

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: SOUTH WESTERN, UGANDA

WASHplus's approach to menstrual hygiene management has the community talking about this previously taboo subject and enlisting men, women, and children in creating reusable sanitary pads for family members and schools.

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Menstrual Hygiene Management: Breaking the Secrecy

Nearly half of Ugandan schoolgirls miss one to three school days every month during menses, affecting their overall performance and potentially contributing to drop outs. Inadequate sanitation facilities and poor access to sanitary menstrual pads are among the main factors affecting school attendance for these girls. In South Western Uganda, however, the story is beginning to change with WASHplus's Menstrual Hygiene Management Campaign. WASHplus, a USAID-funded project, partnered with the Strengthening TB and AIDS Response in South Western Uganda Project or STAR-SW, managed by the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, to pilot a campaign to teach youths living with HIV and their caretakers to safely and hygienically manage menstruation.



Working through the STAR-SW-supported Ariel Clubs and Pediatric AIDS Campaigns, WASHplus is helping to break taboos and build skills. The Pediatric AIDS Campaigns gather families during school break time to provide clinical care and counseling. Their Ariel Clubs, which meet throughout the year, organize youths from 5–18 to provide HIV psychological support and skills for positive living. WASHplus applied its “small doable action approach” for improving water, sanitation, and hygiene to the challenge of menstrual hygiene management (MHM). Rather than waiting for big solutions, the small doable action approach asks: *What can we do NOW, with existing resources and strengths, to improve behaviors and make things better?*

When developing its approach, WASHplus visited a neighboring district to meet with a group of women, supported by the Health through Water and Sanitation (HEWASA)/Caritas Program, who used their HIV Support Group to sew and sell reusable menstrual pads, or RUMPS, as they are called locally. WASHplus engaged these enterprising and inspiring women to come to its target districts to share their success and train trainers. Together they developed the small doable action approach to making a set of RUMPS from cast-off cloth. WASHplus created a simple pictorial job aid to illustrate the process of making pads from used cloth and towels based on the HEWASA women's group work.

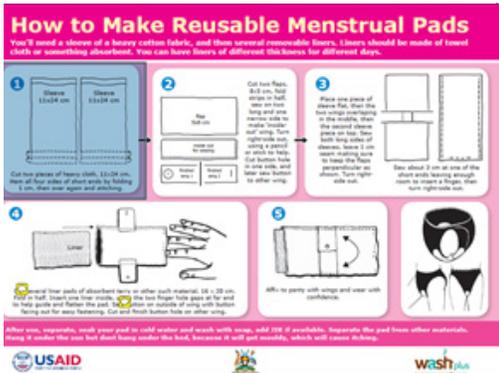
“The first challenge was to break the silence around menstruation and get the community talking,” said Juliet Nandawula, WASHplus project coordinator based in Kabale. “It was really quite amazing to see how community groups quickly overcame the silence and were eager to talk about the issue. Even the boys and men. One man told me that despite the fact that he had a wife and three girls, it was all a mystery to him. But once he learned of the indignities and challenges his girls faced, he was committed to action.”



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The HEWASA women's group shares stories and sewing secrets for making and selling pads.



A WASHplus job aid illustrates the pad-making process.



With a little guidance and a few basic materials—cotton cloth, toweling, button, needle, and string—girls can easily make their own reusable pads.

*Patient names have been changed.

A Hands-On Approach

At Bukinda Health Center IV, women and children wait for activities to get underway. On the agenda this day is MHM. Though everyone is a little uncomfortable discussing the subject, the women and girls are excited about the idea of making their own pads. As part of the program, the girls shared stories of embarrassment and shame around their menstrual periods, about staying home for fear of exposure. When materials are distributed, everyone is eager to start reading the instructions on how to make sanitary pads from the WASHplus job aid; 30 minutes later the first RUMP is produced. By the end of the two hour session, everyone in the room—including boys and men—are admiring the RUMPs they produced.

Kiconco* is a 15-year-old girl with perinatal HIV. She attends the pediatric HIV/AIDS clinic at Kamuganzi Health Center in Kabale District. “I am glad I can make my own pad; it is a simple task, affordable because you used local available cotton cloth. I will teach my little sisters, too.” A health worker who brought her own daughter to learn how to make pads commented, “Incorporating RUMP making in our Ariel Club will enrich our reproductive health sessions for the youths because we finally have a response to the question we are always asked, ‘How can I get pads to manage my monthly period?’”

WASHplus also trains participants, as well as clinical and home-based care workers, how to safely manage menses, clean menstruating women when they can't clean themselves, and how to safely dispose of used menstrual materials. This is extremely important in the HIV context, as menstrual blood can actually carry a higher viral load than plasma blood, so it does present a risk of HIV transmission while the blood is fresh.

The New Normal

Breaking the secrecy around menstruation, and including males in the discussions on menstrual hygiene, created a strong foundation for the campaign. Felix, a 16-year old male clinic attendee, describes his experience with the program, “Normally, we learn how to take medicine...how to feed..., but today we have been taught how to make sanitary pads! As a boy, I don't use these things, but when I get home, I am going to show my [female] cousins how to make these [sanitary pads].” STAR-SW is rolling out the campaign to 15 health facilities in the region, targeting the Ariel Clubs.

Ms. Nandawula says, “I have seen excitement in everyone's eyes, [they] are all very happy about making their own pads. I think it's been the most important activity.... We realize there is a big demand [for sanitary pads]. The girls get all excited, some even cry, because they are so relieved and happy to now have pads for getting about when they have their periods, without fear of embarrassment. They no longer have to stay home and miss school or other activities because of a lack of pads.”

The “new normal” beginning to take root with WASHplus support is that menstrual hygiene can be openly discussed and all you need to make a pad is pieces of cotton cloth and towel, a string, a needle, and a small button.

MHM has caught on like wildfire in the schools. The senior education officer in Kabale escorts visitors to a number of schools where clubs, with support from senior female teachers trained by WASHplus, are making RUMPs for their MHM emergency boxes. The girls and teachers are appreciative of the innovation and of the new skills they have learned. Nkunda SDA Primary School's Senior Teacher Christine Ampiare says, “The parents were happy to learn that their girls can make RUMPs and have contributed cotton materials that are currently used to make RUMPs for the emergency box.” Kanungu's district school inspector and senior education officer plan to roll out MHM in all district schools and include it on the school inspection checklist.