Girls talk about menstrual hygiene in Malawi

Many girls in Malawi stay home from school or drop out due to menstruation. Making their own reusable sanitary pads is a cheap and easy solution which enables them to continue their education, and promotes more open discussions about menstruation.

For young girls in Malawi, puberty often leads to school dropouts, simply due to lack of sanity materials during menstruation. Those girls, who continue their education, avoid school around five days a month due to menstruation, and such absenteeism is detrimental to their grades.

In an attempt to support adolescent girls continue their education, the Malawi Red Cross has facilitated Girls Groups within schools. They encourage girls to share ideas and information, for example about menstruation and avoiding early marriage and pregnancies. Other group activities include motivational talks, drama performances and former students affirming their regrets about dropping out – to deter others from doing so.

Previously considered taboo, the open discussions about puberty and menstrual hygiene is a welcome relief. Even mothers avoid talking about it with their daughters. Arising from the Girls Group discussions was the idea of making their own reusable sanitary pads. The girls learn how to make the pads, which they feel are a hygienic and comfortable solution, compared to the pieces of cloth they normally use. The design of the pad allows it to be held securely in the underwear, adding comfort and confidence to menstruating girls.

Grace Banda from Chilumba Secondary School admits: “it is not easy for me to get money to buy pads from shops. I am able to make them by myself using local available materials. They are also easy to use and clean.”

The reusable pad lasts for half a year and the materials cost 1,000 Malawi Kwacha. The alternative is spending 2,000 – 3,000 kwacha each cycle (or 12,000-18,000 for six months) on commercially produced pads. The skills they gain also allow the girls to earn an income, by selling the extra pads they make.
How to make your own Malawi-style reusable sanitary pad

Trace out the patterns of a pad, 2 pockets and a water-proof backing and cut them out

Fold over the straight edge of each pocket and sew. Place them at each end of the pad

Pin the backing – water-proof side up – and sew around the edge. Leave an opening at the top of one of the wings. Trim the edges

Turn in-side-out, through the small wing opening. Sew around the entire edge of the pad. Hand sew press-studs onto the wings, as shown, one on the ‘pocket side’ and the other on the water-proof side. Fold a piece of towelling, and tuck it into each pocket. The pad is now ready for use.