

Challenges and Gaps in Sanitary Towels Provision in Kenya During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

While the Kenyan government has committed to sanitary pad distribution in schools to provide girls with an allocation of pads each term, many girls continue to use unhygienic methods and materials to manage their menstruation, and many continue to miss school during the threat period. Notably, girls have continued to face numerous menstruation obstacles and problems that are inherent in customs and beliefs, and those from low-income families have either absentee themselves many times or dropped out totally. This article focuses on a cross-section of Kenyan Sub-Counties that have been purposefully targeted by the Ministry of Education and for focused and informed measures to minimize access retention and transition challenges, particularly in rural areas. A mixed-method approach of interviews and questionnaires was used to collect data from Sub-counties with high levels of adolescent pregnancies and female dropouts to acquire both qualitative and quantitative data. This study's participants were 5 headteachers, 5 guidance and counselling teachers, and 100 primary school girls picked using a convenient random method from 100 households distributed across the Sub-counties in Kenya. The findings indicate a lack of adequate supplies and ineffective management of the program plus a high level of poverty, making it hard for most families to acquire sanitary towels for their girls whenever they are required.

Keywords: Child, COVID-19, Kenya

1. Introduction

Every child in Kenya is protected under the 2010 constitution's Bill of Rights and the Basic Education Act 2013, which mandates that the government offer free compulsory basic

education to all children in the country. Ensuring that all girls receive a quality education is a human right, a national and global development agenda, and a strategic priority for the government in its commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 which states that all boys and girls should have access to inclusive and quality education to promote gender equality and women and girls' empowerment. Despite the significance of girls' education to development, 129 million girls are out of school, with 32 million in primary school, 30 million in lower secondary school, and 67 million in upper secondary school (Note 1). Several variables influence girls' access, retention, and transition to school in multiple countries. Women, girls, and other stakeholders have identified menstruation as a critical problem because it has a greater impact on the quality and pleasure of schooling than other elements of puberty. It includes a learning component and components influenced by the school environment and infrastructure (Note 2).

Despite the provision of free basic education, many girls continue to miss out on education due to absenteeism related to reproductive health issues, since they are forced to skip school when they are unable to control their menstruation. Access to sanitary towels is a critical concern for many Kenyan girls from low-income homes, with at least 500 million women and girls worldwide without access to basic menstrual hygiene management facilities (MHM) (Note 3). According to UNESCO (Note 4), over half of all school-age girls lack access to sanitary towels, and one in every ten females in Sub-Saharan Africa skips school during their menstrual cycle.

Studies conducted in low and middle-income countries (Note 5), notes that women and girls have insufficient information about menstruation and continue to miss 20% of school days each year due to a lack of affordable and appropriate sanitary towels. A girl who misses four days of school in a month loses 13 learning days, which equates to two weeks of learning in each school term. In an academic year, a female loses 39 learning days, which equates to six weeks of study time (nine months). A female student in grades 6 through 8 loses 18 of 108 learning weeks. In four years of high school, a girl can skip 156 learning days or more than 24 weeks out of 144 weeks of studying. Despite the loss of learning time, many girls in informal learning institutions and settlements, as well as those in marginalized regions and vulnerable girls on the streets, were left out of the Ministry of Education program, even though it was designed to reach all needy girls and women in all counties, but due to financial constraints, only schoolgirls in public primary, special primary, and secondary were reached through the state department of gender.

The education sector is responsible for promoting students' healthy development; it must assist them to respond to and managing life's changes and obstacles. According to official reports (Note 6), the supply chain supporting this initiative is deficient, and investigations have revealed that sanitary pad distribution to schools is inefficiently managed, and girls are not assured efficient and equal pad supplies. Adolescent females, therefore, has continued to face several problems that may jeopardize their ability to complete high school. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic.

2. Sanitary towels Provision and Girls Education in Kenya

Previously, the Ministry of Education worked with non-governmental groups to obtain and distribute sanitary towels. Proctor & Gamble, the Girl Child Network (GCN), Education for the Marginalized Children of Kenya (EMACK), and the National Gender and Equality Commission, for example, provided sanitary towels to millions of Kenyan schoolgirls. Notably, also, Kenya was the first country in the world to remove tampon charges in 2004 and has long been a world leader in improving access to menstrual hygiene management materials. Furthermore, Kenya eliminated an import duty on sanitary towels in 2011 and began funding \$3 million per year to provide free pads to low-income schools. However, in 2016, Menstrual Hygiene Day (MH Day) published the study “Menstrual Health in Kenya,” (Note 7) which revealed that 65% of Kenyan women and girls could not afford sanitary towels and that two out of every three women in rural Kenya obtained menstrual hygiene products from sexual partners. This has a negative influence on the power dynamics of both women and girls, meaning that most rural women rely on males to manage their menstruation. Some women will even engage in sexual activity solely to get the necessary menstruation items.

Since 2018, the Ministry of Education has supervised the sanitary pad initiative, with the goal of providing sanitary towels to all menstruation girls in public primary and special schools across the country. At the primary school level, the program focuses on girls in grades 6, 7, and 8, when menstruation is most likely to begin for most girls. The sanitary towel project has three components: supplying sanitary towels to schoolgirls, teaching teachers about sanitary towel usage and disposal, and monitoring and assessment. Despite rising evidence concerning the obstacles girls encounter managing menstruation and having a Menstrual Hygiene Management Policy (Note 8), and increased attempts to address these challenges, gaps and challenges impacting girls in managing menstruation and disposing of used products persist. This article investigates the concerns and obstacles associated with the distribution of sanitary towels during the COVID-19 epidemic.

3. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was applied in this research, which comprised both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. To acquire quantitative data, the study used a questionnaire, which was physically given to both the targeted teachers and girls. Telephone interviews with principals were done to collect qualitative data. Documents and reports on sanitary towels were also analyzed to better understand the supply and demand-driven gaps and triangulate the data. Machakos County was chosen precisely because it is close to the Ministry of Education Headquarters, which oversees procuring and distributing sanitary towels.. The county is also one of the counties targeted by the Ministry of Education’s SEQIP (Note 9). The Yatta Sub-County of Machakos County was chosen at random to offer a representative sample, and 5 schools were chosen using stratified random selection to include 3 mixed-day schools, 1 boarding school, and 1 special school. As a result, the research included 5 principals, 5 guidance and counselling instructors, and 100 students from grades 6 through 8. Because all girls in elementary schools are expected to have an equal chance of receiving

sanitary towels, the girls were chosen using convenience random selection from the marginalised rural and informal settlements.

4. Findings and Discussion

The response rate for headteachers was 100 percent, 80 percent for guidance and counselling teachers, and 70 percent for girls. The study’s findings were analyzed thematically and used descriptive statistics. According to the findings, sanitary towels are distributed through Sub-County education offices, where the headteachers pick them up, however, the expense of the trip is not paid by any vote head in schools, as observed by the 5 headteachers. Three principals noted inefficiencies in the distribution procedure and the distribution period sometimes is unpredictable. Even though the MoE program is meant to run on a termly basis, one headteacher observed that “the distribution is seldom timely, and many schools’ girls suffer as a result.” On the amount of the pads, one headteacher stated, “Sometimes we are not sure how many packets the schools are entitled to; we merely collect what is available.” This disadvantages the girls, and schools are compelled to supplement from parents or well-wishers such as local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

Furthermore, the survey findings revealed that girls in classes below six get towels, even though the ministry of education primarily targets classes 6, 7, and 8. This affects the number of packets the girls receive each year. The government planned for girls to get sanitary towels monthly, or 12 packets, but according to the statistics, girls got less than 10 packets on average. This revelation was supported by teachers, who remarked that there is no set quantity of packets for each girl; it all relies on the availability and the overall number of packets received by the schools. There has always been a deficit, but “we have well-wishers like NGOs and foundations that have working arrangements to give sanitary towels regularly,” one principal said. Figure 1 shows the sufficiency of the sanitary towels about the three participant categories.

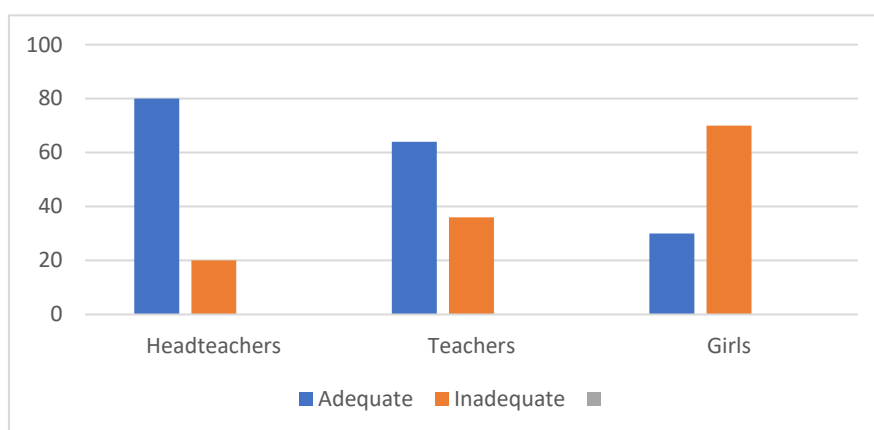


Figure 1. Adequacy of the sanitary towels

According to Figure 1, 70% of the girls in the research believed the sanitary towels given

were insufficient and only covered the period while they were at school. For example, when schools were closed due to COVID-19, 40% of girls said that they only had one packet and that being at home for 9 months was difficult. This exposed many girls to many challenges since, as many (98 percent) indicated, the only assured source of sanitary towels comes from the school. Other concerns mentioned were “when I bring my packets home, my mother and sisters also utilize them, leaving me with gaps” and “many times the “distribution is done once every term, and sometimes there aren’t enough for all of us to acquire as many packets as we need, so we end up with relatively few packets”. Teachers mentioned a method in certain schools where girls receive pads as the need arises. This implies that sanitary towels are only supplied to the girls while they are menstruating. Though this strategy, according to teachers, reduces waste and prevents parents and guardians from sometimes selling them, it also leaves the girls exposed “since it is often impossible to discern exactly when the menaces begin,” one teacher noted.

According to the headteachers, insufficiency concerns are challenging for them since they only distribute to the girls what is available. “We have reported the gaps to the education offices, but we are still waiting for answers; in the meantime, our girls continue to suffer,” one headteacher stated. Furthermore, “sometimes, girls in the lower classes are provided sanitary towels even though they are not accounted for in the distribution, this causes gaps,” one headteacher observed. Because around 40 percent of the schools had not received sanitary pad packets before the March 2020 school closure, “the girls went home without the packets”, as a result of practical difficulties in reaching the girls, it meant that 40 percent of the schools did not supply sanitary towels to girls because of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite 60% of the total number of schools having the sanitary towels. As one headmaster put it, particularly in homes who couldn’t afford even the low-priced disposable sanitary towels that cost roughly half a dollar, many of our girls suffered.” Even though many teachers did not address it, 30 percent of girls whose parents could not buy sanitary towels while they were at home had to find other alternatives. Some had transactional sex with young boys, particularly those in the Bodaboda sector, in exchange for sanitary pad favours. Figure 2 shows the sources of sanitary towels outside of schools.

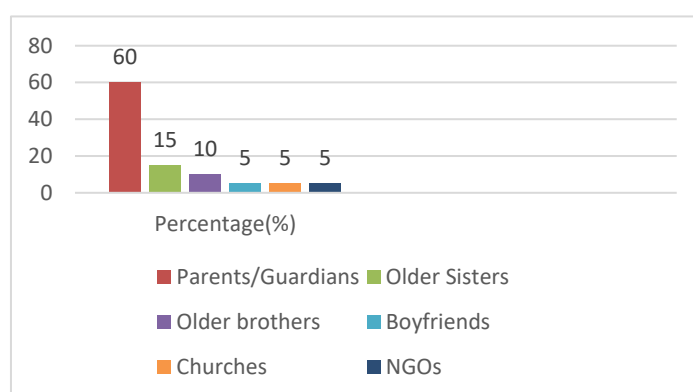


Figure 2. Sources of Sanitary towels Outside Schools

According to the findings, most girls, 60 percent, rely on their parents and guardians for

sanitary towels, followed by elderly sisters and brothers. Churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the least common sources. Although just 5 percent of respondents said they acquire sanitary towels from boyfriends, this is a concerning trend considering the high rate of adolescent pregnancies in many regions. Though the research did not want the girls to identify their sub-counties or schools, two school principals described comparable concerns caused by Bodaboda riders, who had always been reported for sexual harassment by girls.

A schoolteacher stated that “most incidents of adolescent pregnancies, defilement, and even rape come as a result of Bodaboda riders who often take advantage of young girls who may be searching for sanitary pad money and whose bargaining skills are inadequate.” A teacher verified this, saying, “in this location, girls are bought for phones (smallest) and are directed when to call or receive messages, in addition to sanitary pad tokens, and the girls reciprocate by having sexual relationships.” This exposes them, and the parents are ignorant of any deals until the girl misses school or becomes pregnant.” Teachers believe that inadequate menstrual hygiene education has not reached all schools, and as a result, girls endure menstruation with little information.

As mentioned by the five school principals, the arrangement had been done for girls to pick up sanitary towels from school during the COVID-19 school shutdown, but that this could only be done for a limited number of girls whose parents could be reached by phone. As a result, many girls were exposed and some got into teenage pregnancies and early marriages because of school closures, economic hardships caused by the epidemic, and an abundance of free time on their hands. This had an impact on the government’s return to school open door policy for all students once classes resumed (Note 10). Many a time when sanitary towels are unavailable or inadequate, many girls, particularly in rural areas, resort to using unhygienic materials (Notes 11, 12) such as torn pieces of cloth, sponge, animal skin, old rags, leaves, cow dung, or even digging holes in the ground to sit on for the duration of their menstrual flow. Figure 3 shows the many items mentioned by girls as alternatives to sanitary towels.

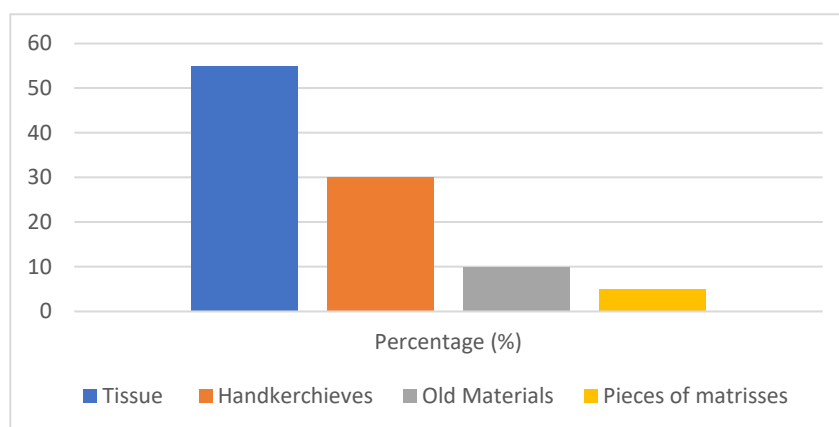


Figure 3. Alternative Materials Used by Girls When Sanitary Towels Are Not Available

When in despair and with little options, the girls in this poll mentioned using tissue (55 percent), handkerchiefs (30 percent), old materials (10 percent), and mattress bits (5 percent). As many girls noted, the first-time menstruation occurs is hard since knowledge and awareness are given after the cycle has begun, thus they utilize whatever item is available out of desperation. Teachers agreed, saying that when sanitary towels are scarce or delivered late, girls are disadvantaged and seek alternatives. Some girls stated that they would rather miss school for a few days or use “whatever is available” than dirty their clothing and face awkward situations from teachers and boys.

According to the teachers, the cost of sanitary towels is out of reach for many families, and because it is a monthly family expense, it may be difficult for households with more than one girl. As a result, the Ministry of Education should continue to distribute pads effectively and efficiently throughout the year. Furthermore, the number of pads a girl can use in a month should be addressed, as almost 8 percent of girls reported using 2 packets each month owing to the severity of the flow. Three teachers also mentioned how girls complain that one package each month is insufficient and that they are often compelled to borrow from other girls. They also stated that girls with special needs mature at a young age, making them susceptible and vulnerable. Teachers or schools are forced to augment the quantity when girls need more than one packet per month and when those from lower classes who are not served by the Ministry of Education want sanitary towels.

The disposal of sanitary towels is a core concern of both teachers and girls after their use. Three school principals corroborated the difficulty girls have in disposing used pads in schools, stating that “we urge pads be disposed of in pit latrines, and girls to maintain hygiene.” The headmaster of one school said that they had to increase the number of pit latrines to suit the increased number of females, “noting that, sanitary towels are not biodegradable, disposing of them, in any case, is a problem to the environment.” Another principal stated that because of the prohibitive cost of waste incinerators, few schools have one, and females continue to have poor-quality disposal facilities. Teachers indicated that because of the necessity for water and sanitation cleanliness during the COVID-19 epidemic, many schools in rural regions had to enhance water gathering, which has continued considerably to help girls post-COVID-19, particularly during the menstrual time. All the administrators agree that many teachers are not fully prepared to guide Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and that many girls are vulnerable due to a lack of information, skills, and alternatives for safe and effective personal hygiene.

According to a Ministry of Health situational analysis (Note 13), sanitary product disposal varies in Kenya, with 65 percent of the rural population disposing of their sanitary products in pit latrines compared to 50 percent in urban settings. Garbage collection was used by 39 percent of urban residents and 22 percent of rural residents, whereas crude burning was used by 2 percent of urban residents and 6 percent of rural residents. Even though the bulk of the rural population uses pit latrines to dispose of waste, 14 percent of households practice open defecation, and 96 percent are categorized as impoverished (Notes 14 15 16). The study’s findings were consistent with the published literature. The majority (70 percent) of girls expressed dissatisfaction with the options available for disposing of pads at home and even at

certain schools, particularly those with limited pit latrines, where “it is really difficult to retain privacy in managing and disposing of pads,” one girl observed. Figure 4 shows some of the strategies girls use to dispose of sanitary towels at home.

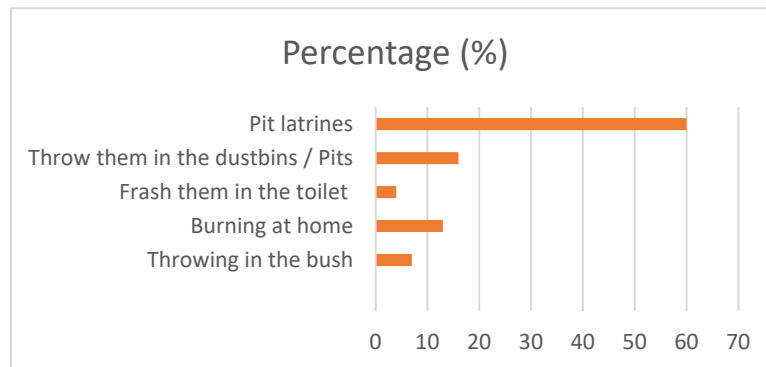


Figure 4. Methods Used by Girls to Dispose of Sanitary towels

According to Figure 3, 60 percent of girls use pit latrines and 7 percent throw them in the bush or in a garbage pit, which might serve as a breeding ground for infections and illnesses (Note 17). Thirty percent of girls stated that while they are at home, they try to conceal days when they are on menstruation since many parents and community members are uninformed of the issue, and menstruation is still surrounded by myths and taboos, which generate stigma on the topic and girls.

5. Conclusion

Girls’ need for sanitary towels is both a family and a government issue. Menstruation disrupts the school calendar for girls, and if not adequately handled, improvements in girls’ education access, retention, and the transition will continue to deteriorate, hurting both national and international educational goals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many girls suffered untold stories. Those, especially from low-income households, suffered most as the families could not supplement sanitary towels-supply-demand compared to those girls whose families could afford it. The distribution of towels by the Ministry of Education is well supported by school managers, teachers, and girls. If the Ministry of Education can effectively and efficiently distribute sanitary towels to overcome menstruation barriers and safeguard girls from unnecessary health concerns linked with the use of unhygienic menstrual products, many girls will be maintained in school and their learning remains uninterrupted throughout the academic calendar.

6. Recommendations

- It is important to tosensitise parents about the relevance of sanitary towels in girls’ education and disposing of used sanitary towels. This will go a long way toward dispelling misconceptions and taboos that perpetuate stigma toward girls.

- Mapping out all NGOs and CBOs dealing with procuring and distributing sanitary towels to avoid duplication of efforts and to create a well-coordinated distribution channel.
- Lobbying the government to maintain the zero-tax policy on sanitary towels to make them affordable.

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Notes

Note 1. Girls' education, *Gender equality in education benefits every child. Girls' education* | UNICEF.

Note 2. Puberty Education & Menstrual Hygiene Management
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000226792/PDF/226792eng.pdf.multi.page=1&zoo m=auto,-16,517>

Note 3. Menstrual Hygiene Management Enables Women and Girls to Reach Their Full Potential
Menstrual Hygiene Management Enables Women and Girls to Reach Their Full Potential (worldbank.org)

Note 4. Puberty Education & Menstrual Hygiene Management
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Note 5. Ministry of Public Service and Gender, State Department of Gender. Sanitary Towels Program – State Department for Gender

Note 6. Sanitary products still too expensive Kenya has scrapped the tax on menstrual products, but they are still too expensive for rural women | D+C - Development + Cooperation (dandc.eu)

Note 7. Menstrual Health in Kenya | Country Landscape Analysis. FSG-Menstrual-Health-Landscape_Kenya.pdf (menstrualhygieneday.org)

Note 8. Menstrual Hygiene Management Policy. MHM-Policy-11-May-2020.pdf (health.go.ke)

Note 9. SEQIP: The Government of Kenya has partnered with the World Bank (WB) to improve student learning and transition from upper primary to secondary education in targeted areas. SEQIP aims to “improve student learning and transition from Primary to Secondary Education in targeted areas

Note 10. Promises To Keep. Impact Of COVID-19 On Adolescents In Kenya
https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2021PGY_ImpactCovidAdolKenya.pdf

Note 11. Tackling period poverty. Tackling period poverty – Team Kenya

Note 12. Cloth, cow dung, cups: how the world's women manage their periods. Cloth, cow dung, cups: how the world's women manage their periods | Women's rights and gender equality | The Guardian

Note 13. Menstrual Hygiene Management Policy. MHM-Policy-11-May-2020.pdf (health.go.ke)

Note 14. Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2014. Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2014 (FR308) (dhsprogram.com)

Note 15. Republic of Kenya Ministry of Health. (2016). Kenya Environmental Sanitation and

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