

# The Social & Health Impact of Girls' Experiences of Menstruation and Schooling in Tanzania

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## Project Background

- Research project for DrPH degree
- Interest stemming from 2 yrs teaching English in Eritrea
- Entrée to Tanzania



What does it mean to become a young woman within a particular society in this age of globalization and shifting cultures and economies?

What changes occur when girlhood is left behind and newly-formed sexuality emerges?

How does a girl growing into a young woman successfully navigate her way in an education system that is inherently girl-unfriendly?

## Background to Issue in Sub-Saharan Africa

- Gender gap in education
  - 57% of all girls attending primary school
  - 17% of all girls enrolled in secondary school
- Benefits of educating girls
  - human right
  - improved health of girls & their families, better economic returns, decreased violence against women, and increased participation in civil society

Herz & Sperling, 2004

## My interest piqued...

- Little empirical evidence about what happens as girls become young women
  - *how do they manage menstruation in schools with no facilities and lacking funds for pads?*
  - *how do they cope with new sexual attention?*
  - *what are the social & cultural pressures that arise post-pubescence?*

## Tanzania

- Population: 37,445,492 million
- Age Structure:
  - 0-14 years: 43.7%
  - 15-64 years: 53.6%
  - 65 years & over: 2.6%
- Ethnic groups: 120+
- Life expectancy at birth: 45.64 years
- Prevalence of HIV: 8.8%
- Total Fertility Rate: 4.97 children

## Tanzania (con't)

- 33% of girls have never attended school as compared to 25% of boys
- ~ 30% of students drop out of primary school (majority of girls)
- Drop-off to 5% net enrollment at secondary level
- 4.1% of girls complete Jr Secondary vs. 8.8% of males

*Young women aged 15-24 up to 6x more likely to become infected with HIV than same-age males.*

## The Kilimanjaro Region



- Located in northeastern Tanzania
- Mostly inhabited by the Chagga
  - historically supportive of girls' education
- History of missionary & colonial influence
- Predominance of coffee farming
- Western tourism a growing presence

## Research Problem

*This study examined how the onset of menses....potentially results in increasing risk to the sexual health and academic success of Tanzanian young women*

## Research Methods

- Comparative case study using mixed methods including:
  - \* Observation
  - \* Archival/Document review
  - \* In-depth interviewing
  - \* Participatory methods
  
- Urban vs. Rural sites

## Sampling

### Theoretical sampling methodology

- Primary target group
  - young women (group work & in-depth interviewing)
  
- Secondary target group
  - adults

## Data Collection

Multi-pronged: (over a 9 month period)

- Preliminary fieldwork:

- archival analysis, informal conversations, observation, site visits

- In-depth fieldwork:

- observation (e.g. classroom observation, school day, use of latrines, use of public/private spaces, interaction with teachers, parents, other adults)

- key informant interviews ( e.g. biology teachers, parents, health workers)



A relatively nice example of pit latrines in a primary school  
(all things being relative)



A really nice  
pit latrine –  
photo from a  
secondary  
school in Moshi

But, consider  
disposal issues  
if all the girls  
actually used pads

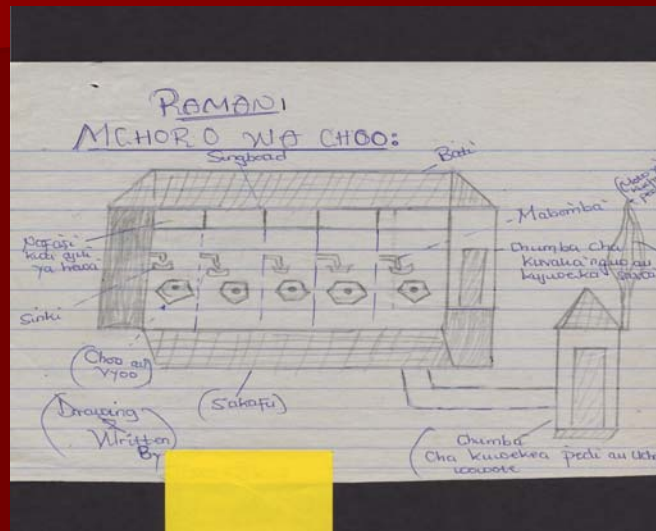
## Data Collection (con't)

### ■ In-depth:

- In-depth interviews (young women aged ~ 16-19)
- Participatory work (e.g. menstrual narratives, 1 million shilling activity, design of perfect toilet)
- Document analysis (e.g. newspapers, curriculum and syllabi, attendance records)

~ *On-going analysis throughout* ~

## Girl' drawing of a "perfect" toilet



## Shift in original hypothesis

- Findings indicated that menstruation is a definite challenge for young women in both an urban and rural setting
- 'Dropout' due to menstruation is not the primary problem among the Chagga young women studied
- Problems result from onset of puberty in its entirety

*It's a real problem...the girls do well in Form 1 and early Form 2, and then something happens...I've been a math teacher for 30 years and have watched it in puzzlement...something happens due to nature and they change and start to fail...the other teachers all worry about it as well and ask how they can help girls.*

## Role of social structures

3 will mention today:

- The absence of reliable information creates confusion and shame
- Managing puberty/menses in the school environment leads to discomfort and embarrassment
- Many structural barriers to attaining pain relief from menstrual discomfort

*The toilets are not so good...the toilets near the classrooms are not in good condition...and dorm ones are flush which is a problem – the girls don't like them because they cannot throw their pads in there and the girls don't like dustbins so they throw the pads everywhere.*

*If you throw your pad in the toilet, you will never give birth.*

## Influence of globalization

2 will mention today:

- The increase in information due to the media does not necessarily translate into an improved situation or more available accurate information
- Many local ideas on how to harness the conduits of globalization to better educate young people

*In the old generation, they used to be taught by their grandmothers...about the importance of staying a virgin until they were married, and how it was a shame if you were not a virgin when you got married. But now, no one cares if you are a virgin when you get married – you are not taught such things – you are just left to grow up with no guidance – no one tells them.*

## Young women's sexual behavior

2 will mention today:

- There is an acute shortage of accurate and relevant information on HIV/AIDS
- Young women conveyed a strong desire to learn more about their bodies, sexuality, and HIV...but they are not really worried about HIV risk

*Young girls should not play with boys or should not have love games (when they start menstruating).*

*If you've done sex before your menstruation, are you still a virgin?*

Implications for future research & interventions:  
*much to learn and to do*

- Future Research
- Potential Interventions
  - public health
  - education

## Next Steps

- Disseminate findings to global health and education communities
- Return to Tanzania and meet with MOE & MOH colleagues, WB, UN/NGOs to present results
- Advocate about the issue and need for attention to puberty/menses in girls' education & health interventions
- Organize funding/structure to do book project, model schools, continued research to fill in gaps