Menstruation, school attendance, spatial mobility and wider gender inequalities in Kenya (research paper).

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Introduction

- High gender inequality in education (only 17% girls in secondary education in Sub Saharan Africa).
- Is this linked to poor sanitary product access?
- How else does MHM influence girls everyday experiences?
- We emphasize girls’ ‘lived experiences' of menstruation and puberty and how these influence school attendance, mobility and broader life chances.
An under-researched and spatially varied topic

- Sommer (2010) argues that as girls mature, a ‘collision’ occurs ‘in school environments that continue to be gender discriminatory’ (523).

- Studies in Malawi (Grant et al. 2010) and Nepal (Oster & Thornton 2009) question links between school attendance and menstruation.

- Agreement on the need for more research!
The theoretical framework of the paper

- Takes a feminist political ecology approach (Rocheleau et al. 1996) to investigate how menstruation helps to reproduce gender inequalities.

Methodology

• Qualitative methods
• 9 schools visited (4 urban 5 rural)
• 17 semi-structured interviews
• 7 focus groups
• Participatory techniques
• Investigation of reusable sanitary towels initiatives
Theme 1. Why do girls in Kisumu sometimes miss school?

- Most girls and all teachers explicitly linked girls’ poor school attendance to menstruation, low sanitary towel access and poor access to WASH facilities.

- It is easier to manage MHM at home.
Theme 2. Menstruation and female mobility

• Fears about their menstruating status being detected and ridiculed restricts girls' mobility.

• Menstruating girls who attend school sometimes sit in class all day to prevent visible leakage.
Theme 3. Menstruation and the sexual exploitation of post-pubescent girls

• Teachers recounted how girls often fall prey to sexual exploitation when seeking money for sanitary products.

• The situation improved when their school started to provide free sanitary towels for girls.
Theme 4. Girls’ and teachers’ responses to schemes promoting re-usable sanitary products

• Project Mwezi and K-Met provide training and sexual health education.

• Project Mwezi’s bikini pads address underwear shortages.

• But many girls prefer disposable pads, if affordable.

Project Mwezi bikini and standard towels

K-Met towel
Conclusions

• The re-patterning of girls movements at puberty restricts their access to:
  – Education
  – Broader life chances.

• Improved access to sanitary products can address some key challenges but are unlikely to tackle entrenched gender inequalities

• Need for more work in different geographical contexts
Recommendations

Simple, cheap and widely applicable

- Flexible uniform codes and classroom rules in school.
- Emergency MHM supplies in school.
- Simple texts explaining puberty, menstruation and MHM.

The Girls' Puberty Book by M. Sommer
More expensive and more regionally specific

Sanitation infrastructure that meets’ MHM needs:

• Safe
• Private
• Well lit
• Disposal facilities
• Hand washing
• Soap
• Wash room
More challenging and regionally specific

• More, better trained female teachers.
• Multi-sectoral schemes.
• Policies supporting the funding of such measures.
• But ‘one size won’t fit all’.
• Need culturally appropriate ways to challenge cultural silence surrounding menstruation.
References


• Truelove, Y. (2011) (Re-)Conceptualizing water inequality in Delhi, India through a feminist political ecology framework. *Geoforum* 42: 143-52