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The GENDER Eye NEWSLETTER

Menstrual Health Management and Violence during COVID-19 Pandemic –Voicing our Experiences and Taking Action

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Editorial

Dear Readers,

Welcome to our Second Issue of the Gender Eye 2020. The theme for this issue is: "Menstrual Health Management during COVID-19 Pandemic –Voicing our Experiences and Taking Action".

On March 27, 2020 Uganda recorded the first case of COVID-19 and cases increased thereafter. COVID-19 is a human, economic and social crisis affecting everyone, and Uganda like the rest of the world, has not been spared. The closure of schools and institutions was one of the first measures to be taken up by the Government to curb the spread of the virus, affecting more than 15 million learners and 548,000 teachers. The COVID-19 crisis has affected Uganda in many ways with adverse effects.

The Pandemic has had huge impact on learning for all children who find school to be a safe haven given the increasing cases of child neglect and abuse. To the adolescent girls, the impact is even worse as many of them struggle to access the basic necessities to manage menstruation with dignity. Many adolescent girls have therefore resorted to risky behaviours which increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse leading to unwanted teenage pregnancies, early marriages, and the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Based on the above, many girls are likely to miss out on education when schools reopen. It is therefore important that key stakeholders especially parents and guardians take action to support our adolescents.

In this issue of the Gender Eye, we document experiences and emerging issues concerning menstrual health and hygiene management during the COVID -19 period. The pandemic has raised a new set of challenges but there is also some learning and positive aspects. This issue highlights;

i) The need to have parental/care giver support to learners is greater than ever before.
ii) The need for greater attention and consideration to contain the adverse impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents.

We hope you find it interesting.

 # STAY SAFE AND KEEP READING

Dr. Cleophus Mugenyi
COMMISSIONER BASIC EDUCATION

COMMEMORATING THE INTERNATIONAL MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY 2020

By: Rosette Nanyanzi/ Ag. Gender Technical Advisor/MoES

Since 2014, the Ministry of Education and Sports has been at the forefront of moving the menstrual hygiene management agenda in the country. The Ministry has worked closely with a number of Civil Society Organisations to hold national level learning events in commemoration of the International Menstrual Hygiene Day.

However, this year due to the lockdown caused by the COVID -19 and social distancing guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Sports together with members of the MHM steering committee had to think of other alternative approaches to hold the International Menstrual Hygiene Day. The Ministry organised a virtual conference which was attended by a wide range of stakeholders across the globe. The theme for this year 2020 MHM day was "It is time for action". Indeed as a sector we had to take action. The day came at a time when our adolescent girls were not in school but as duty bearers we had to have a discussion concerning issues that affect them.

Prior to the conference, the Ministry together with UNICEF U-report conducted a survey on the experiences of adolescent girls as far MHM was concerned. The survey which was responded to by 148,030 U-reporters had disturbing findings. According to the survey, many respondents indicated that access to sanitary products was a challenge during the COVID-19 period due to the high cost and limitations on movements. 30% of the respondents indicated that there is limited information in the communities concerning management of menstruation. In addition, 77% of the U-reporters indicated that very few girls discuss MHM issues with their parents. As a recommendation, 8,026 respondents recommended that it is important for the government to prioritise MHM during this period by creating awareness to the public through the media, provision of sanitary pads and education to women and girls. These issues formed part of the discussions during the conference.

The Commissioner Basic Education - Dr. Cleophus Mugenyi while officiating at the opening of the conference also raised concerns that many adolescent girls were getting pregnant because of lack of sanitary towels. He called upon all the stakeholders to prioritise support to the adolescent girls as a way of addressing these emerging challenges.

In addition to the virtual conference, the Ministry took advantage of the various media spaces to create awareness on the importance of supporting adolescent girls to have access to information and services to manage menstruation with dignity. The Ministry held a number radio and TV talk shows as well as discussions on Twitter and Facebook. Other partners such as Uganda Girl Guides, Reach a Hand, Trailblazers mentoring foundation, Antihill Foundation equally held MHM virtual meetings where the Ministry participated.

Because periods don't wait for pandemics, each one of our partners in the MHM coalition in Uganda had to take action.

Taking action as we reflect on the upheavals of the lockdown

By Daniel Amanyire - Gender Unit

The adage says that it takes a village to raise a child has come to life in the wake of a pandemic that has literally disrupted normalcy and daily routine. The situation has presented parents as the first front liners taking up the full role of care giving and supporting continued learning as well as ensuring that adolescents are supported to safely go through critical stages of growth and development especially the challenges that come with puberty.

During a normal academic calendar year, learners spend up to about 9 months at school and literally only 3 months at home and therefore it became an obligation for the teachers to play the care giving role as compared to parents/guardians. However, the current situation as presented by the ongoing school closure has reversed the trend. The dynamics of this interplay definitely comes at a cost to pay on both ends, specifically to the parents – many parents have not been able to support the early learning patterns as identified during early years and have also failed to perform key family care practices expected of them such as support adolescents go through the challenges of growth and sexual maturation.

How best can parents support children go through the current predicament coupled with the expected adverse challenges of the ongoing lockdown? As a matter of fact, this will greatly depend on the economic status and the social support system surrounding the child.

Several questions that keep running through and will always demand answers; for example, How do I support the adolescents? How do I support my girls to safely go through menstruation? How do we ensure that the home environment is inclusive to support the girls through the lockdown? How can we promote continuity to learning? How do we ensure learners and family members are all safeguarded from contracting the virus?

As we reflect on the many questions, we are hopeful that a collaborative approach through existing structures will ultimately produce synergies and concerted efforts to devise solutions to the current challenges. However, amidst challenging times, the most affected will be the poorest and most vulnerable to economic and social shocks. In such times gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, negative cultural taboos further escalate the disastrous effects.

Amidst the stated challenges experienced in our communities during the ongoing lockdown, parents should support adolescents effectively manage all related challenges of growth and development. Take an example of a young girl who has just attained puberty experiencing menstruation in a less supportive environment. This will ultimately create stigma and loss of self esteem - yet menstruation as a natural physiological process should be experienced with dignity and joy.

It is therefore important that parents and the community join efforts to create a conducive environment that nurtures and supports adolescents to smoothly thrive through the ongoing lockdown without losing focus but most importantly be able to overcome the challenges related to growth and development. As we take forward the agenda of home learning, it is a responsibility of every stakeholder especially from the surrounding community to ensure that every child enjoys each stage of their life healthy and protected.

RETRACTING PARENTS ROLES ON MENSTRUAL HEALTH EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

By Kabunga Ronalds - Gender Unit

Menstrual hygiene is fundamental to the dignity and wellbeing of women and girls and an important part of the basic hygiene, sanitation and reproductive health services to which every woman and girl has a right. To reach the SDG 6.2 target of safely managed sanitation, there is an urgent need to globally prioritize sanitation, hygiene and menstrual health. The subject of menstruation, however, is too often a taboo, and has many negative cultural attitudes associated with it, including the idea that menstruating women and girls are 'contaminated', 'dirty' and 'impure'. In addition, lack of knowledge alongside the stigma and taboo concerning menstruation increases girls' feelings of shame, embarrassment and discomfort which can lead to increasingly poor mental health outcomes.

Traditionally, among the core roles of the elderly were to help adolescent girls go through the trauma and stigma experienced during menstruation. The elderly especially the aunties, grandmothers and mothers always spared time to interact with adolescent girls about the challenges of growing up and sexual maturation so as to prepare them both physically and psychologically. However, this is not the case with the current generation. Parents have become too busy for their children and all the traditional support systems are gradually collapsing.

Based on the above, often parents and guardians shift this important role to school teachers and others feel ashamed to offer both material and psychological support needed for adolescent girls to overcome the related menstrual challenges and thus many rely on the information they receive from school, peers and other community groups.

Due to COVID-19 school closure and social distancing measures, adolescent girls cannot access both their teachers and adolescent girl friendly spaces where they ordinarily had access to information and education about menstruation. This is particularly heightened in rural areas where young girls have limited access to online resources. While at school, it is also important to note that learners come from different cultural backgrounds, mature at different times and also demand different ways of educating them about issues of menstrual health. Therefore, relying on teachers to educate adolescents on reproductive health concerns is challenging and complicated.

It is extremely important that Parents/guardians retract their core role and responsibility to pass down information about menstrual health to their children based on their cultural background and family values. Shifting this important role to schools and other members of the community is to deny adolescents parenthood trust and their rights to embrace changes that occur in their lives. Parents and guardians should "BREAK THE SILENCE" about menstruation and ensure that they have adequate information to educate their girl children.

It is also important for families to utilize the traditional family and community health support systems such as "use aunties and elderly" to support adolescent girls overcome the challenges related to menstrual health. Community response structures must be created with a strong gender and inclusion lens to ensure that those who are hit hardest by the pandemic are reached and their needs are met. There is also a need to strengthen and expand the peer support systems to also engage the male champions so that they treat their female counterparts with respect and dignity.

SUPPORTING AND GUIDING ADOLESCENT GIRLS TO STAY HEALTHY AND FREE FROM MENSTRUAL STIGMA

By Nabanja Norah - Anthill Foundation

"My grandmother gave me 2 pieces of cloth and that's what I use during my period, one during day and the other at night. We have no money to spend on sanitary towels." Says Kirabo, a 14yr old from Nabwojo village Wakiso district

Covid-19 lockdown has affected each one of us in so many ways especially the younger generation. This situation has left many disconnected from their daily support structures such as schools.

Kirabo isn't alone in this dilemma and for many other girls it may be worse given the fact that menstrual health and hygiene management issues are often not discussed openly. Globally, an estimated 1.8 billion girls and women menstruate every month (Unicef 2019), yet many cannot afford menstrual needs to menstruate in a dignified and healthy way.

Lack of access to proper materials and facilities to manage menstruation greatly affects adolescent girls' reproductive health as majority get reproductive tract infections due to using unhygienic materials. In Uganda, a number of cases have been documented by local media houses sharing some of the barriers girls continue to face during COVID-19 period with many testifying to being lured into sexual acts in search for material needs including sanitary towels.

We therefore collectively need to support and guide adolescent girls to ensure they stay healthy and free from stigma or shame experienced during menstruation. As key stakeholders, we need to;

1. Continue encouraging parents and guardians to support adolescent girls with required sanitary materials.
2. Promote Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities that can better accommodate adolescent girls during menstruation.
3. Document and support ongoing media campaigns working to end menstrual stigma and shame among girls and young women.
4. Promote partnerships with interventions on menstrual health and hygiene management.
5. Involve leaders at all levels and remind them of the need to prioritize Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management issues in their routine plans and operations.
6. Continuously avail Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management information in key places such as health facilities, education institutions and all public places especially at community level.

I urge you to remain committed to the girl agenda, we need to keep all community channels of communication open for girls' voices to be heard and supported. Time for collective action is Now, let all duty bearers rise wherever we are and act in support of efforts in place working to keep all Ugandan girls and young women safe and healthy. Together we let girls shine with zero shame!

MENSTRUATION
WITH DIGNITY CAMPAIGN

By: Uganda Youth and Adolescent Health Forum

Uganda Youth and Adolescent Health Forum (UYAHF) advocates for a world where women and girls menstruate with dignity. In order to achieve this goal, a number of activities have been done such as school outreaches and podcasts under the BookB4Babies campaign. These campaigns aim to raise awareness and normalise conversations on menstruation. Ugandan youth are taught about menstruation management and healthy attitudes to menstruation such as; types of menstruation products, how they are used safely, how to maintain hygiene, disposal of used menstruation materials, demystifying myths and taboos, and importance of male involvement in supporting women and girls.

Access to sanitary products is a huge challenge and affects many women and girls especially those in hard to reach areas and rural areas. UYAHF under the youth hub tackles period poverty by facilitating skills and learning to women and girls to make reusable pads in order to ensure that they have clean and affordable pads. At the start of lock down, a webinar was organised on understanding unique menstrual health and management challenges for girls and efforts to address them. The webinar was attended by policy makers, young people, and CSOs.

The month of May reminds advocates around the world to continue challenging stigma and appreciate all their efforts towards ensuring that all women and girls are not left behind because of something as natural as their periods. World Menstrual Hygiene Day is celebrated on 28th May which creates a global advocacy platform bringing together the voices and actions of CSOs, government agencies, individuals, private sector organisations, and the media, to promote menstrual hygiene management for all women and girls.

In light of the World Menstrual Hygiene Day, UYAHF started a fundraising campaign under the tag: #MensturationwithDignity. This campaign was geared towards acquisition of menstrual management products such as underwear, soap, water tanks and sanitary pads. The overall objective of the fundraising campaign was to ensure that all women and girls are able to menstruate safely, hygienically, and with dignity.

All the funds raised went towards acquiring menstrual products for refugee girls in Kyakka II refugee settlement, Kyegegwa district. A couple of activities were also lined up to run alongside the campaign such as the virtual dance party which aimed at demystifying and challenging misconceptions around menstruation.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON MHM DAY 2020

Host: Ministry Of Education and Sports Uganda
Hashtags: #MHDayUg2020, #ItsTime4Action

MHM Day 2020 was commemorated under the theme "It's Time for Action". The theme was a call for action to all stakeholders in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) fraternity, parents, school administrators, politicians, leaders and the education sector to take immediate action on addressing issues concerning Menstrual Hygiene Management of adolescent girls. This comes at the time when adolescents are at home due to COVID-19 pandemic that called for the closure of schools to mitigate its further spread.

The apex of the commemoration was held on 28th May with A virtual conference due to health measures put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
In addition, the Ministry engaged various stakeholders on MHM issues that can also result into violence against children. Several radio talkshows were conducted in Mubende, Jinja, Moroto, Kotido,Abim, Kamuli, Mpigi, Masaka,Butambala
The engagements and discussions were enriched with objectives to;
1. Provide a forum for stakeholders to reflect on the progress made on promoting MHM in Uganda;
2. Discuss strategies to strengthen National and district level engagements on MHM in Uganda.

It was highly put to the attention of stakeholders that, The beginning of menstruation in a girl marks the start of reproductive life. Globally, approximately 52% of the female population (26% of the total population) is of reproductive age (House, et al 2012). Most of these women and girls menstruate each month for between two and seven days. The menstrual period is a natural phenomenon that occurs throughout the reproductive life of every female. Despite the fact that menstruation is a normal physiological process, it is not often discussed openly. Available research shows that the onset of menstruation, which is the most dramatic sign of a girls' puberty, affects their engagement in family and community activities and may have a significant impact on their education. A study by IRC (2012) estimates that one in ten menstruating girls skip school four to five days in a month or completely drops out. A girl absent from school due to menstruation for four days of every 28 day cycle loses 13 learning days, the equivalent of two weeks of learning and 104 hours of school every school term. Around 23% of adolescent girls in

MoES - Basic Education & Jinja DLG Officials Attending Baba FM Radio Talk Show in Jinja

the age-group of 12-18 drop out of school when they begin menstruation. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of silence around menstruation and the majority of adolescent girls are not adequately supported to manage their menstrual cycle effectively and with dignity.

ISSUES OF CONCERN RAISED

A number of concerns were raised from different partners and these included;

1. Teaching girls how to make reusable sanitary pads is essential to keeping girls in school and keeping menstrual hygiene.
2. Over 50% of senior women teachers confirmed that there is no provision for menstrual pads to school girls. There should be allocation of funds to help supply them across the country.
3. Construction of girl friendly latrines would greatly improve girls' ability to manage their periods.
4. Target families through champion parents and women role models. Engaging parents of adolescent girls on positive parenting and Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)
5. Menstruation should be included on the National school curriculum so that girls can get all the information they are not getting from their parents.
6. Every woman and girl, everywhere deserves the right menstrual hygiene management products, safety, privacy, and dignity to manage her menstrual health.
7. Include men and boys in menstrual hygiene to reduce gender inequalities.
8. The strategy of engaging and putting young boys at the forefront to challenge the taboos around Menstruation health creates a safe environment for the young girls.
9. Ensuring that girls get the education they deserve opens up social and economic benefits for them as well as the country. Girls who stay in school earn more.
10. In Uganda, many women use pieces of cloth, foam mattress, toilet paper, newspapers and banana plant fibers which are unhygienic, ineffective and uncomfortable during their Menstrual Periods.

Menstrual Hygiene Management is still a crucial issue that requires every stakeholder to take immediate action and most especially during this pandemic when the girls are at home. We urge communities and parents to take action and break the silence. The men and boys should be engaged. Parental roles and responsibilities are very crucial to keep the dignity of adolescents. IT'S TIME FOR ACTION!!!

Through social media engagements we can reach a number of stakeholders as we take action on improving menstrual hygiene management in schools and communities.

A tweet by Trailblazers Uganda during commemoration of MHM day 2020

Strengthening coordination with District Local Government for effective delivery of Adolescent Development Program during COVID-19 Pandemic:

A case of Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation (TMF) collaboration with Kotido District Local Government COVID-19 Task Force

By: Josephine Pedun - TMF

Closure of schools has continued to increase the rate of violence against children particularly teenage pregnancy, child marriage and affected learning and has watered down the achievement attained in education. As a result the TMF reprogramming and change of strategy involved working closely with Kotido district coordination forums and COVID-19 pandemic taskforce to create awareness in the communities targeting adolescent girls on COVID-19 prevention and response, encouragement for adolescents to continue learning from home, dissemination of Ministry of Education guidelines to schools and learning materials for adolescents

With support from Kotido District Local Government, TMF continues to work with various community structures such as grandmothers/women role models , Girls Education Club (GEC) patrons, teachers, sub county leaders and adolescent leaders to mentor and support adolescents during lockdown. Reflection meetings were held with 80 women role models on how to effectively mentor and support adolescents during lockdown, report and track cases of violence with strong adherence to COVID-19 SOPs. So far 1, 456 adolescent girls have been mentored, 7 cases of defilement have been reported and referred to Police by grandmothers

Education sector coordination meeting held 10th/02/2020 in Kotido District.

Key highlights of TMF Participation in 5 District Coordination and COVID-19 task force meetings;

- As a result increased awareness creation of communities on COVID-19 pandemic and precaution of MOH directives, advocacy messages which were developed by MOES on child safety were disseminated to various communities to keep safe.
- TMF participated in the distribution exercise of learning materials in sub counties for easy access by children which has kept children learning and busy even during the lockdown which has increased visibility of TMF at District level.
- 2 Zoom meetings by child protection coalition members were held to discuss adolescent specify issues related to Menstrual Hygiene and Management and Mentorship.
- During lockdown, the 2 education sector meetings in Kotido pushed for education Ordinances on alcoholism and child neglect to be enacted and enforced.

A radio talk show led by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), District Education Officer (DEO) , Probation Officer and TMF was instrumental in creating awareness on violence against children, security, reporting and learning during lockdown.

The radio talk show held on 20thMay 2020 on Voice of Karamoja Kotido triggered discussion by participants and listeners on matters concerning children's rights, protection and safety. Different callers from communities recommended actions to be taken by TMF and district local government on safety and protection issues. As a result the district has responded by holding various peace meetings among communities spearheaded by the RDC, CAO and probation office with regard to communities role in protecting children especially adolescents girls and call to insecurity caused by raids targeting adolescent boys of age 6-15 years.

Radio Talk Show activity in Voice of Karamoja Kotido.

THE DILEMMA OF HAVING SCHOOLS OPEN OR CLOSED DURING COVID -19 PANDEMIC PERIOD

By Raising Voices

The government of Uganda put in place a lockdown as a pre-emptive measure to control the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. This action saw all schools and education institutions close in March 2020 and since then, over 15 million children have been locked out of school with no certainty of when they will reopen. While the lockdown has helped slow the spread of the virus, it has not been without a cost for children. It has meant missed learning opportunities and led to a rise in rates of violence against children (VAC) in their homes and communities.

Much of the current national debate centres around reopening businesses and kick starting the economy. This is naturally at the forefront of people's minds as their livelihoods are at stake. What appears to be lost in this conversation is that children have an urgent priority too. Their current and future wellbeing depends on having access to a school. For them, and their parents, this question deserves greater attention in our national conversation about how to proceed from here.

How should we move forward?

It is an unenviable task to weigh the risk of a life-threatening infection against loss of an opportunity to learn, restricted self-development and a rise in VAC. Ultimately the decision will depend on emerging understanding of what importance to place on each of these considerations, how exactly the biology of transmission works, and what resources exist at the school level to comply with prudent and practical standard operating procedures (SOPs). Both sides of the equation have heart-wrenching considerations and we do not pretend that there are easy answers. We certainly do not presume to know the answer, nor are we advocating for a specific position. We are simply proposing two key considerations when weighing this decision:

1. We must strive to integrate children's priorities in whatever decision we arrive at.
2. In the absence of clarity, we must rely on data and learn from experience elsewhere.

1) Child Centric Debate: the price children are paying for the school closure

Who would disagree with the notion that children should be in school? Yet the debate on how we weigh the evolving reality and arrive at policy decisions seems to be muted on what this means for children. While children and their parents have a profound stake in the decisions we make, very little appears to be emerging in public discussions on what is guiding our decisions, and how we decide if children are safer at home or in school. What will be the consequences for keeping children away from school, and who will disproportionately pay the price?

We know that schools provide the best start in life. They enable children to grapple with the present and prepare them for the future. They are places that nurture cognitive, ethical, and social development of children. Beyond producing learning outcomes, schools teach children social, emotional, and other life skills necessary to navigate the ever-changing world, make good decisions and contribute to the development of their communities. They provide spaces, environments and relationships that enable a child to find a path toward a productive livelihood, effective citizenship, and a fulfilling life. For children, access to a school can mean the difference between mobility and progress or being left behind in the stagnation of poverty.

Beyond these longer-term considerations, there are also immediate concerns of safety. We know that proximity to adults under extreme stress is a risk factor for children. We have seen reports of VAC rise and an increased number of calls to the Child Helpline. In a media briefing on 9th of August 2020, the Minister of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) reported that in a period of five months (March to July 2020), Uganda Police registered 21,000 cases of VAC. Over 50% of these happened at home. Another report from five districts (Ngora, Kitgum, Kyegegwa, Lyantonde and Kasese) indicated that during lockdown alone, 2,300 underage girls were sexually assaulted and impregnated, many of whom were forced into early or unwanted marriage (Daily Monitor). These figures only account for reported cases of VAC, likely significantly lower than the actual toll. Many more children will be exposed to violence if they continue to stay at home.

2) Evidence and experience from around the world

We are still in an unfolding pandemic and therefore experiences from elsewhere are still being analysed and digested. In the absence of a global consensus, we are still in the position of sifting what lessons we should learn and adapt for our circumstances and the process is complicated by the following reality:

a) Sparse data and experience. Currently there is a lack of data from Uganda to guide the decision on whether to reopen schools or not. Furthermore, the picture is not much clearer across Africa, and only marginally better worldwide. Although African countries remain relatively low in terms of case count (except South Africa, which is fifth in the world but the only African nation in the top 20), this situation may change quickly. This picture may be further obscured by a lack of wide-spread and regular testing.

b) Unclear if children are efficient transmitters or less impacted by the infection. Studies have found children to be less likely (Roland, A. 2020)(between a third to a half) than adults to transmit the virus, but there is very little understanding of why. There is some evidence of an inflammatory condition that affects children (Wilson, K. 2020), but this too is poorly understood. Some new research – like a recent paper from UNICEF (Idele, P. et al. 2020) – questions the narrative that COVID-19 infects children less severely than adults, which argues that risk of infection is dependent on where individuals live and how vulnerable they are to poor health, as evidenced by the higher proportion of COVID-19 cases among those under 20 (11% on average of the national caseload in low-income countries compared to 7% in high income countries).

Other new studies from JAMA Paediatrics (Heald-Sargent, T. et al. 2020) report that young children can carry extremely high viral loads of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, which suggests children do pose a risk of transmission to people around them. Furthermore, while masks reduce the spread of COVID-19 in adults, getting children to wear and keep masks on can be a challenge. Unlike contexts like China, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan, where mask usage is already a widespread norm, many cultures – including most countries in Africa – are not used to wearing masks and they can be uncomfortable for children and often fit poorly.

c) Diversity of experience. By early June 2020, although twenty countries have reopened schools (Taiwan, Sweden, and Nicaragua never closed schools at all) – there is hardly any data on outcomes, and reopening has remained largely an uncontrolled and mostly ad hoc experiment with a wide range of approaches in different contexts. Emerging evidence from reopening strategies from South Africa, Finland and Israel (Science Magazine) suggests that keeping student groups small, requiring mask, and maintaining social distancing can keep schools and communities safe. But these SOPs, despite being onerous, are not enough. Community transmission rates must be controlled – the more the virus is circulating in communities, the more likely that students and staff will bring COVID-19 into – and out of – their classrooms.

d) Experiences from Israel and Denmark act as a cautionary tale. Schools in Israel were closed in early March 2020 and fully reopened in mid-May 2020.Within 10 days of reopening, a major COVID-19 outbreak occurred in a high school, with the first two recorded cases there emerging from different communities. More than 150 students and 25 staff members were infected, and 28,147 children were placed under quarantine for exposure (Stein-Zamir, C. 2020). This occurred largely because they were unable to enforce prudent SOPs. Denmark, on the other hand, is a cautionary tale because of why it succeeded. Children between the ages 2 to12 years were split into small groups of 12 students known as "protective bubbles," and remained in this consistent cohort (Time).They attended school on staggered schedules, ate lunch separately and had designated zones on playgrounds. They were required to wash their hands every 2 hours, their desks were spaced 2 metres apart, and all their education materials were cleaned regularly. Parents were not allowed on school grounds. The success of this story depended on regimented procedure, availability of resources and active compliance, all conditions difficult to replicate in a place like Uganda.

Potential Options for a Way Forward

What can we learn from these experiences? Uganda is not Denmark, nor is it Israel. Spaced desks and regular hand washing are difficult to enforce in places with large class sizes and a lack of clean running water. Therefore, experience from other places is illustrative but should be translated into a local context. Our decisions should be informed by these experiences but should depend on what is feasible in our context. Below we propose two possible scenarios for a way forward:

Scenario 1: Schools Re-open: Safety is paramount and with that in mind, the Ministry of Health drafted some SOPs for the reopening of schools in a 17th June memo from Dr Jane Ruth Aceng (Daily Monitor). While this is an excellent start, these procedures have widely been seen as too stringent and impractical, and it is still unknown whether they will be approved by the Ministry of Education (New Vision).There is therefore a need to:

- Constitute a Taskforce from the Ministry of Education and Sports and Ministry of Health to review these draft SOPs from a realistic point of view and come up with final guidelines to be adhered to. We must also recognize that adherence will be a major challenge.
- Prepare the necessary infrastructure to ensure adherence to health guidelines of hand washing, mask-wearing and social distancing in all the schools. This means from the highest level, emphasize that this is critical, develop capacity to implement the procedure and invest in monitoring compliance.
- Conduct randomized and routine tests and monitor the data fastidiously. Act quickly when a positive result emerges with swift quarantine and contact tracing.
- Institute supplementary mechanisms for ensuring safety of children when schools reopen. This may include enforcing nonviolent ways of disciplining children, zero tolerance of corporal punishment and evidence of school level policies to protect children from sexual and all other forms of violence. More rules and regulations (hand washing, mask-wearing, social distancing) may lead to more 'friction' and violent enforcement. Positive discipline must be promoted over corporal punishment.
- Wherever possible, encourage outdoor learning where flow of air can reduce transmission.
- Consider instituting a hybrid model of either dividing the school population in shifts or alternate weeks of in-person attendance.
- In high-density situations, if access to school can only be for a limited number of learners, prioritize younger learners, those with disabilities and those with most difficulty accessing online learning.
- Disaggregate interventions/guidelines based on the type of school.
    - High-density schools compared to low-enrolment schools may have different infrastructure and space.
    - Urban schools may need different guidelines compared to rural schools.
    - Private schools may have more resources compared to government aided schools.
    - Boarding schools may need additional guidelines.
- Parents and nonessential adults should not be allowed on school premises without permission.
- Schools should be cleaned regularly (after/before each school day). This may pose a challenge and may need an adaptive response.

Scenario 2: Schools Remain Closed: If after careful consideration, it is deemed more prudent to keep schools closed, then attention should be invested in promoting well-being of children at home. This could include:

- Specify regular intervals at which this decision will be reviewed and under what condition it will be reversed.
- Ensure fairness in access to learning materials and other related services. There should be a deliberate plan to cater for children with special needs. The Ministry of Education could broker an agreement with telecommunication companies to make network and internet bandwidth available at discounted rates for educational purposes.
- Establish partnerships with local agencies, religious groups and community-based organizations to facilitate radio, TV and internet-based learning spaces. Deploy teachers to act as supplementary tutors for small, locally organized learning clusters of children.
- Establish a Taskforce whose role becomes to monitor well-being of children at home and is formally mandated to collect data and produce regular reports to Parliament.
- The Taskforce should develop a clear plan on how to curb the rising rates of VAC.
- Ensure expeditious reporting, tracking, referral, and response (RTRR) of all VAC cases.
- Hold appropriate agencies accountable against the frameworks and plans that were spelled out to ensure child protection during the COVID-19 period.
- Raise awareness on VAC through a national dialogue hosted by senior members within the government and education system, that highlights the impact of the added stress of lockdown and on increased rates of violence. Parents should be encouraged to use non-violent means of disciplining their children, and this should be maintained even beyond COVID times.

Conclusion

In the last 20 years we have taken significant steps to promote access to education. As a result, we have started seeing significant benefits in multiple domains of our society. Long term closure of schools threatens those achievements and therefore requires a bold and courageous response to mitigate such a retreat. The perspective presented in this paper is intended to contribute to a collective dialogue on how we might respond to this challenge and continue protecting the present and future of our children.

REFLECTING ON MY EXPERIENCE ABOUT PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOR DURING THE COVID _19 LOCKDOWN

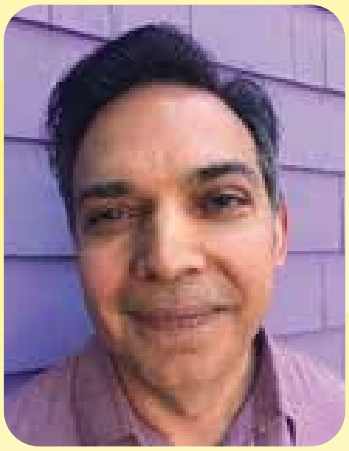
By Wakonya Wilson - Bishop Willis CPTC,

On 18 March 2020 the winds of COVID-19 blew hard in Uganda. In his wisdom the president of Uganda directed that all Education Institutions to close by 20th of March 2020. Closure of schools saw Ministry of Education and Sports come up with a strategy of home learning through radios, televisions and print media. The National Curriculum Development Center was charged with the responsibility of developing home support learning materials and parents 'guides. This had its own challenges however the sector made it clear that this was meant to ensure continuity of learning amidist closure of schools.

The pandemic period had far reaching effects on many families. Many parents for the first time openly acknowledged their failure to manage adolescent children at home. Most learners ultimately gave up with home learning and lost direction. On the stage came increased Domestic violence, Child labour, Parental negligence, Forced early marriage, Teenage pregnancies and among others.

What touched me most was a scenario in Jinja where a husband who couldn't support his family wanted to chase away his wife and children decided to defecate in the little maize flour and beans which had been given to his wife by the RDC so that he could force them leave his home. What a shame!!! The children were traumatized everywhere in the village, this a permanent scar in these children's minds.

On a positive note though, I want to appreciate the Ministry of Education and Sports in collaboration with UNICEF for the support rendered to my college Iganga Primary Teachers' College and districts of Kamuli, Bugweri and Iganga which has enabled us pass on information to parents concerning children's safety and security as well as parenting sessions. We believe, together can contribute the change we want to see in our communities.



7 REASONS FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AT SCHOOLS

Opinion: Start with schools if you want to prevent violence against children

There is a strong consensus that violence against children can have profound and long- term consequences for the potential of the child. Loss of such potential is consequential not only for the child but their families, communities, and wider society too. Therefore, preventing violence against children (VAC) is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic imperative for the entire society.

However, a problem that is so widespread and of such a magnitude, is unlikely to be solved by simplistic and stand-alone solutions. When faced with such a daunting challenge, there is value in assembling resources behind approaches that present a compelling opportunity and a strategic rationale. The interventions need to be multilayered and informed by strategic choices.

For the past twenty years, I have been working at Raising Voices to prevent violence against children (VAC) in Uganda.We have hosted a national dialogue that engaged millions of Ugandans in a conversation about prevention of VAC, designed community-based interventions and developed a school-based intervention (The Good Schools Toolkit) that is being used in 750 schools. Through this experience I have come to believe that the school is a compelling place to start when you want to prevent VAC. Below I outline seven reasons for this belief.

1. Schools have a mandate to prevent VAC

Most schools would concede that the adults working in that environment have a duty of care towards children and are custodians of children's potential.Therefore, schools provide an opportunity to both minimize the exposure to violence, and to mitigate some of the effects of the violence experienced elsewhere. There is no other equivalent opportunity to influence development of any child as there is at school.

2. The school provides an opportunity for change

More than a billion children go to school every day (UNESCO). Structurally, schools gather children as a "captive audience" in the presence of adults who have a mandate to influence their welfare in a positive way. Interventions at school benefit from easier access and a regular presence in children's lives. We can reach a large number of children over an extended period of time through the same set of individuals.

3. The school operates as a system in service of the community

Most schools are publicly funded and therefore are administered through policies and established practice. Schools are governable, open to scrutiny, and held accountable to a collective aspiration such as the community's hopes and wishes that the school will enhance their children's development, equip them to succeed and become better citizens.Unlike a home environment that has its own social autonomy and sovereignty of domain, a school is an ideal setting for planned and systematic interventions and is primed to materialise the highest aspirations of the community. Thus, a systematic, at-scale intervention is much more likely to find traction within the school environment.

4. Everyone wants to create better schools

Every government has a mandate to influence what happens at school, and every parent has a stake in what the school offers their child. Every teacher has a role to play in creating vibrant schools, and every student's quality of life depends on the quality of their school.

Such a converging and intersecting set of priorities gives rise to a collective momentum to act on ideas that can advance shared goals. In such a fertile environment, if prevention of VAC is made a priority of these collective aspirations, the intervention has a unique chance of gaining traction.

5. VAC has an impact on the child's cognitive development

Schools are one of the few spaces where children are primed to learn, and adults are mandated to teach.Therefore, giving students the basic building blocks to understand the world around them is a fundamental task of any school and yet, compelling evidence shows that violence threatens children's cognitive development. Allowing VAC at schools to continue unabated undermines the collective investment in our children and denies society the intellectual capital that will ensure its survival and success.

6. VAC has an impact on the child's ethical development

School is a place where children lay the ethical foundation of their identity. It is in schools that children absorb important lessons such as how the world works, who succeeds, who fails and why reality is so.They learn to discern right from wrong by observing and listening. Whether by design or chance, a school provides data to the child about how to navigate their basic drives. By tolerating unjust practices that culminate in violence, schools signal to the child that such ways of behaving are acceptable and set in motion a destructive pattern of behaviour that perpetuates itself throughout the life of that individual.

7. VAC has an impact on the child's social development

School is a place where through trial, error, engagement, withdrawal, sheer chance and countless other mechanisms — children discover their social selves. They locate themselves within the social spectrum, and discern where they belong, what they are capable of, and their "station in life". Violence and fear have an impact on this emerging self, and lock children in a poverty of imagination about the options they have to navigate the world they emerge into, to the detriment of the entire society.

Invest in children

For these reasons, as well as many others, it is in our collective interest to create the best possible learning environment for every child so that they may thrive and discover their own gifts and potential. This is not a sentimental plea, but the basis of most successful societies, and enshrined in national and international agreements such as the UN Child Rights Convention, Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals. Every global policy framework articulates a desire for a dynamic society with active and powerful citizens. If we desire socially responsible individuals who see themselves as custodians of wider interests beyond their own, it is critical that we invest in interventions that prevent violence against children at school and influence children's experience of schools. The relatively small investments that we put in now are likely to yield substantive dividends in the form of economic, health and social outcomes whose ultimate value may be well beyond measure.

Making a Schooling enjoyable

How to support a friend or a fellow student who has experinced violence?

if you are helping someone who experienced violence, remember to be gentle and kind towards them.

1 Be sensitive

your classment has gone through a hard time.
Be gentle with them

2 Be respectful

Understand their wishes if they want some space from you and your friends.
But make sure you keep checking on them

3 Be supportive

Show your support not only through words but also actions. Be friendly towards them and offer help with their studies if they are having trouble studying.
Or help them if they need support in reporting their case of Violence, especially if they feel threatened to report

OUR ADVOCACY MATERIALS

Ministry of Education and Sports, Legacy Towers Wing B
First Floor, Tel: 0393517407
Web: www.education.go.ug
Blog: www.gendermoes.blogspot.com/
Facebook page: The Gender Unit Ministry of Education and Sports

Please look out for the new publications by Ministry of Education and Sports

1. Guidelines for Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings, 2020
2. Guidelines for Implementation of the Roles and Responsibilities of Senior Woman and Senior Man Teacher, 2020
3. Guidelines for Formation and Strengthening of School Clubs, 2020
4. Menstrual Hygiene Management Training Manual, 2020