



Organisation pilots menstrual cups to help girls stay in school

By MICHAEL ORIEDO

Celestine Awino, a Form Four student at Our Lady of Fatima Secondary School in Nairobi lives with her father and siblings in Kariobangi.

She is grateful and proud of her father who struggles and sacrifices daily to cater to their needs but every month, the 17-year-old finds herself in dilemma. "I have to ask my father for money for sanitary pads. I feel embarrassed since this makes him know that I am menstruating. Sometimes, it becomes difficult and I have to use my own ways to manage my flow," reveals Awino.

Her predicament is shared by many schoolgirls. Some of them stay away from school because they lack sanitary pads or drop out because of shame that comes from lack of proper management of their periods. "Many girls cannot afford sanitary pads to help them control their periods. During this time, many of them smell, they cannot stand or walk around school. Some miss school altogether," says Phelgona Aura, Awino's teacher.

Mrs Aura says sometimes teachers intervene for desperate cases to enable students attend classes. "We buy pads for girls when we realise a student has absented from school because she cannot afford them," she says.

Having witnessed challenges many schoolgirls and women endure during menstruation, an NGO is introducing a cheaper al-

ternative to sanitary pads and tampons. African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) is piloting menstrual cups in schools to aid girls manage their periods.

The cup is made of medical silicone rubber and it is inserted in the vagina to collect menstrual blood. "They are reusable for many years if correctly cared for. We believe they are an appropriate new technology for women and girls, particularly those who cannot afford sanitary pads every month," says Ms Rhonne Ochako, a researcher at APHRC.

TEN MONTHS

Our Lady of Fatima Secondary is among schools where girls are using the cups. "We were selected to participate in the pilot project so that researchers can test the viability of the cup in schools," says Aura.

When researchers approached them, Aura says she talked to about 400 girls at the school.

"Many of them were afraid. I only remained with three who were willing to attempt using the cups. The number, however, increased with time," she says.

Awino is among girls who agreed to participate in the project that started about a year and a half ago and has been using the cup since then. "At first I was afraid. I waited until a friend used it, then I tried. I have now been using it for over ten months," she says.

Awino says she is able to engage in school activities during her periods while wearing the



BENEFITS OF DEVISE

- Menstrual cups are made from medical grade silicone, which is free from chemicals, making them safe for use
- They are re-usable for up to ten years
- They collect blood for between four and eight hours depending on a woman's flow. Once blood accumulates in the cup, it is removed, emptied, cleaned and then re-inserted
- The cups come in two sizes, A and B. Size A is for mature women aged 30 and above or any woman and B is for young girls

cup. "I take part in sports, cleaning and learning activities without any problem. It is better than missing school because one lacks sanitary pads," she says.

Aura says attendance has improved at the school since girls started using the cups. "We no longer have cases of girls absenting from schools because they are having periods and tying

Our Lady of Fatima Secondary School teacher Phelgona Aura. Inset, menstrual cup.

sweaters around their waists," she says. The school is also making savings, having done away with costs they used to incur while unclogging its sewage system, which was often blocked because of poor disposal of sanitary pads.