

Case Western Reserve University

Periods for Peace

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Introduction

You may be familiar with the phrase, “Educate a girl, build a community”. Though we come from different walks of life, we have all come to see the truth and importance in this statement, as well as the limitations to educational access that face girls all around the world.. In 2017, we worked to establish a university menstrual hygiene and sexual health task force to provide free menstrual products in all women’s and gender neutral bathrooms. As we sought to learn more about how others outside our campus are impacted, we came across the work of the Global Medicare Foundation (GMF) in sexual health education and female empowerment. We learned that girls in the local community of Buea, Cameroon miss school due to restricted access to menstrual products. Additionally, we learned that menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is often seen as taboo, resulting in stigma around the natural process of menstruation. A 2015 study conducted by the United Nations (UN) Women in conjunction with the Water Supply & Sanitation Collaborative Council on Menstrual Hygiene Management Behaviour and Practices in Cameroon, recommends the education of women and girls about MHM to better inform them about their own bodies and provide them the opportunity to “participate fully in society” and “[lead] fuller lives.” Unfortunately, after conferring with GMF and community representatives, we learned that this is still the case for many females in the Buea locality. In light of this disparity, our culminating goal is to improve the sexual health education and MHM of young girls in Cameroon. In order to fulfill this vision, we found another NGO, Days for Girls (DfG), whose mission is “creating a more free, dignified, and educated world, through providing lasting access to feminine hygiene solutions and health education.” DfG aims to provide locally sourced and reusable menstrual kits that last for three years to communities with limited access at a cost-effective rate while empowering them socially and economically.

Due to recent socio-political unrest between anglophone and francophone regions, Buea, Cameroon piqued our interest. Furthermore, this town is near eastern Nigeria where the threat of Boko Haram, notorious for numerous abductions and staunch opposition to female empowerment, is persistent. Our findings inspired us to bridge together GMF and DfG to address the lack of access to sexual health education and menstrual products. We are hopeful that these partnerships can prove to be an effective way to empower the young women of Buea in pursuing an education for the future.

Program Objectives

The aforementioned UN study provides data that “girls are poorly prepared for the onset of their periods” as more than 70% of girls “said that they did not understand what was happening to them when they had their first period” and that 60% of the sample said that the dominant feeling once their first period came was fear. The study continues to say that perceptions around menstruation are a risk for those who experience it because it negatively impacts their self-esteem and empowerment, causing them to miss school and activities during their periods. Therefore, we are currently designing a program with GMF and DfG to target the needs of a local community that GMF serves. Our program objectives are the following: provide sexual

*Akinola Akinbote will not be going to Cameroon this summer but will work closely with the rest of the team remotely

health and menstrual hygiene education, provide about 300 DfG menstrual kits, and establish a mentorship program to empower girls in underserved communities in Cameroon.

Preparation and Program Details

We will attend a DfG Conference in March to learn more about how to implement the work of DfG and train in the Ambassador of Women's Health curriculum. This curriculum includes information on how to teach sexual health education and MHM as well as how to distribute the DfG kits. DfG kits are small drawstring bags that include the following: reusable pads, panties, soap, liners, waterproof shields, and resealable bags. In order to personalize the DfG curriculum to fit the needs of the village we are working in, we have started building relationships with community members in Buea, Cameroon through our contacts at GMF. These Skype meetings, first and foremost, resulted in us better understanding their mission, as well as allowed us to share our passion and goals. The intersection of our goals sparked further conversations regarding how we can best collaborate and integrate into the community, ensuring that we are not imposing our ideas without a comprehensive understanding of the community and their needs.

Thus, in conjunction with GMF, we have created a survey for GMF organizers to distribute to the girls before we arrive. This survey includes questions about their knowledge on sexual health and MHM and how menstruation has affected their education and self esteem. Additionally, we will be asking them about their interests to help us create and implement activities throughout the summer as we plan on meeting with them twice a week for a timeframe of two months.

We intend to establish a mentorship program in which students in secondary schools mentor young girls in primary schools. To begin, we must first form relationships with young girls who are leaders in the village; therefore, we have planned multiple Skype calls with them to build trust and begin developing those relationships. This is especially important because striving to improve an issue that is taboo takes vulnerability, courage, and trust. This demonstrates how beneficial a mentoring program will be as it is something difficult to open up about, so having a friend to confide in who can relate will build confidence, allow girls to know they are not going through this alone, and ultimately empower women and improve society as a whole.

Future Impacts and Sustainability

Our program is rooted in community outreach and engagement to ensure its sustainability. After providing sexual health education and MHM, coupled with the mentorship program, we hope to inspire girls in the community to not only pass on their knowledge but also build lasting relationships with each other. Moreover, bringing together GMF and DfG could foster ongoing partnership between them as their mission and goals align perfectly for future collaborations. DfG's work is fulfilled by people across the globe who volunteer their time to sew DfG kits. Apart from relying on volunteers, DfG also helps communities start microenterprises in which DfG provides them with the resources to sew the kits and make a profit by selling them to surrounding areas. We also desire to introduce the idea of starting a microenterprise to the village we will be working with in Cameroon. This, combined with access to environmentally-friendly menstrual pads, will set the stage for long-term improvement of sexual health awareness and practices in Buea, Cameroon.