The Girl - Child and Menstrual Management in Zimbabwe

By

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1.Introduction

Growing up always comes with its challenges - it's a reality that all of us on this mother earth have to live with. However life always takes interesting twists and turns for the girl child with a major issue, above all other being "menstruation." Menstruation is basically the monthly discharge of blood from the uterus of non pregnant woman from puberty to menopause. In its truest sense it's a process which is a clear revelation of the natural order, however it has become a source of pain and challenges particularly for this girl child. This report is particularly focused on identifying the challenges, statics, and recommendations of menstrual management in Zimbabwe.

In pursuit of my findings I had to carry out case studies from various schools in Zimbabwe. Research was carried out in the capital city of Harare, peri-urban areas and rural areas. This gave me an opportunity to have first hand information and a "birds eye" view on menstrual management. Due to the fact that I am also a lady (young woman), conceptualizing was quite easy and very clear.

Our research did not only identify problems and challenges, we also managed to identify areas which needed correction and came up with recommendations which are expounded in the sections below

2.Problem Statement

Some studies have shown that about 1 in 10 school-age African girls do not attend school during menstruation. This suggests that girls are forced to be absent during their period and thereby loose critical learning time. On average, about 4 days per month can be lost, which can add up to 528days of schooling across the years that a girl should be in school. You will know that for poverty stricken families sanitary pads are simply too expensive, and can receive less priority when compared to other household needs such as food (Department of Education, South Africa)

3.Background

Menstruation is a taboo subject that people don't like talking about. This has made life difficult for the 'girl child' to keep in school. Some studies tell us that 1 in 10 school girls drop out of school once they reach puberty, at the onset of menstruation.

When a school girl starts to menstruate, she is faced with a lot of emotional demons like embarrassment, shame, negative attitudes, low self-esteem which will encourage her not to attend school. Menstruation in some parts of Zimbabwe is not that natural, its like a curse to the 'girl child.' I myself remember back then growing up in the rural areas with my late grandmother who was of Malawian origin. I had cousins who had reached their puberty and every time they were on their menses, my granny would not allow them to put salt in the relish or whatever they will be cooking that required salt. The reason behind that was because my granny had a belief that if she ate the food that was cooked with salt by someone in their menses, it would hurt her back. And this also

happened to me for a while when I reached my puberty whilst staying with my mother in Harare. She had the same belief but she originates from Zimbabwe. According to AFAWI (Uganda) a girl can be even banished to the countryside during her period and the male relatives will not even eat her food. In Zimbabwe there have been extra burdens due to the economic slowdown. It has not spared the girl child in terms of access to sanitary wear and cleaning detergent for their use.

4.Work – done

Places Visited	Activities
1 – Rural (Marirangwe Primary and Secondary Schools) Nyamutumbu Primary School (Murehwa) Chikarudzo Secondary School (Masvingo)	- Interview in groups of 100 - Interview in small groups of 10 with active pupils - Interview with lady teachers - Collection and recording of data - Interview of a few parents - Tour of girl toilets and sanitary system
2 – Peri – Urban Domboramwari (Secondary School)	- Interview in groups of 100 - Interview in small groups of 10 - Interview with lady teachers

Chisungu Primary School(Epworth)	- Collection and recording of data - Interview of a few parents - Tour of girl toilets and sanitary system

URBAN?

5. Challenges

In our study we have tried to find out why young menstruating girls keep out of school and the problems they face when they are on menses. It is commonly believed that a lack of separate and specialized sanitary facilities and easy access to water in schools is very critical for the girls who start to menstruate.

5.1. Environment (should trad beliefs come under environment?)

5.1.1. Traditional beliefs

Returning once again to the topic of traditional beliefs, we have found out a lot of the rural girls use white old cotton cloths from worn out t-shirts or sheets. The reason being that there is a superstition that has been passed on for generations that warns against leaving any trace of your menstrual blood for someone to see, for it will be tampered with and you might not be able to bear children when you grow up and get married. So because of that, these girls make sure they use a white cloth because it becomes easy to see that the blood is well gotten rid of when washing.

5.1.2. Stigmatization at school

Though some of these girls manage to come to school, they are not comfortable during the school time because of fear that they might spoil their uniform whilst seated and when its break time they are afraid of walking around the school in case the cloth might drop off and fall to the ground and cause embarrassment to the victim. There was a case in a peri-urban secondary school where one girl was wearing a cloth and was summoned to see the headmaster at break time. On reaching the administration block she got up the step to the headmaster's office and unfortunately her cloth fell off to the ground. A lot of children were watching since they were on break time outside their

classrooms. She quickly picked it up and continued with her journey. But it later turned out that, that day changed her life at this school - not only hers but those of the other girls. This girl is now absent for most days of the school because of the embarrassment she experienced on that unfortunate day. She is a Prefect but she no longer has high self-esteem about herself. She is no longer playing her role as a prefect because the word spread around the school like fire and everyone knows her as the girl who dropped a blood soiled cloth by the headmaster's door. As a result a lot of girls at that school who use cloth are no longer coming to school at all during their menses for they are afraid of being the next victim. That incident has reduced most girls' school attendance during their menses.

It's indeed a tragedy to have something like that happen - just because of a lack of proper sanitary utilities for a girl child. *If only sanitary pads are made available and cheaper to young girls at that school in Epworth in conjunction with training in menstrual hygiene management.* This could be effective in raising school attendance and improving performance among girls at this school which can result in the making of great women leaders of tomorrow. It could have a dramatic impact on girls' self esteem and confidence in themselves.

Maybe school facilities and water come under environment

5.1.3. Lack of proper school facilities

In the rural schools, the main challenge relating to the school environment for girls was the lack of proper school facilities, such as fully equipped toilets. The girl child does not have access to clean water for use in the Blair toilets, which also offer little privacy in so far as preventing other girls from entering while the user is changing their pad or menstrual container. This lack of proper toilet facilities can

also be attributed to the poor social and economic context. (is there a problem with the door less Blair school toilet then)

5.1.4. Communication hindrance

(female) Teachers played a significant role in educating and passing information about menstruation to school girls. In some instances though, some schools were male-teacher dominated. Given the fact that most girls have difficulties to discuss about menstruation, let alone discuss about it with a male figure, communication is affected to a larger extent. Again, this challenge obligates the girl child to abscond from school during the days they are having the menstrual period.

5.1.5. Physiological Issues

5.1.6. Lack of knowledge and training in menstrual hygiene management

The other reason was a lack of knowledge on menstruation for some other girls. There was a case in the rural schools whereby some girls had no idea whatsoever on how to manage their menses. So when it was time for their menses they would always spoil their uniforms because they did not know of any management practices. This was because they lived in child headed families and the elder child would be a boy and so it was difficult to talk about their predicaments to their older brothers. They also were embarrassed to talk about it to their teachers. In some cases girls are not open to their parents when they start menstruating.

According to some girls in the Epworth Secondary School, they are embarrassed to come to school because of the physical changes that result from the menses. For examples some develop pimples and lose their self esteem and some they just don't come to school because they just feel like everyone knows of their condition. It's just a feeling of insecurity. Some do not come to school because

they see no point of going since they are always sleepy whenever they are on menses. Their moods just change naturally and for most girls the mood swings are difficult to control. A serious case is one whereby a girl does not come to school because she does not have panties, so during menstruation she has no choice but to stay home.

The primary level has the same challenges of no pads and the spoiling is very high but this does not really affect them because they are sometimes too young to feel embarrassed.

5.1.7. Period pains

In our investigation it has emerged that the crucial reason why girls drop out of school is due to the period pains. About three quarters of the girls that drop out of school when they are in their menses do so because of the excruciating pains they experience. It's so painful for some of these girls that some cannot even stand up, let alone walk to school, some vomit, don't even eat and some run to the toilet a lot on the first day of their menses. Most of these girls do not know what medication to take, some cannot afford any form of medication and those who do take some medication say it only helps for a few hours and the pain starts again before the recommended time of taking another medication. So they just stay at home because the pain is so unbearable they can't concentrate in school. Their moods changes, which results in lower or no performance at all in class. Some girls have ended up dropping out of school for good and getting into marriages at a young age because of the myth that the period pains are incurable and they can only stop when one gets married and bears a child. So these children run for marriages in a bid to get rid of the pains.

5.2. Economic Context and Social Context

5.2.1. Sanitary pads

The other reason which has become obvious is the lack of sanitary pads, because most of the girls cannot afford to buy them. For example In Zimbabwe pads cost USD3.00 for 10. There are also cheaper ones that cost USD1.00 for 10 but the availability is limited. Traditionally girls mainly in peri-urban and rural areas use cloth rags, socks, leaves, old panties, newspapers and ribbons to hold the cloth together as a means of protecting their uniforms during their menses. But the challenges with these is that the girls develop bruises as a result of walking whilst wearing these cloths between their legs and these bruises are painful and makes the girls uncomfortable in class. This lowers their concentration. In the schools that we have visited a lot of girls who use cloths during their menses go to school with one or two extra cloths to change at school. The soiled cloth is thrown down into the pit latrine (mostly Blair VIP in Zimbabwe) after changing. Some girls do not change at all because they say their flow of blood is not that much and some only change when its summer season because they say it smells a lot during the hot weather.

There are a few cases whereby a girl has to take a lot of cloths (5-8pieces) to school because she has a heavy blood flow and so she has to change frequently. This girl doesn't throw the changed cloths down the pit latrine because they are scarce at home. So she changes them and wraps them in a plastic bag then places into her satchel. During school time, she makes sure she stays with her satchel all the time with the zip closed so that the smell does not come out and that no one tampers with her bag which might lead to others finding out her condition. She then takes them home to wash them and makes sure they dry by the morning, so that she can take them to school again.

6. Comparing this work with work done in other countries

The findings in my preliminary study in Zimbabwe compare favourably with studies and researches carried out elsewhere. In looking through the literature and also contacting people personally I have discovered the following information.

6.1. Studies in Malawi

I have been in contact with Towela Mwase studying at the University of Mzuzu, Malawi. I asked her several questions about her own experiences in the study of this field.

As in our study she found that girls who suffer from menstrual pains do not attend classes. She observed this when teaching at Mzuzu Government Secondary School in Mzuzu where most girls would prefer to sleep at their hostels than to be in class. This was also the case with most girls who failed to report for classes especially on their second day of their menstrual days because they had a big flow of menses and were afraid of staining their clothes. Most of these girls use a piece of cloth (traditional way of wearing, since most of them they can't afford to buy sanitary pads). She agreed that on average, about 4 days per month can be lost. The reason girls may stay home during menstruation may not be entirely due to a lack of privacy in toilets at the school, but also to factors such as pain and or illness during these periods as well. It would be natural for girls to opt out of school during that period.

She also agreed that different people hold different opinions. On menstrual pains she once asked a boarding mistress when this pain would go for good and

she told her that after I deliver a child and when she asked her mother about it she told me that it was a lie. I do not know how true this is because I asked some ladies who have kids some say the pain is gone while other still have the pain. So it must vary from girl to girl. There needs to be a lot more factual information available for girls to read and know the truth.

Also it has become very clear that girls on period do not wish to be identified as such, at school, or anywhere else. It is a private matter. So their life in school or at home should appear to be as normal as possible. This also relates to the use of toilets. They should use the same toilets as other girls. Menstruation is a private matter and girls are taught to be secretive as possible when they are in this state. Their mothers, fathers and brothers shouldn't know. There are passages in the bible which have influenced peoples' thoughts. In the Book of Deut… there is a chapter which talks about menstrual periods which rendered women unclean until 7 days are over. So this is just the same here where a woman is also rendered unclean and everything she touches is also unclean. Consequently no one wants to be associated with this.

This stigma ( ) may start when girls are small and are taught to elongate their labia minora, this is done in private and at all cost their mum should not know and girls have experienced their first menstrual periods they are taught not to tell their mother but rather their grandma, aunt, elder sister, neighbor. It should be noted that in Malawi when a girl has experienced her second menses becomes a big event where women gather to instruct her on how to behave towards elders and during this state.

It has been commonly agreed that the last thing a girl wants is to be identified as being on menstruation. So the toilets she uses should be the same as those that are also used by all the other girls. In visiting a specially designed toilet, she is identified. So specially designed toilets do not solve the problem. Students at Mzuzu University were told to throw their sanitary pads in a pit latrine which was

constructed to serve for that purpose since most of the incinerators were damaged but no one could go there in the day light for fear of being known by their friends especially boys. Even in the incinerators that are put in the hostels most girls would rather wake up very early in the morning or late in the evening to throw their sanitary pads. In Zimbabwe, the multi compartment Blair VIP is used as a national standard. This is a pit toilet, so that sanitary pads can be thrown down them at will.

The washing of sanitary pads has also been much debated. When the girls have just experienced their menses, they undergo training on how to wear sanitary cloths and how to behave and they know that during this period they need to be more careful especially when it comes to wearing the sanitary pads/cloth. So there is great care during this time. When it comes to drying the cloths, the girls are told to hide them in secret so that some people with ill minds should not see them and bewitch the girls; e.g. for them never to conceive or to experience menses. Thus, caution and extra care is observed when it comes to drying the pads/cloths. The girls dry their cloths in the bush or in their rooms under the bed where no one could see them. If they are to be disposed, the pit type toilet system makes it easy – the cloths are just thrown down the pits.

On the subject of open debate, this was welcomed but it is commonly thought that this could only work among students at school both at primary and secondary level. However, I feel that at home, it is subjective because parents cannot discuss these issues with their children since it is considered a taboo. Only aunts or other relations can be free to talk about these issues to their nieces.

6.2. Studies in Uganda

Taken from the article entitled *"**Lifting silence on menstruation to keep girls in school**"*

More than half of Ugandan girls who enroll in grade one drop out before sitting for their primary school-leaving examinations. The fact that girls are dropping out between age 11 and 13 is being linked to the beginning of the menstruation cycle and its associated challenges. Research conducted by an NGO, the *Forum of African Women Educationalists* (FAWE), reveals that the lack of sanitary pads, coupled with other factors like the absence of water or separate toilet facilities for girls in many schools, is responsible for the drop-out rate.

Despite tax waivers introduced to reduce the cost of sanitary pads, finding money to buy them each month is a challenge for many grown women, never mind pre-teen girls. A packet of sanitary pads costs the equivalent of $1.50 in Uganda - for the same amount you could get a kilo of sugar for the whole household. Girls whose parents can't afford to give them the money improvise with strips of toilet paper or old cloth. "Sometimes you buy two packets depending on the flow," says Florence Kanyike, national coordinator of FAWE in Uganda. "For some girls the flow is heavy and they will need to change pad in the course of the day."

In their study of challenges to girl child education, FAWE researchers found that taboos and silence associated with menstruation in many communities mean some girls are in any case unable to ask their parents for money to buy pads, and forced to find ways of getting money on their own. Raising the subject can put unwanted pressures on a young girl. Kanyike says that for some parents, when a girl starts menstruating, it’s a sign that she is mature enough for marriage. This is the age at which many girls in rural areas are sent into forced marriages. Maimuna Kagoya has just started secondary school. She's fortunate that her aunt, Aisha, buys pads for her. In her Muslim family, Maimuna will be assumed to be ripe for marriage once she's known to be menstruating.

One risky means girls less fortunate than Maimuna turn to, to raise the money on their own is through sexual relationships with much older men who can provide the cash; one consequence of this is a large number of unwanted pregnancies, which then force girls to drop out of school. Dropping out of school affects girls in the long-term by limiting their future earning potential. FAWE has launched a campaign to de-stigmatize menstruation through "*girl education movement" clubs in schools*, where girls are taught to treat their periods as a normal occurrence not to be scared of.

The campaign to dispel silence around menstruation and advocate for affordable sanitary pads to be made available in local markets across the country has been piloted in five districts earlier this year. The project is dealing with twelve primary schools in each district, conducting workshops with pupils to open up dialogue on the topic of menstruation. The pupils discuss anything from lack of sanitary pads, poor facilities for menstruation at school and in the community,as well as try to find solutions.

Fatuma Wamala, programme officer at FAWE, says through the workshops they found that poor menstrual hygiene on the part of adolescent girls stem from beliefs, myths and attitudes within the community coupled with poverty. "Many parents do not allocate any budget to sanitary materials for the girls especially in day schools," says Wamala. She says FAWE'S advocacy has led to lower prices for sanitary towels on the open market and increased demand for sanitary towels in rural areas, where local shops are beginning to stock them.

It was FAWE's workshops with members of parliament and government officials which led to tax waivers on sanitary pads being announced by the finance minister in the 2006 national budget. Now the lawmakers want government to

go further and buy sanitary pads for female pupils in primary schools. Nabilah Sempala, a woman member of parliament for Kampala Central constituency, says government should include the cost of sanitary pads in the budget of the universal primary education.

6.3. Studies in Ghana

Source from Alliance for African Women Initiative

Research conducted by FAWE Ghana (2001) revealed that one major constraint to girl-child education was at the onset of menstruation for reasons like abdominal pains, fear of soiling themselves, change in mood and lack of toilet and water facilities. Puberty and adolescence can be a challenging time for many girls.

In Ghana, family members used to watch closely teenage girls and so girls who reached menarche were instructed by their mothers and other females in the community in behaviours associated with menstruation. *This appears to differ from experiences in Malawi and Zimbabwe.* They were also instructed about taboos to be observed during menstruation. Queen mothers in the community were responsible for conducting the girls throughout puberty rites involving education in hygiene and marriage.

Menstruation is a natural event throughout much of women's life, yet it is often a topic which is seldom and openly discussed. Many women lack sufficient or accurate knowledge about it. They often have misunderstanding and mistaken beliefs passed on by family and communities. Many women do not understand the purpose of menstruation and what happens in their bodies during menstruation.

In-depth studies by population report (2005) found out that the adolescents'

knowledge of fertility and menstruation are very poor in many countries of which Ghana is no exception. For example, in Dakar – Senegal, two thirds of adolescent girls and boys aged between 15 and 19 could not identify the mid point in the menstrual cycle and the time when a woman is likely to get pregnant (Population Report, 2005). In Ile – Nigeria, some 40% of school girls surveyed did not know the cause and meaning of menstruation. The report further indicated that among school girls ages 12-17 in Tamil Nadu-India more than half of girls who used old cloth, napkin or only their undergarments as a menstrual product washed them only once or twice a day rather than four or five times a day as is best, much of what these girls had learned concerned restrictions to their mobility and behaviour during menstruation and superstitions about they being 'polluters' of the environment.

Studies reveal that adolescent girls have very little information about menstruation before they experience their first menstruation and this ignorance leads to various reactions including worry, shyness, embarrassment and nervousness. Another significant finding is the lack of adequate education about the hygienic management of menstruation and the provision of facilitating for disposal of menstrual materials. This situation is worsened among the rural communities in the country where access to information are more difficult.

Further studies revealed that items used in the management of menstruation include sanitary pad, toilet roll, used cloth, cotton wool. The study showed that toilet roll and used cloth are in high usage in the management of menstruation. Though these items are not the best, but because of poverty, they can not afford to buy sanitary pad during menstruation.

Also, those who can even afford do not have access to these manufactured protective sanitary materials to support themselves during menstruation due to such factors as availability (distribution in rural areas is uncertain). Consequently

they use a variety of unhygienic materials such as leaves, toilet papers and pieces of sacks that may have long-term effects on their health.
The study further revealed that most of the schools visited did not have facilities to make a menstruating girl comfortable. The respondents said they need facilities such as wash rooms toilet facilities so that it can make them comfortable during menstruation.

Many schools visited were underprivileged and lack sufficient sanitation facilities which are vital not only during a girl's period but at all times generally. Due to inadequate water, toilet facilities and dumping facilities for sanitary wear, many menstruating girls would rather wish to stay at home due to lack of facilities to help them manage their periods than go to school.

The recommendations made in Ghana were common to other studies:

Girls should be taught about menstruation and sexual management practices. Education about menstruation should start at an early age before girls reach puberty, when taught beforehand, girls would be better prepared emotionally, and psychologically for the experience of menstruation and will have fewer negative reaction, they would be able to better care for themselves during menstruation, especially learning about hygiene practices. Intensifying the teaching of girls about menstruation as part of adolescent and reproductive health education in our basic and secondary schools can succeed. This teaching should be part of the school curriculum and teaching should be practical. Since the study revealed that in some schools, health education is non existence. This would go a long way to improve the knowledge of girls about menstruation and management practices.

Provision of sanitary facilities in the schools to take care of girls who are menstruating. What are currently available in the basic schools are inadequate, therefore more wash rooms are still needed for menstruating girl.

Materials or books on menstruation should be provided for girls to read and understand the changes that occur in their bodies, the books should teach the various menstrual management and hygiene practices. Teachers should encourage girls who are menstruating to participate in class activities especially allowing them to answer or ask question while sitting. They should also encourage girls who are menstruating to report to the lady teachers in their schools.

7.Discussion

Many themes revealed in these various studies are common to all. In a recent publication entitled *Putting menstrual hygiene management on to the school water and sanitation agenda* by Marni Sommer, Mailman school of public health, Columbia University, USA, and published in Waterlines Vol. 29.no 4 Oct 2010, the same common themes are revealed. These must be considered as the most recent statements of the problem. Briefly these are revealed as:

Despite the continued call for attention to the importance of girls education, schools throughout the low income countries continue to lack the basic water and sanitation related facilities essential for adolescent girls, who on a monthly basis must manage their personal menstrual hygiene needs in the school environment that:

1. Frequently lack adequate latrines or any latrines at all

2. Lack of a sufficient supply of easily accessible and clean water , and

3. A mechanism for disposing of used sanitary materials in a private and culturally acceptable way. .

4. A private area for washing and drying reusable materials

Marni Sommer states that The water and sanitation community in partnership with the Education community is long overdue in taking ownership of this important agenda. Research has provided some important findings:

1. Girls are unable to attend school due to inadequate facilities (both water and sanitation)
2. Insufficient sanitary material to manage daily menses
3. Shame caused by menstrual accident

Referring to a GPIA-UNICEF Conference on the subject in NY City (2010), growing attention was being paid to providing affordable sanitary pads to girls and most importantly to the importance of using the girls own recommendations for how best to address the girl unfriendly aspects of school environments. That the best to address the problem in terms of providing information was towards the end of primary education, and at the latest, at the beginning of secondary education. Also that local attitudes and beliefs around menstruation are important for designing school interventions or policy.

The active NGO *Forum for African Women Educationalists* (FAWE, 2008) had undertaken many valuable studies, including those sited above and also .FAWE Kenya implemented a menstrual hygiene management related intervention in schools , whilst Makerere University, Uganda followed up with the design of low cost sanitary pads made of papyrus leaves (Maka Pads) for school girls.

Also revealed were the differences seen between rural and urban settings such as the strength of cultural beliefs, and level of secrecy regarding menstruation. Sommers' suggested that solutions made by the girls themselves were very important, including participatory activities with girls, including writing of menstrual stories. The most successful interventions are those grounded in the local context and take into consideration the girls own views. The girls themselves should be engaged in research and planning. The girls own views are important in exploring a potentially sensitive topic

Other studies revealed that in Eritrea, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the National Union of Eritrean women (NUEW) collaborated on a study which revealed the challenges the girls were facing and subsequently provided latrines and sanitary pads to school girls (CRS 2002). In Ethiopia SCF (Save the Childrens Fund) and the large commercial company Proctor and Gamble collaborated on providing latrines, puberty guidance and sanitary pads to school girls. In Rwanda, Sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE) is implementing a project to produce low cost and environmentally sanitary materials. It seems providing girls with adequate sanitary materials might be as important as the provision of text books and quality teachers.

Most valuable perhaps were studies undertaken in Tanzania which led to the publication of valuable educational books for the school girls. Once again, these studies revealed the absence of simple guidance on managing menses that included - inadequate water, sanitation, disposal facilities and locks on doors etc. Girls face difficulties in identifying support given to them because of the predominance of male teachers and administration staff, the lack of adequate materials for managing their menses (e.g. sanitary pads and suitable underwear) and a lack of Practical puberty guidance.

In Tanzania the collection of girls stories led to the publication of a "Girls puberty book" in aimed at 10 to 14 year olds. This valuable book included menstrual management guidance with activities to help girls manage their menses more successfully. And also build their self esteem. 16 000 copies of the book were published with support from Nike foundation and the Tanzanian Ministry of Education. A further 100 000 books were printed with support from the United Nations Populations Fund and UNICEF (Tanzania). Given the books inclusion of practical guidance on how to manage menstruation in schools, including advice on how to keep clean and appropriately dispose of used menstrual materials, there is the optimistic possibility that its widespread distribution across Tanzania will lead to grassroots local efforts to address the girl unfriendly aspects of school environments.

8.Recommendations and steps forward

In a continuation of work already carried out, this project should look into the following topics:

8.1. **Take steps to test and evaluate a locally produced simple book or booklet**, possibly based on the Tanzanian model, taking into account local beliefs and practices, girls' stories and much practical advice on the proper management of menstruation in school girls and designed for girls between the ages of 10 to 14. And also translated into Shona and Ndebele. To write and field test.

8.2. Easy access of sanitary pads for young girls. Reduction of prices and selling sanitary pads at costs prices. Production of cost effective locally made pads.

8.3. Demystifying the stigma associated by menstruation by encouraging open dialogue in the school, Teachers should encourage girls on menses to participate in classes by allowing them to answer or ask questions while sitting at the same time, but not exposing their condition to the whole class. This can be done if the girls can be encouraged to tell their teachers they are on menses so that the teacher can just announce to the class that all pupils on that particular day will be allowed to answer or ask questions whilst sitting.

8.4. Awareness on the importance of hygiene and hand washing

8.5. Improvements of toilet facilities if required. If there are any special toilets for menstruating girls to be built in schools, these toilets have to be built for all the girls in the school so that there's no difference in their use – by the girls whether they are on menses or not. Our studies have revealed that the girls on menses do not wish to be identified as such by their use of special toilets.

8.6. Improvement of hand washing facilities. New designs need to be tested.

8.7. At a later stage intensifying the teaching of girls about menstruation as part of health education curriculum. It should become part of the school curriculum and the teaching should be practical. This will go a long way to improve the knowledge of girls about menstruation.

8.8. Developing methods to make the provision of Pain stoppers practical and low cost to be made available at school for easy access to girls who will be in pain.

8.9. Stakeholders have to facilitate workshops with teachers, thus, enabling them to be better informed and understand the needs by girls.

9. Conclusions

There is a Shona saying which goes "chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda" literally meaning one finger on your hand cannot do all the work. It needs all the fingers to work collectively. Team work is the key. From our research we discovered that we are a long way from having a proper menstrual management system. It needs collectiveness - 100% participation from all stakeholders i.e. parents, teachers, children, government and the community to bring solutions for a better future for our girl child and the right to education with dignity.

So we move forward step by step. By developing a close dialogue with the girls and their female teachers in selected schools, we further build up our background material and the facts we need to find the answers. We test our written educational material using practical input from the girls themselves. We tell their stories and how they solved them. We illustrate. We teach. We spread our learning through direct intervention and through the written word to educate and provide answers for our girls, so they may fulfill their dreams by performing well in school and beyond.

Potential list of reference material

List from Towela Mwase (Malawi)

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Note Marni Sommer of Columbia University also provides a comprehensive list of reference material

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