

REUSABLE MENSTRUAL PADS FOR RURAL GIRLS INITIATIVE

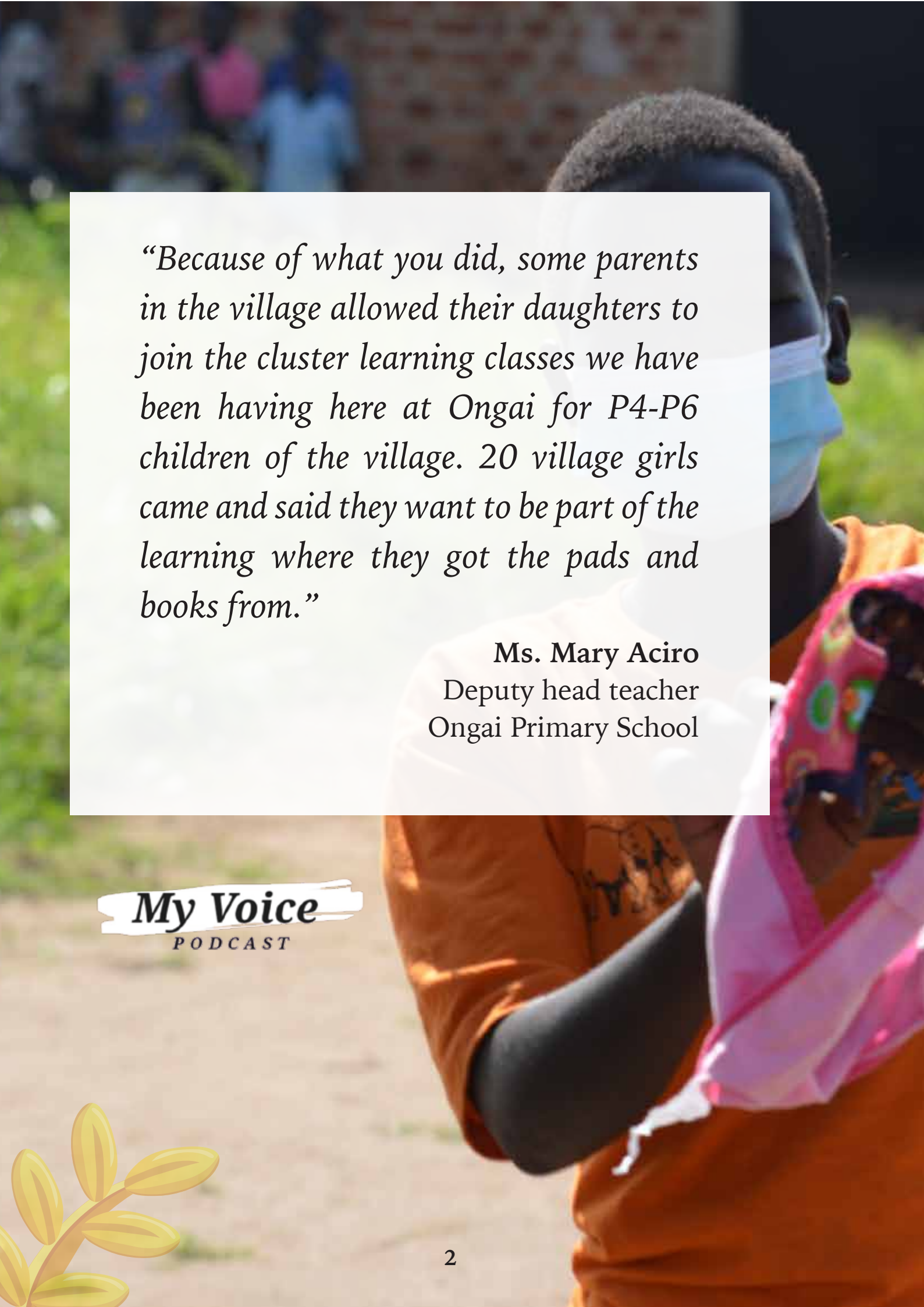
By

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<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Background</i>	5
<i>Context</i>	6
<i>Objectives</i>	8
<i>Methodology</i>	9
<i>Key informative interviews</i>	10
<i>Advocacy Campaign</i>	11
<i>Events of the day</i>	12
<i>Key findings</i>	14
<i>Recommendations</i>	17
<i>Annex</i>	18





“Because of what you did, some parents in the village allowed their daughters to join the cluster learning classes we have been having here at Ongai for P4-P6 children of the village. 20 village girls came and said they want to be part of the learning where they got the pads and books from.”

Ms. Mary Aciro
Deputy head teacher
Ongai Primary School

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INTRODUCTION

The Re-Usable Menstrual Pads (RUMPs) initiative for rural girls is a project under My Voice Podcast done annually to support rural girls in a specific community or school in Northern Uganda with menstrual materials, information on Menstrual Hygiene Management, and to break the stigma around menstruation in the effort to keep them in school.

Menstrual hygiene is fundamental to the dignity and wellbeing of women and girls and an integral part of the basic hygiene, sanitation and reproductive health service to which every woman and girl has a right. In Uganda, access to hygienic menstrual health products and the stigma around the topic of menstruation remains a challenge to many girls and women especially those in rural areas.

A study on Menstrual Management in Uganda by The Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) and IRC International Water and Sanitation Center showed that per term, a girl pupil may miss up to 8 days of study. In a year having 220 learning days on average, missing 24 learning days translates into 11% of the time the girl pupil misses due to menstrual periods. This emulates that the stigma attached to menstruation or the inability to afford period products stops girls from going to school, putting them more at the risk of entering child marriages, experiencing an early pregnancy and pregnancy complications, malnourishment, domestic violence and hence limiting the extent and ways in which they can participate in the public sphere.

On the 21st of November, 2020, a team of 8 volunteers delivered menstrual materials and children's books, and conducted a training on Proper Menstrual Hygiene Management to the girls in Alero sub-county, Nwoya District at Ongai Primary School.

This report therefore, gives an account of the events that transpired, the key findings and recommendations to address the most outstanding challenges setting back efforts to improve the class attendance of the girl child in Nwoya District.



BACKGROUND

Globally, half a billion women and girls lack adequate facilities for Menstrual Hygiene Management . In low income countries like; Uganda, women and girls continue to be held back because of their menstruation. The topic of menstruation in some cultures, is still considered a “taboo” as well as menstruating girls considered, “contaminated,” “dirty,” and “impure.” Girls in rural settings suffer most from stigma and lack of services to help them through their periods. This potentially affects girls’ ability to thrive and succeed within the school environment.

Poor Menstrual Hygiene is one of the outstanding factors driving the escalating girl child school dropout rates in Nwoya District. This effect is quite evident as demonstrated by the high rate of absenteeism and low completion rate of the girl children in Ongai Primary School in Alero Sub County, Nwoya District.

Over 50% of the girls from P4-P7 in Ongai Primary School miss school whenever they get into their menstrual periods. In 2019, 10 girls completely dropped out of Ongai Primary School because of the stigma attached to menstruation and lack of menstrual materials in the school. The inaccessibility to proper and hygienic menstrual materials has driven majority of these young girls to use old, unhygienic and dirty cloths during menstruation which not only has effects on their health but also on their class attendance as well as their performance.



CONTEXT

The RUMPs for Rural Girls initiative is the first advocacy campaign under My Voice Podcast which seeks to achieve the Sustainable Development goals 4; Quality Education, 5; Gender Equality, and 3; Good Health and wellbeing. The initiative focuses on a target population of rural school going girls in Northern Uganda from rural communities with a high school dropout rate of the girl child.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Uganda as a whole continues to experience gains in poverty reduction, but the north lags behind the rest of the country because of its exposure to war, conflict and a long period of insurgency. Northern Uganda's Multi-dimensional Poverty Index , at a staggering 87%, indicates a greater prevalence of acute poverty than any other region in the country . The region also has limited educational opportunities and weakened social structures, resulting in high rates of early marriage and child birth . Northern Uganda has the highest population with no formal education, with two-fifths of working age adults having no formal education.

GENDER GAP AND EDUCATION CONTEXT

In Uganda, majority of adults have attended formal school. However, many do not complete primary school. Retention in primary school is lower for females at 42 percent as compared to males at 53 percent. Urban areas also exhibit higher literacy rates than rural areas – a situation that has persisted over time. This means that for the majority of girls in Uganda, their schooling is halted before or soon after becoming a teenager. For the case of Northern Uganda, economic poverty plays an instrumental role in perpetuating gender inequalities in relation to educational access. The gender gap in Northern Uganda is much wider at 44.1% for females to 73.4% for males. Low levels of education have a significant impact on personal, societal and regional socio-economic development. Studies show that completion of higher education particularly for female headed households, corresponds with increased wealth and better food security. Educational equality is crucial for attaining household wealth, wellbeing, human development and human capital.





OVERALL OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this activity was to contribute to government's efforts of improving girl child school enrolment and retention by championing Menstrual Hygiene Management awareness for rural girls in Northern Uganda.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To distribute menstrual materials to rural girls in Ongai Primary School.
- To train and provide information on proper Menstrual Hygiene Management and its importance.
- To highlight the importance of the culture of reading and education in their lives.

Ongai Primary School

Alero Sub-county Amuru District

supported by Save the Children in Uganda with funding
from Danida under the Rewrite the Future Program



Save the Children
in Uganda

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the initiative entails the selection of the target school and community, key informative interviews, advocacy campaigns and fund-raising as explained below;

Selection of the target school and community was based on the following;

- Regional context – Northern Uganda, which is a war ravaged area having undergone and experienced a long period of insurgency.
- The education sector indicators for primary going children in Nwoya district which showed poor performance in the Primary Leaving Examinations for the past 5 years and a sky rocketing dropout rate of the girl child.
- Increasing class absenteeism of the girl child in Ongai Primary School where 50% of the girls from P.4 - P.7 classes miss class whenever they enter their periods.
- Prior volunteering experience of the My Voice podcast's host in the communities of Nwoya district.

KEY INFORMATIVE INTERVIEWS

From a prior interview with the Deputy Head teacher and senior woman of Ongai Primary school, Ms. Mary Aciro, noted that lack of period materials and the stigma caused by fellow pupils are among the biggest factors that cause absenteeism of girls from the P.4 – P.7 classes. To halt the absenteeism of the girls caused by menstruation, as the senior woman she decided to talk to some of the parents of the girls to allow them stay in her hut which was within the school premises whenever they were menstruating. She went ahead to also offer cloth and soap that they could use and also her hut as a changing room for all girls during the day. However, there were days when she didn't have money to cater for all the girls in terms of cloth and therefore, some girls were forced to use unhygienic, dirty and old cloths during their red days.



ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

My Voice Podcast began an advocacy campaign towards Menstrual Hygiene Management awareness for rural girls in Northern Uganda. Through the podcast and its social media pages, listeners and friends were able to support these young girls through fundraising for menstrual materials. The menstrual materials included; 100 bars of soap, 600 menstrual liners, 200 menstrual shields, 100 African bags, 100 small towels and 100 menstrual calendars for over 100 girls. Well-wishers sent their contributions through mobile money and a total of UGX 2,223,000 was received in cash. A children's organization that aims to improve the learning outcomes of children in Uganda, enjuba donated in-kind UGX 2,000,000 in form of value-based educational children's (Sharon's song and Armani the boda boda rider) books that teach that girls' dreams and choices are valid. Support was also received from O Café Gulu, Alpha Girl Care Uganda, Women against Teenage Pregnancy Uganda, The Loud Project Uganda, and The Professional websites.



EVENTS OF THE DAY

Arrival, introduction of the team and reading session

Having mobilized overwhelming support from the respective partners and donors, an excited team of 8 volunteers set off from Kampala to finally meet, interact and empower the young girls of Ongai Primary school. The journey was characterized by the long drive through the national park, scenery of the grass thatched houses and bumpy roads. One could not help to wonder how the communities in this setting are able to access basic services and lead a quality life. Nonetheless, the girl child of Nwoya couldn't help wearing a welcoming smile to visitors they come across.

When the team arrived to Ongai Primary School, the pupils started coming in one by one. The anxiety and innocent enthusiasm to understand and learn from the team was evident on their faces.

The team introduced themselves to the excited children and run them through the purpose of our visit to their school. This session was facilitated by Rodney Ssewanyana, a character passionate about motivating and empowering children. The session was punctuated with games and songs to set the environment, get the pupils to participate more freely with the team and prepare them for the next sessions. Through the songs and games, the girls were able to share their aspirations. The challenges of the girl child could not stop them from aspiring to become nurses, teachers and doctors. This was evident from repetitive submissions from the songs and games that the girls were taken through. The introductory session was followed by reading session to introduce the pupils to some of the books published by enjuba, one of the partners that made a donation to this initiative. These books have simplified and illustrated stories that demonstrate that the dreams of a girl child are valid and can be achieved. By reading these stories, the girls are not only thrilled but also empowered with reading skills and a positive mind to pursue their dreams beyond any challenges. As the excitement and thirst to understand the stories grew stronger amongst the pupils, Paul Mutanga and Francis Okot translated the stories into Acholi, the local language. This even made the session more interesting as the girls were able to quickly transcribe and relate with the stories.

INTERACTION WITH THE CHILD MOTHERS FROM THE COMMUNITIES

As the reading session went on, more girls continued to stream in. One of the members of the school management Committee recognized the far reaching impact this initiative would have on both the pupils and those who had earlier dropped out of school. So he insisted that some of the child mothers who had earlier dropped out from school be invited to attend the event with the hope that they would be encouraged to resume school. 7 child mothers from the neighboring community were collected and they were able to attend the event. From the interaction with the child mothers, the team learnt that they had had their first born children as early as 15 years, an experience that not only risked their health but also burdened them financially, robbed their childhood and future dreams. One of them shared her experience with access to a sanitary towel. She mentioned that buying a reusable sanitary pad which costs UGX 2500 is very expensive especially when you have a child to take care of. Most of the time, she uses pieces of cloth which do not hold the blood well through the day. The 2 of child mothers continued to share that they still feel ashamed whenever they enter their periods and that even before they dropped out of school, they would miss class whenever they got into their periods. During the conversation with them, there was a strong emphasis that majority of their friends' still miss class because of the unavailability of menstrual materials.



INTERACTION WITH THE GIRLS AND TRAINING ON MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

An interview of a few girls was conducted before the session on Menstrual Hygiene Management. This was based on a randomized selection from girls from P.4 –P.7, of whom all had ever experienced periods. Majority of the girls shared that they feel ashamed whenever they enter their periods and that they feel like menstruation is a bad thing.

The session was then begun with the distribution of the menstrual materials to the girls. It was a very interactive session as the girls shared their first time experiences with menstruation and what classes they were in. Most of the girls were very shy during this session. The girls were then trained on how to use the re-usable sanitary pads and the expected cleanliness and hygiene during menstruation. The topic of the stigma around menstruation was highly emphasized and the girls were encouraged not to skip class during their menstruation.

After the training, 2 girls volunteered to demonstrate what they had learnt to their fellow pupils. This session was concluded with words of advice to the girls to stay in school and believe in their dreams.



KEY FINDINGS

From the events and interactions that transpired from the RUMPs for Rural girls Initiative, the following are the key findings;

Distribution of the RUMPs and reading materials as an incentive for girl child education

According to the feedback received from the Deputy Head teacher of Ongai Primary School after the initiative, 20 village girls were allowed by their parents to join the cluster learning classes that were taking place at Ongai Primary School as a response to children learning during the COVID19 period. This vividly showed that distribution of RUMPs and reading materials to rural girls is an incentive for girl child education.

Positive response or uptake to the RUMPs for Rural girls Initiative by the community

The community of Alero Sub County in Nwoya district was very receptive and the girls were willing to learn. In attendance were the members of the School Management Committee of Ongai Primary School, volunteers from the community of Alero Sub County, village girls as well as the girl pupils of the Ongai Primary School.

Early child pregnancies

The issue of child pregnancies is a big challenge in Nwoya district. Ongai Primary school registers at least 6 school girl drop-outs each year because of pregnancy according to Ms. Aciro Mary. In 2020, the COVID19 effects left the school registering 15 child pregnancies and only 7 child mothers were allowed by the parents to resume and complete their candidate class.

KEY FINDINGS CONTINUATION

Stigma attached to menstruation and limited or no access to sanitary towels

This is a major factor that contributes to the girl child's absenteeism from class for Primary four to seven. Majority of the girls interviewed feel ashamed whenever they go into their periods. It was also noted that most girls were very shy to talk about menstruation as a topic and found it very uncomfortable to talk about.

In 2019, 10 girls completely dropped out of Ongai Primary School because of the stigma attached to menstruation and lack of menstrual materials in school. "In a total of 164 girls from P.4 – P.7, an average of 82 girls are usually present daily in the school. 33 of the 82 girls that are usually absent are from child headed families and 15 girls stay with their grandparents who do not value their education much and are therefore forced to go and work most of the week rather than be in class. This leaves about 20 - 30 girls missing school because of menstruation," said Ms. Mary Aciro. She continued to share that most of the girls start their period as early as Primary 3 with no preparation or information about menstrual hygiene management. When most of these young girls start missing school, some start to get pregnant and are then married off by their parents into violent homes.

*Girl child at much risk
of facing violence in the
communities of Nwoya
district*

Violence against girls from parents and grandparents especially towards receiving an education in the communities of Nwoya District is high and there are no protection shelters for the abused. Ms. Mary Aciro shares that most parents in the community have a negative attitude towards educating a girl and that “ in Acholi, they believe that educating a girl is not profitable and is considered as losing wealth because whatever the girl makes is for the husband’s home.”

In 2020, Phiona Akello, a P.7 candidate was heavily beaten by the mother under the influence of alcohol because she continued to go to school even when she was refused to. This drove the young girl, Phiona to keep sleeping in the bush after school and not report back home because of the beatings she knew she would receive from the mother. By the time Ms. Mary Aciro intervened in the situation, the girl had started living with a man who is now her husband and rejected the girl to go back to school. Phiona is not the only girl that is being denied an education, Ongai P.S registers an average of 4-6 school girl dropouts a year because of this matter. The unavailability of safe spaces and shelters for the abused in the communities limits the young girls to run for help in such situations which predisposes them to other factors like; dropping out of school, child marriages, rape and loss of life.



RECOMMENDATIONS

At school level;

A % of the school's budget should be dedicated to providing emergency menstrual materials and building changing rooms for the the girls.

Information on menstrual hygiene management should be given out to girls as early as Primary 3 class.

Sensitization of boy pupils about menstruation and how to help fellow girl pupils to cope through menstruation.

Peer support should be readily available to help them understand menstrual hygiene management.

At national level;

There is need to create more advocacy towards the importance and effects of menstrual hygiene management on rural young girls to policy makers.

Community protection shelters are needed to protect and report abuse against young girls across the country.

Sensitization of parents in rural communities towards the effects of violence against children should be prioritized as well as strengthening of laws towards eradication of violence against children.

ANNEX

The break down structure of how the funds were used is as follows;

Items	Amount
Purchase of Menstrual materials for 100 girls from Alpha Girl Care Uganda; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 200 menstrual shields - 600 menstrual liners - 100 bars of soap - 100 small towels - 100 African bags 	1,500,000/=
Purchase of 100 disposable face masks	50,000/=
Transportation to receive the menstrual materials	15,000/=
Fuel from Kampala to Nwoya district (To and Fro)	480,000/=
Fuel to pick the child mothers in the village on motorcycles by the School Management committee	28,000/=
Hire the van and driver for a day	150,000/=
Total	2,2230,000/=



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