

## MENSTRUATION: What was your daughter's first experience? Did you prepare her?

By REBECCA BIRUNGI AND TOV TEAM

THE year was 2010. She was 13 years old and in Primary Four, preparing for the end of year exams hoping to progress to the next class. Suddenly, Akiki, not her real name, felt wet! Was it water dribbling down her skirt! Her underpants felt heavy and sticky. She quickly rushed to her 'bedroom' to find out what was wrong. It was blood! What? What's wrong with me! She changed her underpants. She changed again and changed but the blood could not stop flowing!

Matters were made worse the following morning, when despite wearing two knickers through the night, she was still wet. She was scared and together with her only confidant Agnes, rushed to grand mother and broke the news.

"Grandma, I am having a rough time, blood is coming from my private parts, I feel very unclean and very scared. I am not sure whether I will be able to sit my exams tomorrow, lest I faint along the way to school", she said.

Akiki says her grandma explained that this was a sign of growing up. She said, "My dear Akiki, this is a transitional period for you and a sign of maturity. You are now a woman! Most importantly do not engage in sexual intercourse with boys or men, because you will get pregnant. Always remember that. For now I will show you how you will manage the blood flow and at the same time feel and stay clean....."

Akiki represents thousands of girls who face their first menstruation experience without prior warning, with little or no knowledge about the change in our bodies. Different girls have had to discover this important phase in their life by themselves, and devised their own coping strategies. To many like Akiki it is a shock, many feel lost and scared, because they are at a loss at what is happening to them.

Parents have not helped much because even the mothers who must have gone through this phase are reluctant to talk to their daughters about sexual matters. Sex education which would cover physiological changes in a human body now taught in schools, is a privilege only to the lucky girls who attend schools, and even then such topics are delayed until Primary six or Seven when teachers feel, the pupils are 'ready' for such 'controversial' information!

This means that Akiki and the like who start school late and find themselves in Primary Four at the age of 13, 14 or even 15 may have to brace themselves for such shocks. If we refuse to live in modern times, where free exchange of information is required, such scenarios like Akiki's cannot be avoided.

Catherine Othieno, Director COFCAWE says, "Early communication between parents and children



A girl shows off a home-made cotton sanitary pad.



A COFCAWE beneficiary sharing her experiences with MAMA FM presenter, Charles Ssuuna.

concerning values and expectations about sex is equally important in helping adolescents delay their sex initiation and make responsible decisions about sexual behaviors."

### But how does Akiki manage to stay clean?

For starters, Akiki's home is in Kkungu, only 14 kilometres away from Kampala City. And just like any other rural child, Akiki is not different despite leaving in a semi-urban village.

Her grandmother hardly meets the basic home requirements such as education, shelter and health care including sanitary pads. Gender activists are justified to say that such people are vulnerable to exploitation as they cannot afford the basic necessities, not even sanitary pads. Akiki's example and her family is a reflection of the face of poverty. And this situation is forcing them to look for alternatives to work as sanitary pads. They use old clothes and bed sheets as sanitary pads!

**Harriet Namulondo, Assistant Project Officer on Reproductive Health with COFCAWE says:** "In addition to imparting knowledge on reproductive health such as puberty, we train them in making sanitary pads using locally available materials such as cotton, bed sheets and light polythene bags".

Akiki is one of the beneficiaries from COFCAWE who proudly says: My grandmother willingly gives me old cotton bedsheets which I cut into smaller pieces and use sparingly"

When my periods begin I fold the long piece of cotton and put the polythene bag in between the cotton piece. The polythene bag helps in stopping the blood leakage. I wear tight underpants to hold firmly the 'sanitary pads', I carry along with me to school two pieces in my school bag to change after three hours.

Back at home, I boil water and soak the spoilt cotton piece for forty minutes. I wash and hang it on a wire after which I iron it with a local aluminum iron box. COFCAWE taught us to kill the unseen germs. Almost every after four months, I have to replace the old pads with brand new ones. So I walk eight kilometers to Matugga market to shop for old cotton

bed sheets. I am no longer scared and afraid of the monthly periods because the peer educator assured us that menstruation is a good sign to show that a girl is healthy. There is nothing to be scared of".

### Health Tips

- Body hygiene includes cleaning and washing well, our private parts.
- Don't use soap while cleaning / washing your private parts. The impact of soap eventually damages the membrane of the lining of the private parts, and in the event of sexual intercourse with an HIV/AIDS positive person, you will have a bigger expose of becoming infected with the HIV virus.
- Use clean water to wash the surface of the private parts, women should not use their fingers to open their vaginas in the name of cleaning the interior. The fluids inside the vagina provide a natural cleaning process.
- Avoid use of concoctions in the name of enlarging or narrowing your private parts. Some of these concoctions are sensitive and have alkaline, a chemical that destroys the acidic fluids in the vagina which erases the lumen thereby exposing the area to infections including HIV.
- Shun those commercial *ssengas* / *Kojjas* who encourage the use of Coca cola to wash the private parts presumably to restore virginity. Yes, this may work for one or two days but later it will back fire as this will not be sustained later exposing you to HIV/Aids.

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## COFCAWE offers new lease of life to school dropouts

BY BRENDA CHIPO AND TOV TEAM

The out of school youth, who had lost hope now have a life, thanks to a Non government organisation, Concern For Children and Women (COFCAWE), which has decided to provide emotional support and life skills to hundreds of school dropouts in Wakiso District. This comes in form of family planning talks and demos, counseling, STD prevention and HIV/Aids prevention/coping, good hygiene, and proper sanitation, among others.

The three year project supported by the International Solidarity Foundation, ISF, has been well received, and the youth are upbeat about it. Many wish that it can be extended for many more years and urge fellow youths not to miss any of the trainings COFCAWE provides.

Mary Namusisi 22, one of the beneficiaries says; "Only the unserious girls and boys can rush in for sex. Not after this training! I am sad that my husband Johan did not attend this training, because it would have been better if both of us had participated. He would have left this training rich with new ideas that would help us eke out an independent life from my father in law on whose land we are still staying.

But I am going to share with him all this information and talk to him about having a manageable family through use of family planning to avoid economic stress in the future.

If it means using a condom, my husband will have to do so, we shall visit a health centre together so that we get more information on a suitable method for us. A friend alerted me some time back about the benefits of the COFCAWE trainings but I had not taken her serious not until this year.

I know that I will not face as many problems as my friend Kyakuhaire, my agemate who has three children, of which the first born is not yet of school going age!

"COFCAWE has taught us birth control, safe sex, prevention of and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), good hygiene and financial management. These and many others, have helped us to change our life style for the better.

### John Kyakulaga Chairperson COFCAWE says:

There is still a chance for everything that goes wrong. No two wrongs make a right and that is why we have to bring closer these people and show them the right way.

We work had to address the gaps and correct their mistakes. Many of them have already realized that indulging in early sex is not a solution to their financial constraints but rather to look for productive means of survival.

Our work is to impart knowledge and skills to the youth who are willing to attend the trainings.

By the way, many do not like attending such trainings as they suspect that they will be interrogated over their past dids, but later, they appreciate and thereafter train fellow youth in the villages which makes a lot of sense because these too, are our target.

As COFCAWE we have to continue training the children, parents, teachers, religious leaders and the youth to create an environment where each one knows what is expected of him or her. After these trainings on the various areas like HIV/Aids and pregnancy prevention, body hygiene among others many promise to change.



Ms Catherine Othieno, Director of COFCAWE: Don't use soap while washing your private parts.