

School-based interventions in East Africa

A decade of knowledge and learning



Irise International

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Section 1: Chronological overview

Irise International is a global leader in menstrual health programming, research, advocacy, and policy development. In particular, they have worked extensively in East African primary and secondary schools to understand how inadequate support during menstruation affects girls' education, and how this can be effectively tackled.

Irise International uses an evidence-based approach, conducting peer-reviewed scientific studies and developing tools to measure and capture metrics relevant to menstrual experiences. Various interventions have been tested in order to identify which are the most successful at improving girl's experiences in schools, and build an evidence base for their effectiveness. In addition, Irise International also work on the wider policy landscape and enabling environment to support local educational infrastructure to integrate menstrual wellbeing into everyday practice, for sustainable and lasting effects.

This section gives a chronological overview of the main studies, projects, policy development activities, and reports that Irise International carried out between 2011 and 2021 relating to East African schools, along with an overview of the wider narrative concerning menstruation in the public sphere. A timeline of notable studies and developments, along with a table of key interventions and their outcomes, are presented at the end of the section.

2011 – 2013: Irise International established; menstruation is a neglected issue

Working theory: providing pads will improve confidence, attendance, and attainment.

Irise International was founded in 2011 in response to a study of Kenyan schoolgirls, which revealed that they lacked suitable materials to absorb menstrual blood and private spaces to change at school during their periods. This resulted in their absence from school and poor concentration in class. Initially, it was anticipated that providing pads would help to improve their attendance and well-being, and this was therefore the focus of the first intervention.

The INSPIRES project ¹ involved 302 schoolgirls across 10 schools (primary and secondary) in Nyanza province, Western Kenya. Half of the schools were assigned to the intervention arm, whereby the schoolgirls received a training session on how to make a reusable sanitary pad, materials to make three pads, and a handout containing instructions on making the pad and advice for drying and storing it. The other schools were assigned to the control arm, and did not receive the intervention (schoolgirls at these schools were provided with the workshop and materials at the end of the study). All schoolgirls, in both the intervention and the control schools, completed a questionnaire in which they reported how often they had missed school over the last month. The questionnaire was completed at the start of the study, and then repeated four weeks after the workshop and materials had been delivered in the intervention schools.

The study found a small decrease in absenteeism among schoolgirls in the intervention group, who reported missing 1.32 days of school per month at the end of the study, versus 2.01 mean days missed among schoolgirls in the control group. However, it was difficult to isolate and quantify the effect of pad provision on absenteeism because of considerable variability in the quality of pads produced by the schoolgirls. Some reported finding it difficult to source equipment to make the pads at home themselves, and this was most difficult for the poorest schoolgirls, who were most likely to lack menstrual supplies in the first place. Overall, the study concluded that home-made pads were not an optimal solution to the menstrual challenges of schoolgirls; instead, a production operation that could buy materials in bulk and

¹ Wilson, E., Reeve, J., and Pitt, A. 2014. Education. Period. Developing an acceptable and replicable menstrual hygiene intervention. *Development in Practice*, 24(1), 63-80

develop expertise and sewing skills to produce higher quality products consistently would be more effective and efficient.

The study also found that measuring menstrual absenteeism had certain complications, as it was not easy to disentangle menstrual-related absenteeism from economic absenteeism (e.g., not having enough money for pads) and health-related absenteeism (e.g., having period pains), and very clear communication with the participants was important for them to understand what was being asked. Menstrual stigma was a complicating factor in being able to talk freely and openly with the schoolgirls, and those most affected by menstrual absenteeism were not at school in the first place, and therefore unable to participate in the study.

There was limited public consciousness about menstrual-related challenges in schools when Irise International was founded in 2011, although interest was growing in academic fields concerned with gender equality and sanitation ². In 2013, Irise International produced a report, 'A Vicious Cycle of Silence', reviewing the extent to which the menstruation taboo is addressed by the international United Nations treaties and human rights bodies ³. The report highlighted glaring gaps in existing policy on the issue of menstruation and human rights, effectively reproduced the menstruation taboo, with detrimental consequences for women and girls affected by menstrual challenges. By this point, the relationship between menstruation and human rights was gaining visibility, with the detrimental impact of menstrual stigma on the wellbeing of women and girls being highlighted to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in 2012 ⁴. Menstruation was beginning to be framed as an important, hidden, and neglected human rights issue.

2014 – 2015: Irise International builds evidence base; menstruation gains traction and visibility

Working theory: providing pads and menstrual education will improve confidence, attendance, and attainment.

The next study undertaken by Irise International was conducted in the Rukungiri district, western Uganda, and was focussed on understanding schoolgirls' lived experiences of menstrual-related challenges and subsequent effects on their education ⁵. Six primary schools took part in the study, which included a questionnaire and focus groups with schoolgirls, interviews with male and female teachers, and an assessment of school toilet facilities. Metrics were designed and validated to capture elements of schoolgirls' lived experience.

The studies found deficiencies in both material provision (i.e., lacking pads and facilities to change them) but also in knowledge; schoolgirls lacked information to understand what was happening with their bodies. Their schooling was affected in a variety of ways, including their confidence to participate in class, their attendance at school, and their educational attainment. The study also found that female teachers

² Sommer, M., and Sahin, M. 2013. Overcoming the taboo: advancing the global agenda for menstrual hygiene management for schoolgirls. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(9), 1556-1559.

³ Boosey, R., and Wilson-Smith, E. 2014. *A Vicious Cycle of Silence: What are the implications of the menstruation taboo for the fulfilment of women and girls' human rights and, to what extent is the menstruation taboo addressed by international human rights law and human rights bodies?* ScHARR Report Series No. 29. School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield.

⁴ de Albuquerque, C. 2012. *Stigma and the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation*. Geneva, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. A/HRC/21/42.

⁵ Boosey, R., Prestwich, G., and Deave, T. 2014. Menstrual hygiene management amongst schoolgirls in the Rukungiri district of Uganda and the impact on their education: a cross-sectional study. *The Pan African Medical Journal*, 19.

were similarly affected by the lack of facilities during menstruation, and would sometimes miss classes as a result. As a result, Irise International's understanding of menstrual-related challenges in schools, and how they can be solved, transitioned from a product-provision-based approach to a wider and more holistic approach, encompassing menstrual education and information as well as improved school facilities and support.

The next study, initiated in 2014 and running for 1 year, examined the effect of providing both pads and menstrual education on schoolgirls' attendance, confidence, and attainment⁶. This study involved 1,170 schoolgirls across 40 primary schools in Bushenvi district, western Uganda. At baseline, a comprehensive assessment was conducted to identify how menstrual-related challenges affected schoolgirl's lives. The intervention arm (20 schools) then received a workshop on menstruation and puberty, and a set of six reusable pads. The workshop was designed from previous work which invited schoolgirls from all over Uganda to anonymously ask questions about menstruation and puberty. Six months and one year after the intervention, the assessment was repeated, and absenteeism was triangulated between self-reported data and school register data. Schools in the control arm received the intervention at the end of the project.

Various measurement challenges were encountered by the study; use of school registers was compromised by the amount of missing or inaccurate data, and school drop-out considerably reduced the amount of data ultimately collected. Ultimately, small, positive effects on girls' knowledge of menstruation, daily activities during menstruation, and self-esteem were found, but these differences were hard to sustain beyond the life of the project. No positive effect on reducing absenteeism was found by the study, although a post-hoc meta-analysis combining study data with other studies elsewhere in Africa found a small, positive, short-term effect on reducing absenteeism.

The study concluded that behaviour change components would be vital for any sustainable improvements in girls school engagement to be found. The impact of menstrual stigma and taboo meant that structural and cultural improvements to the school environment were required in order for the interventions to have any significant or lasting effect. Indeed, the study suggested that the process of menstrual hygiene intervention delivery is as or more important than the intervention itself, in the sense that it could potentially break the stigma around menstruation and initiate long-term social change.

Qualitative work conducted in the course of the study also revealed a more complex relationship between menstrual hygiene management and school engagement than was necessarily captured by standard measurement approaches. Menstrual absenteeism does not necessarily manifest in terms of entire days missed of school; sometimes a single class would be missed. Even if a girl remained present in class, her concentration and participation would potentially be detrimentally affected. Thus, measuring attendance alone was not providing a true reflection of how improved menstrual hygiene management facilities was potentially improving the lives of schoolgirls.

By 2014 - 2015, menstrual-related challenges were gaining increasing visibility in the public and professional sphere. The first International Menstrual Hygiene Day was celebrated in 2014, and in Uganda, Irise International began working with the Ugandan Ministry of Education and local NGOs to develop national-level policies and targets relating to menstruation. This resulted in the publication of the Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter in 2015, which recognised menstrual hygiene management as fundamental to the dignity and wellbeing of women and girls and set out a range of commitments to improving it⁷. Discussion of pad provision for schoolgirls also featured prominently in election campaigns in Uganda in 2015; menstruation was now firmly in the public spotlight.

⁶ Wilson, E., Smith, C., Herbert, E., and Julious, S. 2019. *Investigating the Impact of a Menstrual Hygiene Program on School Absenteeism of Rural Ugandan Girls: A Delayed Cluster Randomised Control Trial*. Available at SSRN 3321488.

⁷ Government of Uganda. 2015. *Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter - Uganda 2015*. Available at: <https://www.ircwash.org/>

During this period, Irise International continued to develop the menstrual education component of their work. A wealth of educational materials was produced, including curriculums, syllabuses, manual, training and teaching outlines, and evaluation tools. This work was carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Uganda, as part of an effort to standardise and raise the quality of menstrual and reproductive health education in schools across the country.

2016 – 2018: Menstruation Friendly Schools project commences; menstrual stigma and taboo recognised as major issue around the world

Working theory: providing pads, menstrual education, and tackling menstrual stigma, will improve confidence, attendance, and attainment.

By 2016, menstruation had broken into mainstream public consciousness following the ‘Year of the Period’ in 2015. It was increasingly recognised that menstrual challenges such as period poverty, stigma, and lack of menstrual education did not just affect schoolgirls in low-income countries. This prompted Irise International to expand their work to the UK, and the knowledge, experience, and resources produced from the projects in East African schools began to take on a global relevance.

In Uganda, national-level efforts towards improving menstrual hygiene management continued, including the removal of VAT from sanitary pads and menstrual cups, and introduction a national standard for reusable pads. Whilst appetite had increased for tackling the problem of menstrual challenges in schools, the evidence base for which interventions worked best were not strong enough to identify a clear strategy to adopt.

Although menstrual stigma and taboo had long been recognised as a significant obstacle to overcoming menstrual-related challenges, the degree to which they were holding back other interventions of education and pad provision was becoming apparent. In 2018, an Irise International community member produced a dissertation, ‘Hidden Yet Shared’, investigating experiences of menstrual taboo across UK and Ugandan contexts, and noting many similarities between them⁸. The report highlighted how greater focus on tackling taboos and promoting a global, unified response would have a significant impact on improving menstrual health around the world. A correspondence article in *The Lancet*, co-authored by Irise International, also highlighted how the dismantling of negative social norms relating to menstruation is urgently needed to attain broader progress towards gender equality⁹.

Irise International combined and built on the knowledge and expertise gathered from previous interventions in the Menstruation Friendly Schools Project (MFS), which commenced in 2018¹⁰. The project aimed to produce sustained improvements in educational outcomes for girls through a triad of interventions: menstrual and puberty-related education; menstrual product provision via local suppliers; and activities to engage and involve the wider community. The project was conducted in the Jinja region of Uganda, with 20 schools and their associated communities taking part.

A baseline assessment was carried out in late 2017 / early 2018 using surveys of Primary 6 and 7 students and data from District Education Offices. Absenteeism was self-reported by a sample of Primary 6 schoolgirls, attainment was assessed through the exam grades of Primary 7 schoolgirls, and retention (i.e., avoidance of students dropping out of school) was estimated through the proportion of Primary 7

⁸ Goolden, L. 2018. *Hidden yet shared: an investigation into experiences of the menstrual taboo across higher and lower income contexts*. MA Dissertation, University of Leeds.

⁹ Wilson, E., Haver, J., Torondel, B., Rubli, J., and Caruso, B. 2018. Dismantling menstrual taboos to overcome gender inequality. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 2(8), e17.

¹⁰ Irise. 2018. *Baseline Report for: FDYV-NBXV-ZK: Developing a replicable package for creating “menstruation friendly” schools in Uganda*.

schoolgirls who registered to sit exams, but then failed to attend. Knowledge of, and attitudes towards, menstruation was assessed by surveying samples of Primary 6 students. Retention of students was measured using a proxy indicator of students who registered to sit exams and then failed to sit them; this was anticipated to be a substantial underestimate of true retention, as not all students register to sit exams. Retention is particularly challenging to measure, as local sources of data such as school registers are frequently inaccurate, and self-reported measurements are not possible as the absent students cannot be surveyed.

2019 – 2021: Menstruation Friendly Schools project completed; women and girls suffer significant setbacks to gender equality

Pads/education/stigma-tackling intervention triad is very effective, but the global pandemic creates disproportionately negative impacts on women and girls

After one year of the MFS project (from 2018 to 2019), improvements in attendance were observed among the schoolgirls, equating to an additional 7 days in school per girl over the school year ¹¹. Improvements in academic attainment were also shown, with substantially higher proportions of girls achieving top grades in their primary school leaving exams. The proxy measurement for schoolgirl retention also appeared to indicate a small improvement in the number of girls remaining in school, rather than dropping out.

The global Covid-19 pandemic interfered with the endpoint evaluation of the project (originally scheduled for 2020), as the unprecedented upheaval to life and schooling disrupted the relationship between baseline, midpoint, and endpoint data. Changes in school attendance, attainment, and retention could no longer be attributed to the effects of the project when comparing pre- and post-pandemic evaluations. The endpoint evaluation was therefore adjusted to compare attendance, attainment, and retention among MFS project schoolgirls with non-MFS project schoolgirls in comparable schools in the area, and completed in 2021. However, the knowledge and attitudes continued to be surveyed among the MFS project schoolchildren, and these demonstrated very strong and significant improvements between 2018 and 2021. Given the significant interruption to school-based learning in 2020 and 2021, this was an unexpected and laudable outcome.

As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, Irise International conducted a rapid review to assess the gendered impacts of the global disaster on women and girls ¹². The review utilised evidence from past public health emergencies, data and publications on the socio-economic and gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and primary research in Uganda with government and third-sector stakeholders. The review found a growing body of research, stories, and experiences highlighting how the progress towards gender equality over the last decade is in serious jeopardy. Whilst the disease of Covid-19 itself may not discriminate between men and women, existing inequalities and harmful social norms do; the financial security and life-chances of women and girls around the world have been disproportionately affected by the disaster. The report concluded that the potential of young women to transform the long-term prosperity of their communities and societies is at significant risk of being lost if urgent action is not taken to protect them and their futures.

¹¹ Irise. 2019. *“Nowadays I am free, I go to school, I jump” Mid-way evaluation report for: FDYV-NBXV-ZK: Developing a replicable package for creating “menstruation friendly” schools in Uganda.*

¹² Moore, J. 2021. *10 Million Futures: An urgent call to action to protect the futures of young women and girls.* Irise International.

A final, notable development during this period was the creation of the Menstrual Practices Needs Scale (MPNS) by John Hopkins University, Irise International, and the University of Oxford¹³. This questionnaire tool measures the extent to which respondents' menstrual management practices and environments were perceived to meet their needs during their last period, and was systematically developed from a thorough review of past research of women and girls' experiences of menstruation in low- and middle-income countries. The development of validated measuring tools to capture menstrual experience is a significant milestone in the journey to understand and improve menstrual wellbeing.

¹³ Hennegan, J., Nansubuga, A., Smith, C., Redshaw, M., Akullo, A., and Schwab, K. 2020. Measuring menstrual hygiene experience: Development and validation of the Menstrual Practice Needs Scale (MPNS-36) in Soroti, Uganda. *BMJ Open*, 10, e034461.



Product provision



Menstrual education



Community engagement



2011 **Home-made reusable pads study:** Kenyan schoolgirls taught to make reusable pads and the effects on their education is evaluated.

2013 **Menstrual experiences study:** assessment of menstrual-related challenges among Ugandan schoolgirls and how these affect their education and well-being.

2014 **Reusable pads and menstrual education study:** Ugandan schoolgirls provided with reusable pads and menstrual education classes and the effects on their education and well-being are evaluated.

2015 **Uganda’s Menstrual Hygiene Management Charter:** Irise works with the Ugandan Ministry of Education and local NGOs to recognise menstrual hygiene management as fundamental to dignity and wellbeing and to set national-level priorities.

2016 **Menstrual health education resources:** curriculums, syllabuses, manuals, training/teaching outlines, and evaluation tools for menstrual and reproductive health education are developed, piloted, and refined in collaboration with Ministry of Education in Uganda.

2018 **Menstruation Friendly Schools project:** Ugandan schoolgirls are provided with access to reusable pads, menstrual education classes, and community-based interventions to tackle menstrual stigma, and the effects on their education and well-being are evaluated.

2020 **Menstrual Practices Needs Scale:** Irise supports the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to develop a validated tool to measure menstrual well-being.



| Project description | Evaluation process and results | Knowledge and learning |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Homemade reusable pads study, 2011</p>  <p>Participants: 302 schoolgirls across 10 schools in Nyanza province, western Kenya. Intervention: training session and instruction leaflet on how to make, wash, and store a reusable sanitary pad, and materials to make three pads.</p> | <p>Evaluation: schoolgirls completed questionnaires to self-report their menstrual-related absenteeism at the start of the project and one month later. Results: the intervention had a positive but small effect on menstrual-related absenteeism.</p> | <p>Although the intervention appeared to decrease menstrual-related absenteeism, home-made pads were not an optimal solution; they were variable in quality and underprivileged girls struggled to find the time, materials, and equipment to make them. Supplying girls with high-quality products from local entrepreneurs would be more sustainable and efficient.</p> |
| <p>Reusable pads and menstrual education study, 2014 - 2015</p>  <p>Participants: 1,170 schoolgirls across 40 primary schools in Bushenyi district, western Uganda. Intervention: set of six reusable sanitary pads and educational workshop on menstruation and puberty.</p> | <p>Evaluation: schoolgirls completed questionnaires on their knowledge of menstruation, and how it affects attendance, self-esteem, and daily activities, at the start of the project, 6 months later, and one year later. Questionnaire data was triangulated with attendance registers. Results: the intervention had a positive but small and short-term effect on knowledge of menstruation, daily activities, and self-esteem.</p> | <p>Use of school registers to measure absenteeism was compromised by widespread inaccuracy. Metrics to capture effects on concentration and engagement are also required. Pad distribution and menstrual education alone do not appear to result in sustainable improvements in girls' school engagement. Wider community activities, including taboo-breaking components, are critical for long-lasting change.</p> |
| <p>Menstruation Friendly Schools project, 2018 - 2021</p>  <p>Participants: students of 10 primary schools and their wider communities in Jinja district, eastern Uganda. Intervention: schools linked with local menstrual product entrepreneurs and free samples provided to schoolgirls; schools supported to provide menstruation-friendly facilities; education on menstruation and puberty provided to all students; community-based</p> | <p>Evaluation: samples of students and teachers completed questionnaires on their knowledge of menstruation, attitudes towards menstruation, (for the girls) menstrual practices, confidence, and self-esteem. Educational attainment and student retention data was collected from local education authorities. Evaluations were conducted at the start, midpoint, and end of the project. Results: the intervention had a significant, positive, and long-lasting effect on student's knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation, despite</p> | <p>Community interventions which break menstrual stigma and generate interest and involvement from wider society (e.g., engaging male household heads) are key to developing interventions with strong impact and lasting results. Peer-to-peer approaches utilising 'champions' among students, teachers, and the community in particular were a key pillar of success. The stigma-breaking initiatives emerged as key drivers of the resilience and sustainability of the project, and remarkable improvements were achieved despite unprecedented disruption to</p> |

interventions implemented to tackle menstrual stigma.

considerable disruption from Covid-19 pandemic.

the participants lives and schooling.

Section 2: Discussion of key learnings

This section explores and reflects on key learnings from Irise International's work in East African schools over the last decade. In order to identify important findings for inclusion in this report, a roundtable discussion was conducted in June 2021 with Irise staff members from the UK and East Africa, along with their long-term collaborators. Participants included:

- Emily Wilson, CEO of Irise International
- Calum Smith, HOO of Irise International
- Agnes Akullo, Programme Manager at Irise Institute East Africa
- Jennifer Moore, Learning and Evidence Officer at Irise International
- Acushla Young, Advocacy Coordinator at Irise International
- Agnes Nansubuga, Project Officer at SNV Uganda (formerly Monitoring and Evaluation Manager at Irise Institute East Africa)
- Steven Julious, Professor of Medical Statistics, University of Sheffield

The learning points are organised around three dimensions of practice: designing and implementing effective interventions; monitoring and evaluation; and framing the issue of menstruation in schools to stakeholders and policy makers.

Designing effective interventions

Irise International's Menstruation Friendly Schools Project

The Menstruation Friendly Schools project involved activities in three dimensions:

- **Menstrual Product Provision**
 - Local entrepreneurs were supported to establish links with the 10 schools involved in the project. Sample menstrual products were distributed to girls, teachers, and parents so they could trial new products.
 - Schools worked alongside entrepreneurs to establish a sustainable, long-term supply of affordable menstrual products. Entrepreneurs also received training on how to supply, sell, and market affordable menstrual products to ensure sustainable availability of products in the long-run. This training was designed to address needs entrepreneurs themselves had self-identified.
- **Education**
 - District level training was organised for teachers from the 10 project schools. These teachers were supported to train other teachers in their schools and deliver training on menstrual health and puberty to students.
- **Breaking the menstrual taboo through community engagement**
 - Community champions were selected, trained, and supported to develop community led behaviour change initiatives to challenge stigma and taboos and encourage a more supportive environment for women and girls during menstruation.

During the lifespan of the project, girls at the 10 project schools were given 'flower cards' to help them track their experiences during and after their menstrual periods. Exam results and attendance data was also collected to ensure project activities were demonstrating observable improvements in the menstrual experiences of school girls as well as supporting them to attend school feeling confident and comfortable.

In addition to product provision and menstrual education, tackling menstrual stigma through peer-led community interventions and local infrastructure is vital for sustainability, impact, and resilience.

Over the past decade, Irise International has been continuously gathering evidence of the effectiveness of its interventions in order to assess how to create the most significant and meaningful impacts for schoolgirls. The initial projects conducted by Irise International, involving reusable pad provision and menstrual education, resulted in small improvements to schoolgirl attendance that were difficult to sustain beyond the lifetime of the project. The knowledge and experience gained from these initial projects, alongside a reframing of menstruation as a gender equality issue rooted in social stigma, were brought together to form the Menstruation Friendly Schools (MFS) project, which ran from 2018 to 2021.

The Menstruation Friendly Schools (MFS) project was characterised by conceiving menstrual challenges as societal issues requiring community participation, responsibility, and ownership to solve. Thus, community-based work and behaviour change initiatives, in addition to product provision and menstrual education, underpinned the approach. This project was the first to demonstrate positive, dramatic, and long-lasting outcomes among students; both girls and boys made huge improvements in their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, menstruation. In addition, menstrual absenteeism significantly decreased, the proportion of schoolgirls attaining top grades in primary school leaving exams significantly increased, and the number of schoolgirls dropping out of school (as measured by the number of schoolgirls registering for, but not sitting, primary school leaving exams) also decreased. These positive results came about despite the devastating impact and disruption that the Covid-19 global pandemic caused in Uganda during the final year of the project.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the community structures to the success of our projects, because there is a strong link between what happens in the schools and the sections of the community to the work that we do, so if we want to obtain any significant success or sustainable success, we cannot separate the communities from schools. (Agnes A, Programme Manager)

The community-based elements of the project in particular appeared to substantially reinforce the work done in the schools and facilitate long-lasting improvements in girls' education and menstrual wellbeing. Dismantling period shame and harmful practices and beliefs within the school and in the wider environment enabled schoolgirls to feel more comfortable and confident, and allowed them to be better supported by their families and teachers. As schoolgirls typically rely on the support of their families to access period products, and require help from teachers when they start their periods unexpectedly or experience menstrual pain at school, it is important that they can trust the adults around them and feel confident to talk about their menstrual needs. Engaging male staff and fathers in particular was a vital part of success, as they tend to occupy senior positions and control household finances.

The stigma-breaking part actually became the driver for the whole intervention - it became the driver of the impact, it became not just a prop, but the driving force behind it all. (Emily, CEO)

Ensuring on-going commitments to maintaining 'menstruation-friendly' schools, and embedding the interventions within local educational structures, were important for ensuring sustainability. Training to increase teachers' knowledge of menstrual health and puberty meant that the capacity to support students was retained within the school, whilst working closely with District Local Governments facilitated planning and implementation, and raised awareness of the importance of policy commitments to menstrual health.

Community engagement as a central part of Irise's intervention has really enabled sustainability and resilience over the long term rather than short term gains. (Jennifer, Learning and Evidence Officer)

Menstrual education is a fundamental pillar of empowering girls and ensuring their menstrual wellbeing, and the educational packages developed by Irise International were peer-led in both their design and implementation. The resources were designed in response to a national survey of anonymous questions from girls about menstruation and puberty, enabling them to be specifically tailored to girls concerns, and participatory activities in their delivery were designed by a theatre group. A holistic educational package, which covered not only the biological facts of menstruation but also provided guidance on how to manage periods, associated symptoms, and menstrual health, was highly valued by the schoolgirls.

The education to be a very important aspect, because once the girls know that this is how I can deal with my period, this is what my period is, there is no need to be scared about it. (Agnes N, former Monitoring and Evaluation Manager)

Creating safe spaces for students to have peer-to-peer discussions was very effective for communicating information on menstrual health, as schoolgirls were able to gain confidence in conversing and sharing their personal experiences of menstruation. This was not only important for dismantling period stigma and harmful beliefs, but also functioned as an empowering gateway to addressing other issues relating to adolescence and puberty.

Peer-to-peer learning is a successful approach because at that level, communication is made easy, they feel free to share their personal experiences and are able to open up as they learn from their peers, it normalises conversation. (Agnes A, Programme Manager)

The peer-to-peer approach was also used for championing menstruation among school staff and the wider communities. Enabling and supporting community members to lead the dismantling of menstrual stigma and create new social norms was not only empowering for these individuals, but also created a long-term support structure within the schools and communities. Peer-to-peer approaches were particularly effective in convincing parents, especially fathers, that they should take the menstrual health and wellbeing of their daughters seriously in order for them to be able to continue their education.

This idea of using champions, not just for girls, also using teacher champions, using community champions, everything being peer-led, has been a really important part of the community engagement approach. (Emily, CEO)

Sustainability of providing pads still needs to be looked at, providing samples is a good way to start.

Giving free pads, it's not sustainable. It's good to give samples to get them started, but there is also a need to find sustainable solutions to how they can continue providing for themselves. (Agnes A, Programme Manager)

Reusable pads were used at certain points on Irise's journey but this has its own issues.

Teaching local people or teaching girls to make their own pads, that's something that we have tried at various points in our journey, but is something that comes with its own set of challenges and implications as well. (Calum, HOO)

Measuring what matters

Metrics should measure what matters to a variety of stakeholders, utilise existing data collection mechanisms, and capture the journey of transformation.

Irise International are committed to comprehensive monitoring and evaluation, in order to assess what interventions are most effective for improving the menstrual health and wellbeing of schoolgirls, and collect evidence to justify their upscaling. However, identifying what aspects to measure, and how best to measure them within limited resources, can be a complex decision. Ideally, metrics would capture improvements in aspects that are personally important to project beneficiaries (i.e., schoolgirls) whilst also capturing data that can provide a convincing argument to influential stakeholders (e.g., governments, funders) in favour of investing in further interventions. Whilst metrics would ideally capture both aspects, there may be a need to create a balance between the two in the context of limited financial and human resources. Deciding what to measure, and why, requires considered thought and judgement.

Ultimately, it's trying to get that balance of measuring things that intrinsically matter to girls themselves, but also measuring things that convince their government that it's worthy of further investment. (Emily, CEO)

Bespoke data collection can be highly cost- and resource-intensive, and utilising existing local data collection structures can therefore be an effective way of increasing the scope of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within limited resources. In particular, as interventions are scaled up and monitoring and evaluation requirements increase correspondingly, bespoke data collection becomes prohibitively expensive and inefficient compared with harnessing other sources. Early partnership and discussion with local education authorities are helpful to identify what types of data are already collected that might be fit for purpose.

When we first started, we were collecting enormous amount from our own data with not very well validated tools, and actually using what's already there, and harnessing it is likely

to be more effective. It strengthens the local infrastructure, it gives you a bigger dataset much more cheaply, and actually all those things are really important for scale. (Emily, CEO)

Much remains to be understood about the process by which sustainable improvements in girls' menstrual health and wellbeing is achieved. For instance, it would be helpful to further unpack the connections between improvements in menstrual experience, as measured by innovations such as the Menstrual Practices Needs Scale (MPNS), and improvements in other areas of life (e.g., educational attendance and attainment, confidence, self-esteem). When delivering projects, it would also be beneficial to find metrics which can capture the journey of transformation and monitor the progress of change that is undergone by schools and communities. For instance, being able to identify early indicators of success or failure would allow project effectiveness to be monitored and further support and resources to be allocated where necessary.

There's an important next piece of work in terms of linking improvements in the scores that we can now measure with the MPNS with real world outcomes... It could be a really useful tool for exploring how that change is achieved, but also in helping to track it more easily, or to predict it earlier on. (Calum, HOO)

If you're going to roll this out in 200 schools, you don't know exactly what you can monitor, early on, to know that your intervention was having a long-term impact. (Emily, CEO)

Framing the issue

Effective problem-framing is a powerful driver for funding acquisitions, stakeholder buy-in, and partnership development.

The wider narrative and framing of menstruation in the public consciousness has shifted considerably over the decade that Irise International has been working in this space. At first, the menstrual challenges of girls were regarded as a school-based problem that could be solved through relatively simple provision of pads. This understanding has progressively deepened to encompass fundamental issues of human rights and gender equality, and statements in leading academic journals have been used by Irise International to shine a spotlight on these important linkages. A suite of outputs, including reports authored by the Irise International student community, have contributed towards changing the framing of menstrual challenges in schools, and underlined their serious and far-reaching consequences. Without this compelling framing, it would have been considerably more difficult to generate substantial interest and support for Irise International's activities, despite a wealth of evidence on the positive effects of their interventions.

The biggest shifts with government policy have resulted from the framing... Actually, it was the shift in framing that really enabled the work to flourish. First as a school-based issue, then as a human rights issue, then as a gender equality issue: that building of the framing and the arguments over time really accelerated the appetite for this work. It's the framing that has driven the investment, and the data then justifies the investment. (Emily, CEO)

Whilst the framing of menstrual challenges in relation to gender equality and human rights is a powerful driver of interest and investment, it is the data gathered by monitoring and evaluation procedures that subsequently justifies these interests and provides the incentive for further investment and upscaling. Deciding what evidence to collect, in order to meet the needs of funding bodies and other interested parties, requires careful consideration. Whilst the requirements of various funders will differ, Irise International has found that personal testimonies from project beneficiaries in particular can be a powerful and compelling form of data. The stories and experiences of participants can be a very accessible way of communicating how their lives are affected, and the linkages to human rights and gender equality can be clearly illustrated.

The evidence that is more convincing to build the kind of partnerships that we need is more about individual people's stories and experiences and less about the statistics. (Calum, HOO)

Section 3: Take-away messages

This section summarises key findings from the work of Irise International in East African schools over the last decade. Learnings from three dimensions of practice are shared: designing and implementing effective interventions; monitoring and evaluation; and framing the issue of menstruation in schools to stakeholders and policy makers.

Designing effective interventions



Interventions combining **product provision, menstrual education, and community-based initiatives to tackle menstrual stigma**, have proved most effective at delivering sustained improvements in schoolgirls menstrual well-being and educational achievement.



A **peer-led approach** utilising ‘champions’ among students, teachers, and the wider community has been critical to creating a safe and effective learning environment and delivering transformational change.



Breaking the silence around menstruation at all levels of local service delivery, and treating it as a social issue requiring sustained attention and resources, is the key driver for sustainability and impact.

Measuring what matters



Metrics and monitoring systems must meet the needs of various stakeholders, e.g., capturing what is personally important to schoolgirls as well as collecting data to justify further investment to governments and funders.



In order to scale interventions effectively, it is vital to **harness data which is already captured within existing systems**, such as national primary school leaving exams, for monitoring and evaluation.



Further work is needed to **identify early indicators of long-term success that can be easily monitored**, and to link innovations such as the Menstrual Practices Needs Scale to improvements in schoolgirls attainment.

Framing the issue



The **framing of menstrual challenges**, e.g., within the context of human rights or gender equality, can be a **particularly powerful and compelling driver** of stakeholder interest, policy development, and investment.



Whilst the framing of menstrual challenges may drive investment and interest, collecting **high-quality monitoring and evaluation data is crucial to justify interventions** and motivate upscaling.



In addition to quantitative data, **personal stories and experiences from project participants are a powerful testimony** to the success of an intervention, and can be a particularly valuable tool for communicating with funders and other stakeholders.

In light of the Covid-19 global pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted the financial security and life-chances of women and girls around the world, it is vital that the global community continues to invest in schoolgirls. The potential of young women to transform the long-term prosperity of their communities and societies is at significant risk of being lost if urgent action is not taken to protect them and their futures. In order to protect the crucial progress towards gender equality which has been achieved over the last decade, it is more important than ever to ensure that girls can attend school freely and comfortably, whether or not they have their period.

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