



Back to School: this is the time for the government to end 'period poverty'

It is *Back to School* season, which means many schoolgoers are excited about the new school term. Many schoolgoers are excited to meet their new teachers, catching up with their friends and getting on with the curriculum.

The human right to education includes the right to free and mandatory primary and secondary education for all to be "generally available and accessible." In addition to the right of girls to education, educating girls undoubtedly has greater benefits for the economic development of a country, civil society's formation and the overall health of the population.

Not only is education a human right. Education is more than writing, reading, and arithmetic. It is one of the most important investments a country can make in its people and its future. It is also one of the main ways of empowering girls.

However, for many schoolgirls, this new school year marks a period of uncertainty when it comes to managing their menstruation. Menstruation is a natural biological function of all females and menstruators worldwide.

All around the world, girls, transgender and intersex people suffer from the stigma of menstruation through cultural taboos, discrimination and the inability to afford sanitary products. This is also known as period poverty.

When that 'time of the month' arrives, there comes a range of economic and social burdens on young girls during their time of transition into adulthood. The long distances that girls have to walk to school, fear of bullying by boys and other classmates along with the lack of effective menstrual materials and adequate facilities all have a significant impact on girls' education.

In addition, poor MHM prevents girls from being able to reach their potential when they attend school during menstruation. This is due to the fact that girls cannot concentrate in school because their bloodstains could appear on their uniforms as teachers expect that children have to stand up to answer a question or write the answer on the board.

Furthermore, globally including in the East and Southern African region, misconceptions, negative cultural and social norms surrounding menstruation affect girls' perceptions of their bodies. Some communities believe that once a girl has started her menses, she is ready for sexual activity, thus many girls fear disclosing their menstruation due to the association of menstruation being equated to sexual behavior which is considered improper.

The education of girls can end in communities where menstruation is linked to sexuality, and so there is social stress due to the early marriage of girls, leading to the termination of school attendance.

These are just a few of the menstrual obstacles that girls in LMICs have to face on a monthly basis. It is important to understand that these obstacles that girls face during their period can have harmful effects on schooling which further contributes to the gender gap in primary and secondary education and thus violates their rights to education.

Although there is no universal estimate, smaller studies on school girls indicate that interventions such as providing sanitary materials illustrate a higher school retention rate for the girl child.

Menstrual management can be essential in ensuring that children's everyday life is not interrupted by menstruation. It ensures that the girl child can continue with her daily routine such as going to school, going to work or doing household chores.

It can also prevent potential situations of embarrassment and in turn, make them feel confident about themselves and their bodies. In this sense, maintaining proper menstrual health is important for the girl child's wellbeing and development.

I believe that every girl should have access to safe, affordable menstrual products.

Every girl should also learn that her period is a natural even phenomenal bodily process.

Every girl should learn that their period is not a monthly curse and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. PERIOD.