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Final Paper: Period Poverty and Education in Rural Third-world Countries

In many rural third-world countries, young girls are dropping out of school due to issues surrounding menstruation. Education is one of the most powerful tools in combating poverty and domestic violence, yet millions of girls are being denied that privilege because of normal human functions. In this paper, I will argue that menstrual hygiene management (MHM) knowledge and practice must be encouraged in order to boost girls' education. This can be achieved through multiple solutions: (1) private and sanitary restrooms should be built near schoolhouses, (2) period products such as pads should be distributed for free (or at least made more accessible), and (3) education on puberty and menstruation should be incorporated into the regular curriculum, which is the most promising solution.

Effects of Menstruation on Education

As previously stated, girls in third-world countries are missing class and dropping out of school at massive rates because of menstruation issues. One cross-sectional study in Ethiopia reported that more than half of girls surveyed had missed school during their period (Shumie and Mengie *Menstrual hygiene management knowledge, practice and associated factors among school girls, Northeast Ethiopia*). Reasons for

missing school while menstruating include feeling uncomfortable because of the paucity of sanitary bathrooms, the teasing and shame they endure from male classmates, and the lack of clean and effective period products. Excessive absenteeism turns into dropping out of school which only perpetuates existing cycles of poverty. Educating girls will be a key factor in ending domestic abuse, sex slavery, poverty, and a myriad of other issues. Before that can happen, however, we must address period poverty.

Install Private Bathrooms

One potential solution to greater MHM is to build sanitary and private bathrooms near or inside of schoolhouses. One of the greatest reasons that girls skip school while menstruating is that while at school, they lack access to appropriate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. One study performed in seven different third-world countries found that in Ethiopia and Uganda, only 10% and 6% of girls had access to flush toilets, respectively (Rossouw and Ross *Understanding period poverty: Socio-economic inequalities in menstrual hygiene management in eight low- and middle-income countries*). Even when toilets are available, they are not exactly inviting. One program that piloted a new way of disposing of pads in Bangladesh asked school girls why they prefer not to use school toilets and their responses were disheartening: “1) require standing in a queue, 2) there are no facilities to change or dispose of the used products, 3) fear of being teased by others, 4) tension about whether they can make it back to class in time due to the long queue, 5) toilet does not lock properly, 6) lack of sufficient ventilation and light, 7) lack of soap and water supply, and 8) offensive statements on walls of toilets,” (Jahan et al. *Piloting an acceptable and feasible*

menstrual hygiene products disposal system in urban and rural schools in Bangladesh).

It's no wonder girls would rather stay at home than try to take care of their periods at school.

What does a sanitary bathroom look like? Just to start, it requires doors that lock, a place to dispose of period products, and close proximity to an adequate water supply. These requirements, especially asking for clean water, may present roadblocks. Many schools in rural areas are funded by a bottom-up approach, meaning that they are financially dependent on the community. Thus, poorer communities have poorer schools and less access to resources (Witte *Enhancing the menstrual experience of menstruating adolescents in Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe: A qualitative study*). Because of this, providing and maintaining appropriate WASH facilities is not a feasible option, at least not without major external contributions. While this solution would certainly have a profound impact on education in rural areas, it would also require a lot of planning and donations, which may not make it the most reasonable option.

Provide Free Period Products

Another way to curb period poverty is to make period products more accessible. The aforementioned study in Ethiopia found that only one-third of girls used sanitary napkins during their last period. Even those girls who wanted to use sanitary napkins did not because of "lack of money, feeling ashamed to buy from shops, unavailable in their area and some of them didn't know how to use it," (Shumie and Mengie *Menstrual hygiene management knowledge, practice and associated factors among school girls, Northeast Ethiopia*).

There are a few options for helping school girls obtain the necessary period products. One such solution was demonstrated in the Netflix documentary *Period. End of Sentence* (Rayka Zehtabchi). A foundation called The Pad Project has provided rural communities with manual and automated “pad machines” that create comfortable and clean pads. Not only do these machines allow pads to be distributed at a fraction of the commercial price, they also provide women with jobs and income (*The Pad Project*). A source of income independent of men gives women newfound confidence and resources.

Another potential solution to the lack of affordable period products is to provide girls with menstrual cups. Menstrual cups are reusable products, making them much more sustainable than pads. A qualitative study in Nepal gave school girls menstrual cups and recorded their impressions after three months. Responses showed that menstrual cups eliminated the bulkiness and leakage that come with pads and made it possible for girls to attend school even while menstruating (Pokhrel et al. *Acceptability and feasibility of using vaginal menstrual cups among schoolgirls in rural Nepal: A qualitative pilot study*). A relatively inexpensive option, it can be concluded that providing girls with menstrual cups is an effective solution for period poverty.

Educate Adolescents about Menstruation

In order to see true education reform, menstruation education must be implemented into the regular curriculum. All of the above mentioned solutions will prove useless if adolescent girls are not educated on why periods occur and how to manage them. Because of the taboo surrounding menstruation, many people, male and female

alike, live in ignorance, creating an intense culture of shame. A study conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization found that most education systems believe puberty is something that should be discussed in the home. This contradicts findings from other studies. The same study that introduced new pad disposal systems in Bangladeshi schools stated that 86 out of 100 girls surveyed said family and friends were reluctant to talk about periods because “1) it is the social norm to keep it as private, 2) girls are too young to be discussing such topics, 3) such discussion would increase their curiosity and interest in the opposite sex, and 4) menstruation in particular is a matter considered deeply shameful,” (Jahan et al. *Piloting an acceptable and feasible menstrual hygiene products disposal system in urban and rural schools in Bangladesh*). If puberty education isn’t happening at school or at home, where is it happening? The unfortunate answer is that it’s not happening at all.

Research has been done on how to most effectively educate students about puberty. A study done in Bangladesh implemented MHM education programs and then surveyed teachers. Responses revealed that the most impactful and sustainable way to ensure quality MHM education is by integrating it into the national curriculum and exams. Many schools only care about teaching what is on national exams so that students can receive scholarships. Integrating puberty education on a national level would be incentive for schools to teach it (Mahfuz et al. *Teachers’ perspective on implementation of menstrual hygiene management and puberty education in a pilot study in Bangladeshi schools*). Another study done in Kenya measured the psychosocial benefits of MHM education by watching for increases in authenticity, self-efficacy, and hope. They found that those three factors decreased or remained

unchanged in classrooms of both girls and boys. In all-girl classes, however, factors increased (Fialkov et al. *The impact of menstrual hygiene management and gender on Psychosocial Outcomes for adolescent girls in Kenya*). Based on these two studies, it can be concluded that the most effective MHM education should come from the top down and take place in segregated classrooms at first, hopefully merging into integrated classrooms as students get older.

Better MHM education is the most effective of all proposed solutions because it will benefit males as well as females. American lawyer Derek Bok once said, “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” What he means by this is that when we lack knowledge on a subject, we are essentially shorting ourselves on resources. By living in ignorance about periods and shaming women, third-world countries are essentially excluding a huge portion of their population from making meaningful contributions. Better MHM education will allow male and female students to pursue careers and prepare them to raise resilient children.

Conclusion

In order to enhance the quality of girls’ education in third-world countries, knowledge and practice of menstrual hygiene management must be improved. This can be achieved by three different solutions: installing private and sanitary bathrooms near schoolhouses, making period products more accessible, and educating both male and female students about puberty and menstruation. As these solutions are implemented, the physical and mental health of young girls will increase. Accordingly, the shame culture surrounding periods will vanish and girls will be able to fulfill their full potential.

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