

Improving schools' educational environment for adolescent girls by addressing menstrual hygiene challenges in Uganda



BASELINE SURVEY REPORT

Global Bridge Network (GBN)
&
SORAK Development Agency (SORAK)

December 2021

STUDY AREA:

- **MUBENDE DISTRICT:** KIBALINGA, NABINGOOLA & KIGANDO SUB-COUNTIES
- **WAKIS ODISTRICT:** NANSANA MUNICIPALITY, NABWERU & GOMBE DIVISION
- **BUTAMBALA DISTRICT:** GOMBE TOWN COUNCIL, NGANDO SUB-COUNTY & BULO SUB-COUNTY

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List of acronyms

CAO	Chief Administrative Officer
CAWODISA	Children and Women of Disabled Soldiers Association
DEO	District Education Officer
DIS	District Inspector of Schools
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KIIs	Key informant interviews
MEO	Municipal Education Officer
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
PTA	Parents Teachers Association
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
SMC	School Management Committee
SORAK	Strategic Organization for Real Action-Kampala
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction:

This report presents the findings of the baseline survey for the project on improving schools' educational environment for adolescent girls by addressing menstrual hygiene challenges in

- Mubende district; Kibalinga, Nabingoola & Kigando sub-counties
- Wakiso district; Nabweru & Gombe division -Nansana municipality
- Butambala district; Gombe Town Council, Ngando sub-county & Bulo sub-county.

The baseline survey was conducted by SORAK Development Agency during the months of November and December 2021 in the three districts of Uganda including Mubende, Wakiso, and Butambala in the respective sub-counties. This study set out to find out if students are conversant with issues to do with MHM, enrolment of students between 2019 and 2021 in order to trace if there are girls' drop outs related to MHM issues at school, and enlist the situation of WASH facilities at the respective schools regarding the accessibility, adequacy, availability, privacy.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is defined by the United Nations as the use of clean menstrual management products to soak menstrual discharge by women that are changeable in privacy as required, with proper access to water, soap, and disposable methods. If hygienic practices are not followed during menstruation like changing pads after every 4 hours, washing and drying our re-usable sanitary towels properly in the sun, and washing hands after handling the used sanitary pads, then the chances of getting Urogenital Tract Infections increases many folds.

Poor menstrual hygiene can lead to many other issues like fungal or bacterial infections of the reproductive tract, irritation of the skin that may cause discomfort and can possibly result in dermatitis – a medical condition in which the skin swells, turns red, and at times becomes sore with blisters. If neglected, it leads to toxic shock syndrome and other vaginal diseases all of which may become barriers towards classroom attendance for the adolescent girls.

1.2 The Baseline Study

1.2.1 The purpose of Baseline Survey

the baseline survey was conducted to establish the project benchmarks. These would be used to monitor and review the extent of achievement of targets by the end of the project and specifically the survey was conducted;

- i) To understand the problem by gathering information on the status quo to provide a reference point for tracking the project's progress; that is, to measure the degree and quality of change during the project implementation
- ii) To gather key information early in a project so that later judgments can be made about the quality and development results achieved of the project.
- iii) To serve as a benchmark for all future activities, where project the managers can refer to for the purposes of making project management decisions.

1.2.2 Demographic characteristics of respondents

The students from the respective selected schools studying from Primary four to seven (Age 12-17) including girls and boys were interviewed but the questionnaire targeted girls who have experienced menstruation. Government officials, School Management Committee and the community members including the District Education Officer (DEO), DIS (District Inspector of Schools), MEO (Municipal Education Officer), PTA (Parents Teachers Association), Head Teachers, female teachers and the parents/guardians were also interviewed respectively.

2 THE BASELINE STUDY METHODS AND APPROACH

2.1 Methods used to generate baseline information

The baseline survey was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data from all the 5 schools in each of the three districts making a total of 15 schools.

2.1.1 Qualitative methods

- i) **Focus Group Discussions** were used to generate information from the students both girls and boys and community members and the information generated from the FGDs has been distilled thematically and forms content for this report.
- ii) **Key informant Interviews** were also used to collect data from the school teachers, government officials, and community leaders from the different districts. They were purposively selected based on their designations/ roles, seniority, technical knowledge and expertise on MHM
- iii) **Observation** was used to collect data regarding the prevailing situation of the WASH facility in 30 schools in the three districts

2.1.2 Quantitative methods

An online questionnaire was used strictly to generate data from 153 female students who had experienced menstruation regarding their knowledge of MHM.

2.2 Methods of data analysis

The baseline quantitative data was analysed using STATA software to generate tables which were further analysed using MS Excel for the respective visualisation of findings whereas thematic and content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data to make sense of the general findings.

2.3 Selected target schools

■ Mubende district
<Kibalinga sub- county>
1-Christ the King Primary School
2-Kabowa Primary school
3-Kasaana Church of Uganda
4-CAWODISA Primary School
Kigando sub- County
5-Katega Primary School
6-Dyangoma Primary School
7-Ikula Primary School
Nabingoola sub- County
8-Kiyita Primary School
9-Kassasa Primary School
10- St Marys Gwanika primary school
■ Wakiso district
<Gombe Divison>
1-Lwadda Church of Uganda Primary School*
2-Kitanda Church of Uganda Primary School
3-Ssanga Church of Uganda Primary School
4-Buwambo Church of Uganda Primary School
5-Kirolo UMEA Primary Schools
6-Kigoogwa Moslem Primary School

7-Kitungwa Church of Uganda Primary School () *
<Nabweru Division>
8-Maganjo UMEA Primary School
9-Jinja Karoli Primary School
10-Kanyange Mixed Primary school
■ Butambala district
<Ngando sub-county>
1-Butalunga Catholic School
2-Butende UMEA
3-Kitagobwa Catholic School
4-Lwamasaka UMEA
5-Kiwala UMEA
<Bulo sub-county>
6-Nkokoma Catholic School
7-Nawango Church of Uganda
8-Bule UMEA (Bulo sub-county)
<Gombe Town Council>
9-Ntolomwe UMEA
10-Kayenje Catholic School in

2.4 Limitations of the study

- i) COVID 19 Situation restricted interaction with as many people as possible, as the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) issued by the Ministry of Health had to be followed to protect the research team and respondents from probable risks from the virus.
- ii) The fact that schools were not yet open due to COVID 19 was a bit challenging to reach out to the students in a school environment setting and also to some schools the school enrolment information was not up to date

3 BASELINE STUDY FINDINGS

3.1 Questionnaire to Female Students

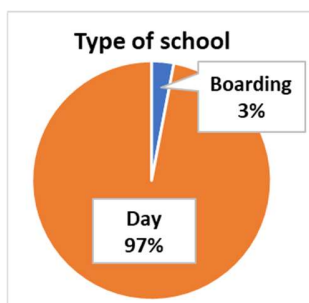
3.1.1 Basic Information of Respondents

Table 1: Targeted population for the Questionnaire

District	Schools	Respondents (Age 10-17)	Sub-Total	Total
Mubende	5 (Kasana CU, Christ the King, Ikula, Kasasa, CAWODISA)	10 female Students	50	153
Wakiso	5 (Jinja Karoli, Manganjo UMEA, Ssanga, Kitungwa, Buwambo)	10 female Students	53	
Butambala	5 (Kiwala, Nkokoma, Kitagobwa Catholic, Lwamasaka UMEA, Ntolomwe UMEA)	10 female Students	50	

◆ Type of school attended

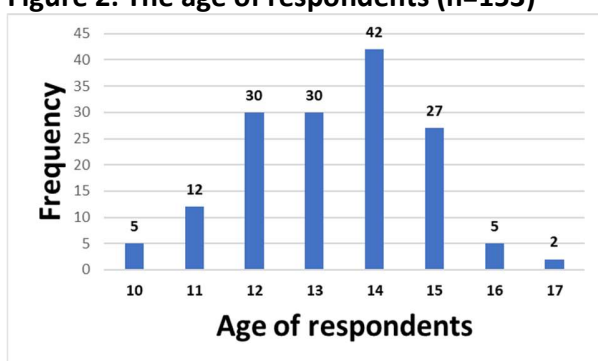
Figure 1: The type of school attended (n=153)



About 97% of the students (149) are day students and 3% of students (4) were boarding students who stayed at School. Jinja Karoli Primary has both day and boarding sections.

◆ Age of respondents

Figure 2: The age of respondents (n=153)



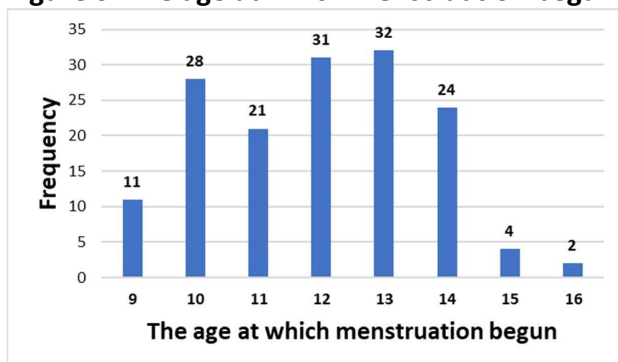
The study revealed that the maximum age of the students was age 17 and the minimum age was 10 with most of the students aged 14 years.

3.1.2 Experience on menstruation

The study revealed that, all of girls experienced menstruation.

◆ Age when menstruation started

Figure 3: The age at which menstruation begun (n=153)

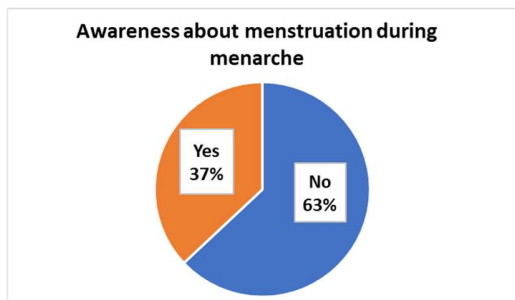


The mean age at which students experienced menstruation is 12. Most of the students experienced their menstruation between the age of 10 and 13 years where the minimum age is 9 years and the maximum age is 16 years.

3.1.3 Perception about Menstruation

◆ Awareness about menstruation at menarche

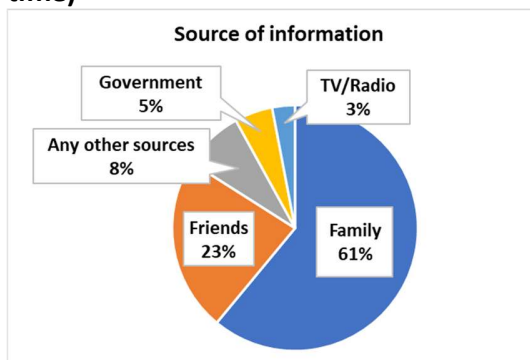
Figure 4: If the students were aware about menstruation at menarche (n=153)



63% of the girls (n=96) did not have the knowledge about menstruation at their first time of experiencing it. This is attributed to the fact that MHM was not given much priority at school where it was only during the upper primary level (age 16 to 17) that students were taught about menstruation under reproductive health as one of the topics in science.

◆ **Source of information about menstruation at menarche**

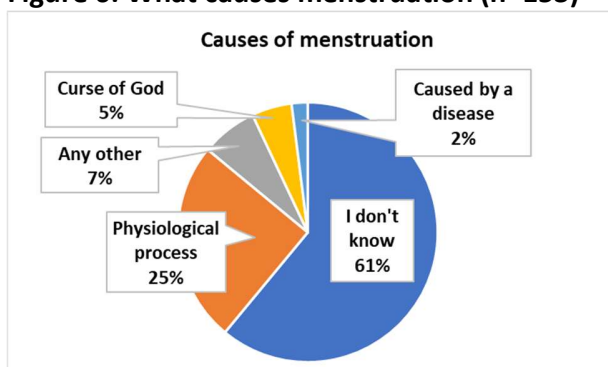
Figure 5: Source of information (n=57 students who are aware about menstruation at their first time)



About 61% of the girls (n=35) who had knowledge about menstruation at menarche got information from home through their parents especially mothers and relatives like grandmothers and Aunties. Friends were mentioned as other common sources of information.

◆ **Knowledge on what causes menstruation**

Figure 6: What causes menstruation (n=153)



About 61% of the of girls (n=93) noted that they are not aware of what caused menstruation. About 5% of them believe that it was a course from God and 2% of them thought that it is caused by diseases. This could be rooted from the fact that Menstrual Hygiene Management issues are not taught in schools unless a student gets to upper primary and there is no policy regarding the same.

◆ **Knowledge on whether menstruation is a secret**

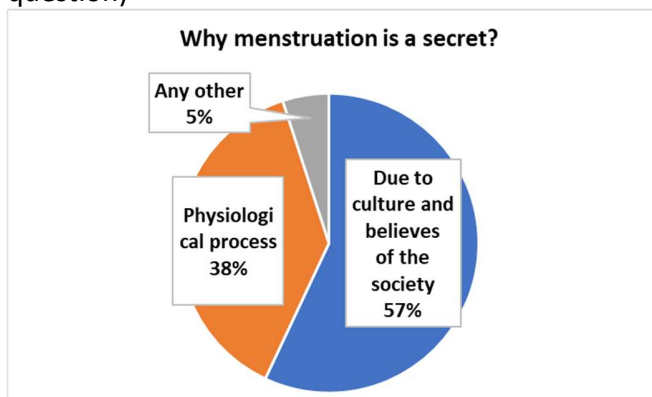
Figure7: Responses about if menstruation is a secret (n=153)



The study revealed that about 70% of Girls (n=96) freely talk about menstruation but this was possible when they are with fellow girls and not with others like boys. Where as to the rest, 30% of Girls (n=57), menstruation is regarded as a secret.

◆ **Why girls think menstruation is a secret**

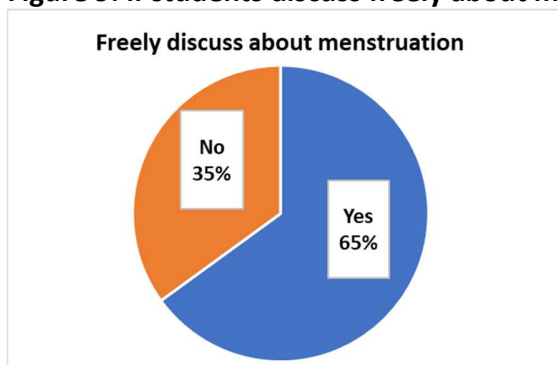
Figure 8: Why menstruation is a secret (n=57) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question)



When asked about why menstruation is considered to be a secret, they noted that such issues are strictly for women and that it is not proper to make them public matters. In that regard 57% (n=32) noted that the culture and beliefs of the society regard menstruation as a secrete where as others noted that it was due to religion and those who selected others identified not feeling comfortable discussing such issues with other people like men who are not supposed to know if someone is experiencing menstruation and shame once one talked about it. It was noted that girls fear to reveal what they are going through especially the ones experiencing menstruation at menarche.

◆ **Free discussion of menstruation issues**

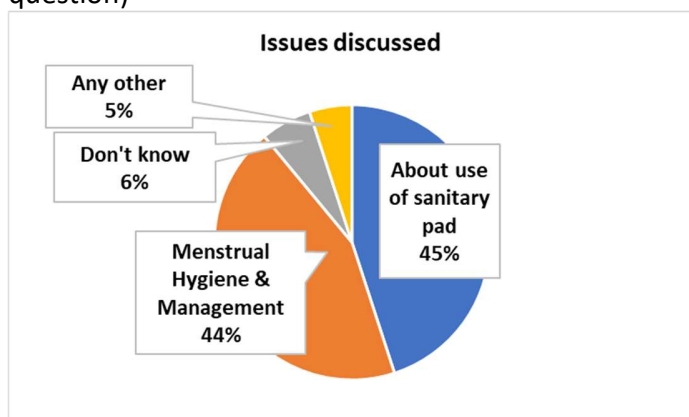
Figure 9: if students discuss freely about menstruation(n=153)



When it comes to discussing freely about issues of menstruation, 65%(n=99) of girls are open to freely discuss among themselves or with their mothers and aunts as it was noted that such issues are feminine and that should be shared with female parents as girls get uncomfortable to share with the male parents. Whereas 35%(n=54) noted that they can't talk about such issues freely.

◆ **Issues discussed about menstruation**

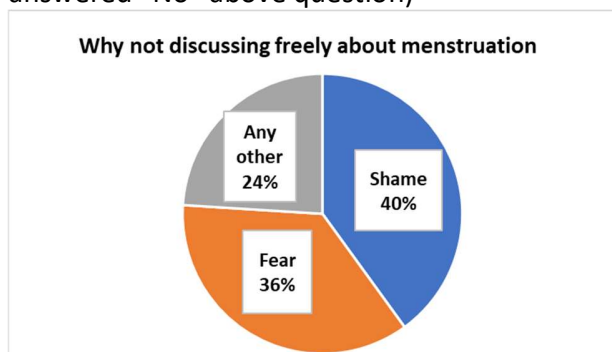
Figure 10: Results about issues discussed (n=99) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question)



45% (n=44) of girls who discuss about issues to do with menstruation would talk about the use of sanitary pads and 44% (n=43) commonly talk about Menstrual Hygiene & Management. Issues regarding the days one should spend while in her periods, the effects of periods like stomach-ache and solutions to them are some of the issues that were discussed when it comes to other.

◆ **Why not discussed freely**

Figure 11: Reasons for not discussing freely about menstruation (n=54) (Respondents who answered “No” above question)

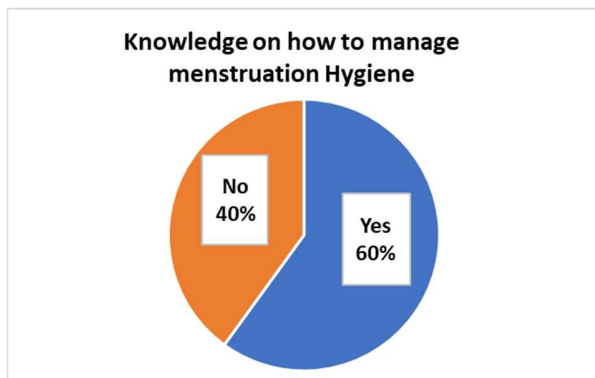


40% (n=22) of Girls noted that they are shy and can be ashamed to discuss such issues openly. In addition, their parents taught them that such issues should be discussed privately whereas 36% (n=19) feared especially boys as they would laugh at them. 24% (n=13) noted that it is their own secret.

3.1.4 Knowledge on Menstruation Hygiene Management and usage of reusable sanitary pads

◆ **Awareness on how to manage Menstruation Hygiene**

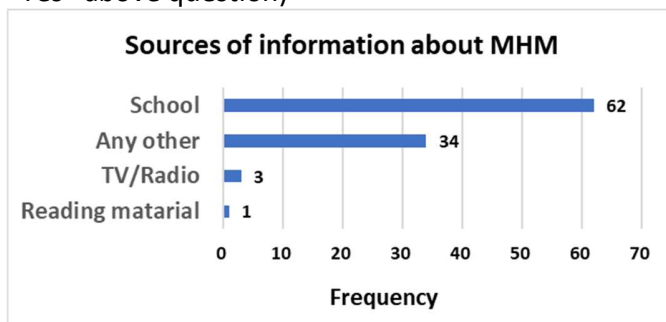
Figure 12: Number of girls with knowledge on how to manage menstruation Hygiene (n=153)



60% (n=92) of the girls noted that they knew how to manage their menstrual hygiene and this was through their parents and the senior woman teachers at their respective schools as it was noted that the senior woman teachers attend to the girls when they have started or about to start menstruation. This is done through counselling and guidance for girls in upper primary in groups or as individuals where as 40% (n=61) did not know how to manage menstruation.

◆ Sources of the information of MHM

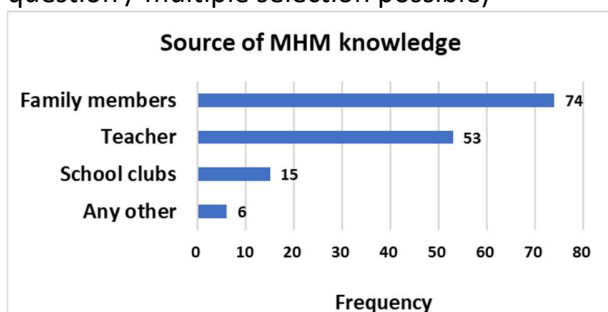
Figure 13: Showing the sources of information about MHM (n=92) (Respondents who answered "Yes" above question)



The results indicated that 67% (n=62) of the girls got information regarding MHM at school through friends, senior woman and science teachers whereas others got such information from other sources like at home by their parents, sisters, and relatives.

◆ Who provides MHM information?

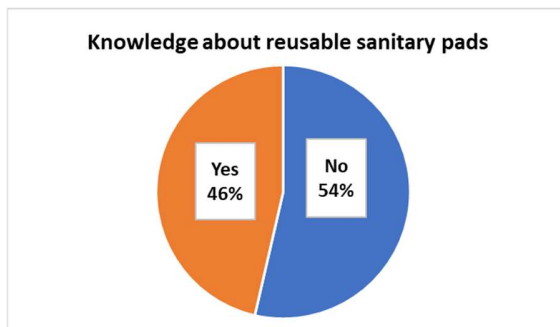
Figure 14: Source of MHM knowledge (n=92) (Respondents who know MHM based on above question / multiple selection possible)



The study established that the main source of knowledge regarding MHM was family members (80%, n=74) and 58% (n= 53) received from teachers at school.

◆ Knowledge about reusable sanitary pad

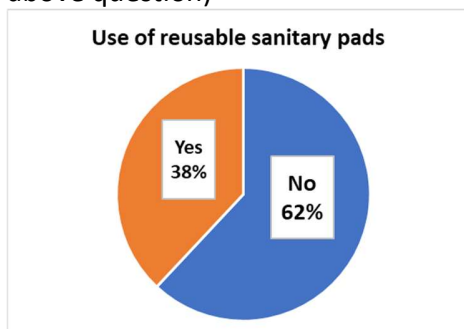
Figure 15: Knowledge on the use of reusable sanitary pads (n=153)



54% (n=82) of the students who were interviewed noted that they did not have knowledge about the reusable sanitary pads whereas 46% (n=71) had knowledge and they answered the next question below ‘Do you use reusable sanitary pads?’

◆ **Use of reusable sanitary pad**

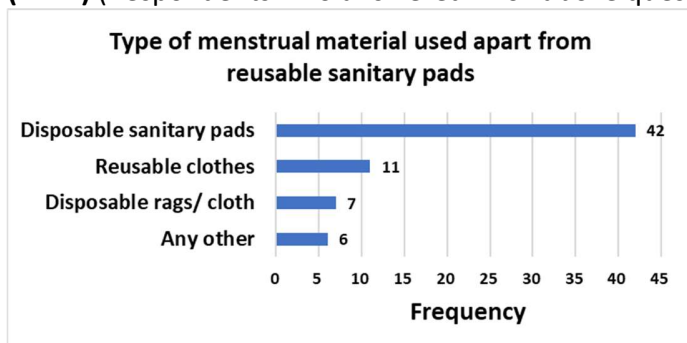
Figure 16: The students who use reusable sanitary pads (n=71) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question)



It was discovered that 62% (n=44) did not use reusable sanitary pads where most of them noted that they use disposable sanitary pads and often other materials like reusable cloths and disposable rags and 38% (n=27) noted that they use reusable pads. All in all, 27 girls out of 153, which is 17.6%, use reusable sanitary pads.

◆ **Materials used to manage menstruation other than reusable sanitary pads**

Figure 17: Other materials used to manage menstruation apart from reusable sanitary pads (n=44) (Respondents who answered “No” above question. Multiple selections possible)

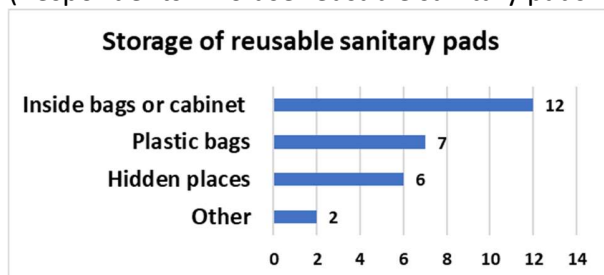


The commonly used materials other than reusable sanitary pads included disposable sanitary pads (n=42) followed by reusable clothes (n=11) as most of students noted that their parents do not have money for buying disposable sanitary pads on a monthly basis whereas others use rags, tissue and cotton. Other supportive material included soap, water, emergency nickers, emergency uniform and pain killers. It is however important to note that, majority (42) of girls reported using disposable sanitary pads, however, it might not be commonly used with the following reasons;

- 1- Most schools are in deep rural areas where disposable sanitary pads are not readily available on the market.
- 2- By COVID-19 impact, the low-income levels family's economic situations worsened and parents cannot afford buying expensive disposable pads when they have an alternative of lags which themselves as mothers have traditionally and comfortably used before.

◆ **The location where reusable sanitary pads kept after use**

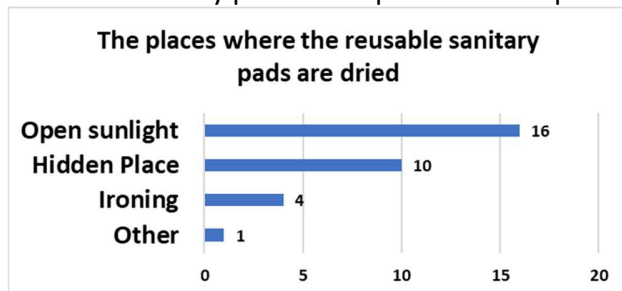
Figure 18: The various ways in which reusable sanitary pads are kept after use (n=27)
(Respondents who use reusable sanitary pads. Multiple selections possible)



Most of the girls who use reusable sanitary pads keep them in their bags or cabinet followed by the plastic bags, hidden places and others noted that they kept them in the toilet. However, it was noted that there is need to educate the girls about sanitation regarding the proper use, cleaning and disposal of pads.

◆ **Where are reusable sanitary pads and underwear dried**

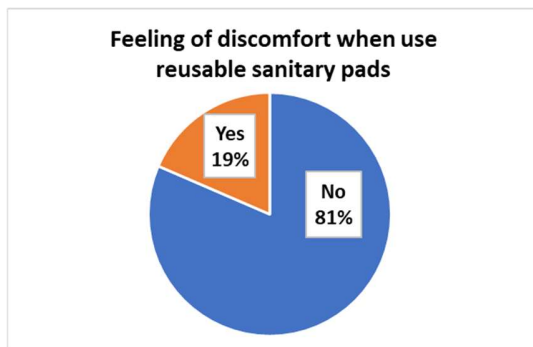
Figure 19: Results on where the reusable sanitary pads are dried (n= 27) (Respondents who use reusable sanitary pads. Multiple selections possible)



Most of the girls who used reusable sanitary pads noted that pads were dried under open sun as most of them are day students they washed their pads while at home. Worth noting is that, the sun's heat is a natural sterilizer and drying the cloths/cloth pads under it sterilizes them for future use. These cloth pads are reusable so they are cost-effective, easily available, and environmentally friendly. They also need to be stored in a clean dry place for reuse to avoid contamination. Others noted that they would hide the pads for drying as men and other people are not supposed to see them due to cultural beliefs which are prohibitive of the practice and others would iron them

◆ **Discomfort associated with reusable sanitary pads**

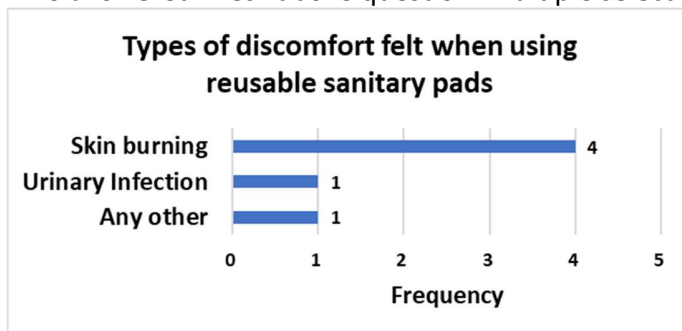
Figure 20: Results regarding discomfort associated with the use of reusable sanitary pads (n= 27) (Respondents who use reusable sanitary pads.)



When asked about if they experienced any discomfort using reusable sanitary pads, 81% (n=22) of the girls noted that they did not have any feeling of discomfort as they would properly sundry their pads and use them when they are ready whereas a few 19% (n=5) noted that they had some feeling of discomfort.

◆ **Type of discomfort felt with reusable sanitary pads**

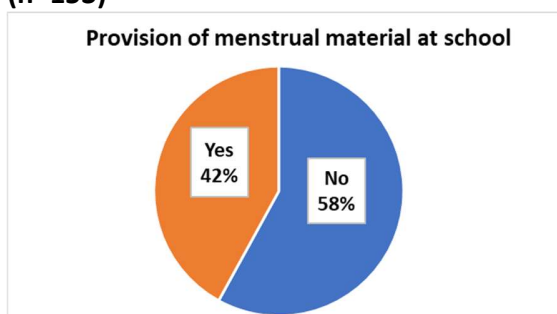
Figure 21: Types of discomfort felt when one uses reusable sanitary pads (n= 5) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question. Multiple selections possible)



4 girls noted that skin burning was the common type discomfort felt while using reusable sanitary pads and this was followed by urinary infections and other factors.

◆ **Provision of menstrual production materials at school**

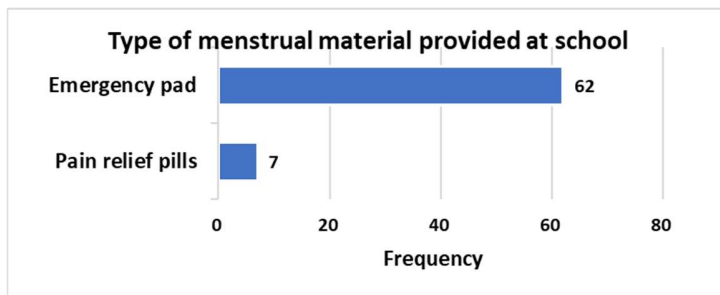
Figure 22: Results on whether there is provision of menstrual production materials at school. (n=153)



Among the schools visited, 58% (n=89) of girls answered that their schools didn’t provide any menstrual materials to them. Majority of girls have not received any materials.

◆ **Type of menstrual materials provided**

Figure 23: Types of menstrual material provided at school (n= 64) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question. Multiple selections possible.)

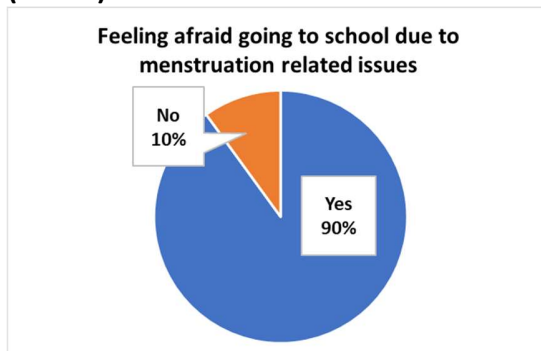


Availability of menstrual material at school was one of the core issues of investigation during the study. Findings from girls interviewed, 62 noted that schools provide emergency menstrual pads whereas 7 noted that they provided pain relief pills.

3.1.5 Feelings of afraid of going to school during menstruation

◆ Feeling afraid of going to school during menstruation periods

Figure 24: Results on whether students felt afraid of going to school during menstruation (n=153)

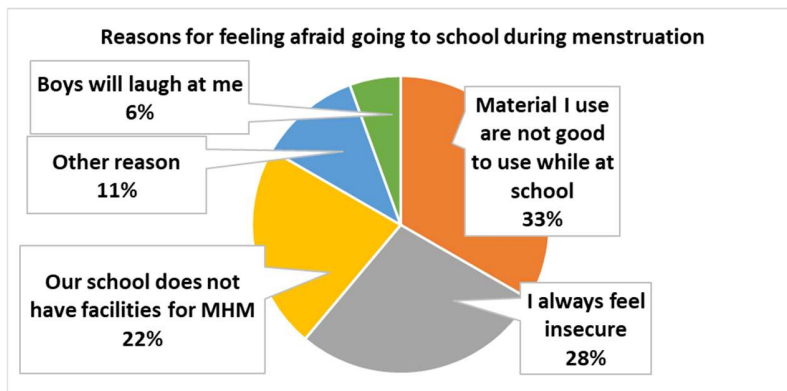


90% (n=137) of the girls interviewed noted that they would feel afraid going to school due to menstruation related issues whereas 10% (n=16) would not feel afraid. This is because the environment at school is not good for girls during their menstruation periods. When this response is collaborated with FGDs, and KIIs it is revealed that specifically the following makes them feel afraid of going to school;

- Lack of safe changing places
- Lack of water for washing
- Lack of adequate sanitary pad and the fear that it can get full when at school in the absence of another one.
- The likelihood of having blood leakage through their dress and being laughed at by other children, especially boys.

◆ Reasons for feeling afraid from going to school during menstruation period

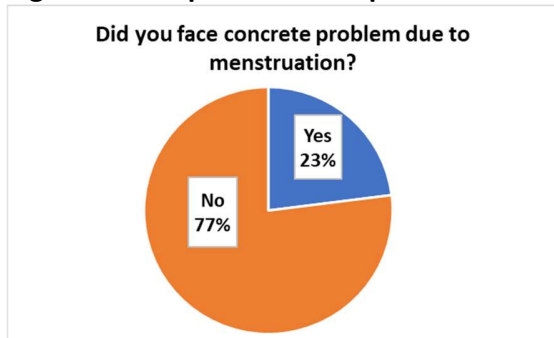
Figure 25: Reasons for feeling afraid going to school during menstruation (n=137) (Respondents who answered “Yes” above question)



Majority of the girls noted that material they use are not good to use while at school which makes them afraid going to school during menstruation. Fears for being laughed at school while in menstruation especially the ones who use pieces of clothes because instead of concentrating in class, they are worried of a leakage or even the piece of cloth to fall out.

◆ Problem faced by girls related to menstruation

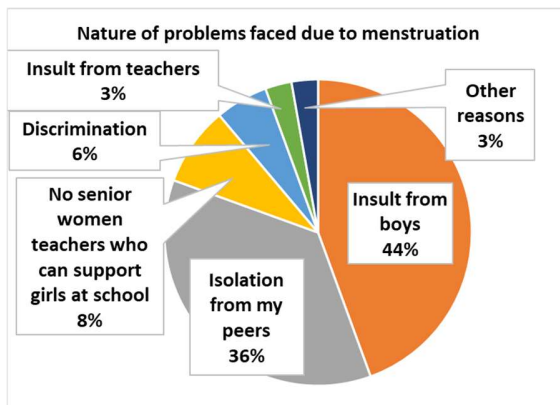
Figure 26: Responses about problems faced related to menstruation (n=153)



The study revealed that 23% (n=35) of the girls noted that they had some challenges due to menstruation including; lack of wash rooms and changing rooms at school, lack of sanitary pads to use when going to school or even at home. They also noted that, there is no privacy at school as most of the doors on the toilets lack locks. Some share toilets with the boys and teachers. There is little or totally no water to clean up and change so they tend to stay with one pad for the whole day which sometimes burns their skin when full. Those having menstruation for the first time are stigmatized, they hide and cry on seeing blood especially when they never had briefing of what is yet to happen in their lives. Some girls stay in isolation, lose appetite, and their moods are not stable which greatly affects their classroom attendance and generally academic performance.

◆ Nature of problems faced by girls during menstruation

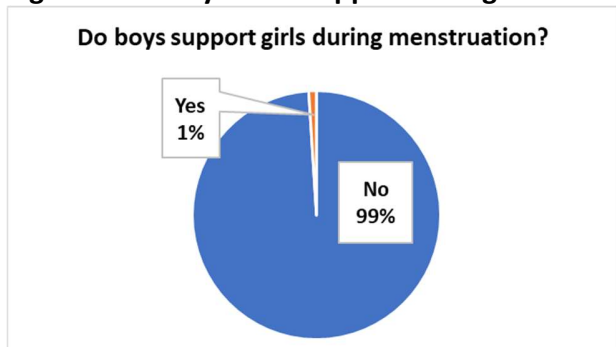
Figure 27: The nature of problems faced due to menstruation (n=23) (Multiple choices possible)



The study revealed that, 44% (n=10) of girls answered that boys insult girls once they discover that they are experiencing menstruation while at school which affects the girls' school attendance. 36% (n=8) of girls experienced the isolation from their peer during menstruation. One highlighted point is that 3% of girls answered they were insulted from teachers.

◆ **Support given by boys to girls during menstruation**

Figure 28: If boys offer support during menstruation (n=153)

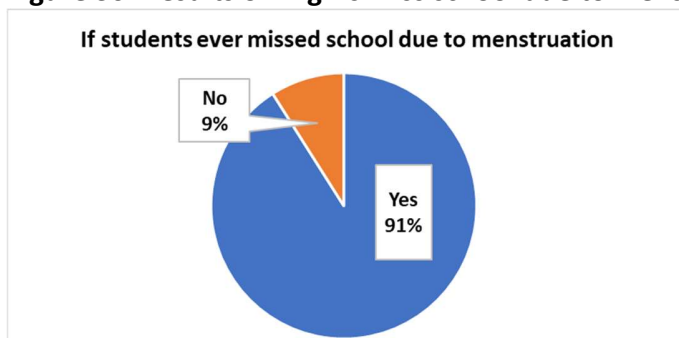


99% (n=150) of the girls noted that boys hardly gave support to them during menstruation however 1% of the girls noted that, boys at times help to report such issue of menstruation to their teachers. Only 1% (n=3) of girls get support from boys. It is noted that boys would assist in informing teachers when they saw girls who were experiencing menstruation for example those who had blood on their uniforms and others would sometimes help with buying pads to girls and sometimes inform their parents. However, when asked about their roles regarding girls' menstruation, most of the boys noted that they did not know.

3.1.6 School attendance due to menstruation

◆ **Missing/Absent from class/school due to menstrual period**

Figure 30: Results on if girls miss school due to menstruation (n=153)



The study revealed that 91% (n= 139) of the girls miss class due to menstruation however, 9% (n=14) did not miss school.

◆ Days missed at school per month due to menstruation

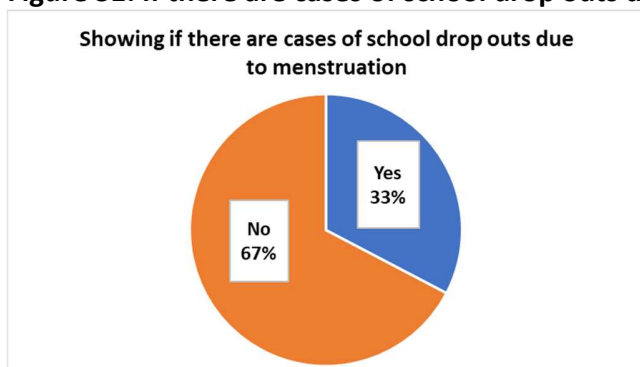
Table: The average number of days missed due to menstruation

Variable	Average
Number of school days missed	3 days

It was noted that on average, girls missed class three days. One of the girls noted that she missed some days due to pain where as others not that they generally missed class during their first days of menstruation on a monthly basis. The range of days missed are 1-6.

◆ Dropping out of school due to menstruation

Figure 31: If there are cases of school drop outs due to menstruation (n=153)



Out of the 153 respondents reached, 67% (n=103) noted that they had not known about any girl who left school due to menstruation as they had not taken time to notice, and 33% (n=50) noted that they had heard about such cases.

According to the interactions with the respondents; this is not the actual number of girls' dropout due to menstruation but knowledge regarding it as majority were not aware of the exact number. This is mostly because few take it seriously. It is also an indicator of the little importance people attach to poor menstrual management as a cause of girl child school dropout.

3.1.7 Other findings

◆ Girls' Concern, opinion, or desire about menstruation

When girls are asked about any concerns, opinions and desires about menstruation, the following were the responses;

- It should be a must for all educational institutions to have changing rooms for girls to avoid shame in class in case it happens and they don't know how to handle the situation.
- Need attention and extra care during menstruation
- Provide pads at low costs and make them readily available
- Teachers should be understanding and considerate to girls especially during their periods
- A conducive MHM environment at school
- Some girls fear to attend school due to lack of pads
- Need to be taught MHM
- Need separate latrines between boys and girls
- Need a school nurse to be readily available at school to support them in case of any menstrual challenges

3.2 Summary of result of questionnaire to female students

The study revealed that most of the girls experienced their menstruation between the age of 10 and 13 years, and more than 63% of girls did not know about menstruation at their menarche. The rest of girls received information mainly from their family members or friends. Most of girls did not know what exactly causes menstruation and some thought that it was a disease or curse by God.

About 30% girls regarded menstruation as a secret. Girls only discuss menstruation related issues with fellow girls and female family members because it was regarded as a shame to be openly discussing such issues and some felt fearful due to cultural believes of the society.

60% of the girls noted that they learned how to manage their menstrual hygiene through their parents and/or the senior woman teachers at their schools. It was also discovered that not all schools offer counselling and guidance for girls eligible to menstruation in upper primary. And 40% of the girls studied did not know how to manage menstruation.

The study revealed that most of the girls use either disposable sanitary pads and or cut piece of clothes. Only 17% of girls had ever used and knew how well to manage reusable sanitary. 58% of girls noted that their schools didn't provide them with any menstrual materials. The other 42% acknowledged that their schools provided emergency pads and/or pain killer medicine. These however hurried to add that there was occasional stockouts of menstrual commodities at schools.

It was learnt that menstrual hygiene management greatly affected the mental health and status of girls. About 90% of girls felt afraid of going to school due to menstruation related issues. The girls noted that material they use are not good to use at school due to blood leakage. Fears for being laughed/insulted while at school during menstruation instilled a lot of fear. This was commonly true among those who use pieces of clothes and the worry of likely leakage or even the piece of cloth to fall out. Many of them feel isolated and or isolate themselves from their peers during menstruation. Girls observed that urgent need to improve and or provide wash rooms, changing rooms, and water in order to address the current menstrual management challenges.

More than 90% of girls reported having missed school due to menstruation, and more than 30% of girls had heard about school drop out of their peers due to menstruation related issues. Actual percentage of girl dropping out due to menstruation could be much higher as teachers and learners could not easily attribute girl child school drop out to menstrual hygiene challenges.