

PRESENTATION OF ARTICLES AND SUCCESS STORIES

"Breaking Barriers: How AWYAD's Menstrual Hygiene Approach is Powering Girls' Education in Kyaka II and Palabek Refugee Settlements"

Introduction

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) remains a significant challenge for adolescent girls in refugee settlements, often leading to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and high dropout rates. In Uganda's Kyaka II and Palabek refugee settlements, these challenges are even more pronounced due to limited access to sanitary materials, water, and safe spaces for menstrual hygiene. An assessment (AWYAD, 2019) found that over 65% of girls in these settlements lacked access to adequate menstrual hygiene products, while 78% of schools lacked gender-sensitive WASH facilities. Moreover, Uganda's Ministry of Education reported that nationwide, one in four girls drops out of school due to menstrual hygiene challenges. Recognizing this, the African Women and Youth Action for Development (AWYAD) has implemented an innovative MHM program aimed at improving girls' access to education. This initiative has been instrumental in breaking the silence around menstruation, promoting dignity, and ensuring that girls remain in school throughout their education journey.

The challenges of MHM in refugee settlements

In many refugee settlements, cultural taboos and misinformation about menstruation exacerbate the struggles that girls face. The lack of affordable and accessible sanitary products forces many to resort to unhygienic alternatives such as rags, leaves, or old clothing. Furthermore, inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools make it difficult for girls to manage their periods with dignity. The absence of gender-sensitive WASH facilities contribute to increased absenteeism, with some girls missing up to five school days per month, translating to 60 lost school days per year. Over time, this accumulates into a substantial gap in learning, leading to a dropout rate of around 30% among adolescent girls. Additionally, the stigma and myths surrounding menstruation discourage open discussions, making it harder for girls to seek the necessary support. According to AWYAD's assessment (2019) conducted in Kyaka II and Palabek, over 70% of girls reported feelings of shame and embarrassment, with 45% experiencing ridicule from male peers. The combination of these factors has significantly hindered the educational attainment of refugee girls, perpetuating gender inequalities in education.

AWYAD's MHM intervention influence

AWYAD's comprehensive MHM program in Kyaka II and Palabek is designed to address these challenges through a multi-pronged approach that includes access to sanitary products, education, infrastructure improvement, and community engagement.

1. Provision of menstrual hygiene products

One of the key interventions of AWYAD's program was designed to ensure that girls have access to menstrual hygiene kits. The initiative has distributed over 10,000 sanitary pads to schoolgirls, providing them with a reliable and sustainable way to manage their periods. In addition, AWYAD has trained over 500 girls and women in making reusable pads using locally available materials, empowering them with skills for self-reliance and sustainability. These efforts have significantly reduced absenteeism by nearly 40% and improved girls' confidence in managing their periods at school.



Girls of Ritah Nanserko Progressive School in Palabek Refugee Settlement receiving MHHM Kits

Menstrual health education and awareness

AWYAD has implemented a strong menstrual health education component within schools and communities. Trained facilitators conduct sessions that teach girls about menstrual hygiene, the biological aspects of menstruation, and ways to manage their periods safely and confidently. These sessions also address myths and misconceptions, helping to dismantle harmful cultural taboos associated with menstruation.

Importantly, AWYAD has also included boys and male teachers in the discussions. By sensitizing boys on menstruation and menstrual hygiene, the program has helped foster a more supportive school environment. Male students are now encouraged to become allies in fighting menstrual stigma, creating a culture of respect and understanding.



3. Improvement of WASH facilities

Recognizing that inadequate water and sanitation facilities pose a major barrier to effective menstrual hygiene management, AWYAD has worked closely with schools to improve WASH infrastructure. This includes constructing 15 gender-sensitive latrines, equipping them with privacy locks, water sources for cleaning, and dedicated disposal bins for used sanitary products. Handwashing stations have also been installed in 20 schools to promote overall hygiene. The availability of these facilities has significantly boosted girls' confidence in attending school during their periods, reducing absenteeism by 35%.

4. Formation of girls' support clubs

AWYAD has established 25 Girls' Empowerment Movement (GEM) clubs in schools, where girls can share experiences, support each other, and receive mentorship on menstrual health and other gender-related challenges. These clubs provide safe spaces for peerlearning and emotional support, ensuring that no girl feels alone in her menstrual journey. Through these platforms, girls learn self-care practices, leadership skills, and advocacy techniques to champion menstrual health rights in their communities.

Impact of AWYAD's MHM Approach

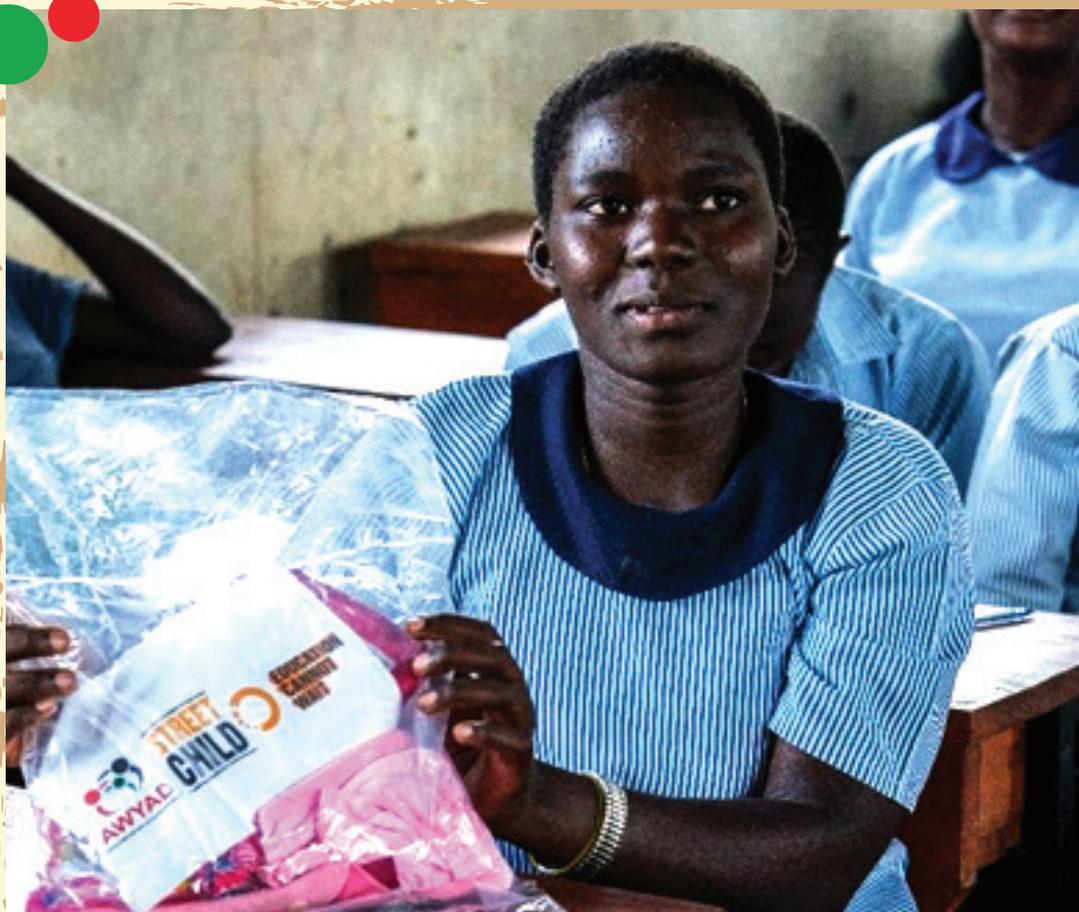
The impact of AWYAD's MHM program in Kyaka II and Palabek has been profound, significantly contributing to improved school attendance and academic performance among girls.



Mukamana Esther of P5 from Kyamagabo Primary school in the zone of Bwiriza aged 13 receiving her MHM Kit

Before the intervention, about 60% of girls missed school during their menstrual periods due to fear of stigma and lack of sanitary products. With the provision of sanitary pads and improved school facilities, girls now attend school more consistently.

Teachers report a 40% increase in regular attendance among adolescent girls, with absenteeism dropping from an average of five days per month to just one day per month. AWYAD's intervention, 13-year-old Mukamana Esther from Kyaka II often missed school due to the lack of menstrual products and inadequate WASH facilities. Embarrassed and afraid of being teased, she would stay home for days each month. Since receiving reusable sanitary pads and attending AWYAD's menstrual hygiene sessions, Esther now attends school regularly. She expresses newfound confidence in managing her periods and aspires to become a nurse.



Akello Grace one of the most outstanding performers in Ritah Nansereko Progress School in Palabek confidently showing off her new MHM Kit

2. Enhanced academic performance

Regular school attendance has led to better academic performance among girls. Previously, missed lessons among adolescent girls created learning gaps that were difficult to bridge, leading to poor grades and, ultimately, school dropouts. Now, with uninterrupted education, girls are excelling in their studies, with 72% of beneficiaries reporting improvements in at least one subject. Grace, a 16-year-old learner from Ritah Nansereko Progressive School in Palabek, struggled with math and science due to frequent absenteeism caused by menstrual challenges. Missing classes led to knowledge gaps, making it hard for her to keep up with her peers. After joining AWYAD's Girls' Empowerment Club and receiving consistent support, Grace's attendance improved, and she excelled in her final exams. She recently received an award for outstanding performance in science subjects, proving that uninterrupted education leads to better academic outcomes.

3. Enhanced Confidence and Dignity

AWYAD's Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) approach has significantly enhanced the confidence and dignity of girls and women in Kyaka II and Palabek refugee settlements. By providing access to reusable sanitary pads, hygiene kits, and safe spaces for menstrual health education, AWYAD has helped break the silence and stigma around menstruation. Girls now attend school consistently and participate confidently in class, no longer hindered by shame or fear during their periods. Women, too, have embraced open dialogue on menstrual health, empowering them to support their daughters and peers. This holistic approach has restored dignity, fostered self-worth, and uplifted entire communities.

Lillian Kababooopi (Child Protection Officer) makes a wonderful conclusion about AWYAD's Menstrual Hygiene Management approach. Lillian says that integrating MHM in schools is game-changer in promoting girls' education. Lillian further notes that addressing menstrual hygiene challenges has empowered girls, improved school attendance, enhanced academic performance, and fostered gender equality in education. She further adds that as the program continues to expand, it offers hope for a future where no girl is denied an education due to menstruation. Investing in menstrual hygiene management is not just about health, rather, it is a crucial step towards ensuring every girl's right to education and a brighter future. She ends by calling upon partners and donors to support AWYAD reach more girls, enable them overcome menstruation barriers and realize their educational dreams.