“If you know the date of your period, you can go see him and he provides”
In Kenya, Sex for Sanitary Napkins.

They are around 15 years old and cash in their bodies in exchange for period supplies. A known but poorly quantified phenomenon.

#UnspokenRules {translator’s note: This is a play on words. The French word “règles” means BOTH “rules” AND “menstrual period”. “Non dites” means “unspoken” or “unsaid”. The movement is playing with this fixed expression as a way to highlight that they ARE talking about menstruation issues, aka “unspoken (un-talked about) periods.”}

The questions come on little bits of folded paper, left anonymously on her desk by the schoolgirls. Whenever she is doing a session with a class in the slum of Kibera, where she grew up, Mercy Aloo, facilitator for The Cup Foundation (a non-profit that distributes menstrual cups and promotes access for young girls to sex education), knows they will never approach the subject publicly, even in front of their peers.

“At the end of the session, I propose that questions be asked in writing. Last time, I had seven of them having to do with ‘sex for sanitary pads’. For example, ‘If I sleep with a boy in order to get sanitary pads, can I get diseases?’”, recounts, in a busy Nairobi café, the capital of Kenya, this woman of 20 so petite she appears barely beyond adolescence. Mercy will then write her cell number on the board. Some shy voices will call her to find out more, “behind the mask of a number”.

The facilitator met 17 year old Cindy (not her real name), during one of these sessions. Big blue woolen cap on her head and a hoody sweatshirt around her shoulders, she comes to meet us in a discreet little Kibera shop, far from the bustle of the main street and from listening ears. When her periods started, three years ago, she turned to a male neighbor. He said: “You have to do what I want. He wanted me to show him my naked body,” she recounts in a low voice, in English. A ritual is established, each month, between this adolescent of 14 and her 30 year old neighbor. Despite “embarrassment” and “fear”, she undresses, he looks at her, she leaves with 50 Kenyan shillings (.43 euros), the exact price of a packet of sanitary pads.
“In the beginning, he did not ask for sex”, continues this girl who lives with her brothers and sisters, under the care of the oldest sister. “But one day he said: ‘Now you have to pay me an extra fee.’ He wanted me to sleep with him, he had not been violent until that day.” Panicked, she manages to escape when a male friend of the neighbor comes into the house unexpectedly. She will not go further with him.

“There are so many girls who sleep around to get sanitary pads,” she says. “My neighbor would bring a few guys over to his house. These boys, they say they don’t want to waste their money. When you ask for their help, they say you have to sleep with them.”

Guilt, stigma and taboo.

Regularly mentioned in the media, this practice which primarily affects slums and rural zones, is nonetheless little documented. The numbers that circulate about it are without any real foundation.

For the moment, only British researcher Penelope Phillips-Howard has approached this question in a more comprehensive study on menstrual needs and the associated risks, lead in 2015 in western Kenya. According to her figures, 1.3% of women aged 13 to 29 say they have resorted to it. But the rate goes up to 1 out of 10 around the age of 15, the researcher explains: “It’s the most at risk population. They have just started having periods. They are less aware, and less likely to have the money to buy themselves products than women who are older.”

What pushes a girl of 15, often younger, to start off her sexual life in exchange for sanitary pads? Extreme poverty is, of course, the number one explanation. But in a country with a traditionally patriarchal culture, this blends with other forces like guilt, stigma, and taboo around periods.

“The first time it [my period] came, I was scared to tell my mother. If I talked about it, it was yet another burden for her, while she’s feeding four children on her own, and pays rent and school costs,” recounts 18 year old Lisa (not her real name), a line of kohl on her eyes and a bit of red on her lips, who also lives in Kibera.

Certainly, many make do with what’s available: rags, pieces of blanket, sometimes plant matter...Solutions both conducive to infection and highly ineffective, exposing girls who are victims of a leak to shame and mocking, sometimes pushing them to miss school. “During this time, girls feel weak, insecure,” explains Megan Mukuria, of the organization ZanaAfrica, which does awareness work among young girls and advocacy work against period taboo in East Africa. “Put yourself in their place, they walk five kilometers in order to get to school, have to get up in front of the class, and there, they have a stain. This creates a lot of shame and insecurity. The only power they have to reduce this discomfort is to use their bodies in order to obtain things.”
Boyfriends who are “always there” for them.

In this fragile context, the transactional nature of the relationship is sometimes difficult to make out. Often, the girls mention a generous “boyfriend”. He is older, works while they are in school, is “always there” for them, especially financially. “If you know when your period is going to start and you don’t have any money, you can go see him and he provides,” explains Lisa, who herself had “a boyfriend who paid for [her] sanitary pads for two or three years.” He worked as a boda boda, Kenyan motorbike taxi driver, often mentioned in this system. Lisa’s older sister “also slept with boys” with the same goal.

“The relationship is not intentionally transactional, but they [the girls] aren’t going to stop, because they will lose their products”, explains Megan Mukuria, emphasizing that access to other products can also be at stake. Her NGO conducted interviews in the county of Kilifi, a rural coastal zone where they do work: “Menstrual management supplies came in second on the list of priorities, after bread. They aren’t the whole story, but they are part of the story.”

One factor, however, tends to confirm the great weight menstrual management supplies hold in this practice which jeopardizes their future: when girls have access to pads, tampons and other such products, they generally stop resorting to this male “help”, those asked have said. Thus Lisa ultimately stopped seeing her boyfriend since getting a “cup”. “This boda boda, where would he have lead me? What would our life have been? I could have gotten pregnant, stopped school, and my life would have been ruined”, she concludes, determined to pursue her studies.

(end of article)

#ReglesNonDites, the project.

France, Kenya, India, Sweden, South Korea, Germany, Burkino Faso. In this series of reports, we have wanted to show how menstrual insecurity touches the world’s most vulnerable women. What do we mean? How many women are concerned? What public policies are in place since the recent addition of the subject to the political agenda in France?

Periods remain a subject little talked about in the public sphere. But speaking about a taboo leads to reducing the potentially devastating risks that result from ignorance and fantasies.

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