The Girl - Child and Menstrual Management in Zimbabwe – part two

By

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1.Practical solutions and observations

During the period when I have been visiting schools in various parts of the country, it has become obvious to me that school girls not only need advice on how to handle their menstrual problems, but also practical hints on how they may, with their own ingenuity of effort make the burden through these critical days easier for them.

There are several areas which may have great potential for further development, In particular can be singled out various ways of keeping menstrual pads in place during periods of walking or activity, and thereby reducing discomfort and embarrassment. Another area includes methods of reducing menstrual pain when pills are not available. I have included meaningful exercise and even deep breathing as a form of relaxation which if practiced may help the girl child. Not least are methods of helping the girl child to increase her self esteem as a young growing woman.

Menstrual pads (commercially available)

These are available in Zimbabwe but normally only in the larger centers. At the Domboramwari school, the school buys for girls to use in emergency at packets of 10 for one USD. They are given to the girls on in emergency situations. Such

pads which are ideal are not used by the great majority of school girls because of their “relatively high” cost. The cost may not seem high in western ears, but it is high to the poor.

Consequently locally made pads are used and made from old used cloths. These can be uncomfortable, come loose, and irritate the skin. They are unable to stop staining of panties and must be changed often ( )

Design of pad holders

Part of this problem may be overcome by providing pad holders with elastic attached which are worn under the panties. The elastics pass over the hips to help the holder keep in place. These will be tested in the program (different sizes are being made). The cost is about 1USD per unit and they are washable. The type of pad used with them is variable, depending on what is available in the home.

The relief of Pain in the absence of pills

This area includes many forms of exercise, deep breathing, application of hot water bottles and other plastic bottles filled with hot water etc.

Traditional plant remedies

According to WHO over half of all Zimbabweans use traditional medicine. This is partly due to the lack of western medicine (especially in the rural areas) or their high cost. A large number of indigenous plants are known to assist **Dysmennorrhoea (**difficult or painful menstruation), according to text books written on the subject. However very few women or girls were aware of these herbs and to date only one example has been sited as being used (jekacheka). I believe this area of work requires deeper exploration. I visited the National Herbarium in Harare to obtain further information on this subject. The list of

indigenous plants which are known to assist painful menstruation can be listed as follows:

Adenia gummifera, Aloe spp, Annona senegalensis, A. stenophylla, Azanza garckeana, Bauhinia petersiana, Brachylaena rotundata, Cassis singueana, Cassytha filiformis, Cissampelos mucronata, Combretum platypetalum, Cyphostemma junceum, C rhodesiae, Diospyros lycioides, Ehretia coerulea, Ekebergia benguelensis, Elephantorrhiza elephantiina, Gardenia spp, Hexalobus monopetalus, Hymenodictyon floribundum, Indigo antunesiana, I.arrecta, I. rhynchocarpa, Justicia elegantula, Lannea edulis, Leptactina benguelensis, Maytenus senegalensis, Pentas purpurea, Rhynchosia resinosa, Senecio coronatus, Solanum delagoense, S. incanum, Spermacoce dibrachiata, Thunbergia lancifolia, Triumfetta welwitschii, Turraea nilotica, Typha latifolia, Vangueria infausta, Vernonia glaberrima, Vigna unguiculata, Ziziphus mucronata.

More detail was singled out from a shorter list (with indigenous names) by the Herbarium Botanist.

Annona senegalensis (Muroro),

Azanza garckeana (Dohire),

Bauhinia petersiana, (concoction made from root and taken by mouth)

Cassis singueana (Kasakwe, Kaudziudzi), (infusion from root taken by mouth)

Diospyros lycioides (Mbune, Mubune, Mushawa),

Ekebergia benguelensis (Mudyamhefu, Mudyauarunga),

Lannea edulis (Muhute, Musambasi),

Maytenus senegalensis (Koko tree),

Pentas purpurea, (infusion from root taken by mouth)

Rhynchosia resinosa (Dapanyuchi, Mudandemutande),

Typha latifolia (Mubungwa, Mubungwe),

Ziziphus mucronata (Chinunga, Muchachani, Muchechena).

At a later stage it is hoped to investigate this interesting and potentially practical subject in more detail.

Herbs known to help period pain.

A great deal has been written about the effects of certain herbs on gynecological problems. In fact the holistic approach of herbal medicine is particularly relevant to the common problems associated with menstruation including PMS and period pains. Emotional and spiritual upsets can be even more significant than physical problems. Chinese medicine, for instance, associates the female reproductive system to the functions of the liver, which stores blood and controls the flow of *qi* or energy around the body. PMS problems can be explained in terms of liver disharmony resulting in irritability and abdominal bloating for instance. Treatment therefore may centre on herbal therapies which stimulate liver energy. Western herbal treatment can also assist – the herb motherwort, for instance is known to be a uterine tonic.

A case history (not from Africa)

Lucy suffered from PMS badly with mood swings and painful heavy periods. She was advised to spend at least 10 minutes every day relaxing to help her unwind, and was given a prescription for liver *qi* of *chai hu,bai shao yao, bai zhu, fu ling,* peppermint, ginger and liquorice. Within 6 weeks to 2 months most of her problems related to menstruation were overcome.

Some herbal remedies

Pre menstrual syndrome

This is associated with irritability or anger, depression and emotional upsets, abdominal bloating, constipation or diarrhoea etc.

Herb remedies include **Lady's mantle,** taken as a tincture or infusion with other herbs, **Evening Primrose,** taken as 250mg – 500mg capsules and combined with other PMS strategies such as vitamen B supplements, **Chaste – tree** (ten drops tincture in water, but can be combined with evening primrose oil and vitamin C supplements.

Period Pains

This is associated with uterine cramps, abdominal pain and bloating etc.

Herb remedies include **Pasque flower** (5g herb to 500mls water for infusion), **Dang gui** (30gms herb in 500mls water) **Black haw** (20mls tincture in water 3X a day).

Heavy Periods

Herb remedies include **Pot Marigold, Shepherds Purse and White dead nettle**, all taken as infusion or tincture.

Note that the importation of Chinese herbs is becoming far more common in Zimbabwe in recent years and such remedies may well be valuable in combination with other herbs and also western herbs and pain controllers if suitable means is found to make them more commonly available at lower and affordable costs.

Work being carried out in Zimbabwe on sanitary pads

This work is being carried out by two NGOs (Lubancho and Hwange Aids Project) in the Hwange district of Zimbabwe. On average, women menstruate for four days each month and change their sanitary wear at least three times daily depending on the flow. That means the majority of women need a kg of cotton wool, forking out at least US$2 each month.

For US$1, most teenagers - even those in difficult circumstances - can buy a 500g pack of cotton wool for their personal hygiene. This lasts about two days. As a result from training in this project, for the same amount of money (US$1) orphans and other vulnerable children in Hwange can make about 10 washable sanitary pads, which can be used for up to four months. This is a huge saving in precious dollars – that is making home made reusable pads to cut down on the costs of sanitary wear.

The project was started in December 2010 and the the washable pads, which are popularly referred to as the Femshuleni napkin, have proved to be a godsend. "We used to provide them with modern sanitary wear but when our coffers ran dry we improvised the home-made napkins," said Lubancho co-ordinator Sister Otilia Nyoni. The organisations used to provide sanitary wear to the children under funding from the National Action Plan for Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (NAP for OVC). The first round of this pool of funding officially ended last year and registered organizations have since submitted applications for the second round of funding.

"Girls in low income households, whose majority are in rural areas, are accepting the pads but some in urban areas still prefer the usual cotton wool," Sister Nyoni said.

The idea of making sanitary wear at home was piloted in Tanzania, where research revealed that many vulnerable girls failed to go to school during menstruation because they were not comfortable: hence the name Femshuleni

- meaning "girls must be in school".

Faith-based organization, Lubancho has so far taught about 800 girls between Grade 4 and Form Two in 16 rural schools to make the pads at home. Sister Nyoni said the training included teachers and officials from the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare. "Our aim is to impart skills on how to make the pads to the few girls whom we can manage to train so that they can teach others as well."

Making the washable pads

What is needed to make the pads at home and how hygienic are they? Ms Rachel Zhou of Lubancho says one needs a piece of material, usually flannel, baby fleece or T-shirting, which are soft and good at absorbing water. A piece of plastic to prevent blood from leaking to under garments and a ribbon to tie the pad around the waist are also needed. The size of materials differs from person to person but on average a metre of fabric makes 10 sanitary pads.

A 30-metre-long ribbon costs R5 or 50 US cents. After use, Ms Zhou says the pads can be washed in salt water. Hwange Aids Project co-ordinator Mrs Silotsholiwe Mpuzu says acceptance has been low since girls are used to modern sanitary wear. She says in Hwange urban they have trained about 200 girls to make sanitary wear at home. Zimbabwe has more than 600 000 orphans and other vulnerable children.

Comment

I have also heard of this idea being used in Marirangwe and as a result we are also making and trying a similar idea in our project. The primary aim, apart from cutting down on costs is to make the home made pads stay in place to avoid embarrassment. The results of trials will be reported later.