

# Menstrual Hygiene

## Challenges, Taboos and Impact on Girl's Education



### RESEARCH RESULTS IN NUMBERS

- 63:1** AVERAGE GIRL TO LATRINE RATIO IN NORTH DAYI
- 70:1** AVERAGE GIRL TO LATRINE RATIO IN ZABZUGU
- 50%** SCHOOLS WITH LOCKABLE, CLEAN, WORKING LATRINES FOR GIRLS
- 33%** SCHOOLS WITH HANDWASHING FACILITIES
- 13** AVERAGE AGE OF FIRST MENSTRUATION
- 0** NUMBER OF SCHOOLS WITH SOME ANAL CLEANSING MATERIAL FOR GIRLS



*This factsheet summarises the findings of a research project about menstruation and its impact on Girl's Education in 12 schools in Zabzugu and North Dayi districts, Ghana <sup>1</sup>. Researchers interviewed students, teachers and parents, and inspected facilities to investigate the societal, environmental, interpersonal, personal and biological factors affecting menstrual hygiene management. The chosen districts broadly represent the cultures and geography typical in Northern and Southern Ghana.*



### IMPACT: Barriers to girls' school attendance during menstruation

In Ghana, 95% of girls sometimes miss school due to menstruation<sup>2</sup>. Menstruation is a major barrier to girls' attendance at school due to a lack of facilities, traditional beliefs that menstruating women are unclean, discomfort and pain, as well as the risk of being teased.

During focus group discussion, many girls said they often left classes early if they felt unwell. They preferred to miss school than to ask for help from male teachers or headmasters. They also absented themselves (and were sometimes even sent home) if there were no proper facilities or they couldn't access sanitary pads or cloths at school.

Only half of the schools visited during the research had lockable, clean and working latrines just for girls. None had toilet paper and only one had a rubbish bin and three a pit for the disposal of pads. Many of the inspected latrines were filthy because they were used by the whole community. Nobody had responsibility for cleaning them, and they were overloaded in terms of demand.

Girls said they were told by their mothers and teachers to bathe three or four times daily when menstruating, but schools lacked facilities for washing.

Cultural beliefs that menstruating women should be reserved, inactive and quiet meant that many girls refrained from participating in classes, even if they attended school. They were also scared to go up to the chalkboard or stand up to answer questions in case their clothes were stained and they would be teased.

Girls said that sanitary pads were the most reliable way they could manage their periods at school. But access to these products was challenging for many.

They were often too expensive for families to provide every month. This meant that some girls felt forced to ask their boyfriends or men for help buying pads. Further research is planned in this area to understand the relationships and expectations relating to this support



***"She will not be herself (when she is menstruating at school). Something is happening to her so she can't concentrate. If she can't contain the pain, she will go home."*** Girls, North Dayi



## CULTURE: Taboos and stigma

Traditions and taboos surrounding menstruation vary, however, there are some similarities between regions.

In homes where traditional religions based on animist beliefs and tribal Gods are followed, girls cannot prepare food when they are menstruating. Some are even forbidden from touching household wares such as buckets, cutlery or plates and bowls. In North Dayi, women traditionally have to leave their homes and sleep in a relative's house for the duration of their menses.

Girls raised in Muslim houses said in focus groups that they stayed away from attending the five daily prayers while menstruating. While many girls from Christian families told researchers that their faith did not prevent them from any activities, it should be noted that some Christian sects do ban women from

entering their chapels .

Outside of the home, women across different faith traditions were banned from entering the chief's palace or going to the stream. Some believe that menstrual blood can be used to invoke supernatural forces against them, which complicates the issue of disposal of sanitary pads.

Because of the stigma surrounding the discussion of menstruation, many girls are unprepared for their first menses and report feeling scared, confused and unprepared.

The information they receive can be scattered, incomplete and sometimes incorrect. Menstruation is often framed as a problem, and the main focus of parents and religious and other authority figures appears to be the risks of teen pregnancy and the need to abstain from sex.

**“[A girl menstruating] only thinks of when school will close for her to go home. Her attention would be divided such that she can't do anything”**

**Girl, North Dayi**

**“I can't sit [in class], when I sit, the thing (blood flow) will flow fast and the boys will see it so I usually kneel, in fact I can't sit.”**

**Girl, Zabzugu**

**“Those that teach or talk about [menstruation] do not take their time to explain many things. They also present it as if that is all one needs to know.”**

**Girl, Zabzugu**



A Northern Ghanaian school girl in her classroom building.  
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## **SLANG: Talking about the taboo**

Menstruation is usually referred to discreetly, using nicknames or innuendoes like:

**Vodafone, Palm Oil, Danger, Madame Red, Red Thing** – all reference the red colour of blood

**Aunty Flo** – nickname for menstrual flow

**Osmo** – shortened form of osmosis meaning blood is leaving the body

In North Dayi, many nicknames refer to the fact women have to leave the house during menstruation:

**Wodo le afeme** - You have gone out of the house

**Wotsi go** - You are left outside

**Woyi xor megbe** - You have gone behind the house

**Wotsi gborto** - You are left at the outskirts



## DREAM: Designs by students

Researchers asked girls to draw their ideal facilities. Most included changing rooms and either showers or water and buckets for washing:

*"I drew a toilet. And I drew a [water] pipe. I drew soap and a table near it. I drew the toilet pit. Then I came to draw a sleeping room and a bed. Then I drew a shower."* Girl, North Dayi



## BASICS: Every girl needs

At a minimum, every school should provide female students with <sup>3</sup>

- Clean material to absorb or collect menstrual blood
- Private place for changing
- Soap and water for washing of body
- Access to facilities to dispose of used materials



Girl students use a new school latrine in Tamale in Northern Ghana.

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## Best practices nominated by students and teachers

- Two scholarship programs funded by the Global Partnership for Education and DFID provide girls with sanitray pads along with other school supplies. These were very positive for beneficiaries, even though supplies could be irregular. Taking this intervention to scale would be a challenge.
- Some schools buy supplies of sanitary pads for use by students with finances raised by the Parents and Teachers Association, tolling food vendors who operate on school grounds or collected during school worship services.
- A school in North Dayyi asks students to bring in toilet rolls from their homes every week so they can be used by girls in case their menstruation comes unexpectedly while at school. The school does not have the funds to buy pads.



“After using the pad, it is not appropriate to dump it at a place where people can see it. They can use the blood in a way that will harm us they can use it for ritual money.”

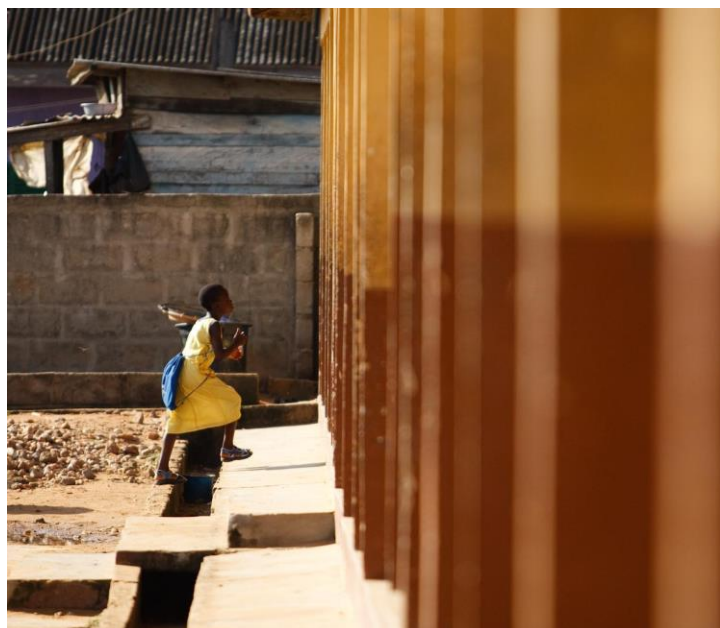
Girl, North Dayi

“I will be sitting down quietly and I will not play with anybody when I have my menstruation especially if it is at the time I have a heavy flow.”

Girl, Zabzugu

“The issue about pads is that there is no money. There is no money and yet you have got her used to the pads. Tomorrow, if you don’t have money, she will go after men.”

Mothers, North Dayi



School girl approaches a latrine at a school in Northern Ghana.

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## SUPPORT: Networks of information

Girls reported that other female students were their main source of support for menstruation issues at school, including Girl’s Prefects and close friends. In North Dayi District, girls also relied on female teachers for advice. However, in Zabzugu, only one selected school had a female teacher.

Girls also got information from School Health Clubs and Social Studies and Science classes, however male teachers tended to gloss over menstruation during lessons and boys teased girls when these subjects arose.

Mothers, grandmothers and sisters were a vital source of information about hygiene and support with chores in the home.

## Recommendations arising from this study

- **Communication strategies should factor in local taboos, myths and prohibitions and be adaptable to regional variations.**
- **Schools should have lockable latrines in order to give girls privacy. Change rooms are ideal, but not currently feasible**
- **Emergency menstrual hygiene materials should be available at schools for use by girls who are not prepared. Used only in emergency situations, these should be replaced and re-stocked.**
- **Male teachers and male students should be engaged with specific trainings about menstruation**
- **Female pupils should be taught both at home and in school about menstrual hygiene management at a younger age**
- **Female students should also be taught exercises that can relieve the pain of menstrual cramps**
- **Dialogue sessions should be held with traditional leaders on the rigidity of traditional rules around menstruation affecting women and girls**
- **Girls should have the knowledge that they could experience menstruation differently, in terms of cycle, flow and pain**