

THE MANY MEANINGS OF MENSTRUATION

Practices, imaginaries and access to water and sanitation infrastructure in Lusaka, Zambia

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals highlight the importance of menstrual hygiene management and sanitation services to protect the wellbeing of women and girls. Within development discussions, menstruation is often associated with stress and stigma and is related to the loss of educational opportunities for women and young girls (Sapkota et al., 2013, UNICEF, 2019). In this context, WASH United, a global non-profit organization that works “to end the global sanitation and hygiene crisis” has made May 28 “Menstrual Hygiene Day.”¹ Since 2014, when it was first celebrated, “Menstrual Hygiene Day” has created a platform for menstrual related information to be shared publicly and has also given an opportunity for advocates and funders to engage policy makers (Bobel, 2019). Menstruation, considered previously as a taboo topic within the WASH sector and social sciences, has surfaced as a topic of interest (Joshi et al., 2015). Moreover, Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) has emerged as a growing domain of development interventions. In 2018, the World Bank reported that 500 million women and girls have inadequate access to facilities to manage their menstrual cycles, most prominently in public spaces such as schools (World Bank, 2018). MHM interventions in schools are said to contribute to the success of girls in education and help them reach their full potential in life (Bharadwaj & Patkar, 2004; Sapkota et al., 2013, Jewitt & Ryley, 2014; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2018).

Development interventions conducting MHM have been met with critiques from feminist approaches. These critiques have highlighted how MHM can reinforce imaginaries wherein women and girls from the Global South are to be educated on how to manage their own menstruation in a proper and hygienic way (Bobel, 2019; Joshi et al., 2015). These critiques also highlight that inequities exacerbated by a lack of access to water and sanitation cannot be solved with technological fixes, such as the distribution of sanitary pads. Instead, efforts must be made to address the roots of gender inequalities and disparities (Joshi et al., 2015). The problems and challenges girls and women face in their menstrual lives are deeply rooted in specific power relations and on the socio-cultural norms and beliefs of a particular context. These critiques also point out that the research conducted to quantify the impact of MHM programmes on the schooling of adolescent girls has been empirically unable to ascertain

the relationship between sanitary pad distribution and an increase in school attendance, and that there are other leading factors contributing to girls absenteeism from schools (Bobel, 2019; Joshi et al., 2015). Moreover, feminist scholars point out that although considerable research has been undertaken on menstruation, most of it has concentrated on the practices and handling of menstruation among women and adolescent girls and findings are confined to indicating what is considered “good” or “hygienic” practices of menstruation. Most of these studies give little room to the socio-economic and national contexts and to the fact that women and girls experience and handle menstruation in different ways among different cultures and at different points of their lives (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014).

This chapter documents expectations and experiences of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls in school from Lusaka, Zambia. With a population of three million people, Lusaka is the most densely populated city in Southern Africa (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022). The study is based on photovoice elicitation,² a community-based research methodology that puts cameras in the hands of participants, who then discuss and interpret images to reveal their ideas, values and beliefs (Fantini, 2017; Harley, 2012; Shaw, 2020). Pre-menarche and post-menarche girls in two public schools were invited to take photos and also share narratives relating to their expectations, dreams or fears surrounding their (first) periods and monthly menstruation. In order to explore sanitation from gendered perspectives, the chapter situates these groups of girls in their socio-economic and cultural contexts, while at the same time listening to their own experiences. It contributes to critical studies on menstrual health by talking about schoolgirls in their own terms, and *seeing* menarche, or the first menstrual period, and menstruation through their own contexts, eyes and views.

Research participants came principally from two informal settlements, George and Chawama. This research collaborated with the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council (NWASCO) that has been conducting MHM programmes in the city. Two “basic cycle” schools in peri-urban Lusaka were selected³ and agreed to collaborate in the research. Parents, teachers and students participated in ethics and introductory meetings before giving informed consent. Students from grades seventh and ninth were targeted, and 22 girls aged 12–17 expressed their willingness to participate. Participants were provided with and trained in the use of cameras. Each camera had a capacity of 27 pictures. Participants were allowed to take pictures for five to eight days and the cameras were then collected and the film developed into pictures. Afterwards, different discussions about the pictures were organised with all participants.⁴ Three focus group discussions were also held with schoolboys, teachers and community members from George and Chawama.

Sanitation and the birth of menstrual hygiene management

UNICEF’s handbook on menstrual health and hygiene specifies that “gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services often cause girls’ and women’s menstrual health and hygiene needs to go unmet” (UNICEF, 2019, p. 13). According to reports by the consultancy firm, Reimagining Social Change (FSG), in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women and girls lack access to menstrual and sanitation facilities and receive limited menstrual-related information prior to menarche. FSG, a consultancy whose reports inform development organizations, has also documented the different kinds of absorbents used for controlling menstrual blood by women and girls around the globe, ranging from homemade materials to disposable and reusable sanitary pads (Geertz et al., 2016). In this vein, different United Nation-led

programmes (Water, WatSan, WASH, WinS) have been implemented by the WASH sector in the last decade in an effort to put women and girls at the center of development interventions. UNICEF states that *good Menstrual Hygiene Management* entails:

Women and adolescent girls using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of a menstrual period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to safe and convenient facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.

(UNICEF, 2019, p. 8)

Emergent interest in menstrual hygiene intensified among governments, international organizations, researchers and charity institutions after the publication of research called the “Girl Effect” which indicated that “one in ten girls in Africa miss class or drop out of school entirely because of their periods” (Thomson, 2015, para. 4). This research argued that in African countries, school environments are incapable of providing for the needs of adolescent girls to privately manage their monthly flows or render emotional support and adequate menstrual health awareness before menarche.

It was in this context that UNICEF started promoting WASH in Schools. “WinS” policies specifically tackle the needs of menstruating girls: ensuring a satisfactory number of 1) separate (female and male) toilets with locks inside the doors, 2) trash cans for disposing menstrual pads and materials and 3) access to water for washing the blood off stained clothes and hands (Sommer et al., 2017). In this context, the governments of Kenya, Uganda, Niger, Senegal, India, South Africa, Philippines and Zambia, among others, have ratified national development policies to cater to the menstrual hygiene needs of adolescent girls in schools (Bobel, 2019; Sommer et al., 2017). These governments made a commitment to 1) supply free menstrual pads to schoolgirls, 2) improve sanitation facilities, 3) incorporate MHM in schools curricula, 4) preserve the dignity of girls and 5) train teachers for an effective deliverance of MHM and for rendering emotional support or counseling to girls (Sommer et al., 2017).

Zambia has been included in UNICEF’s project “WinS4Girls: Advocacy and Capacity Building for Menstrual Hygiene Management through Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools Programmes” (WinS4Girls), implemented in 14 countries. The project, which promoted “evidence-based policies and interventions that could be taken to scale through education systems,” was implemented in collaboration with the national government. It entailed the adoption of “MHM national guidelines to promote effective MHM programmes in schools.” The state committed to providing drinking water and single-sex toilets (at least two toilets per school) and incorporating MHM in the curricula. According to the guidelines, kits were to be delivered to all schools. These toolkits included “washable and disposable menstrual materials and ready to stitch materials for schools to locally produce washable pads” (see www.wins4girls.org/countries/zambia.html).

Looking at menstruation from a gender lens

Paechter (2003) refers to gendered roles as temporal acts of performance which are socially constructed through time. Similarly, Bina Agarwal explains how gender relations are power-laden and revealed in a “range of practices, ideas and representations.” These include, for

example, the division of roles and resources and “the ascribing to them of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioral patterns and so on” (1997, p. 51). Intersectional feminism, in turn, recognises the interlocked workings of different forms of oppression (and emancipation) based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, caste and ability (Ojeda et al., 2022). This chapter understands gender as the socially constructed roles ascribed to males and females. These roles are always time and place specific and interact with other social relations. In this vein, the perceptions and imaginaries around menstruation vary among cultures and change with time.⁵ In this regard, Lahiri-Dutt (2014) has pointed out that we can learn about gender power relations in a particular society by looking at how menstruation is perceived and understood.

Power dynamics in which women and girls from different contexts are immersed go far beyond the availability of menstrual pads. Technical solutions (giving out disposable and reusable pads, menstrual cups and/or tampons) to the so called “menstrual crisis” are a way to manage the female body, and do not do much to erase the different stigmas associated with menstruation (Bobel, 2019). The body of feminist critiques to “Menstrual Hygiene Management” can be grouped around three arguments. Firstly, authors argue that MHM focuses on technical “fixes,” leaving behind the structural roots of gender inequalities. Lahiri-Dutt (2014) contends that the WASH sector continues to be a predominantly masculine sector, and therefore its designs and services are geared towards technical and engineering solutions to complex social issues with limited involvement and awareness of women and girls needs. Gaybor (2020) in turn argues that the WASH sector tends to construct “menstrual hygiene” as a public health problem to be remedied with the promotion of “modern” hygiene measures in combination with infrastructural and technical solutions. What appears important in MHM initiatives is then to *hygienically* hide and get rid of the blood in discreet ways. A predominantly male WASH sector privileges technical solutions and hardware service provision to water related problems; therefore, it is not surprising that MHM interventions are focused on sanitary pad distribution (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Policy approaches thus tend to relate the promotion of gender equality to the provision of accessible water and sanitation services while neglecting the everyday dynamics of gender relations and power dynamics that were reflected and/or reinforced (Zwarteveen & Ahmed, 2012).

MHM targets and strategies are frequently translated into checklists measuring achievements and promoting gender equality without the targeted population’s (menstruating women and girls) active participation. At the end of the day, the burden and responsibility for managing the provided new devices, facilities or services (toilets, water kiosks, menstrual pads and their disposal) is placed on women and girls without considerable wages, as it is considered normal and appropriate due to socially constructed gender roles (Joshi et al., 2016; McCarthy & Lahiri-Dutt, 2020). In their study of Northern Ghana, Joshi et al. (2015) document the intervention of international donors working in partnerships with local NGOs to promote MHM in schools. In the setting of rural Ghana, where male teachers tend to be in charge of children’s education, it is these teachers who are given the responsibility of distributing sanitary pads to adolescent girls. Because of the gender and age power differences between teachers and their students in this particular context, this dynamic can potentially create awkward situations, putting adolescent girls in a state of increased vulnerability.

Secondly, these authors warn about the consequences of making natural female bodily functions universal, pathological and in need of hygienic measures – in other words, subject to *medicalization* (in need of the attention of medical practitioners and prescriptions).

They draw attention to the word “management” in MHM, which suggests girls menstruation is something that needs urgent attention, without which disaster might occur. Gaybor (2020) draws attention to MHM literature concentrating on the Global South, specifically on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, as a product of racially laden colonial imaginaries and assumptions about health discourses and practices. Similarly, McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt (2020, p. 16) raise a critique on the checklists and indicators used to assess or *manage* menstrual hygiene:

The benevolence and utilitarianism of this language obscures the fact that these indicators are embedded in specific contexts, and that a variety of structural, religious, cultural, and gendered practices – that both construct and obstruct the ‘management’ of menstruation – are involved in determining an individual’s menstrual management practices.

Joshi et al. (2015) have also pointed to the existence of another type of discourse around menstruation, beyond those of management and medicalization. The *sexualised* notion of menstruation entails girls reaching maturity and taking up the path of womanhood, and perhaps pregnancy. Their research found that among teachers, local NGOs and pupils in Ghana, anxieties were built more around the sexualised discourse of menstruation. School teachers and principals would use the medicalised discourses around menstruation mostly while dealing with donors.

Thirdly, this literature highlights that the commercialization and industrialization of menstruation has yielded valuable economic gains for corporations and industries. The economic opportunities in making sanitary products available to the huge potential market in the Global South, especially India, have had an influence in the propaganda surrounding MHM initiatives by corporations (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Women and young girls in different areas of the Global South are thus bombarded with advertisements on how the use of sanitary pads will empower them, making their lives easier, more modern and comfortable. These advertisements stand in contrast to their daily lives, where many face inadequate access to water, sanitation facilities and sanitary products (Bobel, 2019; Joshi et al., 2015). Scorgie et al. (2016) highlighted in their research in South Africa: the difficulties, struggles and anxieties women faced in not only concealing their menstruation but also in disposing of used sanitary pads in secret and out of sight. The secrecy attached to menstruation and the inadequate provision of waste bins have impacted the functions of sanitation facilities; women put waste sanitary pads in pit latrines, leading them to fill up quickly (Scorgie et al., 2016). In the context of limited access to urban infrastructures and services and restrictive cultural norms, managing menstrual waste has important sustainability implications and impacts difficulties of women’s menstrual experiences.

Gender relations in urban Zambia

George and Chawama are informal neighborhoods with self-built infrastructure including outdoor toilet blocks, unpaved roads and poor drainage and solid waste collection. Water supply is intermittent, with water kiosks locked at certain times of the day. Women and girls also walk to nearby wells and fetch extra water for bathing, laundry and other domestic chores (VisionRI, 2016).

In general, communities living on informal peri-urban settlements reached the secondary level of education (Milambo, 2019). Metropolitan Lusaka has a total of 758 primary schools and a 79.4% enrolment rate of girls (MoGE, 2018). More than 50% of schools in Lusaka are operated by the government with free education from grade one to seven (Milambo, 2019). According to the interviewed teachers, only about 30% of students in the compounds pursue studies after high school. Community members and teachers believe that some of the main causes for school dropout are economic hardship within the households (sons and daughters abandon school to work or help around the house). In focus groups and interviews, community members claimed that girls are taught to be wives and mothers, while boys are taught to be husbands, fathers and leaders. Girls and women are more burdened by household chores and responsibilities than boys and men. In general, young women and girls explained that there is a lot of respect in what concerns parents and the elderly in general: “*We naturally follow the rules and what our parents decide, without questioning*” (Bertha, 6 46 years).

Schlyter (1999) has pointed out that increasing urbanization in Zambia has catalyzed changes in gender relations as a result of new working and living conditions. These changes disrupt power hierarchies, sometimes leading to women and men bargaining for new gender relations. According to Evans (2014), in a context of economic instability, women have been entering the workforce and contributing more and more to the community's economy. This became evident in interviews and focus group discussions: in both George and Chawama women are frequently the main economic providers for the family. They are involved in small businesses, either selling food or vegetables along the streets of the city or in the local markets, while men are mostly engaged in services and the informal labour market.

Despite women's participation in paid labor, this research found that men are predominantly considered as masters of the household. In both compounds, it is considered taboo for men to engage in household chores that are associated with females. These chores are considered to devalue the charisma and status of men. Dinwali (42), a married woman, explained: “*It is not appropriate according to tradition for someone other than me to cook for my husband, I always do the cooking for him; sometimes if I am travelling, I cook in advance and store the food for him in the refrigerator.*” Elder daughters also take responsibility for taking care of the house. They act as “second in command” after their mothers: “*Boys are valued more. After school we do domestic work which gives us little time to study our books while the boys do not, so they have more time to study*” (Nancy, 15). Elder sisters have become the main economic providers of their households if the parents are not working.

Menarche, moye and womanhood

Although it is expected, menarche cannot be forecasted with precision. It is an important event in the life of females, as in many cultures it marks the entrance to womanhood (Yeung et al., 2016). A first group of pictures analyzed in photovoice workshops relates to the acquisition of menstrual knowledge from their mothers, sisters and friends. Information on menstruation is commonly given by mothers, aunties, grandmothers, sisters and friends. Most of the details are only given after the girls have seen their first period.

As in many other communities around the world, menstruation is seen beyond hygiene and is a moment to celebrate and rejoice among girls, mothers and the community (Joshi

et al., 2015; Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Some of the pictures taken by the schoolgirls talk about this moment when mothers make gifts and impart knowledge and advice on menstruation:

The day I saw my period, I was shocked and cried and told my mother because I did not know what it was. She covered my face with a new chitenge and took me to the room. My father, brothers and other men were not allowed to see me. My mother was so happy, she called her friends, they came and a party was made for me. She bought chitenges, pads and underpants for me. . . . I was given 200 kwacha (14 USD).

(Chusima, 16)

Like Chusima, other girls shared pictures of the *chitenges* and underpants that mothers offered them after their first menstruations. *Chitenges*, which are pieces of traditional fabric, are to be used in different forms: firstly, pieces of the fabric are cut into menstrual clothes to absorb menstrual blood. As such they are placed inside lycra shorts or regular underwear (see Figure 16.1). Secondly, traditional colorful *chitenges* are rolled around the hips as skirts (see Figure 16.2). Before menarche girls dress like “children” but afterwards, wearing *chitenges* symbolises the start of womanhood.

The first period is an important event in the life of girls in peri-urban Lusaka. All participants narrated how, although they were afraid or scared when they saw blood in their underpants, they were also overwhelmed with gifts, blessings and teachings (see Figure 16.3). Upon seeing their first period, girls are taught new practices to live with their periods. After these lessons, girls are celebrated for achieving a milestone in their lives and are ready to face the world as “*matured and knowledgeable women.*” During the week of their



Figure 16.1 “Gifts from my mother: underwear, chitenges and disposable pads.”

Source: Chusima.



Figure 16.2 “Our new chitenges.”

Source: Tasha.



Figure 16.3 “I enjoyed the day, I love the way my mother talked to me, and she blessed and prayed for me.”

Source: Amy.

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first menstruation some girls were given herbs to prevent menstrual cramps. Many girls are celebrated by their mothers with a “nice meal” (see Figure 16.4):

When I saw my first period. My mother went to the market and bought three panties and two chitenges, one was for me to wear and the other one she cut it into pieces for me to use and control the blood. My mum also bought a live chicken which she cooked for me without adding salt to eat, this is the tradition to welcome me to womanhood.

(Tasha, 16)

It is common among girls reaching menarche to undergo a traditional initiation ceremony, commonly called *Moye* in the local language. Traditionally during *Moye*, girls were confined indoors for between one to three months, after which a ceremony was organised for them. During this month they were taught how to cook, respect their in-laws and look after their husbands. They are also told how to shave their pubic hair and to sexually satisfy their husbands, with different sex positions showcased through dance moves. People brought gifts (money, cloth and chickens) and in most cases after a few months of the *Moye* celebration, the girl was promised in marriage. The initiation processes of *Moye* depends largely on the ethnic group to which a family belongs.⁷ In the context of Lusaka’s compounds however, only some families still practice it, as many within the community have converted to Christianity and do not observe traditional rituals. The girls whose families do practice *Moye* explained that initiation rituals have transformed deeply with time. They now spend only one week home after their first period and a party with food and music is organised after the seventh day. Community



Figure 16.4 “We ate chicken with rice.”

Source: Tasha.

members explained that “*nowadays, people are aware of the advantage of educating a girl, so Moye is done only for one week and during the summer holidays.*” Furthermore, sexuality lessons are no longer included, and the girls are not sent off to marriage after the party. In both compounds, “*educating a girl child is an important achievement for a family.*” Unlike compound girls, boys do not undergo any process of initiation to learn maturity, adulthood or to celebrate their manhood.⁸ There is a saying in the Nyanja Language “*when a boy grows up, there is no process of beating drums to show that he is an adult.*”

Some girls explained that during *Moye*, they are treated “*like queens*” and asked to rest. They have discussions with their aunts, grandmothers or a medicine woman called *alangizi* about the entrance to womanhood and the expectation that lies ahead of them. During the conversations about the meanings of “adulthood” or “womanhood” that the girls had with elder family women or from the *alangizis*, they are taught about how to clean themselves and wear *chitenges* or pads. The girls are told how to respect their parents and elders and how to behave in their presence: “*We have to behave like adult women and therefore cannot hug or sit on the lap of our fathers like when we were children*” (Sophia 15). Good behaviour also entails sitting properly as a woman, holding their skirts while sitting, not playing with young children, and becoming friends with other girls that have seen their period (reached womanhood). Girls also explained that they have to take care of themselves to look beautiful. One of them took a picture of herself and explained she felt insecure about her beauty because she now had pimples. Another one took a picture of herself brushing her teeth, explaining that because she is an adult she has to take “*care of herself.*”

It is worth mentioning that the girls told different stories on the occurrence of their first period. Although most of them consulted their mothers or female relatives for assistance, some hid and did not tell anyone during the first days of their periods while traditional ceremonies or initiations were performed for others. Some girls complemented their menstrual knowledge with information from their teachers or through programmes organised by local NGOs.

Besides stories about *Moye*, an important group of pictures referred to the expectations of womanhood related to marriage, families and economic security. Pregnancy is associated with menstruation and the girls mothers fear the “*dangers of*” pregnancy after menarche. It is worth mentioning that the focus is not so much on the loss of virginity as it is on teen pregnancy: “*After my period my mother told me if you are having sex, you should stop because you can get pregnant now*” (Mulonda, 14). Despite the warnings against teen pregnancy, many of the girls took pictures of babies when asked about their imaginaries and expectations about menarche. Amy (aged 16), for example, said “*I am happy anytime I see my period because it reminds me that I can have children and that in the future I will find someone I love, marry and have kids.*”

Girls explained how, at school, boyfriends help them with lunch money, snacks and gifts. As explained by Lungowe (aged 16): “*Sometimes I feel envy of my classmates with boyfriends because the boy shares with them the money they have, it is not much, sometimes they just offer two kwacha but it shows that someone cares about you.*” Munzi (aged 16) added: “*With someone you love you feel protected, you feel you are not alone, someone is always there for you and to treat you with sweet words like honey, baby and darling.*” Some girls explained how boyfriends can give them money for uniforms and to continue with their education (see Figure 16.5).



Figure 16.5 “I want to have someone on my side to protect me and comfort me when I am in trouble and provide for me, maybe help me pay for school.”

Source: Chimunya.

Experiences of menstruation

The first theme regarding menstruation that came up in photovoice workshops had to do with discomfort and uncomfortable physical symptoms: feeling tired in the classroom and having headaches. Five girls photographed (re-enactments of) menstrual cramps, for which they said they can take painkillers or lay down to rest (see Figure 16.6). Some girls keep themselves from sport activities for the fear of staining or because of the uncomfortable nature of their periods. Girls also disclosed that during their periods they sometimes do not feel comfortable around boys because they always suspect themselves of staining their uniforms and continuously look behind their backs and always stay alert. During the discussions, as many girls pointed to the physical pains related to menstruation, some others showed pictures with different stories. While one stated that she did not feel any menstrual cramps, the other explained how she did feel some pain, but upon arrival at school she was so distracted by being with her friends that she “*forgot about it*” (see Figure 16.7). This diversity in experiences is important as it highlights the fact that women physically experience menstruation in very different ways.

Another one of the main themes that came up in photovoice workshops was water and sanitation infrastructure. Many participants took pictures of outdoor water taps in both their compounds and at their schools. They pointed out how, at schools, there are toilets that “*haven’t worked for years*” and how it is difficult to wash their hands or take a shower after sports, due to broken sinks and broken showers. Decaying school infrastructure is portrayed in the photographs; similar pictures were taken in the compounds, where the water supply is intermittent (see Figure 16.8). Some taps are broken and the supply is expensive. Some of the girls explained having to fetch water from wells when there is none in the taps (see Figure 16.9). Intermittency contributes to anxieties, as after menarche girls are in charge of discretely washing their menstrual clothes and underwear.

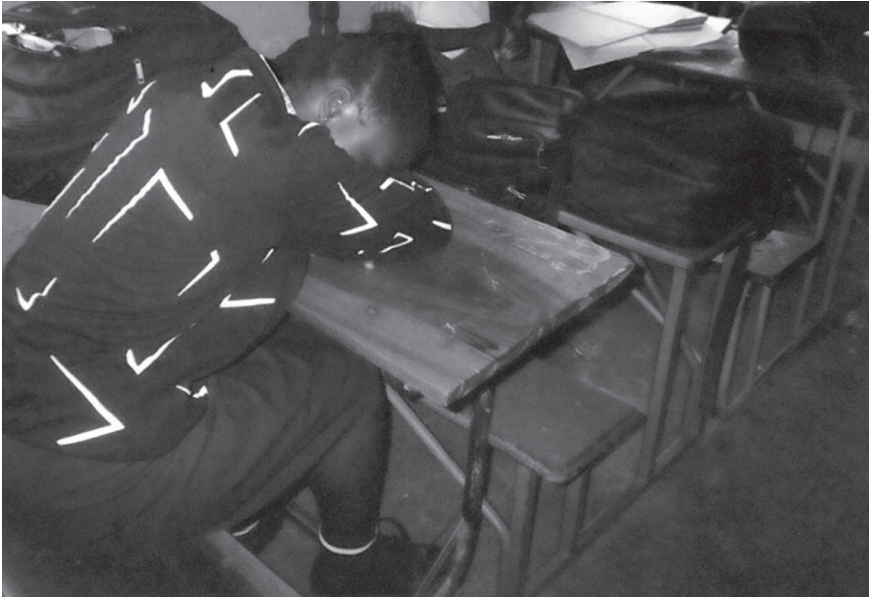


Figure 16.6 “I feel sleepy and lazy in class and I feel tired and lazy during my period.”

Source: Mehai and Nbanji.



Figure 16.7 “When I arrive to school I forget about the pain because I am with my friends.”

Source: Mulonda.

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Figure 16.8 “The toilets are broken and there is no water. . . . Since grade fourth (four years ago) this shower has been broken.”

Source: Betty and Mulonda.



Figure 16.9 “Today there is no water in the compound.”

Source: Josephine.

The third theme which came up in photovoice workshops concerned MHM initiatives championed by NGOs, in partnership with the government. Female students are invited to reusable menstrual-pad distribution days (see Figure 16.10). These days are done on specific occasions, such as Menstrual Hygiene Day and World Women's Day. While some girls explained that they had switched to the *new* reusable pads, some others mix the new pads with the regular *chitenge* cloth, and others are not using the pads yet, but plan to use them in the future. As with *chitenge* cloth, girls have difficulty accessing water to wash disposable and reusable pads.

Although the government plans foresee “incorporating MHM in the curricula,” there is limited biological knowledge of menstruation and the processes it entails. According to Funke (aged 13), “*period is when blood comes from down here.*” Despite the fact that some teachers have attended trainings or workshops on MHM, there have not been major changes in the curricula. Topics such as menstruation and the details of human reproduction are left in the hands of the science teachers. One of the girls explained that she did not feel comfortable asking any questions about sexuality or female reproduction in science class, since it is taught by a young male teacher from the community. Some boys who participated in the focus groups heard about menstruation from their teachers or female friends, while others had no idea about it. According to John (aged 17), “*periods are a natural thing for girls and women, so I cannot tease or mock them about it.*” During the discussions some of the boys felt shy and embarrassed to talk about menstruation.



Figure 16.10 Reusable pads delivered to girls from the George and Chawama communities.

Source: Josephine.

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The fourth theme was related to the special care and support they receive from family during period days. Jenny (aged 14) explained that her mother pampers her during her period days by liberating her from all house chores, even washing her clothes, so that she can rest and sleep more (see Figure 16.11). Petri (aged 14), in turn explained that during her period days her mother prepares her favorite dinner of okra and fried fish stew. Estonia (aged 15) took a picture of a leather bag her mother offered her to keep her menstrual pads and *chitenges*. Maurice (aged 16) explained how she likes to go and take walks in the bushes around her home to be in nature and look at flowers. Nyambe (aged 15) explained how she feels comfortable spending time with her siblings and her dog.

The fifth theme which came up in photovoice workshops has to do with *modesty*. Young girls are discouraged from talking about their periods with boys and men. During an NGO activity to distribute reusable pads in one of the schools, the girls were told to hide the reusable pads before leaving the class, and not to display them around school. Most adolescent girls are also expected to follow certain standards in what concerns modesty: *chitenges* cloth pads, underpants and underwear are not to be hung outside for drying, these items should be air dried inside the home or hidden from boys and men. Special places or bags are provided by mothers for their daughters to keep their menstrual products safe and out of sight. Some girls who wear disposable pads explain that their mothers help them with money to buy the pads (or buy the pads for them). They argue that they prefer disposable pads due to the lack of good water services to wash *chitenges*, and they prefer burning



Figure 16.11 “When I am menstruating my mother does the home chores for me to rest and recover from my period.”

Source: Jenny.

the disposable pads because it is difficult to dispose of them with discretion: “I use pads because I do not like washing cloth pads. After, I burn the pad and then collect the ashes and flush them in the toilet” (Amy, 16).

Conclusion

As mentioned, Zambia was included in UNICEF’s project “WinS4Girls: Advocacy and Capacity Building for Menstrual Hygiene Management through Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools Programmes” (WinS4Girls), implemented in 14 countries. However, in both visited schools the programme has only translated into the delivery of reusable pads whenever there are international funds available. Moreover, although the infrastructure (sinks, toilets and showers) exists in the schools, students involved in the photovoice initiative reported the intermittence of water, the lack of maintenance in toilets and drains and the constant state of breakdown of the showers.

In both George and Chawama, girls are gifted with materials and products to control their monthly flow at the commencement of their first period. Although they face multiple uncertainties regarding economic stability, infrastructural malfunctions in their compounds and socio-cultural changes due to widespread unemployment among men, girls were not particularly challenged about clothes, pads and stains.

According to Wang (1999, 2006) one of the main objectives of photovoice is to advocate for change through policy or decision makers. Following this call, this chapter concludes with three points for discussion vis-à-vis MHM projects in peri-urban settlements from the Global South:

The reality of weak infrastructure in both the compounds and the schools.

Despite efforts to extend infrastructure, toilets and taps seldom work and students complained about the widespread lack of maintenance. This has to do with the fact that some of the development projects do not tackle maintenance issues in the long run. Public schools thus lack the funding to hire maintenance personnel. Thus, it is the financing of primary and secondary education in general which needs restructuring. Beyond infrastructure, it would be necessary to think about redistributive solutions that challenge the inequality and lack of opportunities that affect women and girls in Zambia.

The importance of the bonds between mothers and daughters.

Mothers show love, affection, care and guidance. Mothers also gift materials (*chitenges*, pads, shorts), cook their daughters’ favorite dishes and also do home chores in order to make the period days more comfortable. Mothers are the ones concerned about the possibility of early pregnancy. One of the important findings is that some mothers warn against pregnancy but are more lenient concerning virginity. This link of care and affection between mothers and daughters has not been explored by MHM initiatives. Parents from the Global South are portrayed usually as ignorant of their daughters’ menstrual histories and sexuality or as intransigent and conservative.

Analyzing bonds between mothers and daughters, studies can acknowledge that menstruation is not necessarily a source of problems or discomfort but is also a moment of celebration, of being *cared for*, of receiving presents. By focusing exclusively on

technical and medical issues, MHM risks missing the culturally embedded meanings of menstruation.

The complexities surrounding sexuality, romantic love and marriage.

Households face economic instability as a result of urban inequality and the lack of employment among men. Women have been going out of the house to work in markets or as domestic workers. This situation coexists with persisting imaginaries of men as providers and heads of the family. Even though economic roles have shifted, ideals of masculinity have not. As a result, expectations around sexuality and romantic love are complex. School girls see romantic love as a vehicle to obtain economic stability (having someone to “have your back”) and relationships are not always incompatible with school. As one of the girls explained, boyfriends can help with education costs. Any project aiming to study or intervene in the lives of women in the urban South should first aim at understanding these complexities in order to contribute to context-specific strategies that go beyond technical fixes and challenge gender-based asymmetries.

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Notes

- 1 See <https://wash-united.org/>.
- 2 Photovoice has been used to analyse diverse health, environmental and societal issues. This method promotes critical dialogue and enables underrepresented and/or disadvantaged communities to make their opinions heard. It can also promote the contribution of young people in a genuine way when done in school contexts (Warne et al., 2013). By following the everyday lives of participants, photovoice offers insight to both significant “objective” aspects (such as activities, facts and dates) and “subjective” factors (such as emotions, opinions, beliefs, ideas) therefore contributing to greater comprehension of human behavior (Ciolan and Manasia, 2017).
- 3 This research also received approval from the District Board of Education (DEBS) of the Lusaka District.
- 4 The participatory process of analysis was conducted through a process of selecting, contextualising and analysing (Wang, 1999). Participants went through their photos and selected some for discussion. The SHOWeD technique was followed to structure discussions around the questions: what do you see here? How does this relate to your lives? Why does this problem/concern, expectation or imaginary exist? What can we do about it (Catalani and Minkler, 2010)? Participants were also invited to build narratives about the photos they took as some felt shy and nervous with the structured questions of SHOWeD. They were encouraged to categorise and cluster the photos to discuss recurrent themes and topics (Spencer et al., 2019).
- 5 It is important to mention that transgender menstruators also deal with social expectations (according to expectations of femininity), stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation (see Rydström, 2020).
- 6 All names have been changed.
- 7 Different ethnic groups in Zambia have different names for the initiation rituals: Nyanga people call it *MOYE*, Tonga people call it *NKOLOLA*, Chewa people call it *CHINAMWALI* and Bemba people call it *MBUSA*.

- 8 The Luvale people in North-Western Zambia have an initiation ceremony for boys called *Mukanda*, where 13-year-old boys are recruited to undergo circumcision and the teachings of adulthood.

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