



Empowering Young Women: Menstrual Hygiene Management, Healthy Relationships, and Sex Education in Siaya County, Kenya

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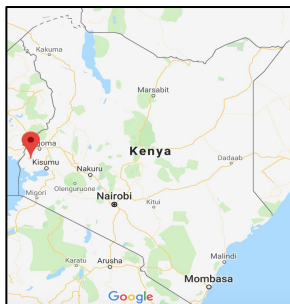
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Background

Large numbers of girls in East Africa often choose to stay at home during their monthly periods because they do not have access to appropriate menstrual sanitary products. Disposable pads are expensive and not readily available in rural communities. This lack of access, combined with a lack of sources of educational mentorship, leads girls to turn to dangerous options such as making homemade pads from materials that can easily lead to infections. This issue also makes them vulnerable to men who request sexual favors in return for money to buy pads. Due to the shame, stigma, and fear that exists around something as basic as menstruation, many girls end up skipping school or dropping out entirely. This negatively impacts their academic lives and therefore their future roles in their communities, and ultimately reinforces gender inequality.

Location

This project took place in Siaya County, Kenya. The mentorship program occurred at both Jera Mixed Secondary School in Udin Village and Kid Star Primary School in Ugunja Village. The major ethnic group represented here is the Luo tribe, with both Luo and KiSwahili being the most common languages spoken.



Objectives

- To identify gaps in both knowledge and practice regarding menstruation and reproductive health
- To further our understanding of women's role in society and identify additional barriers to success
- To uncover deeply rooted myths and misconceptions surrounding contraception and abortion
- To help students develop confidence and leadership skills to overcome such adversities
- To establish a long lasting mentorship program and encourage students to maintain the close relationships they formed and act as mentors for younger girls

Approach

One month ahead of the launch of the project, a short survey was distributed to 60 girls of 12 different secondary schools in the region, allowing us to gain perspective on their initial attitudes toward menstruation and sexual health. Upon arriving in Jera, meetings took place each day for about 4-5 hours with 30 girls at a time. The meetings started with games and trust-building activities to develop a sense of friendship and progressed into more information-based discussions and serious topics such as contraception and abortion. We worked throughout to maintain a comfortable and safe space to talk through these sensitive topics and encouraged the girls to support each other and refrain from passing judgements. Meetings were both discussion and activity-based to stimulate active learning. At the conclusion of the final meeting, leaders that will carry on respective mentorship clubs in each school were selected, and reusable pads that can last up to 2.5 years were distributed to all girls. The distribution was coupled with a presentation by our in-country partner, Maureen Oduor, on how to use them correctly.

Reflections

Overall, we found that the students seemed to be very active listeners and participants throughout our meetings. When asked if they are sharing the information they learn with their friends and family, many said yes and even began asking us questions that their friends and family had for us regarding women's reproductive health. We also had teachers from some of the schools represented sit through our meetings and they too asked us questions about issues they often had students come to them with, but could not give answers to due to lack of official training regarding women's reproductive health.

Throughout the meetings, many of the girls asked us to clarify and provide scientific reasonings for myths they had heard in their community regarding the topics we were having. Several of the girls also brought up not having a safe space they felt comfortable having the discussions we were having outside of the program we were providing. Many also emphasized the strong influence their religion has on their understanding of these topics, especially those of contraceptives and abortion. Towards the end of the programming, we asked the girls to perform skits and presentations on the topics we covered, allowing us to see that they had retained most of the information we provided them and were now able to confidently present this information to their peers.

Future Direction

After spending two weeks familiarizing ourselves with the challenges faced by young women in this region, it was clear that access to reliable knowledge, mentorship, and care needed to extend far beyond our time there. Upon completing the program, we created a manual containing the vital information regarding reproductive health and menstruation as well as guidance for forming confidence and leadership skills. The manual was broken up into 22 meetings, fully structured and simple enough for the girls to implement on their own. Of the 12 schools who allowed their students to attend our program, we selected one or two girls from each who showed stronger leadership skills and a willingness to mentor others. We then met with the group of future leaders and went through the meetings manual with each of them while emphasizing what it means to be a good leader to one's peers. Maureen Oduor has also contacted teachers and the principals of their respective schools to guarantee support for the establishment of these programs.

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