



African Population & Health Research Center

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Menstrual attitudes and practices in an informal settlement in Nairobi: the impact on girl's health and wellbeing

Background

- Research from Tanzania, India and Bangladesh shows that lack of access to safe, convenient and culturally-appropriate methods for dealing with menstruation lead to discomfort and hygiene risks, and restrict women and girl's participation in education and social and economic activities. Negative attitudes and taboos surrounding menstruation have been observed all over the world but are expressed in different ways.
- In urban informal settlements, the problems are particularly acute because of poverty, overcrowding and lack of privacy, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities.
- However little evidence is available about attitudes, menstrual management practices, and problems in poor urban contexts in sub-Saharan Africa

Objectives

- To examine menstrual attitudes, practices and problems in urban informal settlements
- To understand girls' unmet needs and preferences for information and services

Methods

Study population:

- Girls and women in Korogocho informal settlement in Nairobi:
 - Girls attending primary school aged 12-14
 - Out of school girls aged 12-17
 - Women aged 18-49

Research Ethics

- The study was granted ethical clearance by KEMRI and approved by the City Council of Nairobi (CCN).

Data collection

- Data collection carried out in May and June 2008
- Individuals recruited using purposive quota sampling

- 33 In-depth interviews and 18 focus group discussions with girls and women
- 5 key informant interviews with teachers and nurses
- Field interviewers used semi-structured interview guides with questions on menstrual practices, attitudes and perceptions, contextual factors, health and wellbeing and access to information on menstruation sex
- Interviews conducted in Kiswahili and English, audio-tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Kiswahili to English.
- The texts were stored and analyzed using Nudist 6.0 QSR software and analyzed by two researchers using content and thematic analysis

Results

Knowledge and access to information

- Girls received information about menstruation and growing up from mothers, other female relatives, teachers and friends.
- Most girls learned about menstruation before their first period, but for many, the information was not accurate or detailed enough to instill them with confidence.
- Only a minority of girls and women were able to describe the biological aspects of menstruation accurately or knew the most likely time in the cycle for getting pregnant

"I hear people say [menstrual blood] is impurities which are coming out of the body but I don't understand how it becomes impure and why in the form of blood only?" (Girl aged 17, not in school)

"[During menstruation,] you get so bored and don't feel like playing with the other children."

"You just don't feel comfortable, you are just uneasy about everything." (Girls aged 12-14 attending primary school)

Attitudes and stigma

- Many girls expressed a preference to receive information from their mothers, but this was often undermined in practice by cultural taboos about discussing menstruation and sex.
- Menstrual blood is seen as 'unclean', 'dirty' or harmful if touched
- Many expressed negative attitudes about menstruation and there is an expectation that girls will feel irritable and lethargic at that time

Menstrual practices

- Almost all participants see sanitary pads as their preferred method for managing menstrual flow
- Most participants had ever used sanitary pads, but two thirds of in-depth interview participants said they have problems accessing sanitary pads. Clothes, cotton wool and improvised materials such as pieces of mattress or tissue are also used.
- Many participants used a combination of pads and cloths, saving pads for their heaviest days. Some change pads infrequently to save money.

Health and wellbeing and unmet needs

- Lack of access to sanitary pads causes discomfort, embarrassment, anxiety and shame
- Girls who stain their clothes or have body odour due to lack of access to products are stigmatised and sometimes mocked
- Girls and women from poorest families, girls with unsupportive or neglectful parents or guardians have particular problems
- Irregular changing of sanitary pads may lead to skin irritation
- Overcrowding and poor water and sanitation facilities leads to hygiene risks and lack of privacy

"I feel uncomfortable and worse when it is [a] school day [...] I wish I could be at home so that I don't have to worry about my clothes being stained and people laughing at me." (Girl aged 14, attending primary school)

"[A girl] can use a pad for a whole [day] till night [...] she is feeling bad and she can easily start smelling in class" (Head teacher, informal primary school)



Korogocho is affected by overcrowded housing and lack of sanitation and waste disposal facilities



Most residents have to pay for water by the jerry can, and water supplies are limited



Girl standing outside a school toilet



Pit latrines are common in schools and the community



Residents often have to pay to use communal toilet and bathing facilities

Discussion and recommendations

- Girls and women in informal settlements in Kenya lack access to affordable, appropriate and acceptable menstrual management products. Taboos surrounding menstruation can increase anxiety and discomfort during menstruation and make it harder for girls to access information and support.
- School attendance and performance appears to be affected by a combination of menstrual pains, limited access to pads, and stigma. Negative perceptions about girls' capacity to study and interact socially during menstruation may also play a role.
- Interventions are needed to increase girls' opportunities to discuss menstruation and access information from adults including mothers other parents and guardians. School-based sexuality education should be comprehensive, begin early and be regularly repeated.
- The Kenyan Ministry of Education has identified gender as a priority and introduced initiatives to improve toilets and hand washing facilities in schools. Sustained investment is needed to ensure these measures are implemented.

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