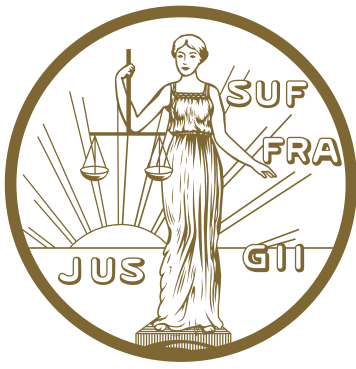


Entering Womanhood

A project of international Alliance of Women





WOMEN'S COMFORT CORNER FOUNDATION REPORT

International Alliance of Women/AIF partnered with Women's Comfort Corner Foundation in raising awareness and educating girls on menstrual issues which arise as a result of entering adulthood. Navigating the passage to adulthood from childhood is riddled with many a challenges which the girls have to be educated on. Cultural taboos of Menstrual Management were addressed including the effect it has on one's self-esteem.

Our target school for the project was Epworth High School located in area where most residents live in debilitating poverty. We also engaged Speciss College located in the avenues area of the capital Harare. The school was chosen mainly because of its central location, the pupils come from diverse backgrounds and localities.

Explaining sexual health and adolescent health issues was largely made easy by the availability of the booklet provided by the International Alliance of Women, *Entering Womanhood*. Some of the content of the booklet was from the booklet *Hé les Miss* a booklet written in French and German. The pupils, both boys and girls were very eager to learn more about adolescent health issues highlighted in the booklet, where grey areas arose these were made clear by representatives from the Women's Comfort Corner Foundation. The booklets were distributed to all students participating in the program. The program, resources permitting, is to be held at as many schools as is possible across the country. Women's Comfort Corner Foundation distributed 953 booklets to the schools, teachers and the community.

How effective has been the program?

In cascading the project the end goal is to find out whether a positive or negative outcome has resulted.

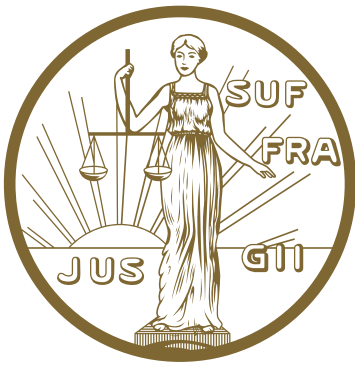


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Overall, we managed to achieve the following outcomes:

The improving general hygiene and avoiding use of material which can inevitably result in diseases.

There have also been achievements in relation to raising awareness and changing attitudes around Menstrual Hygiene Management.



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Impact

The girls told the facilitators of Women's Comfort Corner Foundation that they were grateful for the booklets and that the education has made a very positive impact on their lives and will cascade the information to other girls.

Each year, over 500 women and children stay with us and 3,621 distress calls are answered. Our dedicated counsellors are there to answer the distress line, provide individual/group supportive counselling, public education, advocacy and referrals. An important part of our work is to break the cycle of violence. Women and children who contact us come

from many walks of life, socio-economic classes and cultural backgrounds who have been sexually abused or are fleeing an abusive intimate relationship.

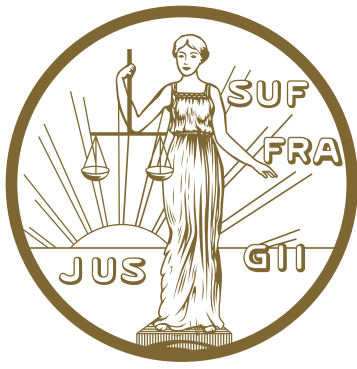
Lack of Water - Activities and outputs

At Epworth High School access to water is limited which follows that the girls need disposable pads which are convenient for the current scenario. At their homes the situation is worse as there is no adequate water or not water at all. In some localities Harare City Council avails water only once a month or once a week to the residents.

When Women's Comfort Corner Foundation broached the subject of menstruation most of the girls lacked requisite knowledge about menstruation. It was very easy for the girls and boys to understand body changes which is fully addressed in the IAW Booklet under the heading; *"the puberty, what is it actually?"* When the adolescents had gained confidence we were pleasantly surprised when one of the boys put his hand up and averred that most parents in their locality were not allowing the girl child to go to school during menstruation. That attitude will obviously have a negative impact on the girl child as she will lag behind in her studies.

Beacon of Hope Support Centre & Lack of Clean Water

We accommodate women and children who have been abused. Our dedicated counsellors are there to answer the distress line, provide individual/group supportive counselling, public education, advocacy and referrals. An important part of our work is to break the cycle of violence. Women and children who contact us come



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come from many walks of life, socio-economic classes and cultural backgrounds who have been sexually abused or are fleeing an abusive intimate relationship. It is difficult to run the shelter due to lack of water, women and girls who are temporary residents in the shelter have difficulties during their monthly periods because they cannot use water which is contaminated. We have communicated with the Minister in question and complained to Environmental Management Agency [EMA]. The newspaper's article dated Thursday August 8, 2019 is attached to the instant report for ease of reference.

Inclusion of Boy Child & Other Issues Affecting Teenagers

The adolescent health awareness sessions were held for three days on a weekly basis starting with the form three class, followed by form five and forms six the sessions ended with the form four class. Exploring sexual health issues was made tricky as the school is a mixed school, having both girls and boys. Judging by the reactions of the boys when handing them the booklet *Entering Womanhood*, the boy child regards adolescent health issues more of a female issue than a male issue. This observation raised an important aspect that boys need also to be socialised well enough to be able to discuss adolescent health issues like menstruation freely.

Arrangements were made to engage form 1's (ranging from 12 -13 years) and form 2's (ranging from 13 -14 years) from the 28th of June, 2021, but unfortunately school opening had to be postponed for two weeks to monitor the rising cases of COVID 19 and whether it was prudent to open schools.



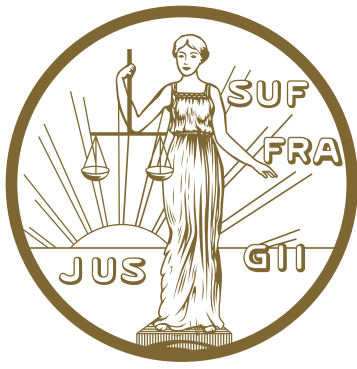
menstruation, peer pressure, drug abuse as well as sexual abuse. The pupils eagerly participated in all the topics that were brought to the fore. Debating sessions were held where topics of menstruation, does sex education in schools fuel premarital sex or not. The victorious teams were given masks and exercise books.

The discussions unearthed a disturbing reality that although adolescent health and puberty are topics covered in the school curriculum, the pupils highlighted the fact that a lot of mystery still surrounds this very important stage in life. A lot of grey areas were evident as seen by the inquisitiveness of the pupils where a lot of questions were posed over menstruation, physical as well as emotional challenges that the girls go through.

Positive Outcomes

The pupils were quite engaging and eager to learn more about adolescent health and sexual harassment.

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Project Achievements

The greatest achievements made were:

- The practical challenges that girls experience during puberty were addressed.
- The facilitators managed to demystify some misconceptions the pupils had regarding puberty, girls are now openly communicating about menstrual issues and not suffering in silence.
- Improved safety of children in the schools through awareness of sexual abuse, bullying and general children's rights.
- Managed to empower participants with knowledge on what to do after sexual abuse or rape
- There has been successes in relation to raising awareness and changing attitudes around Menstruation & Menstrual Hygiene Management and promoting of gender equality.
- Although our project has made significant progress in raising awareness about hygiene, water shortage prevents women from washing the rags or clothes which they use during menstruation as specified by Samantha who stated as follows:

"I have suffered from urinal infection which resulted in me being teased as I difficulties walking properly because of the infection whispers were that I was suffering from a venereal disease"

We have formed Clubs for discussing menstrual hygiene management, sexual violence and the increasing use of drugs by school children. We named the Club "Teenager's Hub", the clubs are effective in seven schools.



Boys generally tease girls but in the case initially they were shy but in the end they were engrossed in the discussion and pledged supported them. The old attitudes and behaviours amongst some male pupils and male teachers crumbled and we made tremendous strides. However, there was a common consensus that this has improved greatly as a result of the project.

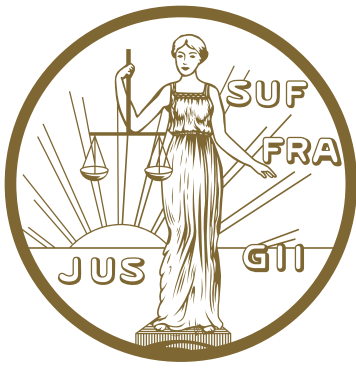
Comments made after conclusion of project

Boys no longer make fun of girls undergoing bodily changes – Matthew form 6 student

I was surprised that boys were undertaking to cascade the information to their counterparts

Girls With Special Needs

The girls who were present in our meeting stated that they prefer the term "girls with special needs" instead of "disabled girls and women." The girls submitted that they face discrimination and are



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underrepresented in menstrual health programs and gender based violence intervention. Breaking taboo is double barreled stigma for girls with special needs. Most facilities are not tailored for women and girls living with special needs. If gender equality is to be achieved an intensive empowerment program involving girls with special needs ought to be cascaded to various provinces of the country as it is critical in the fight for equity.

Girls with Chronic Illness

There were three girls who were born with chronic illness and have to take medication on a daily basis to strengthen their immune system. The also told us that it was imperative that they have access to disposable pads and because of lack of water re-usable pads were not ideal as they could result in infection and in the process their immune system could be compromised. Women's Comfort Corner Foundation gave an undertaking to help the girls with disposable pads for three months from June, 2021 – August, 2021.

Lessons Learned

Water is essential for hygiene. Reusable pads are environmentally friendly than disposable producers. Lack of water incapacitates the girl child to lead a healthy life style during menstruation. Disposable pads are an unaffordable for the majority of the girl child who live in Epworth and suffer debilitating poverty. The forced absence at school for the girl child is distressing and have a negative impact on the education of the girl child.

A small section of students have a unique problem of experiencing heavy menstrual periods lasting from 4 days to 7 days, this situation gives them no option but to skip school and stay at school lest they run a risk of

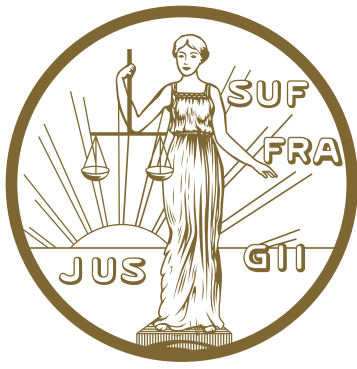


spoiling their uniforms.

Some girls stated that they use toilet paper to stem the flow but at the same breath averred that the paper becomes easily wet and is not suitable for those girls whose menstrual period are heavy. The use of newspapers as pads is not healthy, the newspaper ink consisting of toxic components can result in a plethora of complications for the girl child.

Impact of Project

The project has effectively addressed the unchartered areas and convey valuable information to girls and



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Both girls and boys boldly stated in front of their teachers that they are not completely free to openly discuss issues affecting them.

The sentiments made will be instrumental in crafting future strategies and interactions with school children as they are future generation to understand where the lack to trust teachers emanate from.

Noting that the children were not open due to the presence of their teachers, we gave each student a small papers to document which topic they were most interest apart for Menstrual health education most children chose the topic of sexual and reproductive health education citing limited knowledge especially on issue of sexual abuse.

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Recommendations

Important issues and needs were adequately addressed and was made easier by the booklets written in simple English and interesting illustrations of the menstrual cycle, period and sports including recommendation of teas to reduce menstrual pain.

boys. There was even an indication of changes being passed to future generations:

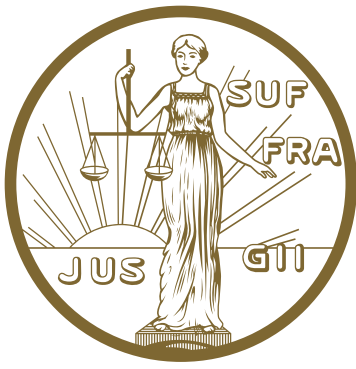
Tamara “asserted that the menstrual project was invaluable in that it had taught her life lessons which she hoped to pass to her children should she happened to get married later in life”.

The teen friendly counselling facilities in schools which have set up in schools, have already the highlighted the need for external counsellors and mentors as they feel intimidated by teachers and fear negative judgements.

Resources permitting Women's Comfort Corner Foundation intends to scale-up the project. Maintain close contact with school and selected school children. We have created a whatsapp forum to stay in touch with the school children in the face of unrelenting COVID-19 to keep the project active and rolling out the project to other schools.

Sustainability

The issue of sustainability is very important for the effect of the project to be felt that project to be felt beyond the life of the project.



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The school management are committed to continuation of core activities. In partnership with Women's Comfort Corner Foundation the selected girls and boys have also undertaken to replicate in other schools.

Teachers who are heavily involved may leave schools as most teachers in Zimbabwe are not happy with the salaries which they earn. Quite a lot hangs on their implementation, and there is a risk posed by teachers and pupils who directly benefitted from the project leaving the school. Our hope is that activities will continue, facilities maintained, and effects of the lessons learned continue to be felt beyond the life of the project.

Posters

In order to make the interactions interesting we have designed posters as an effective way of getting the messages across, the images and slogans eye catching. Good will from International Alliance of Women in supporting the girls in Zimbabwe and gratitude from beneficiaries to the grateful to the organization for helping out cascading the menstruation program.

Involving parents

Parents and guardians have an important role to advocate the girl child about menstrual health. Parents should also be encouraged to teach boys about menstruation so that the girl child in the community, at school or college is treated with respect and dignity.

Community outreach is the area in which least provision was made by the project for sustainability. That could be seen as unfortunate because, as effective as the project sponsored community



outreaches appear to have been, it seems unlikely to be sufficient in challenging ingrained beliefs and cultural norms concerning Gender Based Violence and Menstruation.

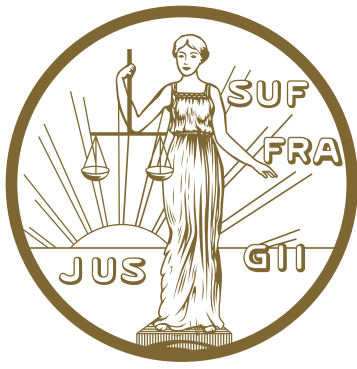
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Volunteers and Other related Costs

It is difficult to find volunteers to cascade the program, most of the volunteers expect to be paid allowances for helping Women's Comfort Corner Foundation to cascade the program. We are grateful to our team for their dedication and commitment to the project.

Conclusion

Access to pads is not a luxury but a necessity it is our responsibility drive awareness campaigns, hopefully rights which should naturally accrue to the girl child and will be embedded in our daily lives. The meetings with girls from and boys from Epworth High School and Speciss College were partly funded by the International Alliance of Women and coordinated by Women's Comfort Corner Foundation sheds light on



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good practices of women and girls worth replicating and expanding. We also thank the Swiss Sexual Health for the contribution made making it possible to make steps towards the funneling local and international cooperation efforts towards the fight of allowing girls to have a healthy life style during menstruation. The booklet a product donated by the International Alliance of Women for distribution to the girls is a superb tool to spearhead action for the achievement of this goal.



END OF FIRST REPORT

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