Developing a Girls’ Puberty Book in Cambodia: Incorporating Girls’ Voiced Experiences of Puberty and Menstruation

Grow & Know, Inc.

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Cambodia Research Background

- **No schooling gender gap but high drop out rates:** Both girls and boys drop out at high rates at the secondary level, with girls at 96.1 net enrolment in primary, 37.4 in lower secondary and 20.1 in upper secondary.

- **Lack of useful reproductive health guidance:** The school curriculum includes black-and-white anatomical diagrams in lower secondary school, but classes include large groups of boys and girls, and the teaching method is typically rote memorization.

- **Insufficient and inadequate latrines:** 31% of schools have no latrine
Applied Research

• **Research**
  - Participatory activities with 16-19 year old girls
  - Key informant interviews with teachers and other adults involved in girls’ lives
  - Ethnographic observation at primary and secondary schools

• **Application**
  - Adapted Grow and Know’s Tanzania Girls’ Puberty Book to the Cambodian context
  - By the end of 2014, 100,000 copies will have been printed.
Research Methods

- 2 field researchers, one American woman and one young Cambodian woman

- 2 research sites: peri-urban Phnom Penh and rural Battambang Province
  - 4 in-school groups and 1 out-of-school group in each site
  - Total of 10 groups, 149 participants

- Participatory activities: 3 sessions per group
  - True/false knowledge quiz
  - Design a puberty curriculum
  - Dream toilet
  - One million riel to improve school WASH for girls
  - Menstrual stories
  - Traditional beliefs
Key Research Findings: School Curriculum

• **Girls lack knowledge of physiological process.** Girls were not aware that variations in frequency and length are natural.

• Almost all girls reported learning about menstruation after it had begun happening to them, and suggested that **girls should be prepared at an earlier age.**

• **Girls preferred confident and knowledgeable women’s health instructors** (preferably female), and expressed a desire for girls-only sessions.
Guidance from female relatives included basic menstrual knowledge, but also some persistent traditional beliefs:

1. During a girl’s menstruation, taking a cold bath is bad for her skin.
2. If a girl keeps her first sanitary pad, it can prevent acne or protect from others’ bad intentions.
3. If a girl carries heavy things during her menstruation, her period will stop immediately or will become irregular.
4. Eating sour fruit during a girl’s menstruation can stop her menstruation.
In their drawings and in discussion, girls expressed a desire for:

- Improved access to and cleanliness of toilets

- Water source (not necessarily running water) and trash bin inside toilet stall

- Meaningful separation between boys’ and girls’ toilets (5-20 meters or physical barrier to ensure privacy from boys)

- Discrete, convenient access to sanitary pads or materials on school grounds
Key Research Findings: Absenteeism

- Some girls missed class due to challenges in managing menstrual flow as well as menstrual pain.

- Girls recognized that exercise and stretching can reduce menstrual cramping, and requested more girl-appropriate exercise materials.
Application: Growth and Changes

- English and Khmer
- Cambodian illustrator, translator and publisher
- Culturally appropriate illustrations of typical adolescent girls
- A5 size to promote private, individual reading at home
“When a girl has her period, she should wash at least twice a day with soap and water in the area around the vagina...If a girl is going to school, she should take an extra cloth or pad in a plastic bag so that she can change after a few hours.”
When I came home from the Pchum Ben festival, I felt irritated and had stomach cramps. When I went into the bathroom, I saw a lot of blood on my underwear. I was frightened, so I told my mom about it with a pale face. She told me that it was the woman's period. She told me how to keep clean and be hygienic when we have our period. We have to use pads to prevent stains on our pants or skirts. We have to dry cloths directly in the sun to kill bacteria. She told me to take a bath at least 3 times per day, get enough sleep, eat food or vegetables that have a lot of protein, and drink a lot of water. I realized that I have become a woman, and I have been following what my mother told me. I feel that I have become another person with a different personality, including my preferences, how I talk and how I make decisions. I have some recommendations for the younger generation. When you see blood on your underwear and have stomach cramps, your period is coming. A few days before having your period, you might have mood swings, become easily irritable, or feel sore on your hips, stomach or breasts. Then, you will see some blood coming from the vagina. Before it comes, you should prepare some pads or fabric to use to prevent leaks onto your trousers. Boil some water, put it in a bottle and roll it over your stomach, exercise, and drink a lot of water. Girls should follow all the methods above to have good health. Don’t be afraid of what is going to happen to your body.
“Is it normal if...?”

“Q: Is it normal if my period only lasts for 2 days?”
“A: Yes, the average length of a period is 5 days but it can range from 2 to 7 days.”
Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport requested underwear, but agreed that the illustration was necessary to give girls straightforward educational information.
Initial 15,000 copies were printed and distributed through local organizations. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and many expressed a need for a Boys’ Puberty Book.

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport provided feedback on the book and approval as a supplementary educational material.

UNICEF, UNFPA and Save the Children will order an additional 85,000 copies for distribution.

Development of Cambodia Boys’ Puberty Book is underway.
Key Lessons Learned

- Identify local champions as early as possible to provide information on the local context, assist with logistics, and to integrate the book into existing programming with girls.

- Partnership with the local Ministry of Education from the beginning is essential to project scale up.

- In order for girls to study the book in private, it should be read at home. Additionally, girls are likely to discuss the content with mothers, sisters or out-of-school girls, increasing project reach.