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## Exploring the Trends in Government Provision of Sanitary Towels to Secondary School Girls in Nakuru County, Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*Girls' education has been hindered by several socio-cultural factors such as household chores, early marriages, teenage pregnancies and poverty which adversely affect access to basic amenities such as sanitary towels. These challenges bring about gender disparities in education. The government of Kenya is committed to end this disparity by ensuring equity of access and participation of all girls and boys in education. This is evidenced through education policies in place such as the Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative (GSTI) whose aim is to minimize barriers to education for girls and put them at par with the boys. This study sought to look at the trends in the provision of sanitary towels and the strategies for the sustainability of such provision in improving education in Kuresoi South sub-county, Nakuru County, Kenya. The study employed Descriptive Survey design; stratified random sampling and purposive sampling was useful in selecting schools and principals respectively. Simple random sampling was useful to draw class teachers and secondary school girls from the target population. Questionnaires for students, interview schedules for principals and class teachers and document analysis are the research instruments that were used to collect data. Data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The study findings revealed that GSTI is not adequate despite existing policies. The study also established that the following strategies if implemented would ensure the sustainability of this initiative. There is need for adequate funding, clearer policies, constant supply through the year and increase in quality of the sanitary towels. Access to information on menstrual health and management is also very important. These findings are envisioned to be beneficial to all the education stakeholders not only in Kenya but also internationally, as an eye-opener on the need of interventions to ensure equity of educational access and participation for both boys and girls.*

**Keywords:** Education, sanitary towels, sustainability

### **1. Background**

Education all over the world has been prioritized as an important means for achievement of global SDGs, national development and individual's social mobility. Educating girls is important to a nation's development, attainment of SDGs and Kenya's Vision 2030 considering that women and girls comprise over half the global population. A nation cannot develop fully when some part of the population is left out in education. Educating girls has therefore been proposed as the world's highest yielding investment. Sperling and Winthrop, (2015) noted that improving girls' attainment of education yields increased productivity and economic growth. Girls' education has been hindered by several factors including menstrual related issues elevated by poverty which hinders access to basic amenities such as sanitary towels. UN's Commission on the Status of Women in its sitting of 2018 came up with some Agreed Conclusions which included the recommendations to governments, inter-governmental bodies and NGOs to put in place measures of promoting educational and health practices to foster a culture in which menstruation is recognized as healthy and natural and in which girls are not stigmatized on basis of this (UNESOC, 2018). This official recognition of menstruation as a global concern is a significant step forward. Several governments have taken measures to eliminate menstruation related barriers. For instance, Yeginsu (2018) notes that Scotland has become among the first Governments to issue free sanitary towels to students at schools, colleges and universities.

Findings of a research done in rural Kenya by Oruko et al, (2015), indicate that school girls often take part in transactional sex so that they can afford menstrual products and that it has led to the rise of HIV, teenage pregnancies and drop outs. Many girls who are not able to purchase sanitary towels often use other means like rags, leaves, feathers which are a risk to their health. These unhygienic materials may result in leakage, psychological discomfort, stigmatization, embarrassment, anxiety and shame. This has also been the cause of some suicide cases among school girls. It is on this note therefore that the Basic Amendment Act of 2016 which makes the government responsible for providing free sanitary

towels to girls in all public basic institutions in Kenya was passed into law. The Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative's (GSTI) objective is to increase access of sanitary products to school going adolescent girls which in turn would increase retention, transition to higher levels and improve their academic performance. It also seeks to minimize cases of absenteeism and improve participation in education which will hopefully place them at par with the boys. The Social Pillar of Medium Term Plan III Kenya (2018-2022) also emphasizes on the need to enhance girls' retention in schools by scaling up this Government provision of sanitary towels. This provision targets girls at the risk of being excluded in educational participation. Since 2018, the GSTI has been of benefit to more than 3.5 million girls and it has also addressed absenteeism issues of girls. This study therefore desired to critically explore the trends of this provision of sanitary towels and the strategies for its sustainability in improving education.

## 2. Methodology

The study used a Descriptive Survey methodology, with stratified random sampling and purposive sampling used to identify schools and administrators. To draw class instructors and secondary school girls from the target demographic, simple random selection was used. The sample size was 329 people, including 316 secondary school girls, six class instructors, six administrators, and one education official. The study instruments utilized to collect data were questionnaires for students, interview schedules for principals and class instructors, and document analysis. The data was examined subjectively and statistically before being presented in narratives, tables, graphs, frequencies, and percentages.

## 3. Discussion of Research Findings

### 3.1. Trends of Girls' Access and Participation in Education

The study's first task was based on the first objective; to examine the trends of girls' access and participation in education prior to GSTI in Kuresoi South Sub-County, Kenya. To establish this, information was obtained from the interview schedules with the class teachers, principals and education officer, documentary analysis and student questionnaire. The study sought to examine access in terms of enrollment and attendance trends of the girls and the various factors affecting this. Findings indicated that girls' enrollment in secondary schools in the study locale were lower as compared to that of the boys. Table 1 summarizes the findings:

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
2019	4129	4016	8145
2020	4486	4117	8603

Table 1: Student Enrollment Trends in Kuresoi South Sub-County  
Source: Field Work Documentary Analysis (2021)

For the schools sampled, the trends were the same with boys' enrollment being higher than that of the girls. School A for instance, had a population of 409 students, 263 (64.3%) boys and 146 (35.7%) girls; school B had a population of 450, 250 (55.6%) boys and 200 (44.4%) girls; school C had a population of 240, 150 (62.5%) boys and 90 (37.5%) girls; school D had a population of 700, 380 (54.3%) boys and 320 (45.7%) girls; schools E and F were girl schools and had population of 502 and 540 respectively.

The study further sought to find out the trends in educational participation of the learners and the factors affecting the learners' educational access and participation. Through interview schedules, it was established that the participation trends of boys and girls in the study locale was almost at par. However, there were several factors that brought about the differences in the participation trends. These factors include poverty, teenage pregnancy, early marriages, menstrual issues, absenteeism and insecurity. A principal from one of the schools made the following statement concerning poverty in the study locale: *'Most parents here are small scale farmers and casual laborers especially as tea pickers at the estates. The students are also involved in this and you can find many of them during the holidays and weekends trying to make ends meet. Most of the boys are involved in the bodaboda business while the girls pluck tea because of the poverty in this area.'* (Principal, school A)

The issue of poverty also cut across all the other factors with learners reporting that they had to miss school because their parents could not afford to cater for the costs of education. The researcher probed further on menstrual issues bringing about differences in access and participation trends of learners. Menstrual related issues such as lack of sanitary towels, abdominal pain and general discomfort were prominent. One of the girls indicated that, *'...lack of sanitary towels is a major issue that has been affecting our access and participation in education. This specifically causes fear of staining uniform and embarrassment.'* (Student, School B)

This was also supported by one of the teachers from a mixed day school who made the following statement, *'...most of the learners here come from very humble backgrounds and cannot afford the basic amenities. Therefore, before the government started providing sanitary towels, those girls who began menstruating while in school went back home because they did not have sanitary towels. Most of them did not come back.'* (Class teacher, school C).

Another teacher from a boarding school made the following remarks, *'...our girls have had a rough time in the past because of lack of sanitary towels. At such moments, they could not come to class and when they did, they lacked the confidence to participate fully. This is especially when a girl is expected to do some presentations and it is a male teacher so he wouldn't understand and excuse the girl.'* (Class teacher, school D)

The study also sought the learners' responses on whether they attended school during menstruation. There were mixed reactions with majority of them 53% reporting that they were always in school, some (32%) attended school at

times and the minority (15%) did not fully attend school during menstruation. Figure 1 shows the summarized presentation of the findings.

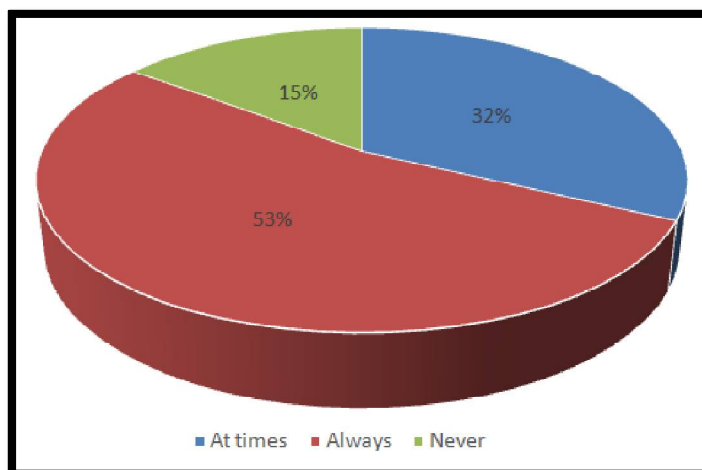


Figure 1: Pie Chart Showing Attendance of Girls during Menstruation  
Source: Fieldwork Questionnaires (2021)

A documentary analysis of the previous class attendance records indicated a trend of 53% of the girls missing class for 2-3 days every month in the year 2017 prior to GSTI. The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed an increase in total attendance of the girls with absenteeism rates of the girls generally at 40% and 28% for the two years respectively. These findings confirmed the findings of a study done by Dolan and Tofaris (2018) that sought to find out if there was an improvement in school attendance when there was provision of sanitary towels. The findings showed that access to sanitary care and puberty education for school girls improved attendance rates by 17% which is equal to 3.4 learning days in every 20 days. It was evident that prior to the GSTI, lack of sanitary towels was a problem to secondary school girls in Kuresoi South sub-county. Access and participation of girls in education was affected greatly due to this. This is in line with Ameade and Majeed's (2015) study in Ghana which found out that 36.9% of the students had their schooling negatively affected by lack of sanitary towels during menstruation with their greatest worry being soiling their uniforms and discomfort leading to not concentrating in class, absenteeism, restrained physical activity and self-consciousness.

### 3.2. Trends in Government Provision of Sanitary Towels to Girls in Secondary Schools

First, the researchers wanted to know if the students had gotten sanitary towels from sources other than the government. According to the findings, the majority of pupils were given sanitary towels by their parents or guardians. Only one school (16.7%) has received sanitary towels from well-wishers and non-governmental organizations. The remaining schools (83.4 %) had to come up with their own ways of providing sanitary towels to girls whose parents and guardians could not afford them prior to the GSTI. One principal who had recently shifted to one of the mixed day schools in the study area noted that, *'The other station I was in was beside the highway, and we had visits and money from well-wishers and NGOs on a regular basis this area is rather ostracized, and it is unusual to have any visitors, let alone receive assistance from other groups.'* (Principal, School D)

The respondents were then questioned if the government had provided them with sanitary towels. According to the data, 85 pupils (23 %) of the 315 who replied claimed that they had not got any sanitary towels from the government, whereas 230 students (73 %) had received them. Those who said they had received sanitary towels from the government were asked to rate the frequency with which they had received them. According to the surveys, 51.7 percent of respondents received sanitary towels on a regular basis, 17.8 percent received them monthly, and 30.5 percent received them only sometimes. 17.8% monthly while 30.5% indicated that they were supplied occasionally only once in the year 2019. The responses are illustrated in Table 2.

Item	F	%
Weekly	0	0
Monthly	41	17.8
Termly	119	51.7
Occasionally (only 2019)	70	30.5
Totals	230	100

Table 2: Students' Responses on the Regularity of Supply of Sanitary Towels  
Source: Field Work Questionnaires (2021)

The researcher was also interested in learning how the sanitary towels were distributed among the pupils. The majority of students, 135 (58.7 percent), reported receiving just one package of sanitary towels per student, while 52 (22.6 percent) received two packets apiece and 43 (18.7 percent) received three packets. Each kid received no more than three packets from any of the institutions.

The researcher attempted to determine the policy level on execution of the government initiative on sanitary towel provision through an interview schedule with an education official. The education officer stated that this effort was a collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Health. Following additional investigation of the execution of this strategy in the study area, the education officer, *'...essentially, counties are obliged to budget for this initiative and incorporate it in their County Integrated Development Plan, which this county has done. The government has occasionally provided us with sanitary towels. The school principals are then required to come to the sub-county offices to pick up the pads and deliver them to their respective schools. Unfortunately, due to the disruption of the school calendar, supply has been irregular recently.'* (Education officer, A).

### 3.3. Strategies for Sustainability of GSTI

The study sought to suggest strategies that can be employed to ensure the sustainability of Government's Sanitary Towels Initiative in enhancing girls' educational access and participation in secondary schools. To address this, information was sought from teachers, students and the education officer through questionnaires and interviews. The majority (82.5%) suggested that there should be increased supply of the sanitary towels to ensure that everyone has enough to take them through the year. The government should also invest more resources in the production and supply of the same. The students noted that, *'...the government should supply a lot of sanitary towels to schools that we may get them every month. The sanitary towels should be made available throughout the year. The regular supply would help avoid shortages and this would be of great help especially to those girls from humble backgrounds.'* (Students)

From the interview schedules, one teacher suggested that, *'There have always been problems on supply and therefore the government should agree on policies stating clearly what should be done. The supply should be regular as over half of these students are needy, and it will boost their attendance in school especially during that period.'* (Class teacher, school F).

Another teacher from a different school said, *'The leadership beginning from the principals should air these issues during their meetings so all girls are given priority especially here in Kuresoi where most parents are humble and most depend on bursaries to pay school fees.'* (Class teacher, school E)

An interview with one Education Officer shed more light on the GSTI, *'The problem is always on funding, if only the government would gear more resources towards this initiative, then there would not be shortages. Sensitization on government policies is also prudent so that all the education stakeholders understand clearly how this initiative is run and what the public is entitled to.'* (Education officer, Kuresoi South)

It is clear from the above findings that while there is policy on this initiative as stipulated by the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) policy (2019-2030), the stakeholders have not been sensitized and are therefore not aware of how this initiative runs. The study concludes that for the sustainability of this initiative, all stakeholders should be sensitized on the policy guidelines. There were also issues on quality with the girls suggesting that the quality of the sanitary towels could be improved. One of them noted that:

*'Some of the pads that we were given by the government were very light and could not be held firmly in place maybe because they did not put enough glue. They should also make them thicker and more secure.'* (Student, school C)

Educating about menstruation was also another strategy mentioned by the respondents. One of the principals during the interview observed that, *'This community is a bit conservative and issues to do with sexual and reproductive health are not talked about openly. The girls here from the way they have been socialized find it hard to open up about their issues, most learn of these things from their friends. It would be prudent if in addition to provision of sanitary towels, everyone is educated on menstruation.'* (Principal, school F)

One student added that, *'...we were given some underwear and sanitary pads and were not educated on how to use them. I learnt from my friends because I could not ask anyone at home. They should also educate us on menstruation and how we are supposed to deal with it especially on the hygiene and the stomach pain. We were also given some iron pills once but they did not explain exactly what it was for'* (Student, school A)

These sentiments are in line with the MHM (2019-2030) policy whose objective, in addition to providing safe and hygienic menstrual products, is to ensure that myths, taboos and stigma around menstruation are addressed by providing women, girls, men and boys access to information on menstruation.

## 4. Conclusions

This study draws several conclusions from its findings. From the objectives, the study concluded that secondary school girls in Kuresoi South sub-county have had issues on access and participation prior to GSTI. Those who could not afford to purchase sanitary towels and could not be provided by their schools had to miss class. The study further concludes that lack of sanitary towels has a negative effect on girls' access and participation in education. Secondary schools in Kuresoi South sub-county have been receiving sanitary towels from the government. The study further revealed that the sanitary towels provided by the government were sometimes not enough for all the students throughout the year. The sanitary towels were distributed only one or two packets per student. Access and participation of secondary school girls has been impacted positively by the GSTI.

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