



Fund for Innovation and Transformation

Fonds pour l'innovation et la transformation



CANADIAN PHYSICIANS FOR AID AND RELIEF

Freedom to Learn for Girls in Rural Malawi – Addressing the Menstruation Barrier

Context

Malawi is among the poorest countries in the world with over 50% of the population living below the poverty line. Poverty is exacerbated by low educational outcomes including failure to complete primary schooling, especially among girls and women in rural areas. As girls begin menstruating, they miss school to the point where they drop out of school entirely, jeopardizing their ability to contribute more effectively to their own and their families' social and economic wellbeing.

The Innovative Solution

Supported by FIT, Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief with local partner Freedom from Fistula tested the effectiveness of menstrual cups and reusable pads in empowering girls and women in selected schools in rural Malawi to manage their menstrual health and thereby reduce school absenteeism. The innovative solution targeted girls from the time they began to menstruate and provided tools and knowledge needed to manage their menstrual hygiene.

Advancing Gender Equality

The gender analysis revealed that menstruation was the main driver of school absenteeism and dropout rates among adolescent girls. The innovation addressed the long standing cultural and traditional beliefs about menstruation by engaging girls, boys, parents, teachers, and community in health education talks, providing affordable and environmentally friendly menstrual products and developing solutions that addressed inadequate WASH facilities in schools.



COUNTRY
Malawi

AMOUNT
\$199,938

TESTING PERIOD
12 months
Ended March 2023



GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE (GE3)

THEME: EDUCATION

Testing Framework

To gauge attainment of objectives, an evaluation was conducted to measure the extent to which indicators of success were achieved. The final evaluation focused on assessing availability of menstrual products, access to menstrual health management (MHM) knowledge and how girls manage their menstruation, availability and access to water and sanitation facilities in the four schools and at household level, availability of parental and community support to adolescent girls on MHM as well as the impact of cultural norms on MHM. Data was collected using surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions.

Results and Impact

- A significant reduction in school absenteeism rates for girls was achieved from 70% at baseline to 14% at endline.
- The use of menstrual cups and reusable pads increased respectively from 0% at baseline to 18% at endline.
- Parents offering their support to their daughters, including the continuation of school, increased from 8% to 64%.
- 934 beneficiaries were trained in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and as a result handwashing practices of households improved from 11% at baseline to 36% at endline.

Key Lessons

1. Inclusion and the involvement of female teachers during MHM training increased ownership of the project and made it easier to manage delivery of relevant services including health education.
2. The inclusion of boys in health education talks addressed issues of stigma and discrimination. This allowed for a holistic approach to MHM and helped participants better understand issues of MHM to better support adolescent girls.
3. Girls preferred using reusable sanitary pads over menstrual cups because of the large sizes of the cups which resulted in pain during insertion. However, female adult users (control group) expressed optimum satisfaction over the use of menstrual cups because the cups were the correct size. This identified a need to procure age-specific menstrual cups to match with the adolescent age ranges.

“The project has given me and other girls life changing skills to fabricate reusable pads. I will impart the skills to other girls.”

– Feruna 15-year-old girl

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Freedom from Fistula

TARGET PARTICIPANTS

Direct participants included 1613 women and girls, and indirect beneficiaries included 2584 women and girls and 2026 men and boys from Kabuthu Education Zone, Lilongwe District, Malawi

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ABOUT FIT

The Fund for Innovation and Transformation supports Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) testing innovative solutions that advance gender equality in the Global South.



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