Our work on menstrual management for school girls in Zimbabwe

A short overview

Annie Kanyemba

Harare. June 2011

We started this work towards the end of last year (2010) at schools I had been working with before where we were promoting and teaching the concept of ecological sanitation. The link between sanitation, hygiene and menstrual management had been discussed many times during this work, but never looked at seriously. So, late last year I started to look at it seriously. A big step in the process was the discovery of a paper in "Waterlines" of work done by Marni Sommer in Tanzania on this subject. We started to communicate and received a copy of her valuable booklet which was designed to help school girls. This was an importance source of inspiration for us. This book was written with a combination of both English and Swahili. 16 000 copies of this booklet were printed and distributed throughout Tanzania. We decided to make a book of our own for the Zimbabwe girls. In Zimbabwe we have three spoken languages, English, Shona and Ndebele. We felt it best to produce a book in English first and then translate and adapt books in Shona and Ndebele. The WRC offered me some funding. We decided to follow the works done in Tanzania and make a practical book which would really help school girls and also to include the Girls' own stories. I think this is just the beginning. We have chosen to use photos rather than hand illustrations in the booklet.

Yes ours is a small pilot project. The primary aim of this work is first to disseminate knowledge to the school girls and also to provide useful and practical advice which can help each girl practically. As in the Tanzanian case I have chosen to include real stories told by the girls and to stress that all girls face these problems and all girls are helped by gaining extra knowledge and being given advice about how to overcome the problems they face. I wanted the booklet to be very practical with advice which works.

My book is being tested in schools and by school girls. The feedback I get back is being used to make the book even more practical. But more than that, giving the booklet to the girls has prompted a lot more questions, even in the more sophisticated schools which reveal the lack of knowledge and still even in 2011, the strong influence of traditional beliefs which

remain strongly in our culture. It has been a good experience to talk through each page with the girls.

We are hopeful that if the final book is well received by the girls and by the schools and by the Ministry of Education, then it can be reproduce thousands of times and distributed free of charge to schools all over the country. We hope that costs can be cut by mass production and generous donor assistance - then tens of thousands of school girls can read and be educated by this simple booklet.

In this case the preliminary research work has been done in a number of schools, rural and peri-urban and this has led to the production of the booklet. But we are also studying many other aspects of this challenge. And a challenge it is. We have to look at traditional beliefs and how they relate to this work and also taboos. I have been in contact with friends and colleagues in other countries and also scanned the literature. Each culture may be slightly different and there are variations between countries. But there are common themes and what we are looking at here are themes which are common to most African countries and cultures. There are also those in Zimbabwe who are doing their own work independently. In Hwange, for instance two NGOs are looking into the subject of low cost home made pads that can be washed and used repeatedly. This work is practical and interesting and we need to examine it more closely and perhaps add on to the existing book some very important extra hinjts for the girls.

We want to put a stop to the silence on this subject. This subject must no longer belong in the realms of silence. And we believe it is a woman's task to speak out and stop the silence and replace it with a dialogue spoken loudly across the nation and across the continent. To this end my very good friend Malaika Mushandu, who is currently Miss Zimbabwe, has joined me in this mission. And we are both very determined.

We are also aware of the lack of water facilities (both water supplies and hand washing facilities) at huge numbers of schools throughout the country and this too is a problem that must be addressed. The generations of the future deserve such facilities and to be taught the important of hygiene as part of their health education. A new hand washing tank which uses water economically has been built as part of this project.

Another important topic is the lack of suitable hygienic pads that the girls can use during their menses. At a cost of one USD for a packet of ten, this may seem low for people living in Europe or the developed world, but for most girls in Zimbabwe, that is high and unaffordable. For most girls the use of cloths will continue, but there are ways and means of even

improving the use of traditional methods. Giving out pads sounds good but it is not a sustainable solution. Local cost effective solutions must be found, tried tested and put into widespread practice. And this can be done through education and promotion and even the widespread distribution of simple booklets like ours.

In terms of disposing of the pads, this is not seen as a problem at schools or in households where a pit toilet is used. In Zimbabwe the Blair VIP is the government recommended sanitation technical option for both schools and homesteads. Used pads go down the pits and stay there. Pads which can be reused are placed in plastic bags and taken home for washing and drying. Where other forms of toilet are used such as urine diversion or flush, then suitable means for the best disposal must be found and made available in schools.

There is also an issue of latrine design which is often brought out. As far as I have found out in my researches, the issue of the multi-compartment Blair VIP as used in schools is not a big issue and I place this so called problem further down the list of priorities. It is true this design is door-less and has no hand washing facility attached to it. But the girls have come up with social solutions which overcome the apparent lack of privacy. Communal hand washing facilities have been fitted in many schools in Zimbabwe. And we are trying a new design which is economical in its use of water.

The main issues are to do with knowledge sharing and the girls gaining practical knowledge which will help them personally. In terms of culture and taboos the booklet provides an answer because the culture accepts that the gaining of knowledge by personal reading is acceptable. This is not embarrassing and there is no question of embarrassment caused by asking difficult questions to elders. The booklet must be backed up with classroom discussions on the subject where the girls feel happy to talk freely.

The book and the concepts and knowledge it reveals should also be read by the boys so they have a better understanding of this currently hidden subject. Naturally such source of simple and practical knowledge should also enter the school curriculum if it is not already there.

In terms of the impact on women and girls. After giving out the books and getting involved in discussions between teachers and pupils we have returned and interviewed the girls to ask if our efforts have paid off in terms of impact and knowledge. We wish to improve the book so it is really helpful. This has now been undertaken and a final version of the English version is complete. A Shona version has also been written. I also intend to write an Ndebele version soon. I have been surprised by the lack of knowledge about how the female body functions,

not only by school girls, but even by adults. It is something that is just not talked about – it is private. And the books that describe it in simple terms – where are they now? Well we have one now in Zimbabwe!!.

In terms of hygiene promotions, yes we have lots to talk about, but where are the practical means. In our school project we have taught girls and boys how to make hand washing devices from simple cans and plastic bottles. They work and are simple to make and use. In the school we have also made a new communal hand washing tank for the school with economic water delivery. Just talking about it is just not good enough. Africa wants to see real things happen not just talk. Practical things count most in our lives. And things that really work and make a difference in our lives.

Yes we know that effort has gone into researching and testing effective locally made pads and napkins. And work on that side is being undertaken in the Hwange district by the NGOs Lubancho and Hwange. OXFAM also have a project looking into this challenge in Zimbabwe. We have not yet visited these projects but intent to find out all the detail and test this for ourselves. We know that cheap as they may be, commercially made pads and napkins will never reach the greatest majority of school girls in Zimbabwe or any Africa country for that matter. Using well designed locally available materials that really work, are reusable and really stay in place is where the real answer lies.

It is remarkable that even in South Africa, 60% of women and girls use crude and unhygienic sanitary wear during their menses and this can lead to infection. This is caused by poverty and a lack of knowledge. The use of ineffective sanitary wear can lead to embarrassment and a loss of dignity and an unwillingness to join active society in its many forms. So bold strides are required to resolve the issue.

We know that there is much to do to bring this subject fully into the 21st century. We shall go step by step. Starting with the education of the school girls themselves. We shall investigate more deeply taboos and fears amongst people. In the end we shall surmount and achieve our goal. That goal is the enlightenment of African girls and women, each of whom must endure this natural piece of Nature which belongs to them