

PREFERRED MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRACTICES AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MBARARA CITY.

Ruth Asasiira*¹, Medard Twinamatsiko^{1,2} and Abigail Komurere¹
¹ Bishop Stuart University
² Mbarara University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

This survey examined the preferred menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls in primary Schools. The purpose was to contribute towards the academic performance of female pupils since menstrual hygiene is perceived as key to their concentration and participation in class. The study population included female candidate pupils, school matrons, teachers, parents/guardians of female pupils enrolled in the candidate class, and other education technocrats like head teachers. The findings of the investigation revealed that sanitary towels are the most commonly used and effective menstrual hygiene practice. Regarding materials used to clean external genitalia, the findings revealed that most adolescent girls use clean water to clean themselves. For the storage of menstrual materials, the results of the study manifested that most adolescent girls store their menstrual hygiene in their suitcases while others store materials with school nurses and matrons. From the study findings, the present study recommends the use of disposable sanitary towels since they were found to give comfort to these adolescent female pupils. In addition, the government should improve access and affordability of sanitary towels since they have an impact on pupils' academic performance. Also, school administrators should maintain and ensure the availability of clean water inside school premises. Lastly, there is a need to intensify health education among both girls and boys.

Keywords: Menstrual hygiene practices, Adolescent female pupils, Primary schools.

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Corresponding Author: Ruth Asasiira*

Email: ruth.asaasira82@gmail.com

Bishop Stuart University

Background to the Study

Globally, socioeconomic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality require all people to have equal access to high-quality early education (Reynolds et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2017). This is more fruitful if the girl child has access to facilities that facilitate a good learning environment. Despite the efforts of many governments globally to boost primary school attendance, there is a widespread scenario where girls do not complete their education (UNESCO, 2020). According to an assessment by King and Winthrop (2015), there has been a stagnation in female education in about 80 different countries worldwide as a result of institutional, cultural, and domestic problems. According to a 2014 UNICEF global monitoring study, 5.3 million children worldwide 62% are girls-do not finish their primary education cycle as a result of various obstacles to educational completion. Worldwide, 132 million girls and 34.3 million primary school-age children do not attend school (UNICEF, 2019). Two out of every five females in India leave school before completing primary school (Tomassini, 2019).

To prepare children for primary education, (SDGs) stress the critical importance of pre-primary education and set the lofty goal that all boys and girls should have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by the year 2030 (UNICEF, 2020). The world is currently experiencing a learning crisis, with girls in conflict-affected nations having a higher likelihood of

not attending school than girls in non-affected nations (Kattan, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Davies, 2018). For example, armed groups and government forces purposefully target girls during violent wars. They frequently experience harassment, intimidation, kidnapping, and sexual assault. Only 87 out of every 100 males attend school in Cote d'Ivoire (Davies, 2018). Globally, different nations and groups have different levels of gender-based violence, child marriage, and other hurdles to girls' education. When spending money on education, poor families frequently favor boys (Jasmine, 2021). Girls' demands for cleanliness, hygiene, and safety may not always be met in schools (World Bank Group, 2018). In other cases, gender inequalities in learning and skill development are brought about by teaching methods that are not gender-responsive.

Government-aided schools (59.3%) and private primary schools (40.7%) make up Uganda's primary education system. Investors, non-governmental organizations, and private business owners oversee both types of schools. The Ministry of Education & Sports presented the following data in 2017. According to Mwesigye (2015), the completion rates are low. Even though there is a high net enrollment rate of 91% in elementary schools, according to the World Bank's (2014) National Education Profile Update of 2014, the completion rate is only 53%. A UNESCO (2020) report states that 45 out of every 100 girls enrolled in Ugandan primary schools drop out before they reach the last grade, with the majority of them not

finishing their studies. The research goes on to say that when basic amenities and facilities are not adequately supplied, girls do not finish the educational cycle.

According to a 2018 report by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), over 700,000 girls in Uganda between the ages of six and twelve have never attended school. Approximately half of girls between the ages of 15 and 24 are illiterate, and four out of every five do not complete high school. Many reasons have been proposed for Uganda's high dropout rate, but one in particular has to do with girls' menstruation (Buwembo, 2021). According to Kemigisha and Humura, 3.75 million schoolgirls in Uganda lack access to basic sanitary care (2021). Thus, the study's objective was to find out how teenage girls' primary seven completion rates were impacted by their menstrual hygiene.

In Mbarara City, Uganda, where this study is focused, there is limited research on menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls in primary schools. Understanding the preferences and practices of these girls is essential for developing targeted interventions that can improve menstrual health and educational outcomes. Research in other parts of Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted several key issues: lack of access to affordable and sanitary menstrual products, inadequate knowledge about menstruation, and cultural taboos that hinder open discussion and education (Hennegan & Montgomery, 2016; PhD thesis by Nabalamba, 2019).

Cultural beliefs and practices also play a significant role in shaping menstrual hygiene practices. In many communities, menstruation is a taboo subject, which can lead to misinformation and inadequate practices (Garnett et al., 2020). Addressing these cultural barriers is crucial for improving menstrual hygiene management and ensuring that girls can manage their menstruation with dignity and without disruption to their education.

This study aimed to investigate the preferred menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls in selected primary schools in Mbarara City. By exploring the current practices, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform policy and programmatic interventions aimed at improving menstrual hygiene for young girls in the country.

Empirical Literature

Tewary, Jain, and Agarwal (2021) studied the relationship between the menstrual hygiene practices of lower-income women and their usage of disposable sanitary napkins during menstruation in India. The study employed Smart PLS to examine the connections between sanitary napkin use, healthcare facilities, and educational awareness. The consumption of sanitary goods during menstruation was found to be significantly impacted by both variables, according to the findings. According to the findings, increased sanitary napkin use can be boosted by better healthcare facilities and increased educational awareness.

Thus, the study's objective is to find out how much girls in primary school are aware of the use of sanitary napkins. In a related study, Srinivasa et al. (2019) examined the degree of knowledge, attitudes, and practices surrounding menstruation and menstrual hygiene among college students in the Bengaluru Urban district in South India. Every student present on the study day received a pre-made, face-validated structured questionnaire. The vast majority of pupils understood enough. Compared to men (29.6%), women (72.3%) had significantly higher awareness levels. Although the majority of female students (96.9%) knew about disposable cloth, 165 (42.7%) knew about menstruation cups, 12 (3.1%) knew about pads, and 254 (65.8%) knew about sanitary napkins, 384 (99.5%) of them were aware of them. Of the female students, 42.6% thought that when they were menstrual, they should follow specific social and cultural standards. The internet was the primary source of information on menstruation and different menstrual products. Menstrual blood was considered to be dangerous, according to one of the reported beliefs (75.2%) about the menstrual cycle. Garg et al. (2012) examined the distribution of affordable sanitary napkins to teenage girls living in rural areas as an essential component of their investigation of India's shift to menstrual hygiene. The study was motivated by the idea that women's period hygiene practices matter since they may raise their risk of Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs). In addition, the majority of teenage girls in rural regions go through their periods wearing tattered rags, which increases their vulnerability to RTIs. In developing nations, menstrual hygiene has not received adequate attention. However, to promote menstrual hygiene, several additional concerns must be addressed simultaneously. These concerns include education about reproductive health, privacy, access to water, quality, and quantity of napkins, regular supply, and awareness. Usman et al., (2020) examined menstruation hygiene awareness and management among women living in a low-income region of Karachi, Pakistan. Between January and June 2019, a cross-sectional investigation was carried out at the Bizerta Lines in Karachi. The study covered all women who are of childbearing age. Women who were menopausal, amenorrhic, or using birth control were not included in the study. Pro forma was used to gauge the level of knowledge and the state of menstrual hygiene management. The participant's knowledge, awareness, and opinions regarding menstruation were gathered using the study instrument. We also looked at the variables affecting the menstrual quality of life for low-income women. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 software was used to analyze the data. The results showed that the biggest percentage of adolescent girls made use of single-use sanitary towels. However, women's fundamental knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the female menstrual cycle is lacking.

Tegegne and Sisay (2014) investigated female teenage students' school absenteeism and management of menstrual hygiene in Northeast Ethiopia. A mixed-method strategy combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies was employed for this investigation. 595 young schoolgirls were selected at random to participate in the quantitative study. In 2013, nine in-depth interviews, five focus groups with schoolgirls, four focus groups with female teachers, and five interviews with school dropouts were conducted. The results showed that 51% of girls knew about menstruation and how to take care of it. During their most recent period, only one-third of the girls utilized sanitary napkins as a menstrual absorbent. Girls who came from higher-income households lived in urban areas, and had moms who had completed at least a secondary education were more likely than their classmates to use sanitary napkins. More than half of the female participants reported missing school due to their menstrual cycle. Those who did not use disposable napkins had a higher chance of failing to attend class. 58% of the female respondents to the survey claimed that their academic performance had declined following demarcation. The qualitative study also showed that females who do not use sanitary napkins often become uncomfortable and are teased and ridiculed by their classmates when their clothes become dirty. From the empirical literature regarding the menstrual hygiene practices currently utilized by adolescent girls in primary seven, a big body of the literature indicated many kinds of menstruation practices. While some girls use clothes and rags during their menstrual periods, the majority of females were found to utilize sanitary towels. It was discovered that girls in colleges and secondary schools knew more about menstrual hygiene routines. The researcher's focus in this study was on the menstrual hygiene practices of adolescent females in primary seven.

Approach and Methodology

The study used both cross-sectional and case-study research designs, where both qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection and analysis were used. The study population comprised of P.7 female candidate pupils as well as parents/guardians of female pupils in P.7 among the selected traditional government-aided primary schools in Mbarara city. These schools included Mbarara Junior School, Mbarara Mixed Primary School, and Booma Primary School. The study also involved teachers, school matrons, and other education technocrats such as Headteachers and City Education Officers. To do so, a sample size of 157 respondents was used in this study who were selected from the total population of 258. This was calculated using Taro Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967). The inclusion criteria of participants were based on those parents or guardians that had P.7 female pupils who had reached adolescent age. Both interview and questionnaire survey methods of data collection were used to collect data. Data from questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the help of data analysis software - Statistical Package for Social Sciences Package (SPSS). Analysis of qualitative data was done manually using content analysis, notes were written and scripts were analyzed by coding; where information of similar code categories was assembled meaningfully.

Findings of the Study

Respondents were asked to reveal their level of awareness about the current menstrual hygiene practices used among adolescent girls. Responses regarding adolescent girls' current menstrual hygiene schedules were gathered using descriptive statistics supported by qualitative data. In the first case, respondents were asked to reveal if their girl child(ren) had undergone menarche. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Showing whether respondents had a daughter (s) who had undergone menarche

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	90	79.6	79.6	79.6
No	23	20.3	20.3	20.3
Total	113	100.0	100.0	100

Table 1 indicates that the majority of the respondents agreed with the statement put before them. This implies that most participants were the right people for this study since their daughters had undergone a menstruation period.

Respondents were also asked about the age of menarche for their daughters. They were asked to reveal the age at which their girl children began experiencing menstrual periods (menarche). The elicited responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Showing the age of Menarche

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
Below 10	7	6.19	6.19	6.19
10-12	35	31.1	31.1	37.29
13-15	58	51.3	51.3	88.59
Above 15	13	11.5	11.5	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Field data, 2023

Findings in Table 2 indicate that the majority of the respondents are aware of the age at which girls experience menstrual periods. It was revealed the majority of the girls experience periods between the age of 13 to 15 years, followed by those between 10 and 12. Findings revealed rare cases where girls experience periods below ten years and above 15 years. Generally, the respondents were aware of the age at which girls experience menstrual periods.

In this sub-section, respondents were also asked to reveal the challenges experienced during menstrual periods based on their interaction with female pupils. Findings were obtained using a questionnaire survey method.

Among the common challenges experienced by female pupils during menarche included a lot of headaches during the periods, abdominal pains, and vomiting in some young girls. In this regard, one of the Key informants had this to say;

...it is quite challenging, especially for the first time. However, we can manage the situation with the help of

our matrons and senior women. They play a very big role in handling students' issues... (KI 2, 2023)

In another interview, one of the key informants had this to say;

...some develop headaches, others have too much abdominal pain, and some even fail to attend classes. We do our best by giving them advice and also providing them with enough drinking water although they are always absent-minded due to challenges experienced during menarche... (KI 4, 2023)

The findings from the structured questionnaire and key informants' interviews all converge at the same point that there are very many challenges experienced by female children during menstruation periods.

The Current menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls

In this sub-section, the researcher presents the major findings concerning the menstrual hygiene practices that are commonly used by adolescent girls. The responses are shown in Table 3

Table 3: Showing menstrual hygiene practices used by adolescent girls

Item	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	(i) Sanitary materials used				
	Sanitary towels	102	90.27	90.27	90.27
	Cloth	6	5.31	5.31	95.58
	Sponge	5	4.42	4.42	100
	(ii) Materials used to clean external genitalia				
	Only Water	95	84.07	84.07	84.07
	Water and Soap	16	14.16	14.16	98.23
	Water with an antiseptic solution	2	1.77	1.77	100
	(iii) Storage of menstrual materials				
	Routine clothes	10	8.85	8.85	8.85
	Bathroom	00	0	0	8.85
	School bag	25	22.12	22.12	30.97
	Suitcase	48	42.48	42.48	73.45
	School nurse/matron	30	26.55	26.55	100
	(iv) Disposal of menstrual materials				
	Burning	3	2.65	2.65	2.65
	Throwing in the dust bin	14	12.39	12.39	15.04
	Throwing in a pit latrine	90	79.65	79.65	94.69
	Flashing in the toilet	6	5.39	5.31	100

Source: Field data, 2023

Table 3 shows the responses concerning the menstrual hygiene practices that are commonly used by adolescent girls. The menstrual hygiene was observed in several ways and these were; sanitary materials used, materials used to clean external genitalia, storage of menstrual materials, and disposal of menstrual materials. The findings of the study are presented in the following sub-sections.

Sanitary materials used; Table 3 shows that the majority of the respondents use sanitary towels as the major menstrual hygiene practice. This was consented to by 90.27% of the total respondents who participated in the study. The outcomes of the study further indicated that cloth and sponges are rarely used. The findings imply that the government needs to get the way of making sanitary towels affordable and accessible such that more adolescent girls can observe the menstrual hygiene. The researcher went further to conduct focused group discussions with female candidate pupils to get their views about their preferred menstrual hygiene practices. The information from the FGDs revealed that most adolescent girls used sanitary towels during their menstrual cycles. This was mainly because most schools made the issue of sanitary towels compulsory for mature girls.

Materials used to clean external genitalia; As far as materials used to clean external genitalia, the outcomes of the survey showed that most adolescent girls use only water to clean themselves. This was agreed upon by 84% percentage of the total respondents. In line with FGD conducted with adolescent female candidates, the findings further indicated that most female candidates use water during their menstrual periods.

Storage of menstrual materials; Concerning storage of menstrual hygiene practices, results 5 in school bags and routine clothes.

Disposal of menstrual materials; Table 3 further indicates that most participants dispose of their menstrual materials by throwing them in a pit latrine followed by those that throw them in a dust bin. This was represented by 79.6% and 12.4% respectively.

For the researcher to adequately understand the menstrual hygiene practices used by adolescent girls, she went further to conduct the key informant's interview. As per the findings, one of the key respondents had this to say "*...unlike in the past where women used old rags and sponges to clean themselves during periods, now things have improved. Our young girls use sanitary towels because it is one of the requirements when they are reporting to school. Those issues of sponges and rags have died out. They are very rare...*" (KI 5, 2023).

The findings from the questionnaire survey, focused group discussions, and key informants' interviews all conclude that sanitary towels are the most commonly used menstrual material. The findings have a great implication for the government to make strategies for improving

access and affordability of sanitary towels since they may have an impact on pupils' academic performance.

About the materials used to clean external genitalia, the researcher conducted key informant interviews. One of the key respondents was quoted saying;

"...we normally encourage our young girls to use clean water so as not to get infections. We realized that many of the diseases they get originate from poor hygiene practices..." (KI 4, 2023).

All the findings from the questionnaire survey, focused group discussion, and key informants' interviews all portray that adolescent girls use clean materials during their menstrual periods.

Discussion

As far as menstrual hygiene materials used are concerned, the findings of the investigation revealed that the majority of the respondents use sanitary towels as the major menstrual hygiene practice. The outcomes of the study concur with the findings of Tewary, Jain, and Agarwal (2021) who examined the use of disposable sanitary napkins during menstruation in the Indian setting. In a related study, Srinivasa et al., (2019) cross-examined the level of awareness, perceptions, and practices regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene among students of a college in Bengaluru Urban district, South India. The findings of the study revealed that 384 (99.5%) of the female students knew about sanitary napkins, 165 (42.7%) knew about menstruation cups, and 12 (3.1%) knew about tampons. However, the majority (96.9%) preferred using sanitary napkins. The findings from the present study concur with findings from the previous studies done on the menstrual hygiene practices used by adolescent girls. They all point to the fact that sanitary towels are the most preferred menstrual hygiene practices. In the same study by Srinivasa et al., (2019), it was revealed that 254 (65.8%) knew about reusable cloth. In this cross-sectional study, the majority of students had sufficient knowledge about menstrual hygiene. Among the female students, 42.6% were expected to follow some social and cultural restrictions during menstruation. The Internet was the primary source of information on menstruation and different menstrual products. These findings concur with the present study that revealed that cloth and sponge are rarely used.

Conclusion

Regarding the menstrual hygiene practices used, the majority of the respondents indicated that they use sanitary towels. Other sanitary materials used included cloth and sponges although they are used in emergency cases. Regarding materials used to clean external genitalia, the findings revealed that most adolescent girls use clean water to clean themselves. For the storage of menstrual materials, the results of the study manifested that most adolescent girls store their menstrual hygiene in their suitcases followed by those that store materials with

school nurses and matrons. Few people store menstrual materials in school bags and routine clothes. Lastly, disposal by burning and throwing in a pit latrine were found to be the most preferred disposal methods of menstrual hygiene material.

Recommendations

As per the findings, the study recommends the use of disposable sanitary towels. This signifies the need for the government to make strategies for improving access and affordability of sanitary towels since they may have an impact on pupils' academic performance.

The government should also make efforts to ensure efficient and effective provision of social services like clean water since it is key in the lives of learners. It further implies that schools should maintain and ensure the availability of clean water inside school premises.

The study also recommends the Ministry of Education and Sports come up with policies concerning menstrual hygiene to promote equity and equality in the attainment of education by both girls and boys.

Lastly, there is a need to intensify health education among primary school pupils. This is because some girls experience menstruation period without knowing what is happening. Health education would prepare their minds and give them confidence in case they experience menarche.

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