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The Assessment of the Effects of Menstrual Cycle on Teenage girls' Education in Meru District Council

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Abstract: Menstrual cycle is a biological condition experienced by females when reach teenage or puberty stage through to menopause. The condition recurs periodically (every month) and it is influenced by reproductive hormone. Although menstruation is a biological condition that could be seen normal, the literatures inform different because menstruation is attached to beliefs, dirtiness and taboos. The study on the effects of menstrual cycle to teenage girls' education was conducted in Meru District and has involved students from five schools –primary and secondary, health teachers and matrons who made a total of 147 participants. The study deployed cross-sectional research design, and data were collected using triangulation of methods: questionnaire and focus group discussion for students, while interview had involved matrons, health teachers and students were ready. The raw data were coded and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that 75 (56%) of respondents get affected academically by menstrual cycle as they have to absent or abscond from school at times of menstrual cycle. It was also revealed that, lack of good infrastructures: toilets, water and rubbish bins in the one hand cause challenges to the management of menstrual cycle. On the other hand, menstrual hygiene is an issue that is insufficiently recognized by parents/guardian and hence it lacks adequate attention to support. The study concludes that cultural beliefs attached to menstrual cycle and poor school infrastructures do affect teenage girls' education adversely. Thus it is recommended that community should improve school infrastructure, CSOs should provide advocate for the right to safe menstruation and parents support their teenage girls with sanitary pads.

Key words: *Menstrual cycle, teenage girls, education*

1.0 Introduction

Menstrual cycle is a biological condition experienced by females when reach teenage or puberty stage through to menopause. Teenage is period of life, involving major biological changes and psycho‑social development (Bhattacherjee *et al.,* 2013). In his view, Hazanah *et al.* (2015) have defined menstruation as a physical change in woman's body that happens periodically and influenced by reproductive hormone. On the other hand, the Republic of Uganda (2013) said, it is the monthly flow of blood from the uterus through the vagina in all girls and is normal and natural. It added that, the first monthly flow normally happens to girls between 9 and 15 years and this can last for 3 to 7 days. Menstruation in other words it is called period. The period cycle, that is the last day of period to the first day of the next period varies from one person to another, to some people it can be as short as 21 days and to others as long as 35 days but the average cycle is 28 days (RoU 2013).

Menstrual cycle is influenced by hormones: chemical messengers that are carried in the bloodstream. It varies in length and amount of bleeding according to the woman's age, weight, diet, amount of physical activity, level of stress and genetics (Mtawali et al., 1997). According to Marván *et al.* (2017), the first menstrual period is called menarche; menarche is experienced as a sudden event, one with little warning, for which girls may be unprepared practically and psychologically. In the same note, Uskul (2003) argued that the onset of the first menses is a significant milestone in a woman's life and reproductive cycle, for the female adolescent; it is a sharply defined sudden and distinct biological even.

Many cultures associate menstruation with uncleanness, as Marván *et al.* (2017) pointed out that in Mexico and the United States; menarche is a private event, which is often treated as a hygiene crisis. Many women do not speak openly about menstruation and take steps to hide the fact that they are menstruating. Also, the Bible; American Standard Version (ASV) in the book of Leviticus chapter 15: 19-33 says; "Whenever a woman has her menstrual period, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean until evening." It continues that anything she touches or sits on will be unclean for some period of time. In support of this argument, UNICEF (2013), through the study conducted in Burkina Faso and Niger revealed that menstruation is a taboo as nearly 86 percent of the interviewed head teachers and teachers said: it was a forbidden, hidden, shameful subject…women talk about menstruation only with other women. In some communities, women do not discuss it openly with their fellow women and therefore some mothers had not received any information about menstruation themselves and hence cannot advise their daughters. The report showed that the majority of the girls feel shy or stressed at school during menstruation and participate less due to shame, fatigue or pain.

In Tanzania the behaviour is not different, according to Nachilongo (2018), some communities in Tanzania do not celebrate a girl's first period; in fact, they are shamed and girls are told to keep it a secret. It is considered a taboo talking about it and women are regarded unholy and unhealthy during their periods. Hiding menstruation causes difficulties in its management. According to Nachilongo (2018), period or menstruation exposes a girl to social exclusion, which in turn cause negative outcome psychologically, physically and behaviorally. She added that some 62 percent of girls feel physically sick and weak during menstruation while 15.9 percent miss school due to menstruation and in most cases many miss between 1-3 days, and 1.6 percent who missed the entire week.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Studies have shown that the issues of menstruation from both the developed and developing countries have negative perceptions especially from cultural point of view and that the phenomenon is kept secrecy (Uskul, 2003). In developing countries management of menstruation and hygiene has been a problem particularly to students including Tanzania as evidenced by a study by Guya *et al.* (2014), a study conducted in Kinondoni and Bagamoyo Districts. Although studies have revealed problems associated with menstruation, the researchers wanted to assess the menstrual effects particularly on academic performance in Meru District. Despite sensitizations campaigns like keeping Tanzania's girls in school: *investing in menstrual hygiene and Tanzania, let's Talk period, Breaking the silence,* and the like, the situation is not promising. It is expected that the campaigns would reduce taboos in the society and make them

open up Moreover, the community services provided by Tengeru Institute of Community Development (TICD) at Kikwe Secondary School in commemoration of the International Day of the Girl Child in October 2017 and the Community Development Week of June 2018 evidenced that girls are suffering from menstrual hygiene including sanitary pads. In nutshell, menstrual hygiene in Meru District is still a problem which affects girls who are economically dependents to parents /guardians. Therefore, conducting study in educational effects related to menstrual cycle to teenage girls in Meru District Council was very important**.**

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study deployed a descriptive and cross- sectional research design. Where participants were selected basing on the age difference and occupational experience. According to SUC (2016), researchers using this design can employ a relatively passive approach to making causal inferences based on findings, but also the designs is relatively inexpensive and take up little time to conduct. The study involved five schools in three wards of Akheri, Kikwe and Uraki in Meru District Council where triangulation data collection methods were applied.

2.2 Description of the Area of Study

This study had comprised five schools: two secondary schools and three primary schools in Meru district, in Arusha region. Meru District Council is located to the Eastern part of Arusha Region. It is one of the two constituencies of Arumeru District. Meru District Council is bordered by Hai District of Kilimanjaro Region on the East, Simanjiro District of Manyara Region on the South, on the west is bordered by Arusha Urban whereas on the North is bordered by Longido District council. The district is populated by 268,144 people; where females were 136,880 and males were 131264. It is formed by 17 wards and 71 villages. It had 57 secondary schools: 30 being public and 27 being private. The target population of this study is all teenage girls of primary and secondary schools in Meru DC. The area for research was selected because, there's no study related to effects of menstrual to teenage girls' education conducted in the area, and the presence of many primary and secondary schools.

2.3 Sampling and sample size

The nature of study determined the sampling technique; this is because menstruation is a common phenomenon among females falling under child bearing age: that is from menarche to menopause, therefore all females who range under this period of time experience menstruation. Hence five schools; primary and secondary were randomly selected from public and private schools for the study.

To get participating students in the study the researcher used stratified random sampling based on the ages of the participants and then prepared pieces of papers written 'Yes' or 'No' where students had to pick one paper. All students who have picked papers with 'Yes' print were involved in the study. These were from standard six and seven in primary schools and form one to form four secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants by virtue of their positions (matrons and health teachers). The sample size for study was 147 participants (134 students and 13 non students).

2.4 Data collection

Methods of data collection used in this study were questionnaire, focus group discussion and key informants interview; which involved volunteered standard seven and secondary school teenage girls, matrons and health teachers after build rapport and thereafter carry out interview when they are at ease. Interview helps to dig deep by probing whenever the point given by the respondents is not clear as argued by the business communication (retrieved on 20th November 2018), that through planed interviews detailed information can be collected which enables proper analysis of a problem.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to collect information from standard seven, form one and form two while questionnaire was used to collect information from form three and form four. Questionnaire method was deployed for the form threes and form fours because of level of their literacy.

2.5 Data Analysis

Researchers used qualitative approach to analyze data through description of issues, tabulating data, and then discuss and interpret for the purpose of sharing meaning.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Teenage girls' Knowledge on Menstrual cycle

Having prior knowledge about menstruation could make teenage girls take precaution and find a way of coping with the situation

Table 1: Teenage girls with pre-information on menstruation cycle before menarche (n=123)

Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Experienced Menarche	81	66%
Have not experienced Menarche	42	34%
Pre-information before Menarche	113	92%
Had no pre-information	10	8%

Source: Research Findings, 2018

The findings in Table 1 revealed that 113 students (92%) out of 123 had received information about menstruation before their first experience (menarche), while 10 (8%) respondents had no information about menstruation.

Table 2: Sources of pre-information about menstruation (n=123)

Sources of Information	Frequency	Percentage
Parents	30	24
Sisters	27	22
Age mates	10	8
Religious leaders	4	3
Classroom lesson	36	29
Media (tv, radio, books, etc)	13	10.4
Health service providers	2	2.1
Matron	1	1.4

Source: Research Findings, 2018

The information from key informants (KIs) who were health teachers and matrons correlated with information from students as 10 health teachers and matrons (77%) out of 13 agreed that their students had pre-information about menstruation before menarche while 3 health teachers and matrons (23%) said students had no pre-information about menstruation. When the respondents asked, where they received information, the responses varied as shown in Table 2.

Further the findings show that the pre-information about menstruation to students may have been attributed by different ways but mainly through classroom teaching 36 (29%), followed by parents 30 and sisters 27 (24% and 22%) respectively (Table 3.2). On the other hand a 'no' response from health teachers and matrons could be attributed by poor management of menstrual cycle among majority of students, while disclosure of menstruation information from parents to teenage girls might have been influenced by formal education and media. Uskul (2003) pointed out that "having older sisters and other female relatives in the house was mentioned as one of the ways of getting educated. As in previous studies, other sources of information about menstruation were school, peers, books and girls' magazines."

3.2 Effects of Menstrual Cycle on Teenage Girls in Attaining Education

The study has revealed that lack of sanitary pads, good toilets, rubbish bins, incinerators and water in schools affects students' studies. Table 3 shows that 75 respondents (56%) out of 134 said when they experience menstruation they have either abscond from school or not attend school at all, while 59 (44%) respondents had no answer. The 44% of respondents may not be affected by condition due to availability of facilities. Table 3 shows the effects of menstruation to students they at school or / and home.

Table 3: Effects of Menstruation at school and home (n=134)

Action	Frequency	%
Abscond from school	45	34
Absenteeism	30	22
No action	59	44

Source: Research Findings, 2018

3.3 Length of time that girls loose for school during menstruation

When the participants asked about the number of days they experience menstruation, the responses varied from one day to above seven days, where the majority 67 (50%) experience menstruation in three in every month while, minority of respondents 3(2%), experience menstruation in one day only per month. There were respondents students 13 (16%) who have been experiencing menstruation from seven and days and above. These findings entail that in a year a student might miss classes for whole months (3*9=27): 3 being numbers of days which a student experiences menstruation and 9 represents months which a student attends classes. For those who experience menstruation in seven days and above may miss classes for 63 (7*9) days per years. This situation informs that, menstruation is not something to be taken for granted as it may cause among other things poor performance of students only because of missing class session in every month. Table 4 illustrates number of days that a student experiences menstruation.

According to Pandey (2014), girls face challenges of attending school during menstruation due to lack of basic infrastructure amenities something which affects studies badly. Moreover, the study

pointed out that when school lacks infrastructure of toilet and/or toilets with no doors, then the girls have to go in pairs to toilet and wait on each other to change pad (*ibid*).

Table 4: Number of days that a student experience menstruation (n=134)

Respondents	**3**	**12**	**67**	**9**	**17**	**5**	**9**	**12**
No of Days	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Above 7
Percentage	2	9	50	7	12.5	3.5	7	9

Source: Research Findings, 2018

Eijk *et al.* (2016) had found that girls' reasons for absence were physical discomfort or pain, lack of water, hygiene and disposal facilities in school toilets, fear of staining their clothes while commercial pad use as a continuous variable was associated with a decrease in absenteeism. The findings therefore suggest that use of modern sanitary pads and supportive environment may improve school attendance and performance of teenage girls. However, Shanbhag *et al.* (2012) had pointed out that, proper menstrual hygiene and correct perceptions and beliefs can protect the women from this suffering.

3.4 Physiological difficulties experienced during menstrual cycle

According to the findings of this study, 75 respondents (56%) out of 134 said, menstruation causes physiological effects on their like womb pains, pains around waist, breast pains, vomiting, general body weakness, headache, menorrhea and loss of appetite and dizziness such that they need bed rest and therefore becomes difficult to attend class sessions adequately. Table 5 shows the response of the respondents about the physiological conditions they face during menstruation.

Table 5: Physiological problems encountered by teenage girls during menstruation (n=134)

Problems	**Frequency**	**%**
Headache	25	18.7
Womb pains	52	38.8
Vomiting, nausea	9	6.7
Dizziness	2	1.5
Pain around waist	9	6.7
General body tiredness	11	8.2
Becoming angry	9	6.7
Diarrhea	3	2.2
Menorrhea	7	5.2
Itching on vulva	2	1.5
Loose appetite	2	1.5
Breast pain	3	2.2

Source: Research Findings, 2018

The findings correlate with findings of the study conducted in Nepal which found that at times of menstruation girls are prone to diseases like Hemorrhage, Anemia, Syphilis, over flow of blood, with symptoms like headache, back pain, backbone pain, leg pain, lethargy (Pandey, 2014).

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1 Conclusion

Basing on the findings of this study, menstrual cycle does affect teenage girls' education, especially when the school environment is not supportive in terms of good toilets: toilets that can protect a person during easing herself, enough water and rubbish bins to throw waste products. Also, although, menstruation is a common phenomenon to all child bearing women, still it is kept secret, such that a girl cannot openly discussion with her parents: father and mother. Hence many students go without sanitary pads of emergency. The coping mechanism, therefore is absenteeism or/ and abscond from school. If this condition happens 3-5 days per month, then obviously in one academic year some students will miss between 27 days and 45days. This justifies the effects of menstrual cycle to teenage girls' education.

4.2 Recommendations

The recommendations are directed to specific stakeholders of teenage girls' education: namely, teenage girls, parents, the community and CSOs.

Teenage girls

Empowerment begins at individual level (power within). Teenage girls are supposed to break the culture of silence and shyness for something biological and essential for continuity of human kind.

Parents/guardians

Parents and guardians should stop from propagating menstruation as taboos, instead should provide pre information about menstruation and its management to their girls and provide necessary support whenever need may be in order to make sure that their children do not miss school.

Community

The community should take deliberate initiatives to improve school infrastructures like toilets with locks, availability of adequate water supply and environmental sanitation through school management boards.

Civil Society Organizations

Civil Society Organizations, serve as catalyst, that help to mobilize resources internally and externally for the purpose of bring about change in the communities. They should educate the communities about realities in order to get rid of, myths, beliefs and taboos which end ups in gender discrimination. Also support the communities through projects like water supply and dormitories.

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