



Girls Education in Uganda

The case for sanitary pads support to girls in UPE schools.

Background

Development literature is full of documented evidence on the benefits of educating girls. For example, educated girls have a higher chance of getting employed thus increasing their access to resources. Moreover, if women have greater control of resources in the family, they are likely to allocate more to the overall wellbeing of the family compared to men; let alone the social and health benefits that accrue to an educated woman¹. The World Bank fittingly recognizes that achievements of the rest of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the most part rests on the achievement of MDG 3 which targets to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.²

Uganda, like many other countries in Africa has prioritised education of children and especially the girl. This has been achieved through the UPE introduced in 1997 that led to a tripling in enrolment and massive entry of girls into the education system; so much so that, gender parity ceased to be an issue in Uganda. For example, according to the 2013 MoES Gender Audit, enrolment in primary was 50.11 for girls and 49.9% for boys.

However, these gains are undermined by the challenges faced by girls in remaining in school in particular completing the primary cycle. A recent study by UNESCO revealed that Uganda has the highest dropout rate in East Africa with up to 75% of the pupils dropping out, most of which are girls. While there are multiple factors for the drop out of girls, a bigger contributor is the poor management of the monthly menstruation cycle. A study in Bukedea district, eastern Uganda in 2010 noted that girls miss up to 3 weeks of school in a term, which translates to 9 weeks in a year only due to lack of proper sanitary materials.

Justification

¹ IRC 2006

² World Bank, 2005: Benefits of Girls Education

As noted above, low enrolment of girls in school is largely an issue of the past; unfortunately there is little room to celebrate given the gloomy statistics related to retention of girls in school.

Poor menstruation has been singled out as one of the major reasons for irregular attendance and later drop out among girls. In fact, it is no coincidence that the drop outs among girls are higher in upper primary. In its 2005 report on hygiene and sanitation in schools, the World Bank computed the impact of poor menstrual management on girls. The Bank report noted that *'if a girl misses 4 days of school every 4 weeks due to her period, she will miss 10 to 20% of her school days'*. And yet in Bukedea District older girls miss at least 5 days every month during their menstruation period³.

Sanitary pads, the only savior in such a situation cost more than 2,000 ugx despite the waiver of VAT on imported pads. In Uganda, this is far much higher than what an average family can afford, considering that 31% of Ugandans spend less than 1 USD a day, on all their household needs.

If the issue of access to sanitary pads for school girls is not attended to, the gains realized in increasing enrolment will be reversed and so will the literacy levels; thereby affecting Uganda's ability to achieve its development goals and vision.

The response of the GoU to this matter

In regard to this subject matter, the GoU through the various ministries has been able to do the following:

- Waived VAT on imported sanitary pads although the cost has remained high.
- Provided guidelines for structural designs of separate toilets and bathrooms for girls at school
- Instituted supportive teacher structure in place including senior women teachers to support girls

The challenge that remains

The above notwithstanding, the biggest challenge is that actual cost of sanitary pads is too high for the common girl/or family. The supportive school based systems in place are simply not enough and the tax waiver has not translated into a significant reduction in price cuts on sanitary pads either.

Proposed solutions

³Bukedea District report on the factors affecting performance of primary schools in Bukedea district, April 2010

The Government of Uganda should consider going a step further to actually ease the ability of the common girl to buy and use pads and generally manage her menstruation. Some of the solutions include:

- Consider sanitary pads as a basic need and prioritise it in resource allocation
- This could be through supporting local sanitary pads brands like Makapads that are not profit driven to increase their reach to the rural areas of Uganda.
- Include emergency pads as an expense in the UPE capitation grant.
- Ensure that every school has at least a senior woman teacher to support with basic menstrual hygiene and training for the girls.

Access to sanitary pads is not just as human rights or health issue but equally importantly, an issue of dignity for the girls.