

## The Problem with Periods in Uganda and What We're Doing to Help



Meet 13 year-old Ayomirwoth Kevin. She is one of 142 boarded girls at Bethel Junior School in Zeu, Uganda, that have plenty of responsibilities on a day-to-day basis. There are preparations for national exams under pressure of school teachers; general chores like cleaning and gathering water; and some of the older girls serve as custodians to the younger.

As a member of the p.7 class, the last level of primary education, Kevin is particularly focused on next year, when she hopes to enter a boarding secondary school and eventually study to be a nurse. But there's a silent responsibility that Kevin and 70 of her female classmates in the Bethel dormitory must bear in their pursuit of education: personal hygiene and self-care.

In Uganda and many places in sub-saharan Africa, female hygiene can be an obstacle big enough to keep girls out of school. A study funded by UNICEF asserts that 1 in 10 school-age girls in Africa does not attend school during menstruation (Sanitation: the challenge. 2005). A more recent study specific to Ethiopia found more alarming results: only 51% of adolescent school girls had knowledge of menstruation and management, and 58% indicated that school performance and attendance had declined after their first menstruation (Tegegne & Sisay, BMC Public Health, 2014).

For many girls, a few missed days each month add up and lead to drop-outs.



For the girls at the Bethel dormitories, missing class during menstruation is not an option. That is why Icaran Charity, a midwife at Zeu Health Center, volunteers twice a week at Bethel to discuss with these girls the importance of hygiene and self-care.

Only a half-generation ahead and not much taller than many of the 13-year-olds in p.7, Charity serves as a big-sister type to these girls. She creates an avenue for easy discussion. Where the students are often solemn and silent in class, trained by teachers to raise their hands before speaking and to formally stand while providing a recitation or answer to a math problem, discussions with Charity evoke comfort and even laughter.

During these talks, she touches on such subjects as sexual education, dignity, menstrual hygiene, and other methods of self-care.

In April 2016, Sue Price, IMO's executive director, began talking with Charity about designing a female hygiene packet that can be distributed to the girls at Bethel. That same week, 12 girls, including Kevin, from the p.7 class were chosen to receive a pilot version of this packet that we're calling My Burlap Bag. Inside,



each girl found a washcloth and soap, four reusable pads of various sizes for each stage of menstruation, safety pins, a sealable plastic bag for washing the pads after use, and a 16 fl. oz. water bottle. As long as they are regularly maintained, these bamboo fabric pads should last 3 to 5 years.

The idea is that these girls will give feedback to Charity on My Burlap Bag, and in months to come the packets can be altered accordingly and distributed more widely to the rest of Bethel and other schools in the parish. With Bethel being the smallest primary school in Papoga parish, there are approximately 1500 enrolled girls at four different primary schools in a parish with no clear source of menstrual hygiene materials. Though Charity meets only with the girls at Bethel, she and Sue have girls throughout the parish in mind as they design this project.

Meanwhile, they hope to see an increase in confidence and comfortability in Kevin and her classmates as they focus on their last term of primary education and move forward in better control of their health and hygiene.

Our goal is to put these items in the hands of 1500 girls in the Papoga parish. This can be done only when those of us with resources help those without. To fund a hygiene packet for a girl in Papoga, contribute at –

[www.IMOutreach.org/myburlapbag](http://www.IMOutreach.org/myburlapbag)

or send cash or check to:

**International Medical Outreach  
915 Gessner, Suite 620  
Houston, Texas 77024 USA**

