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Combating Menstrual Stigma through a Female-Centered Permaculture Garden

A FIT Case Study in Rural Uganda

Lessons Learned from Girls of Tomorrow Foundation
with local partner St. Jude Family Projects



In partnership with
Canada

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Overview



Girls of Tomorrow Foundation (G.O.T.) with local partner St. Jude Family Projects tested an innovative permaculture education tool to reduce menstrual stigma amongst girls and boys in Uganda. It was hypothesized that by teaching 13-16-year-old female and male youths, as well as their parents and teachers, to create female-centered permaculture gardens it would lead to a reduction in menstrual stigma.

In-Depth Gender Scan Revealed Priority Gender Equality Issues:

- **Girls regularly experienced poor mental health outcomes like shame and anxiety due to gender-based stigma surrounding menstruation**
- **Poor access to quality menstrual health education and resources at school led to higher school absence rates amongst girls and reduced participation in sports, extracurriculars and social activities**
- **There was a lack of access to menstrual supplies due to scarce economic resources**

What is a Female-Centred Permaculture Garden?

Permaculture means permanent agriculture which involves the use of perennial plants. G.O.T. Foundation's permaculture program is an innovative initiative aimed at helping girls and women achieve resilient food production. The innovation brought together a team of local experts made up of St. Jude permaculture trainers, nurses, a herbalist, a gender consultant and staff to teach permaculture to participants through a female lens addressing girls' health and hygiene needs.



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Unlike a traditional permaculture garden, each crop not only provides nutritious food for the school, is also tied to lessons focused on female health, anatomy, and experiences. For example, trainers taught participants that the plant millet has traditionally been consumed by women to increase the iron in their blood and to build their blood right before and after their period. As students grew this crop, they received a simple physiology lesson to help them understand why a woman's iron levels may be low during menstruation, and why this can lead to girls experiencing fatigue.

Testing aimed to achieve two gender outcomes:

- (1) Increased support for females at school and home around the issue of menstrual health, leading to increased confidence and self-esteem for girls and higher social participation levels and school attendance rates, and
- (2) Increased access to menstrual supplies by teaching girls to utilize accessible garden resources to make reusable menstrual pads.

Results and Impact

A total of 437 participants took part in the innovation test across 5 secondary schools and 1 community centre including 119 female students, 120 male students, 68 female parents, 44 male parents, 13 female teachers, 29 male teachers, 25 community centre girls, and 19 community centre boys.



At the endline, data has confirmed the hypothesis.

- The percentage of female students reporting that menstruation is stigmatized at their school decreased from 82% to 20%, and the percentage of female students who felt ‘extreme shame’ about their period decreased from 20% to 2%.
- There was a notable increase in the level of support shown by parents, teachers and boys. For example, while only 34% of mothers reported offering their daughter emotional support related to their menstrual health at baseline, this increased to 97% by the end of testing.
- Testing engaged men and boys to combat stigma, increased female’s access to menstrual supplies, and made menstrual health education and resources more accessible. By endline, male students were more comfortable speaking to their female peers about menstruation, were less likely to bully girls about their period, and were more willing to offer help to a menstruating girl who needed it.
- The percentage of girls who reported that they've stayed home from class at least once in the past month because of their period decreased from 66% to 18%.

Changes in Girl’s Word Associations with Menstruation



Baseline



Endline

Deep Dive Into Results

Making Menstrual Health Education Accessible in a Gender-Sensitive Garden Environment

Since female participants had poor access to quality menstrual health education and resources at school, testing combatted this with female-centered gardens — physical garden spaces which celebrate and care for the female by offering plants to support female health, while also providing educational resources in the garden library.

Plants girls had access to included green heart tree, soursop, moringa, lavender, omugavu and banana trees.

The garden workshops were completed during school hours at a time that was accessible for both genders. The gender consultant trained the trainers on how to facilitate discussions about gender equality in the gardens without using language that instills blame or hostility onto males to encourage male participation.

The gender consultant also educated the workshop trainers on gender sensitive approaches to teaching—for instance, how trainers should facilitate in a manner that encourages females to take a leadership role in activities.



Increasing Access to Menstrual Supplies

Due to economic constraints which limits girls' and their families ability to afford menstrual pads, part of the training involved teaching males and females to create reusable menstrual pads out of banana fibers in the gardens.

Most participants had access to banana fibres at home, making this an affordable and accessible way of ensuring females have a way to manage their period without relying on money for purchasing pads.

Since a lack of access to economic resources is a barrier, beneficiaries reported that knowing how to utilize free or cheap natural resources was incredibly valuable.

Comments from female students:

“We grew up using a banana stalk at home for mulching our garden and sometimes they just threw it away. I never knew that it could be of help to me during my menstruation.”

“The materials we can use to support ourselves, we learned they are everywhere.”



Practical Nutrition Tips to Help During Menstruation

Participants reported that one of the most valuable parts of the programming was learning practical nutrition tips to support female health during menstruation. Many reported they had little to no knowledge of changes to female physiology during menstruation.

In particular, before testing, most beneficiaries weren't aware of the unique nutritional requirements of females while they are on their period. Female beneficiaries reflected that this is practical knowledge that they can apply both while at school and at home to improve their health.

“Millet contains a nutrient called iron. When a woman loses blood during her period she loses a nutrient called iron, so when you cook this millet and eat it, you can replace that nutrient”



Engaging Men and Boys to Combat Stigma

Reducing menstrual stigma requires the participation and engagement of males. Throughout testing, focus group discussions revealed that gender-based stigma surrounding menstruation is partly due to males believing they do not have a responsibility to learn about or understand the female menstrual process because it is a “women’s issue”. This is reinforced by observing that no other males in their community are involved with the issue of menstrual health and hygiene.

Lacking knowledge about menstruation, many males disregard this female experience, and either point to it as evidence of ‘weakness’ or deem it too taboo to speak about.

Girls of Tomorrow engaged male youth, parents and teachers in conversations about menstruation to normalize conversations about the subject. However, one roadblock during this process was feedback from males that when organizations implement projects designed to support females it can feel like the project gives an advantage to women over men. Throughout the project, facilitators listened to these concerns, and challenged male participants to consider how they and their families will benefit when the females in their lives are healthy and confident. In workshops facilitators encouraged fathers to consider their role in providing emotional, educational and financial support for their menstruating daughters.

Beyond normalizing conversations about menstruation, efforts to reduce stigma involved increasing boys' empathy for girls by educating them about some of the emotional and physical challenges females can go through while menstruating, and comparing this to some of the challenges that males also face during puberty. For example, feelings of shame a girl might experience during her period may be similar to the feelings of shame a boy might experience after having a wet dream.

Female and male participants indicated that reflecting on the way they both have similar challenges during puberty made them feel more equal to one another. Boys also reflected that learning about the physical pain girls can experience made them more sensitive to their female peers' feelings. Taken together, these efforts have made beneficiaries feel that stigma has been reduced.

“I don’t tease girls because I learned about the pain they can experience while on their periods, and I don’t want to increase their pain even more” — Male Student

“Stigma and shame has gradually reduced, for example a student at Katerero SS freely stood up and shared her story in class about her about her first experience with menstruation without fearing anyone”

—Project Data Collector

The Importance of Involving Elders

During the planning stages of testing, the project overlooked the importance of involving elders.

Girls of Tomorrow learned that menstrual stigma is rooted, in part, in the current generation's misinterpretation of certain cultural practices related to menstruation. For example, it is customary in certain regions of Uganda for girls who are menstruating for the first time to be isolated from their parents including being told to eat dinner in another room, separate from others.

Many youth today interpret this to mean that menstruating girls should stay away from others because they are dirty or impure, however elders explain this tradition as being a mark of transition into adulthood- the girl has become a woman, and she will begin forming independence from her parents which is symbolized by her eating dinner away from them for the first time.

Girls of Tomorrow learned the value of having older generations work within programming to teach younger generations the meaning behind certain cultural traditions to correct these misunderstandings.

Once this critical lesson was uncovered, Girls of Tomorrow engaged elders to take a very active role speaking at workshops across all testing sites.



Conclusion

Testing innovative approaches requires flexibility, agility and the ability to listen to participants' experiences and adapt throughout. Girls of Tomorrow integrated their Gender Equality Strategy inclusive of boys and girls and engaged beneficiaries for feedback throughout testing allowing for pivots and adaptations to occur leading to strengthened and sustainable results.



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