual hygiene management, with sanitation, hygiene, water and health being given priority. Menstruation hygiene management is





important and it should be incorporated as a school subject from primary school. Although commendable efforts are made to cascade information by the Non-Governmental Organisations the noble cause is insufficient to arrest the injustice tainted by lack of attention to the violation of the rights of girls and women. There is need create an enabling environment for girls at any early so as to enjoy the equal opportunities, dismantle the taboos, and outrageous social norms associated with menstruation.

DISPOSAL OF SANITARY PADS

Considering the affordability of cloths bought or torn off from old clothing, most rural girls and city girls use pieces of cloth/rags which impacts on the reproductive health & hygiene of girls. The disposal of the cloths also impact negatively on the environment. Failure to properly dispose cloths is lethal to any person coming in contact with rags and the handler will be infected by a plethora of bacteria and viruses. According to the US Environmental Protection agency (EPA) Dioxins are called persistent organic pollutants (POPs), meaning they take a long time to break down once they are in the environment³. Dioxins are highly toxic and can cause cancer, reproductive and developmental problems, damage to the immune system, and can interfere with hormones. Education on how to safely dispose rags/cloths/sanitary pads should be part imparted to participants in every meeting to maintain sustainable environment.

3 Source: US Environmental Protection agency (EPA)

THANK YOU

We thank the **INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN** for everything they have done to make the PADS PROJECT a success. IAW's generosity is changing lives.

**COMPILED AND PREPARED BY
WOMEN'S COMFORT CORNER FOUNDATION
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