

CLOSING UGANDA'S MENSTRUAL HEALTH GAP WITH FREE SANITARY PADS IN SCHOOLS



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PROFILE Nancy Akello Ongom, is a Humanitarian and youth activist from Northern Uganda. She currently works as the Protection Network Coordinator with ActionAid International (IHART) coordinating the ActionAid Regional Protection Networks in Africa with 16 countries and Asia with 12 countries. She holds Bachelor of Laws (LLB) from Uganda Christian University, Mukono. Nancy is deeply committed to Human Rights and advocating for meaningful youth participation and engagement. Nancy loves to write about issues affecting young people and is passionate about menstrual health.

Nancy has previously volunteered with youth-led organizations like Restless Development and served as a global youth Compact champion with the Compact. She is an Alumna of the YALI RLC Regional Leadership Program and also served in the Teach for Uganda fellowship, where she worked in an underserved rural school in Mayuge. She was also one of the 6 youth contributors who contributed to the development of the Young Humanitarian Handbook which has just been launched this October 2024.

Executive Summary

In Uganda, period poverty remains one of the most persistent yet under-addressed barriers to girls' education, with thousands of schoolgirls missing class or dropping out altogether because they lack access to affordable and reliable sanitary products. Research shows that up to 64% of girls miss school during menstruation, while only 22% have reliable access to sanitary pads (Auditor General, 2024; Joy for Children, 2024). The absence of a dedicated national menstrual health policy has left interventions fragmented, relying mostly on NGOs and ad-hoc government actions. Period poverty fuels absenteeism, school dropouts, early marriages, and risky coping mechanisms such as transactional sex for pads, making it hard for Uganda to achieve its education and gender equality goals.

This brief calls for a national policy on free sanitary pads in schools, backed by improved WASH infrastructure, scaling up local pad production, and awareness campaigns. The above measures would reduce absenteeism, support gender equality, and align Uganda with global best practices from countries like Scotland, New Zealand, and Wales.

Introduction

Menstrual health is a fundamental but often overlooked dimension of public health, education, and gender equality. Globally, an estimated 500 million women and girls lack access to adequate menstrual products (World Bank, 2025).

In Uganda, this challenge manifests as persistent period poverty, which undermines girls' rights, restricts educational opportunities, and transforms a natural biological process into a driver of exclusion.

Nearly half of adolescent girls miss between one and three days of school each month due to menstruation (Miiró et al., 2018). The Office of the Auditor General (2024) reported that 64% of female learners had missed school because of inadequate sanitary products and poor WASH facilities. Joy for Children (2024) further revealed that only 22% of girls have consistent access to pads. These barriers not only cause absenteeism but also contribute to higher dropout rates, weaker academic performance, and entrenched gender disparities in education.

While Uganda has various education and health frameworks that indirectly reference menstrual hygiene, interventions remain fragmented and largely dependent on NGOs and short-term projects. The President's 2016 pledge to provide free pads has never been implemented, leaving many girls to rely on unsafe alternatives such as old clothes, newspapers, or banana fibers (Mugume, 2021). These practices expose girls to infections and long-term reproductive health risks.

The consequences extend beyond health. Studies show that school absenteeism rises to 28% during menstruation, compared to just 7% on other days (Miiró et al., 2018). Nearly one in four girls between the ages of 12 and 18 drops out of school soon after menarche (Leah, 2019). Period poverty also fuels early marriages and transactional sex,

leaving girls vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and teenage pregnancy.

These realities undermine Uganda's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 on health, SDG 4 on education, and SDG 5 on gender equality. Without deliberate government action, Uganda risks sacrificing the potential of an entire generation of girls to preventable barriers rooted in menstrual health. A coordinated national policy is urgently needed to secure dignity, equity, and educational opportunity for all.

Policy options

Dependence on existing education and health frameworks

→ Uganda has frameworks such as the School Health Policy (2008), the Gender in Education Sector Policy (2016), and the National Sexuality Education Framework (2018). These documents encourage safe learning environments, promote gender equality, and address health and sanitation issues in schools. Their strength is that they already provide an institutional base for integrating menstrual health. However, they do not explicitly mention sanitary pads, nor do they create a budget line for menstrual health management (Ninsiima et al., 2020). This policy silence means that implementation remains weak, uncoordinated, and unable to meet the scale of need.

NGO- and Donor-led interventions.

→ Non-governmental organizations and donor projects have piloted innovative solutions such as reusable pad distribution, menstrual education, and WASH improvements (Schmitt et al., 2021). These interventions have demonstrated that community-based approaches can improve girls' school attendance and reduce stigma (Wynne, 2022). Yet, the gap lies in their sustainability and reach. Because they depend on external funding, they cover only selected districts and collapse when projects end. Reliance on this approach creates inequity, leaving the majority of schoolgirls unsupported.

Political commitments without institutionalization

→ In 2016, the President pledged to provide free sanitary pads to all schoolgirls, a promise that raised public expectations. However, in the

absence of legislation, dedicated funding, or implementation guidelines, this pledge has not materialized (Crawford & Waldman, 2020). The gap here is the lack of institutional commitment: without a formal policy framework, political statements remain rhetorical and fail to deliver results. This undermines public trust and leaves girls in the same vulnerable position.

Establishing a dedicated integrated National Policy

→ A comprehensive national policy would mandate the provision of free sanitary pads in schools, backed by upgraded WASH infrastructure, integration of menstrual health into education and health policies, and sustainable financing (Sommer et al., 2017). This approach addresses the gaps in existing frameworks by creating accountability, ensuring equitable access, and reducing fragmentation. Although resource-intensive and requiring cross-ministerial coordination, international experience from Scotland, New Zealand, and Wales shows that such policies are both feasible and transformative, significantly reducing absenteeism and promoting gender equality (Coles et al., 2014).

The current mix of policies, NGO projects, and unfulfilled political promises has left menstrual health management in Uganda fragmented, inequitable, and unsustainable. These gaps justify the need for a dedicated, integrated national policy as the only viable pathway to addressing period poverty at scale.

Policy Recommendations

- Introduce a National Policy on free Sanitary pads in schools. The Government of Uganda through the Members of Parliament and the Ministry of Education and Sports should introduce a new National policy mandating schools to provide free pads for all primary and secondary school girls.
- Upgrade WASH infrastructure in schools. The Government of Uganda through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) should allocate sufficient budgetary resources to ensure that all schools, starting with government-aided institutions, are equipped with clean, private toilets, reliable access to water, disposal bins, and soap. These improvements are essential to support menstrual hygiene management and a dignified learning environment for all learners.

- Support and scale up local reusable sanitary pads production. The Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives and the Ministry of Education and Sports, should partner with local social enterprises such as AFRIPads to decentralize production and distribution of reusable sanitary pads. This approach would reduce costs, and improve access to affordable menstrual products for school-going girls, especially in rural areas.
- Launch National awareness campaigns. The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), and Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, should lead nationwide awareness campaigns using mass media, schools, and community platforms. These campaigns should promote menstrual health education, engage boys and men, challenge harmful cultural norms, and encourage open dialogue to destigmatize menstruation. The campaigns should also demonstrate the government's commitment to ending period poverty and ensuring dignity for all girls and women.

Conclusion

A national policy on free sanitary pads in schools would significantly reduce absenteeism and dropout among girls, supporting Uganda's commitments under SDGs 3 (Health), 4 (Education), and 5 (Gender Equality). Improved menstrual health management reduces vulnerability to early marriages and unsafe practices such as transactional sex for pads. International examples from Scotland, New Zealand, Wales, and Northern Ireland prove the feasibility and positive impact of such policies. Uganda must now act to ensure dignity, equality, and brighter futures for its girls.

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