

DRAFT
CASE: Sanitary Pads in Ghana

Agnes Owusu closed the door behind the UK research team and walked back to the other side of her desk. The last of a hot Friday afternoon in Accra was pouring through her office window as she reflected on her year-long relationship with this group from England.

When the team had first approached her for permission and support for their study, she had been surprised by their research question: whether supplying free sanitary pads to poor girls in developing countries would increase their attendance in school. As Minister of Education in Ghana, Agnes worked hard to put into place programmes that would improve female educational achievement and cooperated fully with the many international NGOs who wanted to support that goal. Yet it had never occurred to her that this simple product, one that middle class women like herself took for granted, could have a role to play in the battle to get education for girls.

On that first visit, the representatives of the UK team, themselves middle class females, had reassured her that the lack of sanitary protection was an issue that had not yet occurred to most people. In their search for grant support to do the study, the team had found that many NGO and international aid agencies had no knowledge of what the girls were doing to keep their dignity when at school during their menstrual periods—and had no idea whether the girls were missing school in order to avoid embarrassment. Nearly all of their NGO and aid contacts, most of them male, had argued that whatever traditional method had been used by the girls' mothers and grandmothers must be acceptable—and had dismissed the idea of providing sanitary pads as a trivial distraction from the real business of building schools and buying textbooks.

Nevertheless, as Agnes and the UK research team sat around the table at that first meeting, they all, as women and as mothers, admitted they were disturbed and ashamed that such a simple issue could have been overlooked. The topic of menstruation is so taboo in most world societies that it did not surprise any of them that the girls would never have mentioned the problem. Yet, once you thought about it, the problem was so intuitively obvious—and so distressing—that it demanded attention. Agnes had thrown her full support behind the project, arranging for the UK team to have access to students, parents, and teachers throughout Ghana.

The Promise and the Problem of Girls' Education.

When UNICEF issued its 2007 report on the state of the world's children, the intragovernmental agency had taken the unusual action of recommending a strategy that would likely anger many government and religious leaders: that the organizations fighting poverty around the world should focus on empowering the women of poor nations.¹ The recommendation was based on knowledge that was already shared among many with experience in international aid, but was supplemented in the 2007 UNICEF report by an entire extra volume of statistical data. This data showed that when women get control over some money and are empowered to make their own choices about what

¹ UNICEF (2007), "Women and Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality," *The State of the World's Children Report 2007*, New York: UNICEF.

to do with it, they use their newly found power and wealth to benefit their children and communities. The improvement in child nutrition, community infrastructure, health practices, and the like, rippled out to benefit entire groups for years to come. Such benefits had also been demonstrated in the inventive work undertaken by Grameen and BRAC in Bangladesh, whose microcredit schemes had focused on women. Indeed, Muhammad Yunus had won the Nobel Prize for showing the benefits of lending to the poor, as well as proving that the value of an investment in women was magnified many times over. In contrast, the studies and statistics held that men tended to use extra money for their own pleasure: buying alcohol, gambling, and hiring prostitutes. Meanwhile, their families suffered from poor nutrition, dirty water, inadequate medical care, and so on—perpetuating the cycle of disease, hunger, and ignorance that held communities in poverty.

The UNICEF report was backed by prior research suggesting that certain elements in women's empowerment, especially improved education for girls, had relatively rapid, measurable effects on key indicators, such as infant mortality, child nutrition, and, especially, fertility rates. The effect of increased levels of female educational achievement was particularly noticeable at the secondary school level.² Further, when girls received a secondary education, they were far more likely to insist on their own children being educated. Thus, keeping girls in school in this generation would likely pay off handsomely in the educational achievement of both sexes in the next.³

Unfortunately, even in countries where gender parity was achieved at the primary level, girls dropped out at alarming rates as they moved into the "junior high" or "middle school" level. Local cultures often did not value girls or their education as much as boys and so families often stopped sending girls to school when they reached a certain age.⁴ In some countries, such as Ghana, teenage pregnancy often brought girls' education to a stop. In the worst cases, pubescent girls ran away, were forced into marriage or were pushed out to find work, or were actually sold into slavery. In Ghana, Accra and Kumasi were full of teenage girls who lived hand-to-mouth, sometimes working as porters in the big markets, sometimes as domestic servants, perhaps most often as prostitutes. As a population, they were easily visible; indeed, at night, a slow drive through the city revealed thousands of them sleeping in doorways or trying to bathe themselves out of a bucket.

In Ghana (and elsewhere), NGO personnel and government workers had focused on solving this problem at its source: the attitudes of the local community. Organizers gave speeches, put up posters, instituted awareness-raising initiatives, and talked tirelessly with parents, trying to persuade them to keep their daughters in school. It was going to be a slow, uphill process.

² Murphy, Elaine and Dara Carr (2007). "Powerful Partners Adolescent Girls: Education and Delayed Childbearing," *Population Reference Bureau*, Washington DC.

³ Hobercraft, J. N. (1993). "Women's Education, Child Welfare and Child Survival: A Review of the Evidence." *Health Transition Review* 3 (2): 159-173. Roudi-Fahimi, Farzaneh and Valentine M Moghadam (2003). "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa." Policy Brief. Population Reference Bureau: Washington, DC. United Nations (2004). "World Population Monitoring: Populations education and development," Department of Economic and Social Affairs. New York: United Nations.

⁴ Lloyd, Cynthia B. and Anastasia J. Gage-Brandon. "High Fertility and Children's Schooling in Ghana: Sex Differences in Parental Contributions and Educational Outcomes" *Population Studies* 48.2 (1994): 293-306. Lloyd, Cynthia and Barbara Mensch (1999). "Formal Schooling for Girls' Transitions to Adulthood in Developing countries," In Bledsoe, Caroline (Ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World* (pp. 80-104). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

On a global level, the situation was further complicated by information collection and measurement conventions, as well as a focus on infrastructure that was sometimes ineffective, in addition to being gender-biased. Achievements in female education, as well as other measures of feminine empowerment, were usually measured as an index against the statistics for males. So, if a country had a .98 Gender Parity Index, it was assumed that there was “no problem” with girls’ education there. However, the Gender Parity Index sometimes masked the low levels of enrolment for both boys and girls—if boys were enrolled at 31% and girls at 30%, for instance, the Gender Parity Index would be very high, even though neither sex were really being educated. Further, the pressure on governments to deliver good enrolment figures had led to incentive programs that often brought children to school on the first day to be counted—but who attended for only a few days before dropping back out.

Given the potential impact of girls disease transmission, infant mortality, and fertility rates, there seemed a need to focus on measuring girls’ education as such, including measurements like sustained attendance or retention, not just citing their enrolment relative to boys. The UK research team was particularly concerned that low attendance rates among girls were believed to be widespread, but were seldom monitored except by local teachers, and might be leading indicator predicting poor performance, disillusion, and, finally, dropout. However, proposing or using such measurements was sometimes taken as favoring girls over boys. At the same time, the preferences of large donors, whether charitable or government, for hard deliverables meant that money went for building schools or buying textbooks that, in turn, benefitted boys over girls and, therefore, were in no way gender-neutral. And, such concrete projects, once built, were sometimes left, unused and unmaintained, by local communities, who simply were unconvinced that their children needed that much education. The Ghanaian countryside was positively littered with this evidence of good intentions gone to seed.

The Onset of Menstruation and the Marginalization of Girls

Armed with Mrs. Owusu’s letters of permission and introduction, and accompanied by an enthusiastic staff of local NGO personnel, the UK research team went into the field. Over a six-month period, they interviewed about 200 schoolgirls, 200 parents, and 200 teachers, as well as a significant number of professional personnel in education, health, and aid, throughout Ghana. They talked to street children in Accra, as well as rural farm girls in Ashanti; they visited Muslim schools, as well as Christian; they met with male and female teachers, as well as parents of both sexes. They also photographed and inventoried toilet conditions at the schools: what they found, as they had been warned, was that few schools had separate, private toilet facilities for boys and girls, most were inadequately serviced pits, and virtually none had water that girls could use to wash themselves if they had an “accident” while at school.

After this initial qualitative round of data collection, the team inferred that the onset of menstruation and the decline in school enrolment among girls were probably tightly linked. The traditional method of managing menses (a cloth folded and placed between the legs, then secured with a tie around the waist) was completely inadequate for a full day at school; the reason the cloth had been sufficient for previous generations was that those females did not go to school, a fact that was discernible in the literacy figures for

women over 30. However, since the generational relations were tense and the topic taboo, the girls and their caregivers (mothers, but also aunts, grandmothers) very seldom communicated about these issues. In the urban and periurban areas, where pads could be purchased, girls secretly used whatever they could save from the cash that came their way to buy pads, often fasting in order to afford this simple consumer product. When they had the pads, these girls could and did go to school. Parents, however, insisted that the girls were using cloth (or sometimes rolled-up toilet paper) because they could not afford pads. Since the girls had not complained to the parents, the older generation inferred that the traditional method must be sufficient.

Girls with no access to pads—in very remote areas pads were not easily found in shops—simply stayed home during their periods. In these places, the walk to school was often more than an hour and so the cloth would be soaked with blood by the time the girl arrived. Once at school, lack of privacy and water for changing the cloth made the entire attempt futile.

These findings were distressing enough, but the change in status that occurred for girls upon menstruation was even more worrisome. Repeatedly, informants told the UK team that the common attitude among men in Ghana was that, once a girl had menstruated, she was “fair game” sexually, even if she were only 12 or 13 years old. Consequently, menarche usually brought with it a sudden onslaught of sexual dangers, including, especially, predatory overtures by teachers, who were mostly young males in the most deprived regions. Sexual harassment of female students by teachers in Africa is a well-recognized problem and no one the team spoke to in Ghana denied that it existed there.⁵ But the interviews and observations made it clear to the UK team that any attempt to deal with issues of menstruation (including delivery of curricular modules for sex education) through the schools would only compromise the safety of the girls themselves by requiring them to have discourse of an intimate nature with the very people most likely to force sex on them. One teacher in a remote northern village even told two male members of the UK research team that he was aroused by the sight of a used menstrual cloth drying on the line because it meant the girl inside the house was “ripe.”

Not surprisingly, then, the girls were anxious about drying their used menstrual cloths in any place that males might see them. The traditional red-and-white cloth that was still used for ritual purposes throughout Ghana was seldom in actual use in these areas. Cloth was very scarce, so girls used cut-up clothing or found cloth—in one case, the girl retrieved cloth from a tailor’s rubbish bin each month, without him knowing it. Girls usually had only two or three pieces to use, so they washed out the cloth each night while bathing. Clean water and soap were in short supply in many villages, so the UK team worried that the cloth did not get very clean, even when washed. Of more concern, however, was that, because of fear of discovery, the girl usually hid the wet cloth to dry in a private place—a place that was often dark and poorly ventilated—and it seldom dried before she had need of it again. As a result, many girls were wearing damp, poorly cleaned cloth day after day during their periods. To make matters worse, cloth was so

⁵ Matasha E, Ntembelea T, Mayaud P, Saidi W, Todd J, Mujaya B, and L. Tendo-Wambua (1998), “Sexual and Reproductive Health among Primary and Secondary School Pupils in Mwanza, Tanzania: Need for Intervention,” *AIDS Care*, 10 (5): 571-82. Mbizvo, MT, J. Kasule, V. Gupta, S. Ruskaniko, J. Gumbo, SN Kinoti, W. Mpanju-Shumbusho, Sebina-Zziwa, R. Mwateba, and J. Padayachy (1995), “Reproductive Biology Knowledge, and Behaviour of Teenagers in East, Central and Southern Africa: The Zimbabwe Case Study,” *Central Africa Journal of Medicine*, 41 (11):346-54.

hard to come by that girls sometimes shared the same pieces with their mother and sisters. The team hypothesized that the health consequences were significant.

Even if pads were available, the girl's family was unlikely to pay for them. A pack of 8 pads cost little more than US\$1 and some fathers were spending that much on beer almost daily. However, the lack of open discussion meant that even the most sympathetic fathers were unlikely to know about the trials their daughters were enduring each month and some mothers saw the pads as an "foreign" item their daughters shouldn't need. Furthermore, the cultural attitudes about girls' education were brought to bear most firmly at the time of menstruation. The girls reported that their carers⁶ had withdrawn their economic support at the time of menarche. The argument was that menstruation was the mark of adulthood; so, the girl was no longer a child and should support herself like an adult.

The girl, left on her own, had no way to pay for books, a uniform, or food at school. Indeed, she had no way to pay for anything and so was pushed toward finding other ways of supporting herself. Sometimes, this meant helping on a nearby farm or going to work in a rich woman's home—or going far away to work in Kumasi or Accra. In some cases, the girls were married off to a man of her family's choosing. Most of the time, however, the girls reported taking a boyfriend to fill in the economic gap left by their family's withdrawal. The research team was told by its local associates that the term "boyfriend" carried the clear expectation of economic support. So, the girl took a boyfriend, who in turn promised to continue paying school fees, buying uniforms, and, in some cases, providing sanitary pads. If the girl happened to attract the attentions of her teacher, NGO personnel reported, the parents might not even complain. Indeed, teachers had such high status in these communities, the parents were sometimes proud of what was happening. In some cases, parents demanded compensation from the teacher, who was also likely to be one of few people in the community getting paid a regular cash salary.

The academic literature was already full of studies of teenage African girls exchanging sex for goods, as was the press and the common gossip in Ghana.⁷ It was usually implied that the girls were promiscuous and materialistic, trading their bodies on a whim for status trinkets like cellphones and everyday trivia—like sanitary pads. The steep rise in teen pregnancies most observers perceived in Ghana was thus usually attributed to the avarice and immodesty of a whole generation of girls. The UK team felt their findings put a different spin on these anecdotes.

At this point, the team from England felt strongly that they needed to expand this research as quickly as possible to a pilot trial of sanitary pads. Having benefitted from the support of the government and NGOs in Ghana, they wanted to take advantage of the informal system they had built to see whether they could get a quick, but quantitative demonstration of the impact free pads might have on attendance—and perhaps some other outcomes, such as feminine infections. After successfully begging for a small infusion of cash from sources back home, the UK team, assisted by NGO workers and government professionals on the ground, set up a pilot experiment in four villages.

⁶ Because of the HIV epidemic and the pressure for able-bodied adults to seek work in the cities, girls were sometimes being looked after by someone other than their birth parents.

⁷ Suzanne LeClerq Madlala (2004), "Transactional Sex and the Pursuit of Modernity," *Social Dynamics*, 29 (2), 1-21.

Piloting the Pad

Three periurban villages believed to be comparable were chosen for three conditions: pads plus puberty education, puberty education alone, and a no-intervention control. On judgment, the team decided also to try the sanitary pads treatment in a very remote, rural village that had no previous access to pads, no running water, no electricity, and no toilet facility of any kind at the school. Conventional wisdom in the aid world was that sanitary pads would have no effect in such places because the need for the toilet to be built first was so much more important. But, based on what they had seen in the previous six months, the team hypothesized that the intervention would, in fact, have more impact in the more deprived site, specifically because the lack of toilet facilities would magnify the utility of the sanitary pad. (Unlike cloth, pads can be changed very quickly and easily, then disposed. Water is desirable, but less necessary than with cloth. The team speculated that the girls in remote areas could run quickly into the forest, strip out the used pad, replace it with a new one, and run back to school without being noticed.)

The girls were surveyed and interviewed prior to the start of the test by a combination of local research assistants and public health nurses. The team had hoped the use of the pads would result in a reduction in vaginal infections and other maladies related to the damp, dirty cloth use. But, from this first interview by the public health nurses, it was clear that infections were so chronic and rampant that any intervention would run into a ceiling effect. During the rest of the winter and spring term, the same team of young, female research assistants visited the villages to interview the girls, record their attendance in school, and give them a replacement set of pads. Each girl was given 12 pads a month and asked to record her school absences and her menstrual days in a diary. The girls were provided with diaries, underwear, pencils, and pencil sharpeners. At the end of the spring term, another full assessment, including interviews with public health nurses, was conducted. The teachers also provided attendance records, so they could be checked against the girls' diaries.

The girls in the pads treatment villages reduced their absenteeism, on average, by half: at the rate of one week per 60-day term. The education-only site improved a similar amount, but after a delay. The control site showed no change. Girls in the pads treatment sites reported improved ability to concentrate in school, increased participation in a wide range of physical activities, as well as higher confidence levels and improved measures of well-being. The girls were enthusiastic in their preference for the pads over cloth. The impact in the remote school was more dramatic, both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, in the rural school, the girls had buried the used pads, rather than put them in the public pit or rubbish heap. The disposal of the pads, always a background concern for the team, pushed forward as an environmental issue.

Research Plans: Funding and the Future

The UK researchers, though pleased with having demonstrated a significant impact on school attendance, saw the test only as a pilot study. Concerned that the factors at work were complex and worried that some of the outcomes were due to a novelty effect, they continued with their original plan to apply for funding to do a scaled-up, longer-term study.

The work this team had just done in Ghana suggested that the challenge of girls' education might be significantly addressed, in the short run, by the provision of sanitary pads. Given the global expectation that keeping girls in school, even if only for a few more years, would produce important benefits to entire societies over a relatively short period of time, it seemed like a small thing to try. Surely some agency could be found to fund a definitive piece of research for such a promising intervention. While the British research team had been in the field, however, the world economy experienced a drastic contraction. One of the countries most negatively affected was the United Kingdom; government cuts that followed reduced research funding and higher education budgets to a crisis point.

To do a one year study in two African sites, the team needed at least £1 million. The better plan would be to try and control somewhat for culture by doing at least one site on another continent (probably Asia, where respondents in another project had reported similar problems), but a distant site would likely add at least £700K to the budget. These were big numbers for a project that the UK team felt would still be seen as a silly, trivial, "feminine" thing by many potential funders and, thus, their prospects for getting a grant to do a longer-term study looked bleak, especially in the aftermath of the economic downturn. So, the team decided they needed to increase awareness of the problem and its potential solution among policy-makers, potential donors, and the public by releasing the results of the pilot study and hoping for some press coverage.

How to Pay for Pads; How to Get Them There

Agnes Owusu was impressed with the work the UK team had done and she felt sure that the press release they had shown her before leaving her office would be picked up around the world. After all, not only did the study offer a simple, clear solution to an intransigent, important problem, the news would play to the rich world's emotional appetite for stories of deprivation in Africa, especially its women. (Agnes felt she could practically write the script for Oprah while standing right there at her office window.) Though the UK team had assured her the problem was probably present in most of the developing world, she knew she would feel ashamed when the news broke, as if Ghana alone had failed its young girls. At the same time, she was as determined as ever to make sure those girls got to go to school and would be there with dignity.

The problem was going to be paying for it. At a cost of about \$12-\$20 annually per girl, providing free pads would be a huge chunk of money (though perhaps small compared to other outlays aimed at the same issue). The thought of buying pads for the entire school career of every girl in Ghana was staggering. However, not every girl needed the assistance, the pads might not have to be provided in every village, and they might not have to be provided forever. Still, distributing the pads would itself be expensive—and would present a risk of theft, as the cash value of these pads would make them a temptation to whoever stored or shipped them. When the pads arrived at the village, who would give them to the girls? Agnes agreed with the UK people that having the teachers hand them out was asking for trouble. But local health districts were much too thinly spread to do it. Even with the best of intentions, the pads might never reach the girls at all.

Agnes knew that one of the big multinationals had been in talks with the Ministry of Trade about reducing the duties for importing some of their products, which included a well-recognized brand of sanitary pads. Maybe a quid pro quo involving tax reductions for a donation of pads could be struck. Agnes was afraid reducing tax revenue might be little different from the government simply writing the cheque for the pads. The UK team had told her this same company had run a short cause-related marketing campaign in the US that raised money for a school in southern Africa to have sanitary pads provided for girls. The team had not known any details about the success of that marketing venture, only that it had occurred.

Thinking of the many NGOs now flashing their girl-oriented brochures to donors around the world, Agnes wondered whether any of those organizations could be engaged to raise money to provide pads and perhaps even to distribute them. But she shook her head, thinking of how uneven NGO coverage was on the ground in Ghana. Save UNICEF, none of them could cover more than two or three of the seven regions. When it came to the rest of Africa, or the world, there would be no way for one charitable organization to orchestrate something like this.

And then there was the environmental issue. Whether the pads were thrown in an open pit, buried in the forest, or dropped on the community rubbish heap, the little plastic backing on each one was going to stay there forever. Agnes, having spent enough time in rural Africa to know it was not a pristine jungle, but dotted everywhere with open rubbish heaps, was nevertheless politically savvy enough to anticipate that concern over girls' education would evaporate if any of those pads washed up where the world press could see them.

The problem was too complex to solve at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Agnes decided to wait until Monday and think about it when she was fresh. The press release would not go out until the research team got back to England, which gave her a few days' time. The matter would be in her prayers on Sunday; she would ask for guidance.

CASE QUESTIONS:

What should the next step be for Agnes? Should she talk to the press herself?

What about the multinational corporation? Should she approach them? Do they have a legitimate role to play here?

What about the research team? Are they doing the right thing by sending out this press release? What should their next step be?