

Girls & Sanitation Project - 23 Schools in Nwoya & Amuru Districts, Northern Uganda (2018-2022)



Introducing African Revival:

Our vision is an Africa where every child has equal access to quality education, as we believe education is the key to overcoming poverty. Since 2005, we have worked with primary and nursery schools in Uganda, Zambia, and South Sudan. We don't just provide infrastructure; we empower whole communities – pupils, teachers, and parents – to transform schools into thriving learning environments that build better futures. The end goal is simple: to improve equal access to quality education.

Background and Objectives:

In the schools of rural Northern Uganda, girls face more challenges than their male counterparts in accessing quality education. Early childhood marriage, teenage pregnancy, menstruation, and a lack of support from parents and the wider community, all keep girls from attending or finishing school. Furthermore, there is a lack of facilities at rural schools for girls to use when they are menstruating – hygienic latrines, changing rooms, access to water and soap for washing, provision of reusable sanitary pads – this leads to them staying at home during menstruation. There are therefore multiple factors affecting attendance and attainment of girls at school in rural communities.

Previously, quantitative data that could be used to support other organisations implementing MHM/ girls' education interventions was lacking, because typically, programmes are either too small or too short-term to cause long lasting effects. We aimed to implement a longer programme, approaching menstruation and sanitation in a holistic manner, to produce significant, long-lasting impacts in the communities we work with.

The Girls & Sanitation (G&S) project was a five-year programme, launched in January 2018 and implemented at 23 primary schools in Northern Uganda (6 in Nwoya District and 17 in Amuru District). The aim was to improve sanitation at project schools and develop a better all-round approach to menstrual health management (MHM), by addressing taboos and discriminative cultural/social norms, shaping community attitudes, providing reusable sanitary pads for menstrual hygiene management, helping girls develop positive habits for menstrual hygiene from a young age, and ultimately keeping girls in school to complete their primary education with the aim they continue to secondary education.

Early Testimonials:

“Many girls are very shy to come and ask for pads and other support during their menstruation and they end up staying home and missing classes because they think menstrual issues must be kept secret and nobody should know about it.”

Madam Mary, Senior female teacher, Palukere Primary School

“I have too much fear during my periods because boys like making fun of girls when they realise you are menstruating, for instance a girl got up unknowingly and her skirt was stained with blood and boys made fun of her and even they drew her cartoon, this evoked too much fear in me and I always feel I shouldn’t come to school during my periods.”

Akello Brenda, P6 pupil, Reckiceke Primary School

“We share latrines with the female teachers and there are no washrooms for us girls where we can bath and change pads during menstruation while at school.”

Acayo Prossy, 16yrs, P5 pupil, Purongo Primary School

“Our school do not provide sanitary pads for emergency use for the girls while at school and I always stay home during my period.”

Lakica Grace, 17yrs, P7 pupil, Ober Abic Primary School

Outputs:

The programme comprised refurbishment of one borehole at Pawel Langetta Primary School, and construction of latrines and handwashing facilities at two other schools - to ensure adequate sanitation facilities were in place to support the wider programme - combined with provision of sanitary supplies and educational elements.

Building Latrines

African Revival constructed four blocks of latrines for staff and students at two project schools (as well as a further three blocks, built at a third school as part of a separate but concurrent project at one of the G&S project schools; Palukere Primary School) – improving sanitation for the whole school community. Three blocks of VIP drainable latrines were built at Purongo Primary School, which now has 1x5 girls’ latrines (with a changing room), 1x5 boys’ latrines and 1x2 teachers’ latrines. The girls’ latrine block includes a changing room, to provide privacy and a conducive environment for girls to wash and change pads at school. At Lujoro Primary School, a 1x2 block of drainable latrines was constructed for the teachers. Previously, the teachers at Lujoro had no functional latrines, and they were sharing with the pupils.



New latrine blocks at Palukere and Purongo Primary Schools

Education

The education element was centred on shaping how people in Northern Uganda think about hygiene, menstruation, child marriage and puberty. We provided extensive training to both male and female pupils, teachers and members of the wider community, using materials developed by Irise International to run comprehensive workshops, discussing the various issues with all stakeholders.

- Menstrual Health Management (MHM) & WASH Training

Each year, a total of 46 teachers (23 senior female, 23 senior male – one female and one male teacher from each school) were trained on MHM and related issues. Almost 12,000 girls benefited from MHM training and attended advocacy meetings focussed on addressing stigma, discriminative cultural and social norms and encouraging young girls to have a positive attitude toward menstruation from a young age. Most of the training workshops also included boys. Refresher training was conducted annually, to ensure girls were supported at school throughout the academic year, and school packs - with training manuals, MHM comics, and posters - were supplied to each school, to enable teachers to continue running workshops after the end of the programme and support thousands more girls with menstrual challenges in the years to come.



Pupils attending MHM training



- Community Engagement

A series of community meetings were conducted at all the intervention schools, involving the School Management Committee, the Parents Teachers Association, local leaders and parents. At the meetings, the stakeholders discussed key issues, such as parental support to keep girls in school, traditional taboos, and myths around menstruation.



Reusable Sanitary Pad Distribution



During the five years of the project, a total of 13,080 packs of reusable sanitary pads (each pack contained five pads), were distributed to over 11,800 girls in classes P5-P7 (9-15 years) and to school administration for use as emergency pads at the 23 project schools. Easy Pads - a social enterprise based in Jinja, Uganda, that employs women from the local community - supplied pads that had been modified using feedback from the girls, so that the pads produced were longer and suited their needs. We decided to use Easy Pads, because the pads are robust (made with a sewing machine and interlocker), cost effective (approximately £3 per pack) and they supported a local initiative providing employment and training to women.

Girls' Advocacy Clubs

Following two separate pilot projects (AmplifyChange and Menstrual Health Advocates), early in Y5 (2022) we set up Girls' Advocacy Clubs at all 23 of our G&S project schools. With support from senior female teachers, each school set up a girls' club with 30 members, who were selected from P5-P7 by their peers to represent the entire class. Club members voted two girls to be their girls' club leaders and take the lead in running the club's activities. Club activities included MHM training sessions, debates about challenges the girls face (with boys and the community invited to attend), drama, songs, poetry and sewing. Along with the girls, we designed and distributed Menstrual Health Advocates (MHA) Comic Books with fun and educational content, which were used as resources during club discussions. The clubs are a safe space for girls to talk openly and support one another to advocate change within their schools and communities.



MHA comic books, which were designed with input from the girls' club members

Outcomes:

The sanitation interventions will benefit both male and female pupils, teachers, as well as the wider community in the case of the borehole at Pawel Langetta School. Sanitation interventions disproportionately benefit girls, who often walk long distances to collect water, or care for sick family members.

The MHM and WASH training has helped improved sanitation practises and menstrual hygiene. Young girls have better knowledge and information about menstruation, which will help them to manage their periods without shame and maintain their dignity.

The community engagement meetings have changed the attitude of the parents - especially the men, who used to treat menstrual issues as matters to be handled by women and not by them. The discussions created awareness about the responsibility of every member of the community to ensure that girls are supported with menstrual and educational needs, so that they remain in school and complete their primary education.

“I used to treat issues of menstruation as women’s issues and should not be handled by men and it should be secret but after the community dialogue conducted with the community at the school, I realised I have a role to play in supporting my daughter with her menstrual and educational needs.”

Ojwang Geoffrey, Parent at Agwayugi Primary School

Provision of reusable sanitary pads has improved attendance of girls. Girls used to stay home during their periods because they were not able to manage their periods safely or feel comfortable in class.

“I used to miss school for one week when I am menstruating because I didn’t have pads to manage my periods and I always use old pieces of clothes to absorb the menstrual blood which makes me uncomfortable in school, but after distribution of reusable sanitary pads and training how to use reusable sanitary pads and manage menstruation, I became so confident about myself and started using the Easy Pads distributed and I no longer miss school during my periods.”

Aketo-Wanga Flaxy, P7 pupil, Palukere Primary School

The Girls’ Clubs are a huge success, and this is obvious from the increased confidence that the members now show in talking openly about the issues that affect them. Club members are now able to support their fellow girls in school and in the wider community. The clubs’ activities have sparked discussions on menstrual issues in the schools and wider communities, where this was previously not talked about at all, let alone so openly. More support is being given to girls in the schools.



Girls’ Club debate in progress and Abi Dar, AR Programme Fund Manager, with girls during a monitoring visit to Pagak Primary School

Impacts:

The refurbishment of a borehole and construction of latrines and handwashing facilities will improve sanitation for male and female pupils and staff at the beneficiary schools, immediately and for years to come. Attendance of boys and girls will be improved; the fixing of the borehole at Pawel Langetta School means that children there won’t have to walk long distances to fetch water and the newly constructed latrines at the other schools will help reduce the spread of diseases.

Data

With the exception of Y4, when enrolment dropped, due to school closures and COVID-19, there has been a significant increase in enrolment year-on-year at all the project schools, as well as improved attendance of pupils. Enrolment of boys increased from 9,275 across all 23 schools at the start of Y1, to 10,679 in Y5 (an increase of 13% over the 5 years). Enrolment of girls increased from 8,484 at the start of Y1, to 9,942 in Y5 (an increase of 15%).



The project has taken significant steps towards making sure schools are comfortable environments for female pupils during menstruation, including provision of changing rooms for girls to use. As a result of our intervention, more girls are being retained and are finishing their primary education. In 2017 (the year before the project started), 306 girls passed their Primary Leaving Exams (PLE) (achieving grades of Div I-IV) in the 23 project schools. In 2019 (two full years after the project began), this had increased to 426 girls (an increase of 28%). There was a drop in PLE attainment in 2020 (Y3) and no PLE took place in Y4, both related to COVID-19. At the end of Y5, 358 girls passed their PLE in the G&S schools, so not quite back up to pre-COVID attainment of 2019. PLE passes for boys also increased year-on-year in Y1-Y2, before the disruption, however, on average, twice as many boys than girls sit (and pass) PLE, so there is still more work to be done to help girls achieve at the same level as their male counterparts. Improving educational outcomes for girls will help increase the disproportionately small number of girls that proceed to secondary school. Over time, improved education in the Amuru and Nwoya Districts will create notable returns both financially and with regard to health across the region. These returns will contribute towards rural development, eventually lifting many children and families out of poverty.

“We have realised a great increment on the enrolment and the number of girls completing their primary cycle at the project schools over the years, through monitoring the enrolments and PLE results. This project has really supported the young girls through addressing their challenges and needs, which give them more confidence to remain in school and complete their primary education.”

Mr. Apollo Kaggwa, Secretary of Education and Sports, Amuru District Local Government – comments made during regular monitoring of schools.

Both male and female pupils have been educated on menstruation and other issues and there has been a shift in the mindset of whole communities that will help to better support girls’ education in the future. More than 1,600 community members have attended engagement sessions and there was an increase in participation over the first three years of the project (when the meetings took place). Open discussion will eradicate the shame often associated with menstruation for women living in rural communities. The community engagement element of this project has led to increased collaboration between the school and the community, not just on menstruation, but on various topics. For example, exam candidates, supported by their parents, are now residing at schools, which provide accommodation while they sit their exams.

“I am so glad parents are following up their children and turning up for school programmes when called upon at school - which was not the case before African Revival brought in the community dialogue. Working with the community have become so easy since they now have school at heart.”

Mr Odida Massimo, SMC Chairperson, Palukere Primary School

The communities we worked with have become more open-minded surrounding issues of menstruation and we had planned to introduce moon cups to the girls, as an alternative to pads – the benefit of a moon cup being that they last several years and have the lowest environmental impact. However, based on feedback from several teachers, it was felt that moon cups still have a stigma attached to them regarding breaking virginity etc. There are other hygiene considerations too, such as access to changing rooms and clean water, in order to manage using moon cups effectively. The cost of moon cups is higher than reusable pads, which is justifiable if they are then used and last several years, but not if they are not going to be used. If discarded, moon cups are actually worse for the local environment, not better.



The programme provided almost 12,000 girls with reusable sanitary pads and learning resources over the five years (although in Y4 none were distributed, as schools were closed due to COVID-19). Over 1,200 pads were distributed to the 23 schools to keep as a store of emergency pads. Sourcing 13,080 packs of pads over a five-year period has helped Easy Pads scale up the size of their operation, providing jobs and transferable livelihood skills to more local women in Jinja. Using reusable pads ensures project sustainability, and some senior female teachers are now trained in pad-making and are sharing this knowledge in the project schools.

At the start of the project, most schools did not have any budget for supplies of sanitary pads for emergency use by the girls. We have provided a stock of emergency pads to each project school and, in addition, as part of our sustainability strategy, we have helped the head teachers to set up a fixed budget for health and sanitary supplies at all 23 project schools, which will cater for emergency sanitary provisions every term. This will help create a better learning environment for girls while at school during their periods.

We have collected quantitative data, which will help to support similar interventions in future and will be shared so that other organisations can learn from this project if they run a similar programme.

Retrospective Testimonials:

“I didn’t know what to do when I began to experience my menstruation for the first time, I was really traumatised and I left school for one week, but after the training on menstrual health and hygiene management, accompanied with distribution of sanitary pads, has helped me to know how to manage my periods and my general body hygiene and I feel more comfortable at school during my periods.”

Lakaraber Innocent, P6 pupil, Abera Primary School

“I used to fear boys so much because they like making fun of girls who are having menstrual challenges because my periods come with heavy flow and sometimes my uniforms get stained, but after a joint menstrual advocacy meeting with both boys and girls, the boys became so supportive and caring to the girls. One afternoon I got up from the classroom and wanted to go out but my skirt was stained with blood, a boy seated behind me held my hand and told me to sit down and gave me his sweater to tie around my waist to cover the blood stain on my cloth.”

Ageno-Rwot Lisa, P6 pupil, Pawel-Langetta Primary School

“Managing the girls have become very easy because they have been trained on menstrual health and hygiene management and they are able to handle most of the challenges that come with menstruations. The pads provision has caused improvement in girls’ class attendance because many girls used to miss classes during their periods because they do not have menstrual products to help them while at school.”

Madam Sophie, Senior female teacher (P7), Pagak Primary School

“Girls have become very assertive and they do not fear to seek for help and ensure that their voice is heard and actions are taken, for instance, a girl came to me and reported how boys were disturbing her and the head girl followed up on this issue and this was so wonderful seeing girls ensure that their concerns are responded to.”

Gladys, Senior female teacher, Kaladima Primary School

Project Alterations and Challenges:

Data collection was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to extensive school closures in Uganda for much of Y3 and the whole of Y4 of this project. It was not possible for planned project activities to be implemented during this time, so the data we managed to collect was not as expansive as we had hoped it would be. There were no PLE exams at the end of 2021. Schools reopened in January 2022.

Budgets:

The final overall project spend was **£100,835**. This project was funded by AR Ball 2017 and AR Ball 2018, as well as several smaller donations from Trusts & Foundations.

Future Work:

Despite extended school closures affecting this project, we have shown that targeted support of girls and improvement of their sanitation facilities does help to keep them in school. A big success in this project was the setting up of Girls' Clubs at all of the 23 project schools, which have clearly empowered girls and made a huge difference to the support they receive from teachers, parents and the wider community. African Revival will be continuing our work to Keep Girls in Education through another project 'Girls' Advocacy Clubs' (funded by Big Give Christmas Challenge '22). This one-year project will be led by G&S Project Officer Justin Ogen and will expand clubs to 20 new schools in Amuru District throughout 2023 and will include pad-making workshops to further enable girls to support themselves and each other.



A big thank you to everyone involved in this project, from stakeholders, teachers, parents, pupils, project staff, and all our donors – Keeping Girls in Education!