



African Population and
Health Research Center

Policy Brief

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Experiences and problems with menstruation among poor women and schoolgirls in Nairobi, Kenya



Menstruation is a significant stage in the development and maturity of adolescent girls

The Situation

Many adolescent girls and women in Kenya experience problems with menstruation due to limited knowledge and poor access to safe and affordable methods and materials, with consequences in terms of poor self-esteem and infrequent school attendance, among others. This policy brief is based on a field research and feasibility study to explore menstrual practices and investigate the suitability of the menstrual cup in Kenya. It shows that many of the adolescent girls and women who participated in the study approved the use of menstrual cups and would like to continue using it because it is safe, economical, convenient, and easy to use. Its use can contribute to the promotion of reproductive health and education rights of young girls and women.

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Who is this policy brief for?

Policymakers, program managers, their support staff, doctors, researchers and other professionals dealing with reproductive health, people interested in gender issues and women affairs, educationists, school principals, teachers, parents and those with an interest in education outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa.

Why was this policy brief prepared?

To summarize the best available locally-generated knowledge for a better understanding of issues of menstruation and associated practices of adolescent girls and young women in Kenya, including their experiences, attitudes and other problems that they encounter. It aims at encouraging the formulation and implementation of policies that promote the reproductive health and education rights of adolescent girls and women by tackling problems associated with menstruation and by improving access to appropriate menstrual products.

What does this evidence-based policy brief include?

A summary of the study methods, findings, implications for wider use of the menstrual cups. There are also suggestions as to what can be done to address the health implications that may arise from the wider use of the menstrual cup.

Full report and references

The evidence that is summarized in this policy brief is described in more detail in the report entitled 'Research and Feasibility Study To Explore Menstrual Practices and Investigate The Suitability of Menstrual Cups for Adolescent Girls and Women in Kenya – Phase 1: Research on Menstrual Attitudes/Perceptions, Practices and Problems' By Dr Josephine Kibaru, Joanna Crichton, Dr Caroline Kabiru, Dr Chi-Chi Undie, Dr Eliya Zulu, and Dr Lucy Musyoka. The report is available on request.

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The Problem

Limited access to safe, affordable, convenient and culturally-appropriate methods for dealing with menstruation has far-reaching implications for the rights and physical, social and mental well-being of many women and adolescent girls in Kenya. It undermines sexual and reproductive health and well-being and has been shown to restrict girls' access to education. In collaboration with the Division of Reproductive Health (DRH) of the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, and with funding from UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) carried out a research on menstruation with adolescent girls and women in Kenya.

The project entitled '*Research and Feasibility Study to Explore Menstrual Practices and Investigate the Suitability of Menstrual Cups for Adolescent Girls and Women in Kenya*' sought to provide policy-makers and program managers with a better understanding of menstruation and associated practices of adolescent girls and young women in Kenya, including their experiences and attitudes as well as the problems they encounter. The ultimate goal of the project was to promote the reproductive health and education rights of adolescent girls and women by tackling problems associated with menstruation and by improving access to appropriate menstrual products.

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved qualitative research to explore beliefs, attitudes, practices and problems associated with menstruation among women and girls in informal settlements of Nairobi. Based on the results from Phase 1, the second phase was designed as a pilot study to assess the cultural, practical and health-related appropriateness and feasibility of menstrual cups as a method for managing menstrual flow. The menstrual cup (cup made of medical silicone rubber that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood) may be an appropriate new technology for women and girls in Kenya.

The menstrual cup has been used since the 1930s in Europe and North America and is manufactured commercially in those regions. The Mooncup®, one of the manufacturers of the menstrual cup, has received regulatory acceptance from the Food and Drug Agency (US), which regulates menstrual flow management products (<http://www.mooncup.co.uk/>). For more information about the menstrual cup, refer to the document **Menstrual Cup: Frequently Asked Questions** (available upon request).

The study explored beliefs, attitudes, practices and problems associated with menstruation among women and girls in informal settlements and other urban areas of Nairobi.

Methodology

Activities carried out in Phase 1 included:

- i) Qualitative research among women and in- and out-of-school girls aged 12 years and over living in urban informal settlements in Nairobi, to explore menstrual experiences, problems and needs, personal and social practices, norms, attitudes and beliefs, and the impacts on adolescent girls and women.
- ii) Qualitative research with key informants on menstrual practices and problems and the implications of the institutional, socio-economic and cultural context for menstrual well-being.
- iii) Semi-structured telephone interviews with relevant experts about appropriate and hygienic methods for cleaning menstrual cups in contexts with limited access to clean water.

This policy brief is based on Phase 1, which was completed in May 2009.

A scientific review working group and an Advisory Group of experts on new technologies in reproductive health, adolescent health and feasibility study methodologies provided input into the design of the study. Clearance was obtained from the Pharmacy and Poisons Board's Expert Committee on Clinical Trials, the Kenya Medical Research Institute's Ethical Review Committee and the National Council for Science and Technology.

Data collection was carried out in May and June 2008. Participants were selected using purposive quota sampling, and informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection. Twenty-nine in-depth interviews, 18 focus group discussions and five key informant interviews were conducted. Key informant interviews were carried out with primary school teachers and a nurse (see Table 1).

Table 1: Description of in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussion (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs)

Sample group	IDIs	FGDs	KIIs
Adult Women aged 19–49	19	8	
Girls aged 12–14 in school	8	6	
Girls aged 12–14 out of school	1	2	
Girls aged 15–17 out of school	1	2	
School teachers and Nurse			5

A desk-based literature review was carried out on existing research on menstrual practices and attitudes, the institutional management of menstruation, and the menstrual cup. The researchers also carried out interviews with medical practitioners and experts in trials of intra-vaginal products to provide information about how to minimize health risks involved in such trials.



SHARING EXPERIENCES: Rhoune Ochako, a Research Officer working with the menstrual cup project, listens to schoolgirls. Schools should initiate guiding and counseling clubs that act as forums for girls to meet and discuss issues on menstruation and how to overcome them.

Key Findings

Below are the key findings of the study presented along five thematic areas.

1. Knowledge about menstruation

- There was limited knowledge of the biological aspects of menstruation among both girls and adult women living in Korogocho. Only a minority of the participants were able to describe what menstrual blood is in biological terms.

"People are not taught what menstrual blood is, and all of us don't know what it is. Why can't you tell us what it is so that we also know what it is?" said an FGD participant.

- Perception was that menstruation is a time during which women are most likely to become pregnant. This misconception appears to be linked to the tendency to inform girls that once they start menstruating they should no longer 'play with boys'.

"They say when the blood comes out you can give birth anytime and the baby's house is already being made. And if you have sex with a man you get pregnant immediately," said an FGD participant in a group of girls aged 12–14.



A MENSTRUAL CUP:
Cup made of medical silicone rubber that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood may be an appropriate new technology for poor women and girls in Kenya.

2. Attitudes and taboos concerning menstruation

- Taboos about discussing menstruation limit many women and girls' access to information and support.
- Almost all research participants, including women and girls of all ages, described menstrual blood as "unclean", and many said that they perceived it to be a "harmful" substance.

"I have never gone to church and I know it is not right to go to church when you are menstruating. Even if it is my third day and the pain is no longer there, I cannot take dirt to church," said a woman during an in-depth interview.

- Girls in school stated that some teachers support them by providing information, often informal, based on the general knowledge and worldview of the teacher rather than on the official curriculum. Information tended to focus on advising girls about keeping clean and avoiding boys rather than emphasizing knowledge about the biological aspects of menstruation. However, taboos around menstruation may also limit the amount of support that teachers provide to girls, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

"When a girl starts to menstruate, as I told you, they don't know what a period is. So most of them take a cloth or even paper, and you know paper cannot hold that thing, especially when that girl has a heavy flow. When a girl stands and [...] she has that thing on the dress, all the other girls go mocking her, talking about her... and even the teachers are ashamed," said a teacher during a key informant interview.

3. Menstrual practices

- Sanitary towels (pads) were described by almost all participants as their preferred method for managing menstruation. Because pads are not always available, many participants said that people in their community use cotton wool, cloths (including socks), tampons, tissue paper, pages torn from school exercise books,

and pieces of sponge torn from mattresses.

- From the in-depth interviews, 28 out of 29 participants had ever used pads, 18 had used cloths and 2 had used cotton wool.
- Eighteen participants (out of 29) reported using pads as the sole means of managing menstrual flow during their last three periods. This shows that use of pads is widespread to some extent among the residents of Korogocho. However, 18 participants reported that they have experienced problems accessing pads and 13 of them used either cloths or a combination of cloths and pads during their last three periods.

"Sometimes you are at home and your mother has no money at all, there are no rags in the house and all the things that are there are useful, it becomes difficult for the girl to manage her periods. You end up using pieces of paper. Such a person has more than enough problems because she has no one to help her at all," said a schoolgirl during a focus group discussion.

4. The impacts of lack of access to menstrual management products on health

- Lack of access to menstrual products was described as a source of embarrassment, anxiety and shame by many participants. Staining one's clothes was regarded by many as stigmatizing:

"Once tissue paper gets wet and gets into contact with the fresh air, it will definitely smell. And that makes the girl more uncomfortable because when she stands up from her sitting position, she will smell badly. She develops fear," said a key informant.

- Some participants explained that problems with menstruation inhibit their behavior and activities.

"If you are employed but somehow you did not plan well, you are forced to stay at home and the boss will not understand why you couldn't manage your affairs in time and report to work. The problem is that you will not tell him/her that you were down because of menstruation. You can easily lose your job. You just say you were ill," said one woman during a focus group discussion.

- Some schoolgirls described feeling anxious and uncomfortable about menstruation during school, and some said that this affects their concentration in class as the following quotation from an in-depth interview with a schoolgirl shows.

Interviewer: *When you can't afford or get these pads and you love them so much, how do you feel?*

Respondent: *I feel uncomfortable and worse when it is on a school day. That is the time I wish I could be at home so that I don't have to worry about my clothes being stained and other people laughing at me.*

Because pads are not always available, many participants said that people in their community use cotton wool, cloths (including socks), tampons, tissue paper, pages torn from school exercise books, and pieces of sponge torn from mattresses.

5. Reactions to the menstrual cup and perceptions about its expected advantages or disadvantages

At the end of focus groups and in-depth interviews, the interviewer/facilitator introduced menstrual cups to participants and showed them a sample. Participants were invited to ask questions about the cup, which were answered by the interviewer/facilitator. The interviewer/facilitator then asked a series of questions about participant's first impressions of the device, their concerns about it, and perceptions about its advantages and disadvantages, and appropriateness for the community.

- Concerns included the idea that it is too big to be inserted in the vagina; that the blood would leak when the user bends, sits or walks; and that the cup was not large enough to deal with the flow of blood.
- There was considerable interest from participants about the prospect of a new, reusable menstrual product. The change in body language was noticeable when the menstrual cup was introduced, with participants leaning forward in their seats and with focus group participants speaking animatedly about the practicalities of the cup in their community.
- Most participants thought that the cost-effectiveness of reusing the menstrual cup for many years was a great advantage because they would no longer need to look for money to buy sanitary pads each month.

"It will save you money to go and buy pads for the girls, and time to clean those cloths daily when the periods are on. Since it is not something that will get the blood stuck on it like the cloth; whereby you have to scrub it thoroughly for it to be clean, and you only have to keep it inside your body until the periods are over, then it is the right thing to use," said a woman during an in-depth interview.
- There were concerns about how to use the menstrual cup discreetly, for example how to empty, store and boil the menstrual cup without others noticing it. However, a few participants thought that an advantage of the menstrual cup is that it is more discreet than other methods, for example, it is more reliable than cloths, or more easily portable than sanitary pads.
- A few participants raised concerns that the cups could be messy when removing and emptying. The advice sheets from the manufacturer acknowledge that until they are used to the menstrual cup, users may find the

cup messy, and this may affect the cup's acceptability, as seen by a respondent's concern below:

"Will it not spill when you change it from the house?" asked a woman during a focus group discussion.

Challenges and Implications for Wider use of Menstrual Cups

If used according to the menstrual cup use guide, menstrual cups do not involve health risks to users. However, the findings from Phase 1 reveal that a number of potential areas where participants may fail to follow the protocol may pose some risks. Some of these risks are more likely than others and some would have greater impact in the event that they occurred.

- **Failure to wash menstrual cups:** The manufacturers of menstrual cups state that the cups must be washed with unscented soap and rinsed in clean water or wiped with tissue each time they are emptied and reinserted.
- **Failure to sterilize menstrual cups once per month:** The manufacturer Mooncup® recommends that menstrual cups can be sterilized once per month either by boiling or immersing in sterilizing solution. Participants will, therefore, be presented with a choice of sterilization methods, and encouraged to think about which method is best for them.
- **Poor hand hygiene:** Both the intravaginal product trial specialists and the nurse adviser at Mooncup® emphasized that good hand hygiene when inserting and removing the menstrual cup is the most important requirement for safe use. Participants who have limited access to bathing facilities, and those with very heavy flow may find this particularly difficult.
- **Existing vaginal cleaning practices:** Some participants mentioned that women in their community use soap, fizzy drinks or lemon to clean the vagina. The presence of soap or fizzy drinks in the vagina can affect pH levels, which could reduce levels of vaginal flora and lead to fungal infections such as candida.
- **Risk of sharing menstrual cups:** The menstrual cup is for individual use. However, there is risk that participants could share the menstrual cup with someone else.
- **Cultural factors** such as concern about virginity and insertion of menstrual cups and concern about coming into contact with menstrual blood could lead to anxiety among participants in the menstrual cup trial.

There was considerable interest from participants about the prospect of a new, reusable menstrual product.

Also, there was fear that the menstrual cup would encourage teenage sex or lesbianism. Since inserting the menstrual cup involved touching the genitals, it was feared that if young girls became used to touching their bodies, they would likely arouse sexual feelings which is bound to encourage them to experiment or practice teenage sex or even lesbianism.

- **Privacy:** Findings from this study showed that privacy is limited for many women and girls in Korogocho due to overcrowded housing, and inadequate toilet and sanitation facilities.
- **Using menstrual cups with active infections:** There is a risk that the menstrual cup could interact with any existing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), reproductive tract infections (RTIs) or urinary tract infections (UTIs).
- **Using the menstrual cup with contraceptive devices:** The Mooncup company states that there should be no problem with an Intra-Uterine Contraceptive device (I.U.D) as long as you remember to place it low down in the vagina and take care to release the seal properly when removing the Mooncup.

Policy Options

Findings from this study have a number of policy implications at the school, community and national levels.

1. Provide education and open up discussions about menstruation

Information about menstruation is very important. Several participants said that it would be good to provide more education in schools about menstruation to help students get similar information or have someone give this knowledge.

"There should be more lessons in school related to menstruation so that everyone can be educated on the same to stop being embarrassed about it and treat it as normal. Menstruation should not stop girls from going to school. They should also be taught on how to manage the periods with the different methods available," said a schoolgirl, 17, from Korogocho.

Opening up discussions on menstruation would allow women and young girls to openly talk about menstruation. Discussions on menstruation would also remove the stigma associated with it. Menstruation would be 'normalized' and girls would see no reason to miss school. The various methods of managing the menstrual flow would be mentioned and this would provide information on a range of choices to pick from and thus enable girls to make informed decisions on their personal health.

Participants also proposed that schools should offer more sessions on counseling related to menstruation. The counselor could explore issues further with the girls. This would be an opportunity to answer 'difficult' sex-related questions normally left for girls to discover on their own.

According to participants, awareness campaigns targeting schoolgirls should be done. They should include information on how to deal with pain and discomfort during menstruation.

"Awareness campaigns and education on how to solve nausea, vomiting and personal hygiene issues related to menstruation should be conducted countrywide," said another schoolgirl, 19, from Korogocho.

It was also mentioned that schools should initiate guiding and counseling clubs that act as forums for girls to meet and discuss issues on menstruation and how to overcome them.

"There should be a guiding and counseling group to educate girls on what to do and what not to do during periods because there are things that one might do out of ignorance," said a 17-year-old schoolgirl from Jericho.

2. Provide sanitary pads and other menstrual management methods and information to schoolgirls

Some participants expressed the opinion that schoolgirls should be provided with pads. It was noted that menstruation is a stressful period for many girls and that

Cultural factors such as concern about virginity and insertion of menstrual cups and concern about coming into contact with menstrual blood could lead to anxiety among participants in the menstrual cup trial.

the provision of menstrual management commodities and information would alleviate some of the difficulties attendant to menstruation. These would also help girls use the more effective methods and reduce the use of the less effective, and often dangerous ones like tissue, cloth and socks.

"Provide menstrual cups, sanitary towels and other methods so that girls can participate fully in their activities and stay in class," an 18-year-old schoolgirl from Korogocho said.

The cost-benefit and portability elements of the menstrual cups were also noted.

"If the cup comes to the market, it can make things easier because some of us do not know the dates of our cycle and when you have the cup ready with you at all times, you will be prepared," said a 19-year-old girl from Korogocho.

Some participants proposed that active groups and non-governmental organizations should lobby the government for reduction of the price of sanitary pads and other menstrual flow commodities to make them more affordable to schoolgirls.

Lobbying should also be extended to the manufacturing and retail companies to increase the number of pads found in a packet so that one packet lasts for a longer time.

"I can say that the government should try and make the price of the pads a bit cheap because not all girls can afford them. Girls who are maturing specially those of 9 years and above can benefit if the government introduced cheap pads to schools for those who cannot afford; ... I would like that they increase the number of pads in the cheapest packet such that one can use one packet for two months or more. They should range from about 50 to 60 shillings per packet such that if one is able to save up to two shillings per day, one will be able to afford at least a packet by the end of the month and they should be more than 10 pads in the packet, say 15 or 20 of them," said a 17-year-old schoolgirl from Jericho.



Both the intravaginal product trial specialists and the nurse adviser at Mooncup® emphasized that good hand hygiene when inserting and removing the menstrual cup is the most important requirement for safe use.



DISSEMINATION MEETING: Some of the study participants during a community meeting in Korogocho, Nairobi. Participants proposed that active groups and non-governmental organizations should lobby the government for reduction of the price of sanitary pads and other menstrual flow commodities to make them more affordable to schoolgirls

There was also a suggestion for schools to pool resources together by asking students to contribute some money to a kitty which could be used to purchase sanitary pads for students who are not able to afford them.

3. Improve infrastructure in schools

Some participants proposed to have toilets with taps so that one is able to clean the menstrual cups well while in the toilet.

"The tap should be inside the toilet so that when you remove your menstrual cup or pad, you can wash your hands," a 17-year-old schoolgirl from Korogocho said.

This, participants suggested, should go hand-in-hand with the separation of toilet facilities so that the girls' toilets are made more private. This was felt to have the potential to prevent embarrassment when girls are changing pads or menstrual cups.

"When it comes to the toilets, they should make them more private for the girls because it is embarrassing when it comes to changing," said a Jericho schoolgirl aged 17.

Participants also expressed that toilets in schools should be clean and sanitary disposal bins provided. It was mentioned that many schools did not have disposal bins for sanitary pads and this was stressful for girls who were having menstruation.

"The toilets should be kept clean and there should be kits in the toilets where they can dispose the pads," a Jericho schoolgirl, 16, said.



If the cup comes to the market, it can make things easier because some of us do not know the dates of our cycle and when you have the cup ready with you at all times, you will be prepared.





Opening up discussions on menstruation would allow women and young girls to openly talk about menstruation. Discussions on menstruation would also remove the stigma associated with it.



EXPAND CHOICE AND ACCESS: Study participants during a group discussion meeting. Should menstrual cups be found to be appropriate, they have the potential to expand choice and access to the latest reproductive technologies for Kenyan women and girls.

Conclusion

Should menstrual cups be found to be appropriate, they have the potential to expand choice and access to the latest reproductive technologies for Kenyan women and girls. Distribution methods that could be considered include social marketing and distribution through youth-friendly services. Other interventions include the provision of information on menstrual flow management, production and

distribution of cheaper menstrual flow commodities and guidance and counseling programs for young girls.

In the context of the study, useful information has come to light some of which requires further research to increase evidence about menstrual practices and preferences of women and girls in urban informal settlements in Kenya.

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