

## Girls' Advocacy Clubs Project, Amuru District, Northern Uganda January - December 2023



### Introduction:

Since 2005, African Revival – Investing in Education has worked with primary and nursery schools in Uganda, Zambia and South Sudan. Our vision is an Africa where **every child has equal access to quality education**, as we believe education is the key to overcoming poverty. 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.

In Uganda, we work with school communities in the Acholi sub-region in the North, which is still recovering from decades of brutal war. Education for children, particularly primary and nursery ages and especially girls, was further impacted by the enforced closure of schools for two academic years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many girls became pregnant or married during lockdowns and did not return to school afterwards.

Girls' Advocacy Clubs (GAC) was a one-year project that aimed to set up supportive and empowering girls' clubs, each with 30 members led by two leaders, at 20 primary schools in the Amuru District of Northern Uganda - to help keep girls in education. Club activities included debates with each other, boys, parents and the wider community - to address the stigma of menstruation - as well as MHM training and reusable pad-making workshops.

The schools that were selected jointly by African Revival and the Amuru DEO's office to benefit from this project were: Awer (Community) Primary School, Jimo PS, St. Stephens Musalaba (Community) PS, Palwong PS, Olwal Mucaja PS, Lacaro PS, Labongogali PS, Aporwegi PS, Oloyotong PS, Okungedi PS, Mutema PS, St Philips Teddi (Community) PS, Pabo PS, Abbott PS, Agole PS, Paminalwak PS, Guru-Guru PS, Gira-Gira PS, Amuru Lamogi PS and Tekibur PS.

### Background:

In rural Uganda, menstruation is still widely stigmatised, and girls face challenges such as child marriage, teenage pregnancy and not being prioritised to attend school. African Revival is focussed on keeping girls in education, to give them the same opportunities as their male counterparts, by empowering girls to face challenges and tackle negative attitudes themselves.

In January 2022, we ran a three-month pilot project (Menstrual Health Advocates - MHAs), as part of a wider advocacy programme in partnership with Irise International. The aim was to empower girls and give them a voice to speak freely. MHA girls' clubs with 30 members each, were established at 10 schools in the Amuru District of Northern Uganda, with support of senior female teachers. The impact of the clubs on girls' confidence was striking.

Following the success of this short pilot project, we established girls' clubs at all 23 schools in Amuru and Nwoya Districts that had been part of our Girls & Sanitation project (providing Menstrual Health Management (MHM) training and menstrual facilities for girls in schools over three years). This project finished at the end of 2022, but the girls' clubs continue to meet.

### **Project Objectives:**

- Establish supportive and empowering girls' clubs at 20 schools in the Amuru District of Northern Uganda, each with 30 members led by two leaders (elected by their peers in P5-P7) and supported by senior female teachers.
- Create a forum for girls to discuss challenges and support one another.
- Conduct one-day WASH/MHM workshops at 20 schools.
- Implement reusable pad-making workshops at 20 project schools.
- Address the stigma of menstruation through club activities, eg. debates with each other, boys, parents and the wider community.

### **Baseline Data:**

Initially, we collected details about project schools (including enrolment data) and their new girls' clubs, which AR's Project Officer, Justin Ogen, helped to establish as soon as schools re-opened for the 2023 academic year. At the start of the project, average enrolment was 19,115 pupils across all 20 schools, with 49% girls.

We handed out baseline questionnaires to a random selection of 20 respondents from each school – mainly female pupils (including girls' club members), but also some boys and staff, and asked about menstrual health knowledge, facilities, resources, support and challenges. Each answer was given a score out of five, which we aimed to compare at the end of the project, to measure impact.

Girls said they faced challenges including teasing by boys, lack of support from parents, lack of knowledge about MHM, low confidence and a lack of access to menstrual pads, including no stocks of pads for emergencies at school. Project schools lacked resources for senior teachers to confidently train both girls and boys on menstrual issues.

We knew we wanted to introduce reusable pad-making workshops as part of this project, but we wanted to ensure the girls would be making pads they found comfortable and wanted to use. We asked 20 girls' club leaders from previously established clubs to test samples of three different pads we had distributed as part of previous projects and tell us what they liked and disliked about each. The pads that were tested were: Easy Pads, Afripads and Atek Pads and girls were asked for their feedback on their design, size, comfort and functionality.

Atek Pads, made by a local female-led enterprise - Lutino Adunu, Nwoya - were a clear favourite for all the girls, who said the pads were well-sized, extremely comfortable and had a great design with quality material. Lutino Adunu was already engaged to lead the workshops on pad-making at all project schools, but we didn't need to ask them to adjust their pad design.



### Project Launch:

Each project school organised its own launch, assisted by AR's Project Officer, to learn more about the project, ask questions, and share ideas about how best they could work together to make the project a success for girls, pupils and the wider school community. Girls' Advocacy Clubs were then created at all schools - each club comprised 30 members, two of whom were chosen by their peers to serve as club leaders, who would oversee all club operations and act as spokespersons.

### Early Testimonials:

*"I am always very afraid to go to school during my periods because I feel a lot of pain and the pain makes me very uncomfortable in class."* said **Adoch Agnes**, 16yrs, P6, Aporwegi PS.

*"Sometimes no girls meeting is conducted at the school and most issues affecting girls are not addressed to the senior female teacher because she is also very rude and doesn't give a soft ground when we want to talk to her."* said **Aketowanga Prossy**, 15yrs, P5, Oloyotong PS.

*"For me usually when I am menstruating, I feel uncomfortable sitting in the class because of the heavy flow and the abdominal pain I always experience. This has made me to sometimes miss class or even sit outside the classroom."* said **Atimango Mirriam**, 14yrs, P6, Olwal Mucaja PS.

### Girls' Clubs:

Once the clubs had been established and were meeting regularly, the safe space they provided allowed girls to speak openly, so their confidence and assertiveness grew. The leaders of the girls' clubs were very engaged, open, and shared their experiences on menstruation, as well as other difficulties they encounter at school and in their communities.

Clubs arranged their own activities, including debates and advocacy meetings with boys - addressing key issues that affect girls and how boys can support them. They discussed what roles boys, teachers and parents should play to help keep girls in school. Girls expressed concern that their parents, particularly male parents, needed to be made aware of the value of education, to support their daughters and start taking care of their menstrual needs.

Various other project activities took place during club meetings:

#### One day WASH & MHM workshop at each project school:

AR's Project Officer delivered training that covered all key areas of MHM, including puberty and the science of menstruation, general body and menstrual hygiene, myths and facts about menstruation and responding to key issues raised in the community that affect the wellbeing of local girls. Girls were also trained on how to use, wash and care for reusable sanitary pads. All this new knowledge will be passed on to other girls (and boys) in the school community.



We established a pathway for referrals to health posts, so girls can get more information and assistance with menstruation. Senior (female and male) teachers attended the training sessions and each school was given a clear MHM Training Manual, so they can replicate the training for other children (boys and girls) after the end of the project.

*“This was my first time attending training on menstrual hygiene management, which is very helpful especially to me, who have just taken the role of senior female teacher at the school. Please, if possible this training should be organised for other senior female/male teachers so that they can get equipped to handle the girls and boys at school.”* said **Lala Paska**, Senior Female Teacher, Guru-Guru PS

#### Reusable sanitary pad-making workshop at each project school:

All 30 girls' club members, as well as 10 invited boys from each project school received a two-day training course on making reusable sanitary pads by hand. The training was conducted by partner organisation Lutino Adunu, based in nearby Nwoya District and set up by a determined local lady, Shilla Adyero, who is also an activist for the rights of girls and a great role model for the girls that attended. Lutino Adunu are experts in training and production of quality reusable menstrual pads in the region. Shilla and her team teach over-locking sewing techniques, which ensure pads are as well-made and robust as those sewn by machine. Teaching girls to make their own pads without specialist equipment is a more sustainable option than handing out ready-made reusable pads, which last for around a year.

On the first day of training, participants were given templates and shown how to cut and prepare the materials needed to make the pads, including: waterproof PV material, mackintosh, absorbent liner material, pocket material (Kitenge cotton), pins, threads, press buttons, Kitenge wax material for making bags, and scissors for cutting material to shape. First, they learned how to sew a shield (or pocket), which takes time and requires more focus. The instructors emphasised that senior female and male teachers should make time for pupils to practise making more shields after the training. On day two of the training, participants were taught how to sew liners and bags. Some basic training on how to use and care for the pads was included too.

*“This was one of the workshops that I have enjoyed so much because it handles menstrual issues. The content is great and very organised, thanks to African Revival for this initiative to equip the clubs members plus boys. I know the invited boys shall advocate for girls regarding menstrual issues.”* said **Concy Jean**, Education Officer in-charge of Guidance and Counselling, Amuru District.



Pads were distributed amongst the girls, and some were stored, to be given out for emergencies at school. Additional materials for making more pads were also given to each school and these are available at low-cost for the schools to procure direct from Lutino Adunu in the future. One of the challenges when making reusable pads is sourcing good quality materials that work well. Many available pads are made from cheap alternatives, which are not comfortable or absorbent enough.

There were some challenges securing enough time during the school day to complete the initial training, so Lutino Adunu agreed to conduct refresher training when schools reopened in February 2024, to ensure they fulfilled their contract agreement and all beneficiaries had received full training on how to make all the elements of the reusable pads (the shield, the liners and the bag). When Shilla's

team re-visited the schools, they found all clubs still operating and having recruited fresh members from the new intake of P5 pupils, many of whom benefited from the refresher training. The additional training was also beneficial to ensure all club members and senior teachers were confident to continue making more pads and training their peers - to spread the knowledge as far as possible. Some senior female teachers had already conducted follow-up training and used the extra materials that had been left at each school to make more pads.

#### Girls' club leaders' exchange visits:

All girls' club leaders took part in one exchange visit at/with neighbouring project schools, to share their experiences, challenges, ideas and thoughts on how they feel they could be better supported. One school in each of four sub-counties hosted club leaders and senior teachers from up to five visiting schools. The host schools were: Jimo PS, Gira-Gira PS, Agole PS and Okungedi PS.

In addition to the girls and teachers involved in the girls' clubs, the meetings were attended by AR's Project Officer, the Amuru Education Officer in-charge of Guidance and Counselling, the Amuru Education Officer in-charge of Children with Special Needs and an invited speaker - Director of Community Girls Rising Network (based in Gulu City), Anena Nancy Kimberly.

The girls were very interactive and open to share their experiences on menstruation and challenges they face. Their main concerns were a lack of facilities at school (e.g. changing rooms and private latrines for girls), a lack of spare knickers and uniforms (meaning girls must go home to change), and unsupportive parents, especially male parents, who do not provide for girls' education or menstrual needs. If girls are having to look for pads, knickers and other basic needs on their own, this puts them at very high risk of being manipulated and abused by older men.



The senior female teachers, invited speaker and female district officials all shared their experiences of how they managed their menstruation from a young age, how they completed their education, and overcame the same challenges. This was very inspirational for the girls' club leaders, showing them that education is the key to overcoming poverty and building a better future.

The invited speaker explained how she attended Agwayugi PS in the Lamogi sub-county of Amuru District for her primary education. She told the girls about her academic journey, achieving first place in both her PLE and Uganda Certificate of Education, being the top student in her Advanced Level education, and being named the best candidate nationwide in her final exams for her diploma in Environmental Health from Gulu School of Clinical Officers. The girls' club leaders' were motivated by her story, which showed them that despite various obstacles, education is still attainable if they are committed to studying.

*"This was a very wonderful event. I now have a new perspective of education and I will work so hard to become a teacher in future. I had almost given up on studies because of bad peer group, but **Anena Nancy Kimberly**, the guest, gave me a solution to my problem through her story and experience on how she studied and overcame challenges faced by young girls."* said **Ocwee Prossy** P6, Labongogali PS

#### Printed resources:

800 copies of a fun and informative MHM comic book were distributed to all 20 project schools. This is used as a resource during in club meetings and helps girls during their discussions on menstrual issues. The girls were asked if they would like to change/re-design the comic book before it was printed

but they agreed the content was good. The comic book will also be read by other boys and girls at the schools, dispelling myths and reducing stigma. Additional comics books will be distributed to other AR project schools in Northern Uganda over the coming months.

As previously mentioned, 20 MHM Training Manuals were also distributed to the GAC project schools, to help the senior teachers conduct their own training after the project has ended.



### Joint Monitoring:

Joint monitoring visits took place towards the end of the project, to provide independent feedback on the impact of Girls' Advocacy Clubs on the beneficiaries at the project schools. The aim was to sustain good practices that led to positive achievements and to agree mitigation strategies for areas where there were challenges. Visits were conducted jointly by AR's Project Officer and members of the Amuru District Education Office; the District Inspector of Schools, the Education Officer in-charge of Guidance and Counselling and the Education Officer in-charge of Children with Special Needs. Due to time constraints, eight sample schools were selected to represent all 20 project schools - two were chosen from each of the four sub-counties we were working in; four top performers and four under-performers. The monitoring team aimed to interact with 160 beneficiaries at the following schools: Awer PS, St. Stephens Musalaba PS, Gira-Gira PS, Amuru Lamogi PS, Agole PS, Oloyotong PS, Gira-Gira PS and Pabo PS.

District officials interacted with headteachers, senior female and male teachers, girls' club members and some boys. All the beneficiaries reported that they were really appreciative of the GACs, because they had given the girls such a sense of empowerment, so they were able to be very open about menstruation and challenges and ask for help from teachers.

The team reported that they were amazed at the assertiveness of the girls because they were able to talk openly, and also commented that the pad-making workshops have helped girls reduce the cost of buying disposable pads on a monthly basis.

*"This is one of the projects that impacted so much the girls on MHM and as the district, we are going to ensure that girls' clubs are functional during our routine school visits, so that many pupils continue to benefit from this project many years after project fund period is done."* said **Concy Jean**, Education Officer in-charge of Guidance and Counselling, Amuru District.

The district education team pledged their full support to the project schools, so that the girls' clubs remain functional and the resources that have been shared with the schools continue to benefit more children in years to come.

**Endline Data:**

At the start of 2024, once all clubs were established and the project had officially ended, enrolment had increased to 19,688 pupils across all 20 schools, with 48% girls. The same questionnaires that had been distributed at the start of the project, were handed out again at the end, to 20 respondents at each school, including as many of the original respondents as possible. Again, it was mainly female pupils (including girls' club members), but also some boys and staff. Compared to the start of the project, there was an overall increase in the scores out of five for all questions, showing:



- Improved knowledge about periods and MHM (2.12 to 4.29)
- Improved access to MHM resources (1.93 to 3.6) and products (1.86 to 3.74) - at school and in the local community
- Improved support at school (2.08 to 3.72) and
- More regular girls' club meetings (2.06 to 4.16)

The largest score increases showed girls felt more comfortable sharing their MHM challenges with others (2.06 to 4.61) and attending school during menstruation (1.96 to 4.65) by the end of the project.

Endline questionnaires hardly mentioned teasing by boys as an issue after the project, although lack of support from parents and the community continued to be concerns. The main feedback was the need for more MHM training for parents and the wider community, which respondents felt was still lacking and would make the largest difference in support for girls. There was still a need for more sanitation infrastructure at many schools too – especially changing rooms and a clean water source, which AR will consider for future projects.

**Outcomes:**

- Girls' Advocacy Clubs, each with 30 members (P5-P7 girls) set up at 20 schools in Amuru District, supported by senior female teachers and continuing independently.
- 20 safe forums created for girls to meet and discuss challenges, to support each other and come up with solutions.
- One-day WASH/Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) workshops at each of 20 schools.
- One MHM Training Manual and 40 MHM comic books distributed to each project school, with additional copies to be distributed to other schools in Northern Uganda.
- Two-day reusable sanitary pad-making workshops conducted at 20 schools, each including 30 girls' club members, 10 invited boys and senior female and male teachers.
- 40+ reusable sanitary pad kits hand-sewn at each of 20 schools, with additional high-quality materials provided for more pads to be made after the workshops.
- A stock of hand-sewn pads provided for schools to keep for use in emergencies.
- Four exchange meetings organised for leaders of neighbouring girls' clubs to come together and share ideas.
- Open discussion of menstruation and challenges affecting girls' likelihood of staying in education, in schools and the wider community.

### Impacts:

Girls' Advocacy Club members have been supported and empowered by each other - they have been able to voice concerns, experiences and ideas for how they could be better supported to remain in school and complete their primary education and their increased confidence and assertiveness was highly evident during exchange visits. Testimonials collected at the start and end of this, and previous AR girls' club projects, show the huge positive impact of this initiative. During monitoring trips, we have been able to observe girls' club meetings and it is so inspiring to see the difference they can make in such a short space of time. Girls speak confidently and with such passion about various issues and how to address them – not just menstruation, but also pressures from boys and lack of support at home. Clubs also provide a forum to invite boys, parents and other community members to hear the girls' voices. All the girls responded that they are now very confident to share their challenges with others and attend school during menstruation - due to training and support gained from the clubs.

MHM training and comic books have provided accurate and helpful information to club members, invited boys, and senior female and male teachers, who will all be able to pass on their knowledge to others, to reduce stigma and promote understanding and support for girls in the wider community. Senior teachers have been provided with MHM Training Manuals, so they can continue to educate more primary school children for years to come and feel more confident to support them and answer their questions. Endline questionnaire data showed an improvement in MHM knowledge in girls and senior teachers following the project. Some boys who didn't attend the training said they still have little knowledge, but the senior teachers are now equipped to provide MHM training for girls and boys (and parents) themselves. It is evident that more MHM training is needed for parents and the wider community, and we hope that the girls' clubs will be able to provide this by inviting these stakeholders to meetings and perhaps arranging training sessions for them.

The reusable pad-making workshops were a huge success and well-received by girls, boys and teachers. Girls were able to make enough pads for themselves, as well as extras to be stocked at school for emergency use, which will allow girls to stay in school during their periods. This is a longer-term and more sustainable solution than handing out either disposable or ready-made reusable pads. Making Atek Pads does not require a sewing machine and good-quality materials are available locally from Lutino Adunu, so the opportunity to make pads indefinitely is now accessible to most girls and their contacts. Schools will continue to procure materials for girls to make more pads. There was a marked increase in the number of respondents answering that menstrual hygiene products are readily available in their community after the training. Prior to the project, most said that disposable products were either available but too expensive, or not available at all. All the respondents said there is now good provision of sanitary materials to support girls during menstruation at school.

The exchange visits were inspirational for all those that attended, both in the sense of realising they are not alone and other girls are facing the same challenges, and also because of the experiences shared by the invited female role models, who showed how challenges can be overcome for girls to complete their education. Attendees discussed how they could continue to run their clubs after the project had finished, to make them sustainable. They will accept new members from P5 at the start of each term, to replace P7 girls who graduate, but will retain existing P5 & P6 members to keep club activities running and train newcomers with the assistance of senior female teachers. We are aware that this is happening and we expect all the clubs to continue for many years to come.

All respondents said their girls' club meetings are now conducted regularly, with senior female teachers ensuring meetings take place at least three times per term; at the beginning, middle and end. Headteachers and senior female teachers also confirmed girls' school attendance has improved. They ascribed this to the reusable pad-making workshops and MHM training sessions, which gave girls confidence and comfort to go to school even when they were menstruating.



### Challenges:

Only 9/20 project schools have good menstrual sanitation facilities, for example, latrines with wash/changing rooms and clean water sources. These schools have benefited from a WASH project being implemented by AMREF Health Africa, which constructed girls' latrines with wash/changing rooms and incinerators and supplied clean piped water to the schools and surrounding communities using a motorised solar-powered pump. However, the majority of school-aged girls don't have a private place to change and wash their sanitary pads and there is need for improved WASH infrastructure, to create a more supportive environment for girls to manage their menstruation effectively at school.

Most respondents to the questionnaire (start and end) said there is additional support given to girls at school during their menstruation (other than pad provision), including guidance and counselling, provision of painkillers and general assemblies for the whole school community, to increase awareness, reduce stigma and discuss related issues. However, a few respondents said they do not get any additional support from remote community schools that are not supported by the government.

Most questionnaire respondents (start and end) said there is only moderate community action to protect children's rights and promote girls' education and some said there is very little effort being made in their communities. Most respondents also said their parents do not give them enough support towards their menstrual and educational needs, due to limited resources and negative attitudes of parents towards supporting girls - most parents concentrate more on supporting boys. A few respondents said their parents were supportive of their needs.

### Budget:

This was a one-year project funded by Big Give Christmas Challenge 2022 and an anonymous donor in 2023. Total project spend was **£21,371**, which was within the original budget. Underspends have been allocated by AR Trustees to the continuation of this project - Girls' Advocacy Clubs, Nwoya - establishing 20 more clubs in a neighbouring district in 2024.

### Conclusion:

The Girls' Advocacy Clubs, Amuru project met its aims to establish inspiring and empowering girl's clubs at 20 schools, which are now operating independently, sustainably and will continue to benefit countless girls (and communities) in years to come. They provide a forum to create awareness through debates and drama, as well as open conversation to reduce stigma. Senior teachers are now equipped to carry out MHM training at school and in the wider community, which is clearly still very much needed, and have resources to support this. Girls have knowledge and access to quality materials to make reusable sanitary pads for themselves and their peers in the wider community. These initiatives have improved access to environmentally-friendly sanitary pads, raised awareness of menstrual hygiene and improved the likelihood that more girls will remain in school to complete their education.

The aim is to expand girls' clubs across Northern Uganda, using them as a base for various activities, such as debates, training workshops, sharing of information, and making reusable sanitary pads.



## Thank you for your support!

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