

Letter to the editor

The increasing prices of sanitary products and the potential impact on menstrual hygiene management practices in Ghana.

Dear Editor

Menstruation is a milestone of puberty and an indication of reproductive maturity, which occur naturally. Menses is often accompanied by some forms of discomfort such as mood swings and pain[1]. Menstruation's onset has a significant impact on the lives of young women. When this natural phenomenon occurs, the women are required to clean themselves regularly. Some years back, women used pieces of clothes and other things to grip or collect blood during menses. Progress has been made along this line with the initiation of sanitary pads.

Absorbent materials are used to absorb blood during menstruation. The users of these materials which include sanitary pads, cotton, tissue etc., have a primary need to feel clean and dry, to be protected and in control, and for comfort and convenience [2]. According to Asumah et al.,[3] in Ghana, almost all adolescents use absorbent material, with the majority using the sanitary pad then cotton, cloth and tissue papers. The preferred absorbent materials depends on the user's preferences, cultural tolerance, religion, financial situation, and materials availability [4, 5].

The majority of basic schools in Ghana have very poor hygiene facilities to support proper menstrual management [6]. Although, cotton, cloth, tissue etc. are still being used in Ghana, majority of women used sanitary pads during menstruation since they can absorb more menstrual blood, make them comfortable, allow girls to participate in school activities and curb male counterparts teasing them[3]. Unfortunately, the prices of sanitary pads are skyrocketing making some adolescents stay home until their menses ends. This is corroborated by Asumah et al., [7] who indicated that pocket money are able to afford sanitary practice and thus practice good MHM. The discomfort brought on by the monthly flow has been made worse by the expensive expense of sanitary pads. In Ghana, the prices of sanitary pads are more than tripled since March 2022. In rural areas in Ghana, nearly 40.0% of adolescent girls have had to be absent themselves from school due to poor menstrual hygiene management in school such as unavailability of absorbent material for emergency usage, no privacy at the washroom, no designated place for ladies to change their absorbent materials etc.[8].

Although basic schools are expected to have designated places for changing of dirty/ used absorbent materials, designated places for washing and cleaning, bins for menstrual wastes and gender segregated washrooms , this is not the practice in most schools in developing countries[6]. Some young women are left with no option than to use unclean fabrics and tissues because sanitary pads are so expensive, which has an impact on their health and wellness [3]. Although the increasing prices of sanitary products have been largely attributed to the high global inflation and disturbed supply chain distributions occasioned by COVID-19, to make sanitary pads more accessible and inexpensive for everyone, there are currently more appeals than ever to abolish taxes on them. At the moment, up to 20% tax tariff and 12.5% (value added

tax) VAT is placed on imported sanitary products because sanitary pads are considered extravagant or luxury goods per the Ghana Revenue Authority's manuals [9]. Some civil society organizations have resorted to giving out sanitary pads for free to girls who have reached their menarche; particularly those in the rural areas of low-income countries as a motivation to boost girls' presence and involvement in school activities during their menses [3, 7–9]. However, this initiative is unsustainable as these donations are often done on the menstrual hygiene days, besides, the pad donation alone is not enough to meet the required sanitary need of the women.

The call for collaboration to promote menstrual hygiene is justified because without sanitary pad, a section of adolescent girls would practice poor menstrual hygiene. Poor menstrual hygiene management can lead to issues such as absenteeism from school, subpar academic performance, school dropout, and illness[7, 8]. This can significantly affect government efforts to the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 and 5 on quality education for all and gender equality and empowering all women and girls respectively. It is not the fault of any female to menstruate every month. It is not by choice to be a male or female biologically. As such, the government should institute some measures to cushion sanitary product users. The Government of India introduced a new program in June 2011 to provide sanitary pads to chosen rural parts of the country at a discounted price of Indian Rupee (Rs) 6 per pack of six commercial sanitary provided by accredited social health activists (ASHAs), who operate as frontline healthcare providers in villages [10].

We believe the government of Ghana should subsidize the prices of Sanitary products, especially in rural Ghana. Sanitary pads must be considered basic needs and not a luxury product, as such there is the need to abolish the 20.0% tax and 12.5% VAT on sanitary products. To further mitigate the increasing hikes in prices of sanitary products, the government should initiate or support the production of sanitary pads in Ghana. In addition, adequate supply of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities should be available, especially, in educational facilities and work environment. There should also be a rigorous public education to demystify the misconceptions about menstruation.

Key words: menstrual hygiene ,health, sanitary products

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned, externally peer reviewed.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created.

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