



Sophia's Struggle

By Carol Meyer
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Sophia Christine can't sit still. She is nervous, anxious and not quite sure how to solve her dilemma. While Mr. Oremo, her seventh-grade teacher asks the class to repeat phrase after phrase in English, Sophia is weighing her options – devising a plan to discreetly slip out of the classroom and return home to deal with the stain she is absolutely certain exists on the back of her skirt. She knows the boys will laugh and taunt her. Some will even take note of the date and remind themselves to tease her again next month. She can feel her abdomen clench tighter at the thought.

The problem – Sophia doesn't have a sanitary pad. Instead, this month she is using strips of old clothes which have obviously failed. She could ask Mr. Oremo if there are supplies in the classroom's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) kit. But at 14, and in a culture where girls are encouraged to be timid, interrupting class and having to ask a man for something so personal is not an option. She'll just wait until everyone leaves class before she gets up, ties her sweater around her waist and seeks out a female teacher to ask for permission to return home.



Sophia Christine, third from left, girls in her school are often left to improvise when their families cannot afford toiletries. During menstruation, the added anxiety is a distraction that sometimes results in missed classes and learning.

Families in the small community of Miongwe, in Muhoroni district of Kenya's western Nyanza province, rely primarily on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood. Financial resources are strained if they exist at all. Women's and girls' needs fall second to those of

men and boys. Like many families in this community, Sophia's parents struggle to purchase even the most basic essentials. Toiletries are simply a luxury. And given the tradition of using old clothes or very inexpensive rolls of cotton batting during menstruation, girls learn to "do as their mothers do."

In Kenya, the rite of passage to become a woman can be riddled with unanswered questions, fear and embarrassment. Discussion around menstruation at home is often limited to bare basics. As such, for girls, especially those as young as 9 years old when they have their periods, managing menstruation is daunting. Keeping track of when her period will arrive is yet another task to add to a long list of daily chores. If caught off guard, an unprepared girl can be the focus of ridicule – causing some girls to stay home from school, thereby derailing their education.



For girls at God Obuoro Primary School, a sanitary pad can provide peace of mind, allowing them the freedom to explore and thrive.



Breaking tradition

Beginning in 2007, Sophia's school took part in a five-year research initiative of the *Sustaining and Scaling School Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Plus Community Impact (SWASH+)* project in Kenya. During a pilot phase of the God Abuoro Primary School received a "package" of WASH interventions including separate cement block-constructed latrines for girls; containers to store treated drinking and handwashing water; and a limited supply of cleaning products and bleach for latrine maintenance, toilet paper and a water treatment chemical known as WaterGuard.

Students formed a health club to learn about and share important health topics like puberty, sexuality HIV prevention, in addition to undertaking WASH activities including daily latrine maintenance. They also take responsibility for maintaining a clean and healthy school environment. Two teachers, one male and one female, were trained to serve as *health patrons* who oversee the club.

The female students are grateful for the new latrines and WASH supplies, but Sophia still longs for a bathing stall at school. "One thing I would change about this school is to have a place to cleanse, especially for the times when I'm having my period," she says. "And if we had sanitary pads, we would find it easier to concentrate in class because we would not worry if blood will show on our clothes."

Advocating for change

In its final phase, SWASH+ is building upon the in-depth research and analysis of rigorous quantitative studies in 185 schools to advocate for changes in the government's school WASH allocations. In 2009, the Kenyan government's school budget included five Kenyan shilling (KES) per child (approximately six US cents), per year for WASH activities. Electricity costs were also included in this five KES.

Representatives from the Ministry of Education (MoE), school administrators, and the SWASH+ team examined school budget allocations. They asked the Ministry of Education to consider reallocating certain line items to increase WASH services. For example, school budgets already contained line items for structural improvements such as fences. But a school with sub-standard sanitation facilities could not deviate from the budget guidelines and use those funds for latrine maintenance.

In 2010, the government raised the WASH allocation to 10 KES (12 US cents) and then in 2011, raised it again to 20 KES (24 US cents) per child per year. While these are certainly steps in the "right" direction, the SWASH+ team's research has shown that it still is insufficient to cover the basic WASH needs of schools. For 34 KES (41 US cents) per child, per year, the SWASH+ team suggests that the Kenyan government provide a minimum package to include WASH supplies such as disinfectant for latrines, WaterGuard to kill bacteria in drinking and handwashing water, and necessary tool to clean latrines. An



Health clubs in schools help children learn about and practice good hygiene at school and home, which ultimately results in lower absenteeism.



ideal package would cost 270 KES (\$3.27) per child, per year and include the basic WASH supplies in the minimum package, with the addition of sanitary pads and toilet paper.

However, since fluctuations in currency and costs of products are common, the SWASH+ team is encouraging the Kenyan government and the MoE to think in terms of allocating a percentage of the budget towards WASH. Under the current budget, this would mean that 3 percent of the government's school budget would be directed towards providing an optimal WASH package in schools. In 2011, after the SWASH+ team presented its research, the Kenyan government created a separate budget of 300 million KES (\$3.6 million) for the purchase and distribution of sanitary pads to schools. The amount has since been reduced to 240 million KES (\$2.8 million), which the government estimates will reach 500,000 girls in grades 7 and 8. Set to begin in May 2012, it is still unclear how the government arrived at these numbers or how the sanitary pads will be distributed, but nonetheless, it's a noble step for the Kenyan government and a promising acknowledgement for SWASH+.

Sophia Christine read about the government's new plan and has a few thoughts on how she would manage the supply of pads at God Abuoro Primary School if selected. "The pads could be stored with the WASH supplies in each classroom. Or better yet, we could store a few at a time in the girls' latrine each day. If the government brings pads, we will find it easier to concentrate in class because we will not worry. The pads will prevent embarrassing situations."

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.