

In April 2016 Faith in Water held the first consultations on girls' menstrual health with faith groups in Uganda



162 SCHOOLGIRLS
CONSULTED FROM
FOUR SCHOOLS



115 FAITH-BASED
WOMEN'S GROUP
MEMBERS ENGAGED



83 FAITH LEADERS,
HEADS, TEACHERS,
EDUCATIONALISTS

ENGAGING FAITHS ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH



Introduction

In April 2016, the UK-based charity Faith in Water held nine workshops in Uganda to discuss how challenges in managing menstruation impact girls' education and wellbeing, and what schools can do about it. The workshops were aimed at Christian and Muslim schoolgirls in rural and urban areas as well as faith women's groups, faith leaders, head teachers of faith schools and educationalists in charge of faith education departments.

This is the first initiative to engage faith groups – which are massive providers of education both in Uganda and globally – on girls' menstrual health. This document sets out the key results of our consultations.

Studies have found that 57% of schoolgirls in Uganda miss 11% of learning time due to problems managing their period.

SNV



Faith in Water is a UK-based charity that works with faith communities on water, sanitation and hygiene. We aim to:

- Engage faith communities in giving greater priority to water, sanitation and hygiene issues – in their teachings and traditions and their communities and schools.
- Build partnerships between secular and faith groups to scale up implementation of WASH initiatives.

Faith in Water developed out of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation which has spent two decades working with religious groups on environmental issues. We work with faiths because they are involved in at least 50% of schools worldwide¹ and have enormous community influence².

www.faithinwater.org



FIW would like to acknowledge with gratitude the invaluable help and excellent contribution of our partner, A Rocha Uganda (ARU), in organising and delivering these workshops.

ARU is a Christian conservation organisation that engages communities on WASH and other initiatives, and works extensively with young people.

We are also grateful for the valuable help of our Muslim workshop co-ordinators sourced with the help of Energising Solutions and HEAR Uganda.

<http://uganda.arocha.org>

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Acronyms used

ARU	A Rocha Uganda
FiW	Faith in Water
HEAR Uganda	Humanitarian Efforts and Relief Uganda
MH	Menstrual health
MHM	Menstruation hygiene management
MoESTS	Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
UFNEA	Uganda Faiths Network on Environment Action
UMYA	Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly

Executive summary

There has been growing recognition in recent years of how girls' health, wellbeing and education are impacted by difficulties in managing menstruation. One study in Uganda estimated that over 57% of girls missed 11% of learning time due to their periods³. Another study found that 28% of girls dropped out of school, accounting for 20% of the school year. The same study found that 18% of girls (36% in some districts) leave school early and of those girls almost 46% do not go to school because there are no proper water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. ⁴



Uganda is leading the way in focusing attention on menstruation hygiene management (MHM). However, faith groups have not been involved in any of its initiatives. This is a missed opportunity given the faiths' major role as providers of education in Uganda. For this reason, Faith in Water linked up with Kampala-based Christian organisation A Rocha Uganda, and recruited coordinators from Muslim partners, Energising Solutions and HEAR Uganda, to engage faith leaders, teachers and schoolgirls on MHM for the first time. We held nine workshops in Kampala, Mpigi and Nakasongola. Our aims were:

- To gather information about girls' experience of menstruation, including any religious restrictions they encountered, and to understand the challenges faced by schools and teachers.
- To raise awareness of this issue among faith leaders and to bring faith schools into the Ugandan government initiatives in this area.
- To consult faith groups on our plans to develop an MHM toolkit aimed at Christian and Muslim schools in Uganda.

Response by faith groups

The response of faith leaders, representatives of faith women's groups and heads and teachers of faith schools to this issue was overwhelming positive. They recognised its importance to girls' education and wellbeing and they called on faith schools to become examples of best practice.

They endorsed Faith in Water's proposal to develop a faith-based MHM toolkit for Christian and Muslim schools and welcomed the comments by keynote speaker Angela Nakafeero, Gender Technical Advisor at the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports, who said: 'We are aware that over half of our schools are founded by religious groups. We are looking forward to this toolkit for religious schools. It's very exciting for us. We feel that this contribution will complement some of our interventions.'

Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga of All Saints Cathedral, Kampala, said it was time to let go of outdated ideas around stigma and shame. 'Why can't we create new

'We are looking forward to this toolkit for religious schools. It is very exciting for us.'

Angela Nakafeero,
Ministry of Education,
Science, Technology
and Sports

'We need to break the silence on menstruation, just as we did on HIV/AIDS.'

Participant,
Faith Leaders'
Conference



Faith MHM Toolkit

Religious and cultural taboos are cited by NGOs as contributing to girls' difficulties in managing their menstruation, yet there has been little or no attempt to engage faith groups in these issues.

Even where no religious taboos exist, religions have a major role to play in making it easier for girls to complete their education. More than half of schools globally - up to 70% in some countries - were established, funded or are run by faiths⁴.

That is why Faith in Water is developing the first Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) toolkit for faith schools, in consultation with faith groups, beginning with Christian and Muslim schools in Uganda. It will:

- Help schools teach girls (and boys) about the natural biological process of menstruation.
- Give girls the information they need to manage their own menstruation with dignity.
- Encourage schools to provide appropriate toilet facilities and support for girls.

The toolkits will be integrated with faith-specific values around water, cleanliness and dignity in Christianity and Islam.

cultures, our own African culture? As missionary ladies went door to door, church schools should be exemplary places of teaching dignity and hygiene.'

Girls' responses

The girls overwhelmingly told us they couldn't afford to buy sanitary products (56%), they were worried about being mocked by boys (46%) and they weren't being taught enough about menstruation (40%). Almost two thirds (62%) voiced concerns about school toilets, saying they were too dirty, too crowded and lacked water. Embarrassment and shame were significant concerns for the girls - and completely underestimated by both the women's groups and the teachers. There was a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about menstruation, and evidence that a substantial minority believe myths. For example, 38% of girls think used menstrual cloths will attract evil spirits.

Religious restrictions

We found little evidence of widespread religious restrictions among Christian groups, although a very small minority said a girl or woman should not enter a church, touch the Bible or take Holy Communion during her period.

However, traditional restrictions exist much more strongly in the Muslim community where blood is considered a ritually impure substance (other such substances include semen, urine and stools). For this reason, Muslim girls and women should not enter a mosque or touch the Qur'an during their period, and are excused from prayers because they cannot enter a state of ritual purity.

Next steps

Much energy and enthusiasm has been generated as a result of this first consultation of faith groups on MHM. Not only did they declare it vital for girls' education and wellbeing, but many participants were personally inspired - such as the university lecturer who is now working with his students to supply 100 low-income girls with re-usable pads. It is important to capitalise on this energy. We urge faith groups to embrace best practice on MHM in their schools and communities. We recommend that government and secular initiatives fully engage faith groups to break the silence on MHM to ensure all girls are able to fulfil their potential.

85%
of Ugandans
are Christian
and 14% are
Muslim.

Situation in Uganda

Background

Mounting evidence shows that girls' health, wellbeing and education can be significantly impacted by difficulties in managing menstruation. Inadequate school toilet and washing facilities, lack of access to sanitary products, lack of knowledge of menstruation and fear of stigma all combine to make life difficult for menstruating girls.

In Uganda a 2012 study by SNV/IRC showed more than 57% of girls missed 11% of learning time due to their period⁵. Another found 28% of girls miss school, accounting for 20% of the school year, according to Plan Uganda. That study also found 18% of girls (36% in some districts) leave school before graduating and of those girls almost 46% do not go to school because there are no proper water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities⁶.

Missing school regularly because of their periods has a big impact on girls' future. Educated girls are less likely to marry early or die in childbirth. They are more likely to send their own children to school and they earn more as adults. Evidence shows that an extra year of secondary education for girls correlates to a 25% increase in wages later in life⁷.

A major problem is ignorance and misunderstanding about menstruation. Studies worldwide show a high proportion of girls have no idea what is happening when their period starts⁸. Many think they have a disease, some think they are dying. This lack of information is compounded in some areas by traditional religious, social or cultural taboos that reinforce myths and mean girls can't talk about these issues.

Role of faiths

Religion is important in Uganda. According to the 2014 census, more than 85% of Uganda's population is Christian and 14% Muslim⁹. Christian denominations include Catholics (40%), Anglicans (32%) and Pentecostal, Born Again or Evangelicals (11%), with the rest mostly comprised of Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists and Orthodox.

As well as playing a significant role as opinion leaders, the faiths play a major role in education. The Catholic Church has 4,986 primary schools and 659 secondary schools, while the Church of Uganda runs 4,904 primary schools and 460 secondary schools¹⁰. There are more than 1,000 Muslim primary schools and around 200 secondary schools¹¹.



Uganda is leading the way in East Africa in focusing attention on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM). The Ministry for Education and Sports produced a reader for learners in 2013, entitled: *Understanding and Managing Menstruation*.

The first national MHM conference was held in Uganda in 2014 and politicians passed a parliamentary resolution on MHM and issued guidance to schools. Uganda also celebrates the international Menstrual Hygiene Management Day on May 28.

In 2015 a Menstrual Hygiene Charter was launched, endorsed by five government ministries and signed by 27 civil society organisations. All of these initiatives are impressive.

However, faith groups have not been involved in any of these initiatives; for example, no faith group was invited to sign the Menstrual Hygiene Charter.

This is a missed opportunity given the faiths' major role as providers of education. For example, the Catholic Church alone has 4,986 primary schools and 659 secondary schools, according to a January 2016 report by the Uganda Catholic Education Department¹⁰.

Methodology



Discussing periods can be difficult. It was important that the girls felt comfortable and secure. We reassured them that the discussions would be confidential, this was not a test and they did not have to participate.

The workshops took a participatory approach that included a mix of discussions, group work and games. Documents were translated into Luganda for rural areas.

The workshops began with an ice breaker game called Open, Private, Secret, a fun way of introducing the subject of menstruation.

We asked participants to use coloured stickers to indicate attitudes to periods among Ugandans generally, teenage girls and themselves personally.

Were they:

- **Open** (a subject you could discuss with anyone)?
- **Private** (something you'd discuss only with a few people close to you)?
- **Secret** (something you'd never, ever talk about)?

Almost none of our girls said 'Open'. For the girls, periods were overwhelmingly considered a **Secret**. Their answers to other questions reinforced the sense that, for them, periods are shameful, embarrassing, deeply private.

Schoolgirls' workshops

We held four half-day workshops involving 162 girls aged 11-12 from four schools who had started their periods. They included two Christian schools – Queen of Peace Primary, Kampala, and Kisaalizi Church of Uganda Primary, Nakasongola – and two Muslim: Nateete Muslim Primary School, Kampala, and Mpigi UMEA Primary School, Mpigi.

The workshops were delivered in a mixture of English and Luganda, and the girls worked together in small groups and occasionally alone. Our aim was to understand their experience, concerns and understanding about menstruation. Although the sample was small, it produced some interesting results.



The Dot Game

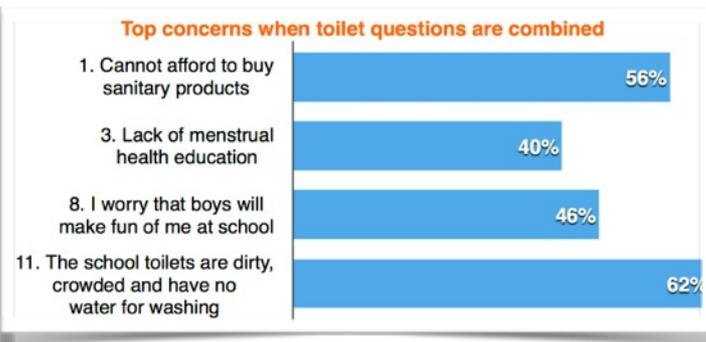
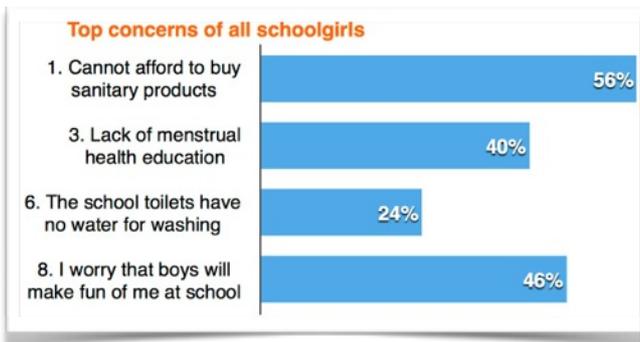
We listed a number of common challenges that girls face in MHM in big posters on the walls. We then gave each girl three dot stickers and asked them to choose which were their top three concerns about managing their periods, or, as they told us, their *ensonga* or MP (menstrual period).

Girls overwhelmingly told us they couldn't afford to buy sanitary products (56%), they were worried about being mocked by boys (46%) and they weren't being taught enough about menstruation (40%). Lack of water for washing came fourth, listed by 24% of girls.

But when we looked more closely, it became clear that the condition of the school toilets was a major problem. We had been keen to find out their specific concerns about school toilets and so had listed a number of issues. However,

56%

of girls said they could not afford to buy sanitary products.



46%
of girls are worried about being mocked by boys

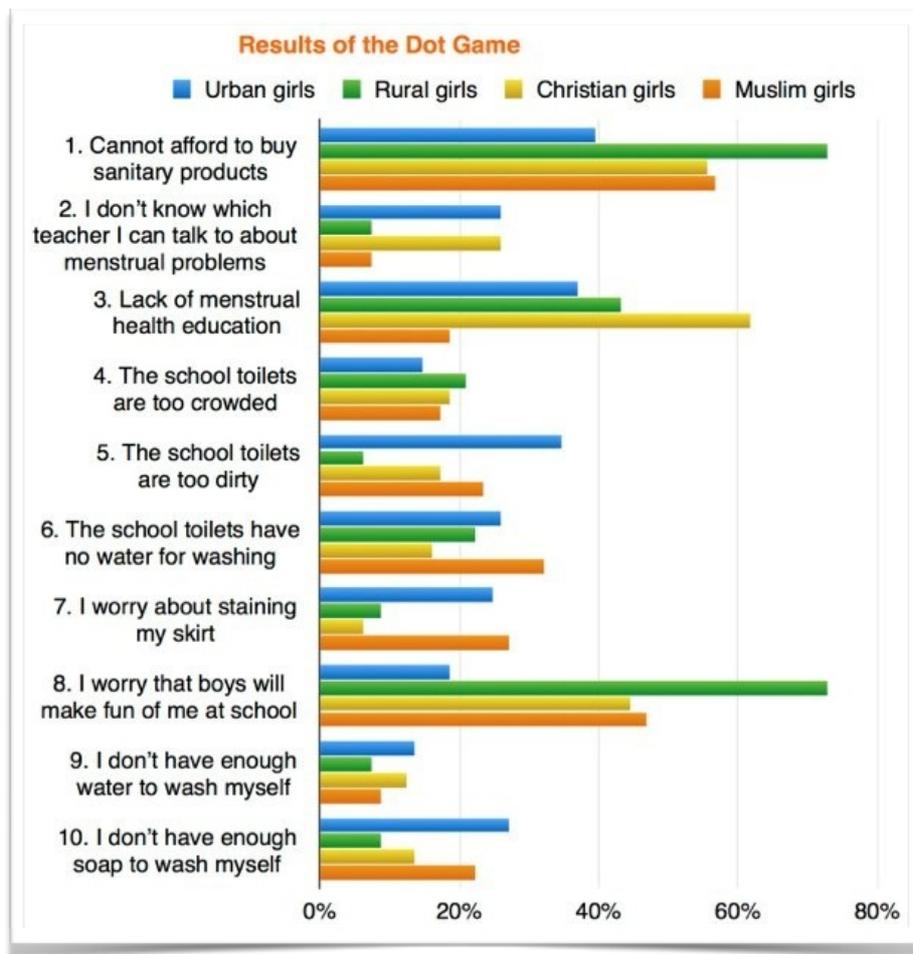
when the results of those choosing issues 4, 5, and 6 (the toilets are too dirty, too crowded and lack water) were combined, it was clear that 62% of girls had cited school toilets as a major concern.

Having looked at the results as a whole, we then took a closer look at the responses from urban and rural and Christian and Muslim girls.

Urban and rural

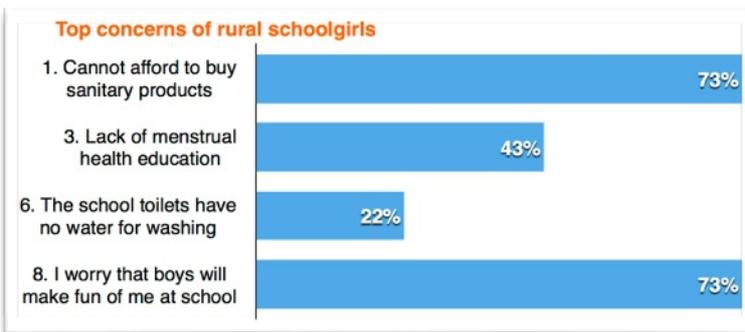
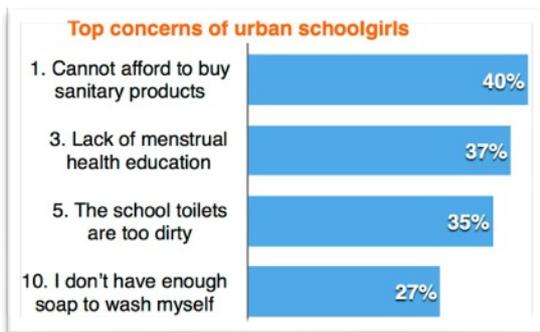
There were key differences between urban and rural girls. Rural girls were much more emphatic in their choices, whereas urban girls were more evenly balanced. For rural girls, by far the two biggest problems, chosen by 73% of participants in each case, were not being able to afford sanitary products and worries that boys would make fun of them.

Only 40% of urban girls chose being unable to afford sanitary products although this was still their top concern. Almost as important was lack of menstrual health education chosen 37% of urban girls (their second



The Dot Game: We gave the girls 14 questions but discounted four after they received no response or just one or two votes. The percentages shown for the remaining 10 (and in the detail charts) reflect the proportion of girls who chose that issue as one of their top three concerns. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

62%
of girls voiced concerns about the state of the school toilets.



biggest concern) and 43% of rural girls (their third biggest concern).

Both also criticised school toilets but focused on different issues. Lack of water for washing worried rural girls (22%). Dirty toilets were an issue for 35% of urban girls but only 6% of rural girls, while lack of soap was a concern for 27% of urban girls but only 9% of rural girls.

73%
of rural girls worry about boys making fun of them

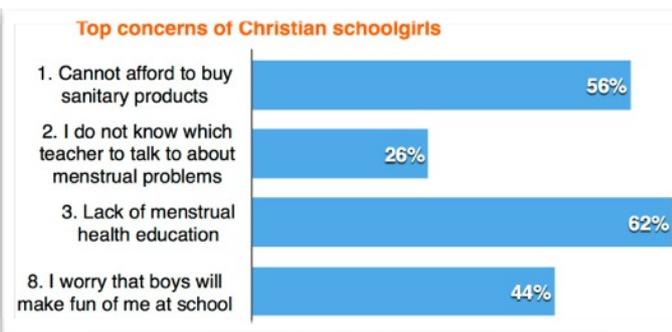


Christian and Muslim

For Christian and Muslim schoolgirls, not being able to afford sanitary products were key concerns. Both cited it in similar proportions (57% Muslim and 56% Christian). But whereas this was the top concern for Muslim girls, Christian girls were more worried about the lack of menstrual health education (62%).

Worry about boys making fun of them was a major concern for both (44% Christian, 47% Muslim). Linked to this fear of shaming was the Muslim girls' concern about staining their skirt (27%).

Over a quarter of Christian girls (26%) also said they didn't know which teacher to talk to about menstrual problems although this possibly reflected the fact that one of the schools had almost no female teachers.

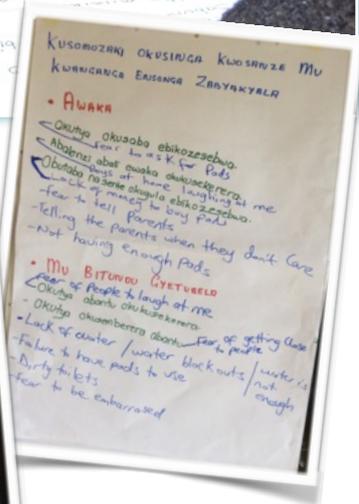
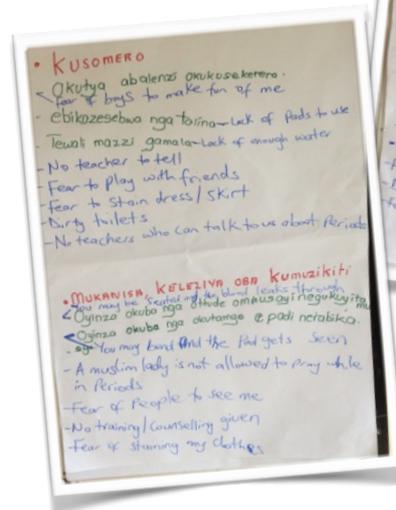


Group work

We asked the girls to work in groups to discuss their biggest difficulties or concerns when it came to managing their periods, looking at the home, school, society and the church or mosque.

Themes highlighted in the Dot Game emerged here too: being unable to afford pads, lack of water or soap to wash (themselves or menstrual cloths), dirty toilets, lack of menstrual education, fear that boys will laugh at them.

But they also voiced other concerns: 'It's difficult to wash menstrual cloths when your father / brothers are watching you'; 'I worry about my brothers/my father seeing me'; 'When your mother didn't tell you about menstruation'; 'I feel ashamed'; 'You feel left out'; 'When you don't know how to use pads'; 'Lack of knickers'; 'Fear to tell parents'; 'Telling parents when they don't care.'



'It's difficult to wash menstrual cloths when your brothers are watching you.'

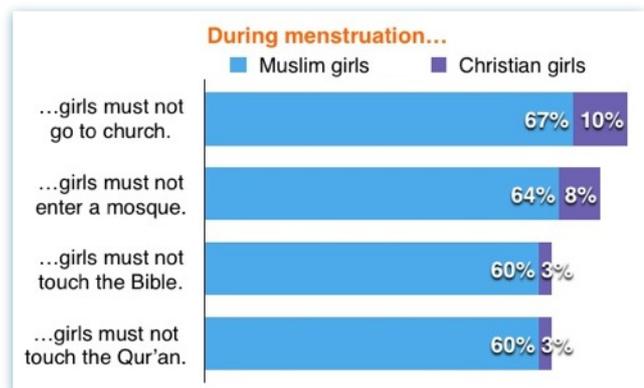
Girl, rural workshop

Religious restrictions

When it came to managing menstruation at places of worship, there were marked differences between the girls depending on their religion.

Traditionally Islam has extensive rules governing what is considered ritually impure – ie, not suitable for sacred acts such as prayer and worship. Blood is considered to be ritually impure (other impure substances include semen, urine and stools).

For this reason, menstruating girls and women are not allowed to enter a mosque or touch the Qur'an during their period, and are excused from prayers. This is because they cannot place themselves into the state of ritual purity required before such sacred acts.



57%

of girls think that menstrual blood contains harmful substances.

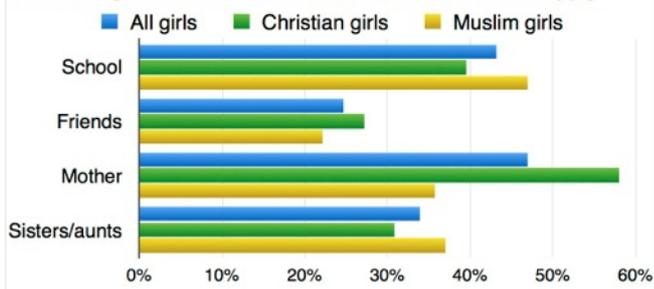


The Muslim girls showed a good understanding of their religious rules, with 63% saying menstruating girls must not touch the Qur'an and 68% saying they must not enter a mosque: 'A Muslim lady is not allowed to pray when in periods.'

Due to time constraints, most of the Christian girls could not complete these questions so we were unable to gather statistics. However, it was very clear, in discussions and group work, that the vast majority of Christian girls saw no problem in going to church or in touching the Bible.

25%
of girls thought they had a disease when they started their first period.

Where did you learn about menstruation? Tick all that apply



Girls were able to choose several sources of information.

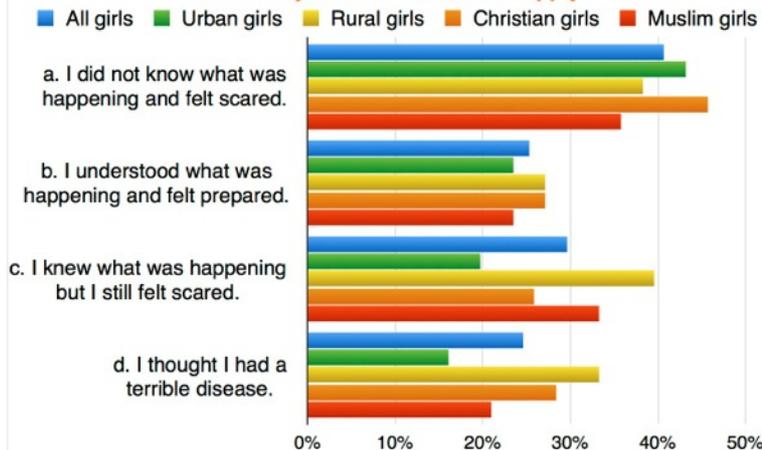
Sources of information

Mothers were the biggest source of information about menstruation for all girls at 47% but particularly for Christian girls (57%) compared to Muslim girls (36%). School was also a significant source of information, cited by 43% of all girls. For Muslim girls, school was their primary source of information, cited by 47% of participants.

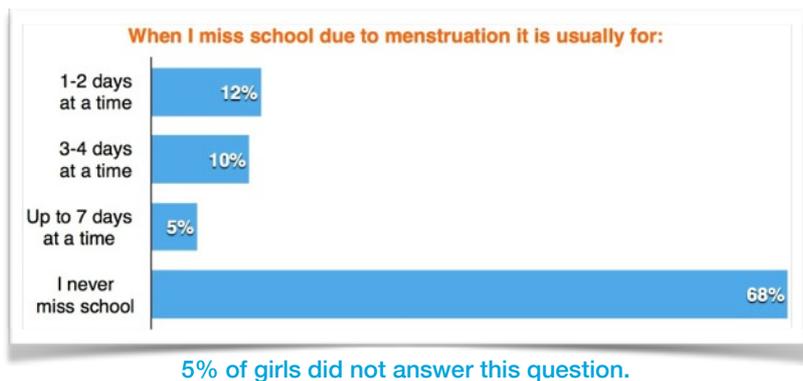
First period

As for their experience of their first period, 41% of all girls said they did not know what was happening and felt scared. This response was more marked in urban (43%) and Christian (46%) girls than in their Muslim (36%) or rural (38%) sisters. Only 25% of all girls said they understood what was happening and felt prepared. Exactly the same percentage said they thought they had a terrible disease.

Can you remember the day you started your period? How did you feel? Tick all that apply



Girls were able to chose more than one option.



Missing school

We wanted to find out if our girls missed school due to problems managing their periods. Due to time constraints, not all the girls participated in this session.

Of the 121 girls who did, 27% said they missed school for between 1-7 days at a time, while 68% said they never missed school; 5% did not answer the question.

This supports other research by Plan Uganda suggesting 28% of Ugandan girls regularly miss school due to period problems.

35%
of girls believe if their menstrual cloth is burned, they will become barren

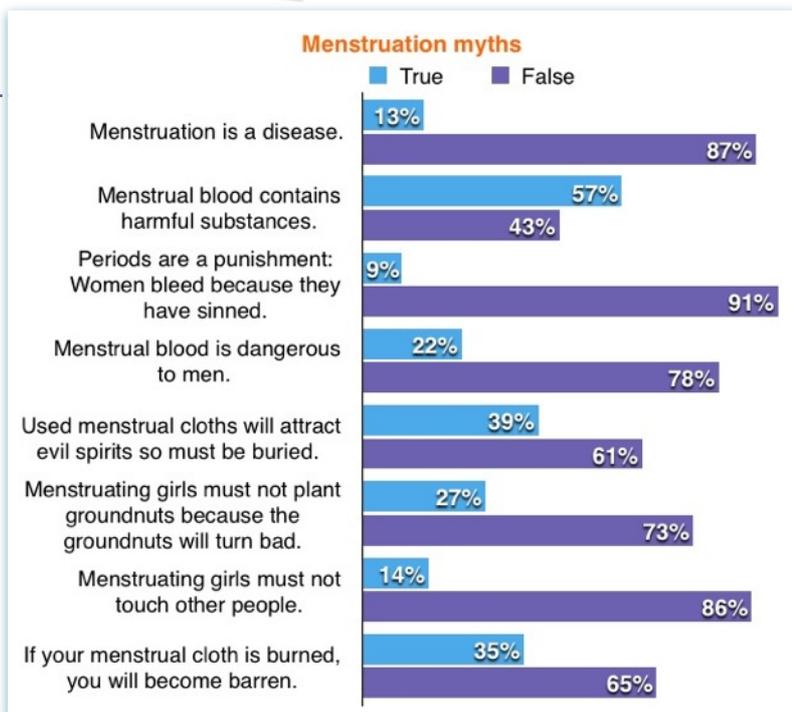


Myths & taboos

We gave the girls a simple 'true or false' exercise, using a variety of statements, to test how far they were influenced by common myths and taboos. Because of time factors, only 121 girls took part in this exercise. The percentages (see right) refer to the proportion who participated.

Around two thirds of participants dismissed myths such as 'Used menstrual cloths will attract evil spirits so must be buried' and 'If your menstrual cloth is burned, you will become barren (a belief we were means girls won't use incinerators in some schools).

But around a third of girls (39% and 35% respectively) thought they were true. In both cases, the biggest proportion of girls believing this came from the rural Muslim school. More than one in ten (13%) thought menstruation was a disease; 17% thought menstrual blood was dangerous to men; and 38% thought menstrual blood contained harmful substances.



39%
of girls believe used menstrual cloths will attract evil spirits



Women’s workshops

We held four workshops for faith women’s groups linked to our two Christian and two Muslim schools, attended by 115 women in total.

We wanted to discover what challenges they faced in helping their daughters manage their menstruation. We used discussion and group work as the main tool of engagement.



Open, Private, Secret?

We began with the ice breaker game that we used for the girls. It is a variation on the Johari Window tool devised in 1955 to explore a group’s relationship with other groups. Using coloured stickers, we asked the women to indicate attitudes towards periods in Ugandans generally, among teenage girls and themselves personally. Were periods:

- **Open:** a subject you could discuss with anyone? For example, the weather.
- **Private:** something you’d discuss only with those close to you? For example, a health problem.
- **Secret:** something you’d never, ever talk about? Often something considered deeply shameful, for example, that you have committed a crime.

They agreed that most Ugandans regarded periods as either Private or Secret. As for themselves, some women said they were Open – as many as 20% in the Kampala Muslim women’s workshop.

But all of them underestimated the deep secrecy with which their teenage daughters regarded their own periods.

Helping their daughters

We asked them what their challenges were in helping their daughters manage their periods at home; in school; in society generally; and at church or in the mosque. Practical issues such as lack of money to buy pads or knickers was key concerns, as was lack of water.

‘It’s too embarrassing, especially for people who stay in our homes, to see clothes of a woman or girl stained with blood.’

Member of a rural parents’ association



Many were concerned about how to deal with pain or nausea during menstruation.

But social issues also featured, such as difficult relationships between parents and children: ‘Most girls don’t talk when they are in their periods because their relationship with their parents is not very good’, and ‘Girls don’t have friendship with their parents so they don’t get advice and the result is pregnancy’. Other comments included parents being ‘too busy’ and ‘too shy’.

Shame was a big issue for the mothers: ‘Some girls keep quiet and they don’t talk and we mothers feel embarrassed when their clothes get stained with blood,’ said one woman.

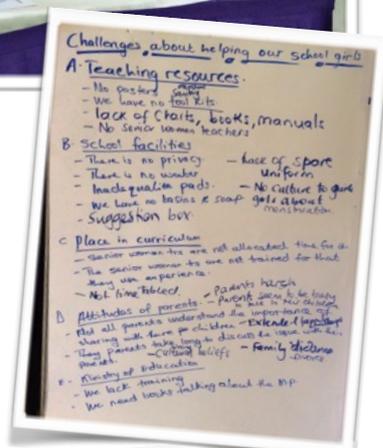
Another added: ‘It’s too embarrassing, especially for people who stay in our homes, to see clothes of a woman or girl when they are stained with blood.’ Periods were seen as ‘shameful’ by society - ‘an insult’, they said.

When it came to schools, they criticised inadequate toilet facilities and lack of water, sanitary pads and soap. But they were just as concerned about a lack of senior women teachers in some schools and what they saw as a lack of approachability.

Religious restrictions

When asked about challenges managing periods at the church or mosque, both Christian and Muslim women found little to say. In group work, this section often generated no comments at all or general statements about feeling shy or embarrassed or lacking sanitary pads, although Muslim women were clear that menstruating girls or women should not go to the mosque.

We had a couple of comments from Christian women that they should not go to church or receive Holy Communion, although this was very much a minority opinion. Mentioned much more often was the lack of toilets for women or girls in churches or mosques, or the lack of water or soap.



Reusable pads



We gave everyone – girls, women and men – who came to our workshops a reusable sanitary pad kit.

We used two Ugandan suppliers – Days for Girls and Rise International – and each kit had six to eight reusable pads and a bag to store them. We added two pairs of knickers and laundry soap.

Not surprisingly, given what they'd said about not being able to afford sanitary pads, they were very well received. Before we handed them out, we asked the girls what kind of sanitary pad they would prefer to use.

59%

said they would prefer to use reusable pads

28%

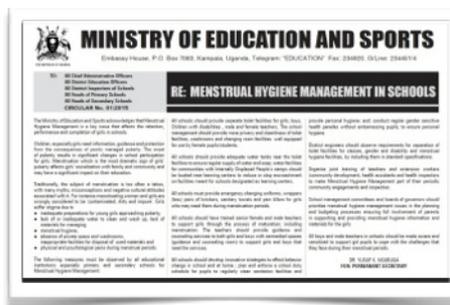
chose commercial disposable pads

12%

preferred their own cloths

Rural teachers' workshops

We invited teachers and faith leaders attached to our rural schools to workshops in Mpigi and Nakasongola so that we could understand the difficulties facing rural schools in particular. We wanted to know what would be most useful to them in a faith-based MHM toolkit and so we invited 30 teachers, head teachers and religious leaders associated with our rural schools to attend workshops. (Heads and teachers linked to our Kampala schools were invited to the faith leaders conference (see page 16).



In 2014 the Ministry of Education and Sports issued guidance on MHM for primary and secondary schools. This instructs them to provide separate toilet facilities for girls, boys and children with disabilities. As well as ensuring a regular supply of water and soap, all schools should have emergency changing uniforms, knickers, sanitary towels and pain killers for girls.



Neither of our rural schools had heard of the MHM guidance and so none of them had implemented it. When asked if they *could* do so, all the teachers were emphatic that it would be impossible without additional resources. Their existing facilities (from toilets to teaching materials) were inadequate, they said, without being required to provide additional materials such as emergency sanitary pads.



Lack of resources

Resources were a major challenge for both our rural schools. Heads and teachers complained that they lacked teaching resources, such as books, manuals and posters, and training in teaching menstruation.

There weren't enough female teachers, they said, particularly in rural areas where it can be more difficult to attract them. They complained of not having enough time in the curriculum to teach girls about menstruation. One added: 'It is in the curriculum but it doesn't address the management of menstruation.'

School toilet facilities were universally considered poor, with students lacking privacy or places to change, as well as water and soap. Disposal of sanitary pads was a major concern. Many teachers complained of the girls' failure to do so properly. But it did not appear that schools had given much consideration to helping girls to do so, such as providing buckets for collecting used pads for incineration, for example.



‘Parents seem to be too busy to talk to their children.’

Teacher, rural workshop

Parents' attitudes

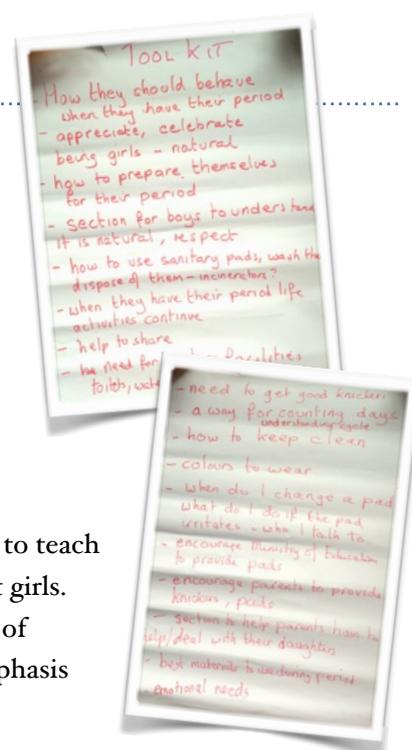
We asked teachers about parents' attitudes to teaching on menstrual health. Parents were generally not considered supportive. Comments included: 'They don't provide resources for their children'; 'They take them to be ready for marriage'; 'Parents seem to be too busy to talk to their children.' 'Fear to talk to children about menstruation.'

Faith-based MHM toolkit

All the teachers welcomed the idea of a faith-based Menstrual Hygiene Management toolkit. We asked them what they would like to see in the toolkit and they wanted a great deal of practical advice – such as how to use sanitary pads, what to do if the pad irritates, how to understand their menstrual cycle, the importance of washing.

The toolkit should help students appreciate being girls and understand that this is a natural process. There should be a section for parents on helping their girls and it should address boys as well as girls; boys need to respect girls, they said.

They wanted faith values to be included. One group said it was important to teach boys about Islam's emphasis on respecting humanity so they don't laugh at girls. Others said disposing of menstrual waste properly was part of taking care of Creation (significant to both faiths) while both Christianity and Islam emphasis cleanliness.





Programme

- 9.00 am:** Opening Prayers and Welcome
- 9.10 am:** Introduction: Faith in Water and A Rocha Uganda
- 9.30 am:** **Speaker: Susie Weldon**, Faith in Water. *Developing a faith-based toolkit for Christian and Muslim schools*
- 9.40 am:** Questions & comments
- 9.45am:** **Speaker: Mugulumu Hamed**, Chair of the Uganda Faiths Network on Environment Action. *The environmental impact of menstrual hygiene management*
- 9.55 am:** Questions & comments
- 10.00 am:** **Keynote speaker: Angela Nakafeero**, Gender Technical Advisor, Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports: *Uganda's efforts on Menstrual Hygiene Management*
- 10.20 am:** Questions & comments
- 10.30am:** **The Square Game:** *Open, Private, Secret:* Attitudes towards speaking about menstrual hygiene management
- 10.45 am:** **Tea break**
- 11.00 am:** **Speaker: Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga**, Priest/Vicar, All Saints Cathedral, Kampala. *Giving our girls their dignity*
- 11.10am:** Questions & comments
- 11.15 am:** **The Dot Game:** The main challenges for girls & schools
- 11.30 am:** **Plenary discussion:** Comments from participants
- 11.45 am:** **Group discussion:**
- What role can the faiths play in this area?
 - What do you want to see in a faith-based toolkit?
 - What are the faith values/teachings that can be incorporated into the toolkit?
 - What would your schools need for this toolkit to be useful and how could you implement it?
- 12.10 pm:** **Feedback** from groups and discussion
- 12.25 pm:** **Next Steps**
- 12.40 pm:** **Celebrating womanhood**, final prayers
- 13.00 pm:** **Lunch**

Faith leaders' conference

This was the first initiative to engage Ugandan faith groups on menstrual health in Uganda, and was held on April 21, 2016, at Namirembe Guesthouse in Kampala. It was attended by 52 faith leaders, heads of faith education departments, head teachers of faith schools and representatives of women's faith organisations.

Groups represented at the half day conference included the Catholic Church, Church of Uganda, Kampala Baptist Church, New Life Church, Full Gospel Church, Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, the Uganda Episcopal Conference, the Baha'i community, Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly,



Uganda Muslim Women's Association, the Mothers' Union, the Office of the Supreme Mufti, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptist Union of Uganda, Uganda Faiths Network on Environment Action (UFNEA), HEAR Uganda (Humanitarian Efforts and Relief Uganda), All Saints Cathedral, Bunyoro-Kitara Diocese, Namirembe Diocese, the Catholic Women's League and Caritas Uganda.

Methodology

The conference took a participatory approach and involved a mix of presentations, games and discussions. We wanted to enable the participants to debate the issues, ask questions and contribute their views. We also played a couple of games: Open, Private, Secret, aimed at getting people talking about menstruation; and the Dot Game, intended to gather information.



Angela Nakafeero, Gender Technical Advisor (MoESTS)

Keynote speech

Our keynote speaker was Angela Nakafeero, Gender Technical Advisor with the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports, who spoke about Uganda's progress in addressing menstrual hygiene management (MHM).

She welcomed the development of the faith-based MHM toolkit, saying: 'We are aware that over half of our schools are founded by religious groups. We are looking forward to this toolkit for religious schools. It's very exciting for us. We feel that this contribution will complement some of our interventions.'

Ms Nakafeero said difficulties in dealing with menstruation created a real barrier to girls' education. 'It's becoming discriminatory to girls because during their cycle they cannot equally access education,' she said.

Girls' education was very important not only for their personal dignity and progress, but also for the country's development, she said. Lack of access to menstrual hygiene materials, latrines and places to change made life difficult for girls. 'Quite often girls are missing out on certain days at school. We need a favourable and

'We are looking forward to this toolkit for religious schools. It is very exciting for us... We look forward to your participation.'

Angela Nakafeero,
MoESTS

conducive environment for our girls in schools. Girls should be able to perform as equally as the boys.'

Uganda had developed a national strategy for HM, developed an MHM reader for students and issued guidance to schools.

'There is a lot of silence around

Open, private or top secret?



This game uses the Johari Window tool devised in 1955 to explore a group's relationship with other groups. The main advantage of the game is it is a great way of getting people talking about the subject.

Using coloured stickers, we asked participants to indicate attitudes towards periods among Ugandans, among teenage girls and themselves personally. Were periods:

- **OPEN:** a subject you could discuss with anyone, such as the weather.
- **PRIVATE:** something you'd discuss only with those close to you, such as a health problem.
- **OPEN SECRET:** something everyone knows about but rarely talks about, such as corruption.
- **SECRET:** something you'd never talk about? Often considered deeply shameful, for example, a criminal past.

The vast majority chose Private and there were quite a number of Open Secrets and Secrets, plus a handful of Opens. One woman said: 'We need to be more Open so that we can talk about these issues.'

'I used to think this issue was not important. Now I know it is very, very important. We must break the silence on menstruation and keep girls in school.'

Balinda Sirag, UMYA



'Menstruation is a gift. God has elected us as co-creators and blessed is the fruit of our womb.'

Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga,
All Saints Cathedral



menstruation which we need to break,' she said. Much had been achieved but there was still much to do: 'As you know, the gap is still big and we call on civil society organisations and partners to help us.'

'The development of the MHM toolkit for Christian and Muslim schools is welcome. Let's share the material. As a country we can no longer afford to miss out on the education of our people, especially the girl child. We look forward to your participation.'

Ms Nakafeero's presentation was very well received and generated a good deal of discussion by participants. The overwhelming consensus was that helping girls manage their menstruation safely and with dignity was a very important issue and one that faith schools must grapple.

Balinda Sirag, from the Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly, spoke for many when he spoke powerfully of the need for faiths to get involved in this issue. A couple of years earlier he'd been involved in an MHM project in Mukono, he said.

'Before I got involved, I used to think this issue was not important. Now I know it is very, very important. We must break the silence on menstruation and keep girls in school.'

Giving girls their dignity

Presenting a faith perspective, Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga, Priest of All Saints Cathedral, Kampala, also used her speech to address one of the most significant aspects of this issue – the sense of shame and embarrassment that so many girls feel about their periods.

She told participants that being a man or woman was a God-given gift. And while being a woman was not easy, God does not take away a gift and nor does He want us to scorn it, she said, adding that Jesus had chosen to come through the womb of a woman.

'Menstruation is a gift. God has elected us as co-creators, and blessed is the fruit of our womb,' she said. 'The onset of our period should be celebrated as a matter of joy. It is a beautiful thing that has happened and I am one of those privileged girls that has never been taught to be ashamed.'

‘It is honourable and should be celebrated.’

Rev Canon Nkesiga said it was time to let go of outdated ideas around stigma and shame. ‘Cultures are there for a reason but when they become irrelevant, why do we hold onto them?’ she asked. ‘Why are you scaring me with some old taboo?’

She quoted the Biblical passage, Luke 8.43-48, in which Jesus heals a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years (see right). Rev Canon Nkesiga said: ‘She was an outcast lady, desperate. Jesus declared her healed, whole and clean. Best of all, he calls her a daughter,’ she said. ‘This is what we want our girls to feel – that they are your daughter.’

It was time to take back the taboos and rehabilitate them, she said: ‘Why can’t we create new cultures, our own African culture? Cultures must have a purpose that make us flourish. Times have changed and we need to create beautiful, wonderful cultures for women and men.

‘As missionary ladies went door to door, church schools should be exemplary places of teaching dignity and hygiene.’

MHM and the environment

Muguluma Hamed, chair of the Faiths Network on Environment Action (UFNEA) and also executive director of HEAR Uganda, spoke about the environmental consequences of managing menstruation poorly. The impact of disposal was significant with girls’ latrines filling up much faster than boys and carelessly discarded pads creating an environmental hazard that would take a very long time – hundreds of years – to decompose.

‘We need to learn how to dispose of them properly,’ he said, especially with a growing population: ‘In the 1960s, Uganda’s population was five million, today it is 35 million.’

For this reason, he said, it was important to promote re-usable pads. It was also critical to engage faith groups in this matter. ‘Uganda is notoriously religious so if you want to force through some issues, you need to engage faith groups,’ he said.



‘Church schools should be exemplary places of teaching dignity and hygiene.’

Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga,
All Saints Cathedral

Luke 8.43-48

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. ⁴³ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years, but no one could heal her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

⁴⁵ “Who touched me?” Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.”

⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”

⁴⁷ Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.

⁴⁸ Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”



The Dot Game

We gave our participants six coloured dots and asked them to identify the top three challenges for girls and for schools in managing menstruation. The percentages shown reflect the proportion who chose that issue as one of their top three concerns. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

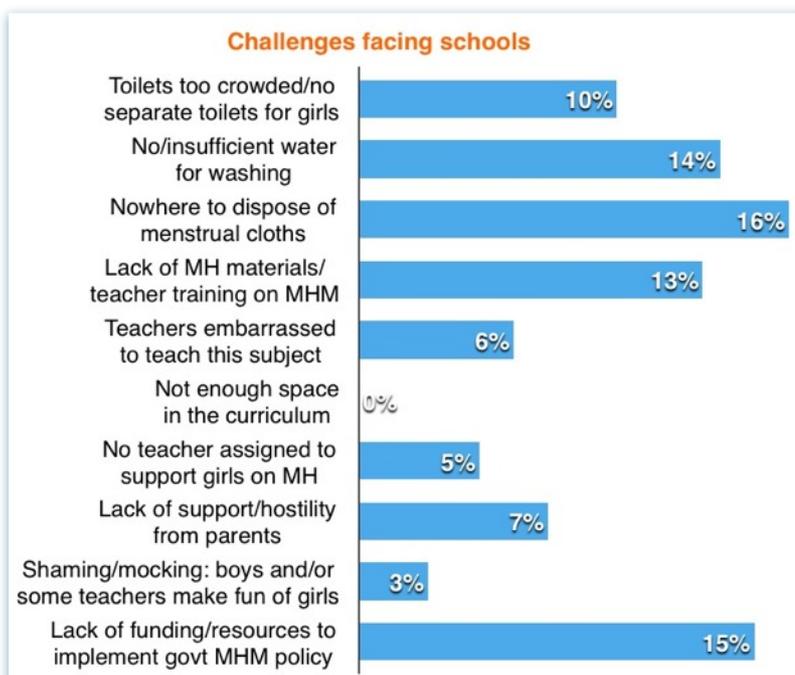
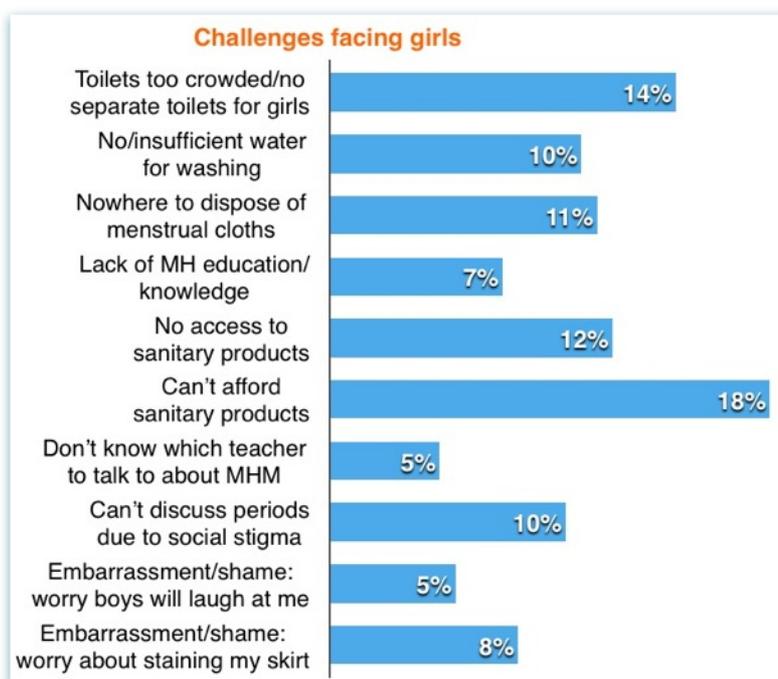
Challenges facing girls

Our participants thought the top three challenges facing girls were: ‘can’t afford sanitary products’ (18%); ‘school toilets are too crowded/no separate toilets for girls’ (14%); and ‘don’t have access to sanitary products’ (12%).

Our participants were correct in thinking that girls’ biggest concern was not being able to afford sanitary products. When we’d played this game with girls, 56% of them listed it as their greatest challenge (see page 6).

But they totally underestimated the impact of ‘lack of menstrual health education’ and ‘worry that boys will make fun of me’ – the girls’ second and third biggest concerns. In contrast, our participants considered them to be two of the three least important issues.

Grouping the questions in topics, participants thought inadequate infrastructure posed the biggest challenge to girls: 36% chose ‘toilets are too crowded or no separate toilets for girls’; ‘no or insufficient water’; ‘nowhere to dispose of menstrual cloths’. They considered the second biggest challenge for girls was lack of access to, or affordability of, sanitary products, chosen by (30%) of participants.



Concerns facing schools

When it came to schools, our participants were worried about infrastructure and lack of funding. The three biggest worries were: ‘nowhere to dispose of menstrual cloths’ (19%); ‘lack of funding or resources to implement government policy on MHM’ (17%); ‘no/ insufficient water’ (16%).

In total, worries about the state of school toilets and disposal of sanitary products accounted for 45% of responses, while 39% were concerned with the teaching of MHM: ‘Lack of menstrual health education materials and training for teachers’; ‘teachers too embarrassed to teach this subject’; ‘lack of funding/ resources to implement government policy on MHM’.



Faith-based MHM toolkit

There was overwhelming support for an MHM toolkit aimed at faith schools. Participants thought the toolkit should include practical advice for girls on managing their menstruation – from how to calculate their monthly cycle to how to use sanitary pads properly – as well as how to deal with their emotional needs.

It should also include sections aimed at boys, to teach them that menstruation is a natural process and to respect girls, and at parents, so that they can better understand how to help their girls. And participants said it was also important to include men.

The toolkit should be part of a bigger campaign to break the silence on menstruation. ‘We need to break the silence on menstruation, just as we did on HIV/AIDS,’ said one participant. Another suggested: ‘Can’t we include it in sermons to congregations?’ Others said: ‘Religious leaders need to share this and own it.’ Participants wanted faith values around dignity and cleanliness to be integrated into the toolkit, and a sense of the gift of menstruation. The toolkit should also be couched in simple, straightforward language, and infused with a sense of African culture.

‘We need to break the silence on menstruation, just as we did on HIV/AIDS.’

Participant, faith leaders’ conference

‘Religious leaders need to share this and own it.’

Participant, faith leaders’ conference

Footnotes

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¹ USAID (2013), Faith, Water and Development: http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/508_SEPT13_single.pdf

² BBC (15 Sept 2005), World Service/Gallup International Poll Reveals Who Runs Your World, http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/09_september/15/world.shtml

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³ SNV (2014) Girls in Control: http://www.snv.org/public/cms/sites/default/files/explore/download/snv_girls_in_control_baseline_report.pdf

⁴ Plan International (2015): <http://www.plan-uk.org/news/news-and-features/lets-talk-about-that-time-of-the-month/>

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USAID (2013), Faith, Water and Development, op cit

⁵ SNV (2014) Girls in Control, op cit

⁶ Plan International (2015), op cit

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⁷ UNESCO (2015), EFA Global Monitoring Report: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002325/232565e.pdf>

⁸ UNESCO (2014), Puberty Education and MHM: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002267/226792e.pdf>

⁹ Uganda 2014 Census: <http://www.ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/NPHC/2014%20National%20Census%20Main%20Report.pdf>

¹⁰ Uganda Catholic Education Department report, 2016 and Church of Uganda: <http://churchofuganda.org/about/departments/education>.

¹² UMBS (Uganda Muslim Brothers and Sisters) <https://umbsextra.wordpress.com/2012/02/23/uganda-muslim-secondary-schools/>



Acknowledgements

These consultations were carried out by Faith in Water with A Rocha Uganda. We would like to thank A Rocha Uganda for their invaluable contribution and express our gratitude to all the girls, women, teachers and faith leaders who took part. We are very grateful to our speakers, Angela Nakafeero, Gender Technical Advisor with the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports, Rev Canon Diana Nkesiga, Priest of All Saints Cathedral, Kampala, and Muguluma Hamed, chair of the Uganda Faiths Network on Environment Action. We would also like to thank the Congregation of La Retraite and New Psalmist Baptist Church, Baltimore, for supporting these workshops.

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