



Implications of Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative on Curricular and Co-Curricular Participation of Secondary School Girls in Nakuru County, Kenya

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Abstract

The government of Kenya is committed to end disparity in education by ensuring equity of access and participation of all girls and boys in education. This is evidenced through education policies in place such as the Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative (GSTI) whose aim is to minimize barriers to education for girls and put them at par with the boys. This study sought to explore the efficacy of GSTI on educational access and participation of secondary school girls in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study employed Descriptive Survey design. The sample size was 329 respondents comprising of 316 secondary school girls, 6 class teachers, 6 principals and 1 education officer. Questionnaires, interviews and documentary analysis were utilized as data collection tools. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The study findings revealed that lack of sanitary towels has been a major issue affecting girls' access and participation in education. GSTI has impacted the girls' educational access and participation through enabling them to be always present in class, freely stand and answer questions, mingle freely even among boys, concentrate in study activities, volunteer to dust the board and feel comfortable in class

during their menstruation period. The findings also indicated that through GSTI the girls have comfort, confidence, motivation and dignity leading to increased participation. In conclusion, GSTI has had a positive impact on girls' access and participation in education and strategies should be put in place to ensure its sustainability.

Key Words: Educational access and participation, Sanitary towels, Menstruation

Background

Globally, education is regarded an important instrument for a nation's overall development, social mobility and as a basic human right (UNESCO, 2015). Countries all over the world are prioritizing education through ensuring access, retention and participation of all boys and girls. The United Nations estimate the world's population by 2017 to be 7.6 billion. There was an almost gender parity in terms of the population with 50.4% being men and 49.6% being women (UN, 2017). However, in matters education, only 66% of the countries globally had achieved gender parity at primary level, 45% and 25% in lower and upper secondary respectively by the year 2018 (UNESCO, 2018). These disparities differ according to regions with girls occupying 54% of the out of school population recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab States, Yemen, South and West Asia. A nation cannot develop fully when some part of the population is left out in education. Educating girls has therefore been proposed as the world's highest yielding investment. Some factors that have hindered girls' access and participation in education in the world have been identified as culture, household chores, early marriages, teenage pregnancies and poverty which leads to lack of basic amenities (UNESCO, 2015).

Menstruation has been identified as a gender-specific hindrance to adolescent girls' education. It is one of the major changes that adolescent girls undergo and is supposed to be celebrated as a girl transit from childhood to adulthood. Unfortunately, it is not celebrated in many parts of the world but rather seen as an increase of problems for most girls. Menstrual related issues include unaffordable sanitary protection, menstrual symptoms as well as social, cultural taboos and myths associated with menstruation. Proper management of menstruation is therefore an important issue in a girl's life especially when at school. Such management will ensure preservation of the girl's dignity, improved confidence and concentration. Menstruation in Kenya has become a policy concern as it threatens the country's efforts to ensure everyone attains education. The Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative's (GSTI) objective is to increase access of sanitary products to school going adolescent girls which in turn would increase retention, transition to higher levels and improve their academic performance. It also seeks to minimize cases of absenteeism and improve participation in education which will hopefully place them at par with the boys. This study focused on assessing the influence of the provision of sanitary towels on girls' access and participation in education.

Objectives

The study sought to;

1. Examine the implications of the Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative on curricular participation of secondary school girls in Nakuru County, Kenya.
2. Investigate the implications of the Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative on secondary

school girls' co-curricular participation in Nakuru County, Kenya.

3. Suggest strategies that can address the sustainability of Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative in enhancing girls' educational participation in secondary schools.

Methodology

The study employed Descriptive Survey design; stratified random sampling and purposive sampling was useful in selecting schools and principals respectively. Simple random sampling was useful to draw class teachers and secondary school girls from the target population. The sample size was 329 respondents comprising of 316 secondary school girls, 6 class teachers, 6 principals and 1 education officer. Questionnaires for students, interview schedules for principals and class teachers and document analysis are the research instruments that were used to collect data. Data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively then presented in tables, graphs, frequencies and percentages.

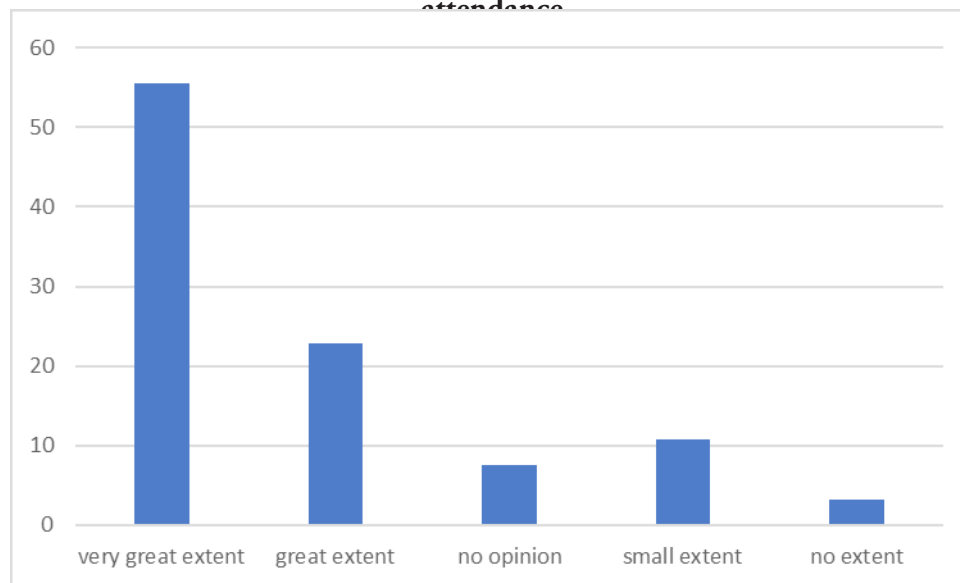
DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Curricular Access and Participation of secondary school girls in relation to GSTI

To achieve this, the students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed on various statements relating to GSTI. Over half of the girls strongly agreed that the GSTI has positively impacted their participation in various activities in the classroom. The majority, 182 (57.8%) stated that with the GSTI they are always present in class while 91(28.8%), 21(6.7%), 16(5.1%), 5(1.6%) agreed, neutral, disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Majority of the girls also agreed that GSTI enabled them to freely stand and answer questions, mingle freely even among boys, concentrate in study activities, volunteer to dust the board and were comfortable in class during their menstruation period. These findings concur with Muthaa and Njue's (2015) study that sought to find out whether girl-child participation in education was influenced by availability of sanitary facilities. The study found out that 72.4% of the girls were of the opinion that the availability of sanitary pads influenced their concentration in class to a greater extent and that the availability of sanitary towels influenced the performance of girls in class to a very great extent.

The study also sought to examine the influence of availability of sanitary towels on class attendance of the girls. The availability of sanitary towels influenced class attendance of girls to a very great extent as opined by the majority (55.6%) of the girls. The minority (3.1%) were of the opinion that availability of sanitary towels did not influence class attendance of girls. Another 22.9% indicated to great extent while 7.6% and 10.8% indicated no opinion and to a small extent respectively. Figures 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of the same.

Figure 1: Students' opinion on the extent to which sanitary towels influence their class attendance



Source: Field work questionnaires (2021)

In addition to the above opinions, one teacher also said:

“Availability of sanitary towels has a positive impact. Girls are motivated to come to school because even if they lack the sanitary towels at home, they know they can find them in school.”
(Class teacher, school C)

Co-curricular Access and Participation of secondary school girls in relation to GSTI

The respondents listed sports, games, clubs and societies as the co-curricular activities they took part in at school. The study sought to find out how often the girls participated in these activities during menstruation. Majority of the girls 135 (42.9%) indicated that they participated in co-curricular activities sometimes during their menstruation period. Those who always participate in co-curricular activities even during menstruation were the minority 87 (27.6%) while the rest 93 (29.5%) never participate in co-curricular activities during menstruation. The findings were summarized in table 3.

Table 1: Participation in co-curricular activities

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Sometimes	135	42.9%
Always	87	27.6%
Never	93	29.5%
	315	100

Source: Field work questionnaires (2021)

The students were further prompted to explain why they wouldn't participate fully in the co-curricular activities during their menstruation period. According to the information obtained from the questionnaires, it was due to discomfort and fear of staining. This was noted through the following statement made by one student:

“...I do not take part in co-curricular activities during my periods when I do not have enough pads to change many times. I do not want others to know that I am on my periods when I stain my clothes so I just tell the teacher I am not well and I do not play.” (Student school F)

Interviews with class teachers also indicated lower participation of girls in co-curricular activities during menstruation. One female teacher noted the following:

“...you can easily notice when a girl is on her menses by the way she appears uncomfortable to the point of not participating. I have observed many of them restricting their movements, refraining from outdoor play and even social interaction. Upon inquiry, most of the girls who restrict themselves in such a manner do not have adequate sanitary towels and therefore avoid moving that much so they do not stain their clothes. Those who afford to change sanitary towels regularly are freer, you can tell the difference.” (Female teacher, school B)

These findings agree with Chinyama et al., (2019) study which highlighted the main reason for girls not participating in co-curricular activities as the lack of sanitary towels and those with makeshift pads fear that they may drop or leak if they involve themselves in co-curricular activities during this period. The researcher further sought to know the impact of GSTI on the girls' co-curricular participation. This study established that GSTI had a positive impact on girls' participation in co-curricular activities. The students highlighted issues to do with comfort, confidence and increased participation in co-curricular activities confirmed by their responses as follows:

“...this program by the government has enabled me to play comfortably this is because I now change before going to the field then I play freely and do not stain my clothes. (Student, school E)

“...when the sanitary towels are available, a girl plays and cheers freely and happily. This is because she can get enough to change as many times hence, she is comfortable.” (Student, school D)

“...this program has helped prevent shame, no one can know that I am on my periods now. It has given me confidence, raised my self-esteem and courage to participate and even mingle with others. (Student, school C)

One of the teachers also noted that:

“GSTI has brought positive impact. The girls are now more motivated to come to school and participate in all activities. Girls' participation in co-curricular activities is at par with the boys. They now mingle freely with their classmates and take part in sporting activities with confidence.” (Class teacher, school B)

Strategies for sustainability of GSTI

The study sought to suggest strategies that can be employed to ensure the sustainability of Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative in enhancing girls' educational access and participation in secondary schools. To address this, information was sought from teachers, students and the education officer through questionnaires and interviews. The majority (82.5%) suggested that there should be increased supply of the sanitary towels to ensure that everyone has enough to take them

through the year. The government should also invest more resources in the production and supply of the same. The students noted that,

“...the government should supply a lot of sanitary towels to schools that we may get them every month. The sanitary towels should be made available throughout the year. The regular supply would help avoid shortages and this would be of great help especially to those girls from humble backgrounds.” (Students)

From the interview schedules, one teacher suggested that,

“There have always been problems on supply and therefore the government should agree on policies stating clearly what should be done. The supply should be regular as over half of these students are needy, and it will boost their attendance in school especially during that period.” (Class teacher, school F).

An interview with one Education Officer shed more light on the GSTI,

“The problem is always on funding, if only the government would gear more resources towards this initiative, then there would not be shortages. Sensitization on government policies is also prudent so that all the education stakeholders understand clearly how this initiative is run and what the public is entitled to.” (Education officer)

It is clear from the above findings that while there is policy on this initiative as stipulated by the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) policy (2019-2030), the stakeholders have not been sensitized and are therefore not aware of how this initiative runs. The study concludes that for the sustainability of this initiative, all stakeholders should be sensitized on the policy guidelines. There were also issues on quality with the girls suggesting that the quality of the sanitary towels could be improved. One of them noted that:

“Some of the pads that we were given by the government were very light and could not be held firmly in place maybe because they did not put enough glue. They should also make them thicker and more secure.” (Student, school C)

Educating about menstruation was also another strategy mentioned by the respondents. One of the principals during the interview observed that,

“This community is a bit conservative and issues to do with sexual and reproductive health are not talked about openly. The girls here from the way they have been socialized find it hard to open up about their issues, most learn of these things from their friends. It would be prudent if in addition to provision of sanitary towels, everyone is educated on menstruation.” (Principal, school F)

One student added that,

*“...we were given some underwear and sanitary pads and were not educated on how to use them. I learnt from my friends because I could not ask anyone at home. They should also educate us on menstruation and how we are supposed to deal with it especially on the hygiene and the stomach pain. We were also given some iron pills once but they did not explain exactly what it was for”
(Student, school A)*

These sentiments are in line with the MHM (2019-2030) policy whose objective, in addition to providing safe and hygienic menstrual products, is to ensure that myths, taboos and stigma around menstruation are addressed by providing women, girls, men and boys access to information on menstruation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that menstrual related issues especially lack of sanitary towels is a challenge among secondary school girls. Provision of sanitary towels by the government has positively impacted girls' access and participation in education. With access to sanitary towels, girls are now more confident and can attain their potential in education as they are able to manage their menstruation with dignity. Access to sanitary towels translates to increased attendance rates, participation both in and out of class.

Recommendations

The GSTI is a timely initiative by the government of Kenya. It is therefore imperative to ensure its sustainability for the country's goals on education and gender equality to be achieved. This study recommends that the government should ensure constant supply of sanitary towels to all schools nationwide with further consideration given to funding and sustainability of the initiative. The GSTI should also be monitored and evaluated to further inform policy and facilitate addressing the gaps within the initiative.

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