

### **1B.3. The Social & Health Impact of Girls' Experiences of Menstruation & Schooling in Tanzania**

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**Background & Significance:** A gender gap in girls' education at all levels of the school system continues to exist in Tanzania and across sub-Saharan Africa. One unexplored aspect of this inequity is how the onset of puberty, and menstruation in particular, may be impacting on girls' attendance, participation, and completion of schooling. The lack of affordable menstrual management materials and sufficient water and sanitation facilities within school grounds; the social and cultural pressures that arise for a girl as she becomes a young woman within the local society; and the implications of womanhood for a young woman's sexual health, well-being, and continued academic focus, were all reasons behind this exploratory study. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzanian young women aged 15-24 years old are the fastest growing population with HIV. Understanding the nature of this "age of risk" is critical to mitigating the spread of infection.

**Main Question/Hypothesis:** This project sought to reveal girls' voiced experiences of menstruation, puberty and education in order to understand how post-pubescent young women's academic and future life chances might be threatened by the onset of puberty within gendered schooling institutions, patriarchal household structures, and the historical, economic, and social context of Kilimanjaro. The original hypothesis was that the onset of puberty, and menstruation in particular, was directly responsible for girls' school dropout. Over the course of the fieldwork, this hypothesis shifted significantly, recognizing the indirect effects of menstrual onset on academic success, along with the importance of the overall pubertal experience to sexual health and educational outcomes.

**Methodology:** A comparative case study that combined multiple methods, including qualitative (observation, in-depth interviews, written narratives, participatory activities) and mixed methods (document analysis and secondary data analysis) to provide information on cultural understandings and meanings of menstruation; capture young women's lived experiences of menstruation and schooling; and explore the potential role of menstrual-stigma in creating feelings of shame in post-pubescent young women. The study provided information on how menarche is indirectly or directly contributing to young women's impaired school performance and dropout, within the context of northern Tanzania.

Preliminary fieldwork (Aug - Oct. 2006) led to the decision to conduct an urban vs. rural comparison, given the differences in economic, social, and cultural influences on girls' transition to adulthood. The in-depth research (Jan - Apr. 2007) was conducted in the Kilimanjaro region, where the confluence of globalization and eroding tradition is particularly well exemplified. Significant entrée was available through a Columbia University faculty member who has conducted 12+ years of research in the area. In each site, observation was conducted, alongside 4-5 key informant interviews (n=10), and 8 in-depth interviews with young women in and out of school (n=16), ages 16-19. Participatory work was conducted with 4 groups of ~ 20 girls in the first site (3 in school and 1 at a vocational center) and 2 groups in the second site (in school).

Data were analyzed in collaboration with the local research assistant, and validated through triangulation of the findings obtained from the different methods. The types of analysis utilized in this research project included: 1) narrative analysis, 2) descriptive analysis, and 3) thematic analysis. Sub-sets of the thematic analysis included structural analysis of physical environs, and curricular analysis of relevant educational content.

**Data:** Project data included field notes of observations and informal conversations; contextual background of schools through a standardized checklist; transcripts of key informant and in-depth interviews; notes from archival documents; and young women's written narratives and participatory activity write-ups.

**Findings:** The fieldwork and analysis revealed, from the perspective of young women and adults who interact in their lives, the physical and emotional challenges of menstrual management, the internal and external pressures to engage in premarital sexual relations, and the ways in which girls' academic and future life options could be improved with pragmatic and locally driven interventions. The findings have relevance for schools and puberty education programs across Tanzania, along with providing insights into future research and HIV-prevention for young people.

**Knowledge Contribution:** This project was important in revealing the strengths and challenges of girls' maturational experiences as they attend school in Kilimanjaro. The capturing of young women's recollections about the pubertal transition period, the dynamic between sexual maturation and schooling, and their pragmatic and thoughtful recommendations for improving the lives of girls maturing after them, represents the power and importance of the findings. Equally valuable was the effort to place these young women's experiences within the social, economic, and political context of a globalizing world. Although additional research was implicated, there are public health and education interventions that could be implemented now to improve young women's chances of remaining in school, and their overall health and well-being. This project provided a critical step towards better understanding modern

Tanzanian young women's experiences of puberty and schooling, and potential for future life accomplishments, should global, national, local communities provide the enabling environment for their success.