

Access to Feminine Hygiene in Public Schools.

Why Education Policy has Failed our Women and Girls?

by Samuel Shapiro



Samuel Shapiro is currently the senior researcher at Equal Education. Previously, he was the national organiser at Equal Education, where he organised training and development of young members around the country, and supported these members in organising communities and campaign for quality in education. Shapiro was also a community organiser at Equal Education between 2012 and 2013, a sports coach at St Andrews Prep School between 2008 and 2012, and the previous chairperson of the African Drum Society in 2010.

Abstract

The advancement of women's rights in democratic South Africa since the fall of apartheid has witnessed robust debates and strong political rhetoric. However, in practice we have seen stuttering, fragmented, and largely failed policy initiatives that have not helped transform the everyday lives of women. This paper will look at these failures from the perspective of feminine hygiene in schools and attempt to illuminate the dismal shortcomings of policy, government, and the private sector in ensuring all young women learners have access to hygiene, health, dignity, and education.

Why is this an issue?

The issue is most starkly represented by Impendulo, a community based organisation that works with young women around the country. This organisation estimate that 1 in every 3 girls will miss school during their periods. In other words these girls spend their entire school life behind their peers. These learners receive an alarming three and half years less education than their peers in the time before they sit down to write their final examination. This is compounded by dirty toilets and a general lack of access to sanitation which impedes girl learners across the board. Many do not make it to their exams and drop out well before matric.

The majority of these girls come from poorer communities where the cost of sanitary pads or tampons is simply too expensive and less prioritized than other needs such as food and clothing. In South Africa tampons, sanitary pads, etc are considered luxury items and therefore have a tax associated with them. One of the main policy demands coming from various sectors of society is to do away with this tax, reducing the cost to communities. Although this is definitely a progressive move it must be accompanied with other initiatives.

The issues of feminine hygiene impacting, as they do, on the rights of girls to education, should be taken seriously by everyone. In our communities, UNESCO in 2014 reported that 60% of women do not have access to sanitary ware (pads or tampons). Most use rags, toilet paper, newspapers, leaves, "recycled" tampons, pads and disposable nappies. This raises major concerns around health, productivity, dignity and the ability to function as an active and respected member of society.

These concerns are not lost on the government which has responded, at least in rhetoric, to the problem for many years. In 2011 president Jacob Zuma said:

“Given our emphasis on women’s health, we will broaden the scope of reproductive health rights and provide services related to amongst others, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy and sanitary towels for the indigent.”

This was not the only statement made about advancing women’s health nor was it the only one to talk about sanitary towels for the indigent. In 2015, Gauteng MEC of Education Panyaza Lesufi promised a hall full of Equal Education activists, learners, parents, and community members that he would deliver thousands of dignity packs to schools around the Gauteng province.

Both the president and the MEC were commended for their promises. However, a closer look shows the dismal failure of numerous projects in providing an urgent social service to our schools and communities.

How have we responded?

There are numerous international, national and local initiatives that are looking at the problem of menstrual hygiene amongst school girls. Most of these initiatives are run by small NGO’s with a primary focus on reusable solutions. Although these initiatives are born out of good intentions, they are fundamentally flawed in two ways.

Firstly, the issue of reusable: this solution is often touted as affordable and environmentally sustainable and it is. One reusable cup lasts much longer than a single use pad or tampon and it can be cleaned as opposed to dumping which in the long run is good for the environment. Yet these products haven’t taken off commercially which could be the result of bad marketing and/or a less effective product. Most significantly, poor girls, the main recipients of these alternative methods are expected to suffer the burden of environmentalism and the indignity and discomfort of substitute methods, and avoidance of a major female impediment to leading an unconstrained life whilst wealthier people have the luxury of choice.

The second way these initiatives are flawed is that they are not, in fact, sustainable. Many of them rely on private donations, they have a limited reach, and tenuous life span. Others are born of corporate social initiatives, intended for good PR or to meet with basic legislation. Proctor & Gamble, one of the main players in the global economy and mass producer of feminine hygiene products, has an initiative called “keep a girl in school” something that on the surface sounds helpful. However with no available report from the project nor any contactable person in charge it is difficult to believe any good has come from it. To be fair some of the products associated to P & G like the “*Always*” brand of feminine hygiene has played a role in educating young girls in school about proper menstrual hygiene as well supplying some products. A recent survey showed that young girls learnt about their periods from companies like “*Always*” more than from their parents, or from their schools. However only 10% of school girls knew what menstruation was before their first period suggesting that the numbers are still extremely low.

Government has also put together projects that attempt to address the lack of access to feminine hygiene products. The Gauteng Department of Education, in partnership with the Gauteng Department of Social Development, are handing out thousands of dignity packs to school girls around the province. According to the 2015 end of year expenditure estimates more than 250 000 dignity packs have been handed out. A closer look at this programme however shows that a viable solution is still far away.

Surveys of schools that are part of this programme show that the vast majority of them do not receive enough packs for all the girls to benefit and are therefore required to come up with ridiculous methods to redistribute them. Some schools decide not to give any of them out simply to avoid having to choose some learners over others. This haphazard delivery puts schools in uncomfortable positions and leaves many girls without an option but to stay home: “I don’t know if the school will have pads available this month but I don’t want to risk it.” – Grade 10 learner from a school in Tembisa. Open up the dignity pack and one is faced with another very alarming issue. The dignity pack has more than tampons and pads. Although not the same every month the dignity pack usually consists of a 10 pack of pads, soap, roll-on deodorant, toothpaste, and some tissues. The choice of items raises a lot of questions and without a clear policy laying out the specific needs of women the contents of the packs is left up to the packers. Of the girls we surveyed, 90% of the ones who missed school

during their periods did so because of headaches, menstrual cramps and nausea – nothing in the dignity pack provides girls with relief from these.

This is a consequence of what happens when important social programmes are simply political rhetoric or corporate PR. From inception to implementation they remain disconnected from the real needs of many girls and women. As in many instances, no one has bothered to ask these girls what they want and need and, somehow, the issue of female sanitation has been separated from other issues of female health, from contraception, to rape, to conception. In reality, people, and that includes the managers of these programmes, do not want to talk about feminine hygiene and its implications. They are, by definition, “dirty.”

Refocusing priorities?

We are currently in a situation where the majority of our girl learners are suffering because of the lack of access to basic amenities. If any campaign is going to work it requires a shift of thinking from both society and government. These products are not a luxury item, they are an essential part of every women’s lives and every women’s dignity. Providing access to these products for all women and girls is simply non-negotiable. It is easy to agree that girl learners should stay in school.

It is far more difficult to ensure that they do. Political rhetoric and PR stunts although originating from the right place are not sustainable or effective methods of overcoming a malarkey that affects all women. Government needs to lead the charge in implementing an holistic approach that puts an end to “female tax” and ensures there is no unfair discrimination of girls and women by not supplying, free of charge, feminine hygiene products and giving young women holistic access to the elements of their own bodies.

The focus must shift from a sense that any initiative aimed at addressing these issues is a charity drive for poor women and ensure the focus is on women and the ability for all women to participate equally and unhindered in school, society, and the economy. This challenge must not be relegated to the back benches of policies but rather should be a driving force of gender equality in our democracy. Young girls should not be handicapped by their gender or led to believe, in any way, that they have to live with “less than” simply because they are female.

Policy Recommendations?

In order to achieve the goals of universal access of feminine hygiene products for girls and women in South Africa it is important to develop policy that can drive this change. Many groups are already calling for tax to be dropped on all tampons and pads, which will immediately make access easier for many poor and working class communities.

Alongside this policy it is vitally important to introduce menstrual hygiene education at a much earlier stage in the curriculum. Currently girl learners are taught about menstruation in school when they are 12 or 13, however the majority of girls have already experienced their first period by then. Many are left scared and alone during this time. Proper knowledge of what menstruation is and how to properly navigate the bleeding, pain, and hormones is an extremely important part of any women’s education and should not be taken for granted. Boy learners should also receive education around menstruation, not doing so reaffirms to many male learners that menstruation is only important for women and not part of a larger societal challenge. We must use this chance to change the social perceptions of women in our society and debunk the patriarchal myths that prevent both boys and girls from seeing women as equals.

Infrastructure is vitally important for the wellbeing of girl learners during their periods. A commitment to building and maintaining good quality sanitation facilities is critical. Currently the Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure which speaks about the basic requirements for all school buildings does not make provisions for sanitary bins. This should not stop schools putting these bins in every toilet stall but ensuring it through policy would allow communities to hold schools who don’t provide bins accountable.

Comprehensive rollout of pads and tampons in public areas is needed to ensure easy access, anywhere, anytime for girls and women who are having their periods. Schools and hospitals should be priorities in this rollout. If we, as a society, can provide condoms for everyone, everywhere then it is unconscionable not to do the same for pads and tampons. We choose to have sex; women do not choose to have their periods and should not be discriminated against for having them. Government must develop a policy that ensures all public and private buildings make pads and tampons freely available. Inevitably this should emphasise that menstruation is a normal function that's does not exclude women from any societal function.

Tax free feminine hygiene products, properly maintained infrastructure, earlier introduction in school education programmes, and policy that ensures public and private organisations provide feminine hygiene products free of charge in their buildings are essential to overcoming one of the most glaring gender inequalities we are faced with today.