

## Background

An important milestone in a girl's transition to womanhood is menarche. Menstrual management refers to managing menstrual flow and continuing regular daily activities such as working and going to school. Women around the world have developed various strategies to manage menstruation depending on the country, economic status, individual's personal preferences, local traditions, cultural beliefs, and education status. Improper practices and ineffective menstrual hygiene have a negative impact on a female's health, education, and future prospects. Unfortunately, menstrual health is a serious, but overlooked, issue among females in developing countries. In many areas of Africa, teenage girls miss school for a number of days every month due to menstrual pain and the lack of access to necessary resources such as menstrual materials to absorb menstrual blood, private places to wash and change re-usable menstrual cloth, adequate disposal system for menstrual materials, and education about menstrual health management. Additionally, many taboos label a menstruating female as unclean and isolate her from her family and community.

## Objective

- To assess menstrual hygiene and management awareness among adolescent females in Bwiam, The Gambia, West Africa.
- To determine the challenges a menstruating female in Bwiam face, and their impact on health and school attendance.

## Methods

A cross-sectional study questionnaire consisting of 42 questions was designed and distributed to female students from Fatima Senior Secondary School in Bwiam, The Gambia, on July 18, 2019. Responses from 108 menstruating females aged 15-21 years were collected and analyzed. Participants responded to the questionnaire individually and simultaneously at the school's exam hall.

## Results

Our study found that 62% of the participants use reusable cloth to manage menstrual flow, 22% use sanitary pads, and 16% use both. It is financially challenging for almost all of the participants to purchase sanitary pads monthly because some of them are orphans, and others have many siblings, and the parents can not afford to provide them money. Those who use commercial pads either skip lunch and use their lunch money to purchase them or receive them from relatives who work at a hospital and have access to the maternity ward.

**When we asked why do you use cloth instead of sanitary pads, one female student answered: "I prefer to use pads because they are more comfortable, and they do not cause irritation as cloth does, but I do not have the money to buy them."**

We also found that most of the girls are aware that maintenance of hygiene is very important during menstruation, yet they simply do not have the resources to practice good hygiene. In addition to the lack of sanitary pads, students do not have access to private sanitary facilities. Almost all of the students said that they are not comfortable with using the school toilets because of inadequate water supply, hand-washing sites, and a waste disposal area. The school toilets are simply a hole in the ground.

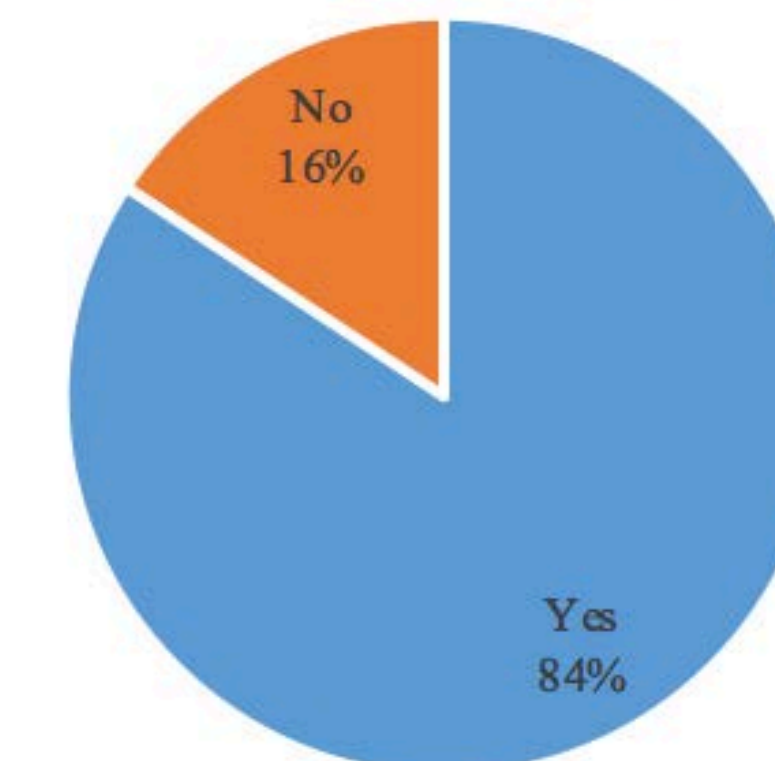


**"I feel like vomiting when I wash my bloody menstrual cloth because of the smell," a junior school female student in Bwiam.**

Each month, more than 84% of participants miss school for at least a day during their menstruation because they have to change and wash their menstrual cloth almost every two hours since cloth is not as absorbent as a sanitary pad and very uncomfortable to wear during a school day. Those who do not miss school go home during lunch break to wash and change.

With the help of community health nurses at Bwiam General Hospital, we designed an educational class on menstrual hygiene awareness and management through which we addressed many of the menstrual taboos in Bwiam, such as a menstruating female is unclean. However, young girls in Bwiam are in need for more than an educational class on

## Do You Miss School During Menstruation?



menstruation and personal hygiene. They need our help and support. Our goal is to build a menstruation-friendly environment through:

- Educating students, teachers, and families on menstrual hygiene and management.
- Building school toilets that are supplied with water, hand washing areas, and waste disposal areas. Each toilet costs around \$1000 to build, and we are hoping to build 4 toilets.
- Supplying female students at the junior and senior school with sanitary pads every month for as long as we can.

Please join us in empowering young girls of Bwiam by donating through the link below:

<https://www.gofundme.com/gu595c-help-empower-girls-of-bwiam-the-gambia>



Contact: [alrasf22@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:alrasf22@sas.upenn.edu)

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