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Period poverty: empowering rural communities



Sharifa Negesa
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University of Cape Town (UCT) master's student Sharifa Negesa uses her vacations to go back home to Uganda to join a travelling cast of [Girls Alive Uganda](#) volunteers. They visit remote schools to teach menstrual hygiene and how to make reusable, sustainable sanitary pads with basic materials.

The Girls Alive Uganda initiative is empowering in poor, rural communities where young women face "period poverty". A lack of resources and access to clean water, coupled with cultural and social taboos around menstruation, reduce them to using unhygienic absorbent material – anything from newspaper to grass and even cow dung.

This has health implications as they become vulnerable to reproductive tract infections. There is also the shame and stigma attached to menstruating; these young women are often barred from cooking food, interacting with others, and find themselves isolated. It's a cycle that robs millions of girls and young women around the world of education and associated opportunities.

Negesa knows what it's like. At school in the Mbale District, a rural community in Eastern Uganda, many of her peers struggled to access clean, safe sanitary products. As a result, they lost out on schooling, fell behind and often dropped out. Some fell pregnant, said Negesa, ironically by the same men who promised them money for sanitary products.

Girls Alive Uganda is working to change that. Established in the nearby Tororo District, the non-profit organisation was founded by Makerere University alumni from different parts of Uganda. They began with 10 volunteers and now have 50.

With an undergraduate degree from Makerere University, Negesa wanted to expand her interest in child and maternal health at a top institution. She was accepted for a master's programme on social impact in the health sector at UCT's ICT4D. This multidisciplinary ICT4D hub aims to finding research solutions, specifically new technologies, that address socio-technical problems in South Africa, Africa and other developing nations. She is supported by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program (MCFSP). UCT is a partner institution in Africa.

Currently the Girls Alive Uganda mentorship and education programme offers guidance and counselling to boys and girls across eastern Uganda. They have also worked in the urban slum of Luwero in central Uganda, training the girls to make reusable pads.

In terms of life skills, Uganda's Ministry of Education curriculum highlights only basic aspects of menstrual hygiene, said Negesa. Otherwise, it's an "invisible visible problem".

"The programme needs support from parents, teachers and other role players," said Negesa. "It's important to involve boys too. They think they are not affected but they are.

"We teach them how to support the girls during menstruation. For instance, when we ask boys if they menstruate, they always laugh. We point out that boys may not menstruate physically, but they menstruate financially and emotionally. Their mother may be the family breadwinner and if she's in pain or unwell, she could miss work and earnings. We are all affected in one way or another."

Many adolescent girls face stigma, harassment, and social exclusion, too. "Besides information, they need safe spaces and I believe men and women should be creating those safe spaces. We must build the structures that bring change," she added.

In future, Girls Alive Uganda hopes to make their own sanitary pads to distribute at schools during training. The organisation has already reached over 500 girls in more than 10 schools and 15 communities – something Negesa is proud of. "By volunteering, I have been able to give back to my community."

The MCFSP encourages this. And as a social healthcare project, the work also complements her master's research on women's wellness. This specifically addresses healthcare workers where care and empathy are central to reducing maternal mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa.

"I believe that these two aspects of my work will contribute to a better, healthier and empowered generation of mothers and leaders who have access to quality women's health resources – individually and as communities."

Next up, Negesa plans to do a PhD in Computer Science. She is keen to become a researcher and lecturer in ICT4D for health, and a lecturer at a Ugandan university.

"I want to share my knowledge with other people."

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News

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