



Sustaining and Scaling School Water,
Sanitation, and Hygiene Plus
Community Impact



Boys and Male Teachers Play a Role in Helping Girls Manage Menstruation

By Carol Meyer

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At Ogwodo Primary School, teachers and students have come a long way when it comes to discussing the often embarrassing subject of puberty. Teacher and health patron Peter Odhiambo at this school in Sidho community of western Kenya's Muhoroni district recounts that the school used to have problems with water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as they relate to puberty. The toilets, he says, were a particular cause of worry for girls because they are shy and the toilets lacked privacy. Peter acknowledges, "Girls have things to deal with, like menstruation, which require more privacy than boys. The previous toilets were exposed and girls would go to the sugar cane fields or go home for privacy. Even though menstruation is a natural thing, the girls felt insecure and embarrassed."

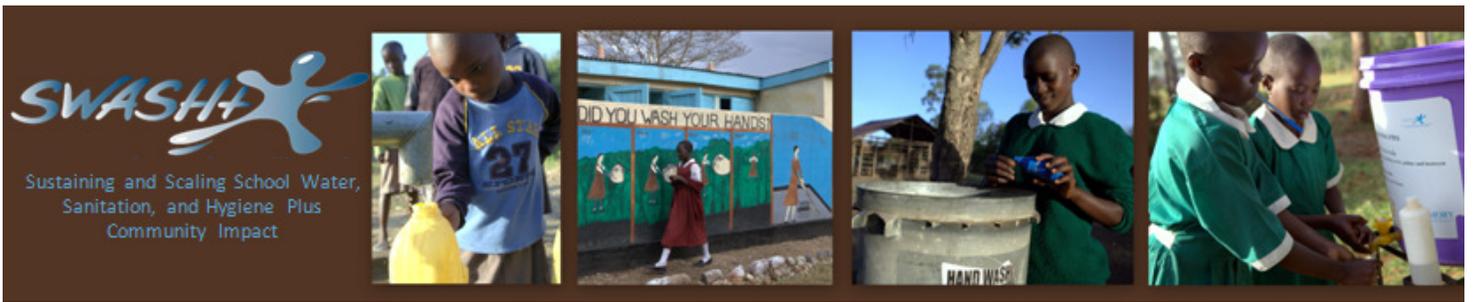
He admits that despite learning about bodily changes and sexuality in science class, boys still saw menstruation as an opportunity to tease girls. The *Sustaining and Scaling School Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Plus Community Impact* (SWASH+) project¹ has helped minimize teasing by ensuring that girls have privacy, access to supplies and a place to cleanse themselves during menstruation. In the pilot phase, the school received a WASH "package" that included a new block of three latrines plus a bathing stall with a door. The government-designed latrine and bathing block is surrounded by a six-foot wall for added privacy. In their allotted supplies, the school also receives a small amount of sanitary pads for students, though not enough to last the entire year for every girl. The school health club serves as a place to reinforce positive messages, with boys and girls together, about a wide range of topics, including menstruation, prevention of early pregnancy, personal hygiene and WASH.



Teacher and health patron Peter Odhiambo believes that creating a comfortable space for students and teachers to talk about sensitive topics is essential and makes his job easier. "When nothing is hidden," he says, "it is easy to help."

As the health patron, Peter feels it is critical that boys be part of the discussions about menstruation to help them understand what girls go through and to be more sympathetic towards female students. He volunteered as health patron because, he says, "Since becoming a teacher, I have been impressed by the

¹SWASH+ is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Global Water Challenge. It is implemented by a consortium of partners including CARE, Emory University's Center for Global Safe Water, the Great Lakes University of Kisumu and the Government of Kenya.



closeness of children. I imagined that if I volunteered, I could make a real difference. I don't see them as children, I see them as people who, when guided, can become responsible adults."

Instilling a sense of compassion around menstruation is particularly important for men and boys. "As men, we need to be included in the discussions about menstruation because we can help offer solutions," Peter says. "In cases where the madame health patron is not present, girls need to be able to ask me for sanitary pads and they need to be comfortable asking."

Girls at Peter's school agree, but also note that the new latrines have made a world of difference in the comfort they now feel at school. Thirteen-year-old Susan Awino says, "With the old latrines, we were terrified that boys would open the door or peak underneath to see us. With the new latrine, boys can't see what we do behind the wall, so they don't know whether we are bathing and have our periods or are just using the latrine."

Still, having access to resources is a welcomed addition for the girls at Ogwodo Primary School. Peter attests, "Providing sanitary pads is a challenge for many students because they come from homes where things like pads are not seen as essential. Instead, they use strips of old clothes or rolls of cotton batting. After we started the SWASH+ program, we had discussions with parents about helping their daughters manage their periods and the head teacher has been instrumental because he has access to some funds." Peter knows that educating girls at school is only part of the equation. Parents need to support what their children learn. In part, Peter feels that his job as teacher and health patron is essentially helping to raise the next generation of his community. He elaborates, "Professionally, we are teachers, but your love for children helps you guide them into the future. This (primary school) is a foundation for children. If they are taken through a good learning process, they will become responsible members of society."

In the end, Peter acknowledges that girls have traditionally been marginalized in rural Kenya, yet he feels they have the power to become important members of society. "The key," he says, "is to make sure that neither girls nor boys have more opportunities than the other. Instead, we should lift up both boys **and** girls."

SWASH+ is a five-year applied research project to identify, develop, and test innovative approaches to school-based water, sanitation and hygiene in Nyanza Province, Kenya. The partners that form the SWASH+ consortium are CARE, Emory University, the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, the Government of Kenya, and formerly the Kenya Water for Health Organisation (KWAHO), and Water.org. SWASH+ is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Global Water Challenge. For more information, visit www.swashplus.org.