

CHALLENGES TO GIRLS' EDUCATION: MENSTRUAL PRECARIOUSNESS IN SCHOOLS

Thursday, March 14, 2024

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, March 14, 2024, the West African citizen think tank WATHI organized a virtual round table on the theme of «Challenges to girls' education: menstrual precariousness in the school environment».

Access to education is a structural issue common to many countries, and girls in particular must not be excluded from this issue. Indeed, access to education and to the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic is an essential foundation for personal development and national progress.

So far, Senegal's education policies have delivered results. According to the 2022 national report on the state of education in Senegal, the gross elementary school enrolment rate is 83.8%, with a rate of 91.10% for girls. Nevertheless, girls face specific challenges linked to their status as women, one of the most worrying of which is menstrual precariousness.

Menstrual precariousness is defined as the difficulty, or even impossibility, of accessing sanitary protection. This problem, which exclusively affects menstruating women, is exacerbated by poverty and geographical isolation. The cost of period protection, lack of education on sexual and reproductive health, stigmatization of menstruation and misinformation are all factors contributing to this precarious situation.

This round table highlighted the reality of young girls in schools, their difficulties in obtaining periodical products and information on the subject, while presenting initiatives put in place to remedy this problem in Senegal.

INVITED PANELISTS

- **Fatoumata Leye**, Program Manager Kitambaa (Company specializing in menstrual health and hygiene)
- **Jerry Azilanon**, General Secretary of Yeewi (Association fighting menstrual precariousness)

Note : QUICKs are short documents produced from WATHI's virtual roundtables. They present the main findings and avenues for action, and are intended to feed into public debate, collective action and the decisions of political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Menstrual precariousness has many causes, but is mainly due to poverty and lack of education. The people most affected tend to come from the most precarious sections of the population, often living in rural and remote areas, where access to healthcare, potable water, health infrastructures, hygiene products and information on menstrual cycles is limited. However, women and girls living in urban areas are not spared.
- Menstruation is a major financial burden, as menstrual protections are expensive and inaccessible for some households. In Senegal, these products are taxed as luxury items, making them even less affordable. What's more, medicines, especially painkillers and generics, are scarce and expensive. Yet menstrual pain, sometimes very intense, is a real obstacle to girls' schooling.
- The school environment is not always equipped with suitable sanitary facilities enabling girls to change or relieve themselves in conditions of hygiene and privacy. In some schools, toilets are mixed or used indiscriminately by boys, creating discomfort for girls. The lack of suitable facilities, combined with menstrual pain, leads to recurrent absenteeism among young girls. They can miss between three and four days of school a month, or up to 48 days a year (around 248 hours of classes). This accumulation of learning delays can lead to dropping out of school and considerably affect their results. Despite these difficulties, they are expected to perform at the same level as boys, creating an inequality of opportunity.
- From a societal point of view, menstruation remains a taboo subject. Many girls and women feel a sense of shame, anxiety, loss of self-confidence and stress linked to their periods. This taboo, fueled by a lack of information and awareness, encourages the spread of false beliefs and inappropriate practices. Yet menstruation is a natural phenomenon, essential to reproduction. The lack of education on this subject leads some women to adopt unhygienic gestures, such as using cloths or rags without knowing the correct washing and storage practices. This lack of information increases the risk of gynecological infections and diseases. What's more, many young girls are caught off guard when they first start menstruating. The silence within families and schools means that they are neither prepared nor supported during this transition.
- At present, it is mainly civil society organizations and associations that are mobilizing to combat menstrual precariousness. Yet women's issues are often put forward as political arguments during election campaigns. It is legitimate to wonder whether women's rights are not being exploited for electoral purposes, without any real commitment on the part of those in power.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish inclusive communication throughout the population, regardless of gender. It is essential to train teaching staff to demystify menstruation and help those concerned to better understand their condition. The training of school nurses must be a priority, so that they can properly support young girls in the educational environment. In addition, school infirmaries must meet hygiene standards, and school sanitary infrastructures must be healthy and functional.
- Introduce educational content on menstruation in the form of participatory workshops, educational games, etc., to encourage everyone to get involved. These materials will inform young girls about the best practices to adopt, and explain the origin, functioning and importance of menstrual cycles. Awareness-raising sessions should be led by health professionals to deconstruct prejudices and prevent stigmatization. It is essential to raise awareness among young people so that they understand that menstruation is a natural phenomenon that can be discussed freely, without fear or embarrassment.
- Providing psychological assistance in schools would be a considerable asset. Many girls are unable to talk freely about menstruation within their families. Such an initiative would help them to speak out and come to terms with the experience.
- Implement monitoring policies in schools and other areas where civil society organizations are active, to ensure that health and hygiene standards are maintained over the long term. These policies could include the creation of monitoring committees. The state must be at the forefront of the fight against menstrual precariousness, funding and supporting the initiatives of committed organizations. It must also play an active role in campaigns to distribute sanitary protection and appropriate medication.

- Encourage civil society organizations and citizens to mobilize around this issue and denounce the State's shortcomings in dealing with menstrual precariousness in schools, in order to put it on the government's political agenda.
- Encourage partnerships between schools, associations and companies to support local initiatives. This collaboration can promote the construction or renovation of separate, secure toilets equipped with running water and adapted waste garbage cans. We also need to identify and replicate successful local innovations on a national scale.

QUOTES FROM PANELISTS

«Some girls tell us they prefer to hold back and wait until recess or the end of the day so they can relieve themselves and change their protection. They don't have access to sufficiently hygienic toilets in their schools.»

Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary

«Menstruation needs to be demystified. It's a natural phenomenon that shouldn't be stigmatized.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«Distributing sanitary pads is not enough. We need to explain what they're for, and how they help protect girls from infection.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«We need to make sanitary protection tax-exempt. Today, they are taxed as luxury products.» **Fatoumata Leye, Program Manager Kitambaa, Senegal**

«Financial resources are insufficient in some families to ensure good menstrual hygiene for girls.» **Fatoumata Leye, Program Manager Kitambaa, Senegal**

«Awareness must be raised at grassroots level. We need effective communication and sexual and reproductive health classes in schools.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«Menstrual insecurity is one of the direct consequences of poverty and lack of education. When families have primary needs such as food and clothing, they can't consider buying sanitary protection a priority.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«On average, menstruation lasts between five days and a week. Yet in many schools, including in urban areas, there are no suitable sanitary facilities where young girls can change.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«Private schools are perhaps making more of an effort by offering girls a space where they can change during their periods.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«Before we even talk about menstrual management, we need to consider the issue of daily hygiene. It's easier for men to relieve themselves whatever the layout, but not for women. Women are more vulnerable when sanitary infrastructures are inadequate.» **Jerry Azilinson, Yeewi General Secretary**

«In many schools, there is no potable water and the toilets are defective. This is not conducive to good menstrual hygiene management.» **Fatoumata Leye, Program Manager Kitambaa, Senegal**

«There is also a lack of medication and painkillers to support the girls. During this period, some of them experience intense pain that is difficult to bear without treatment.» **Fatoumata Leye, Program Manager Kitambaa, Senegal**

«Support is insufficient. Apart from young girls who are lucky enough to have a close friend or family member to advise them, those experiencing their first period should be able to benefit from assistance within the school.» **Fatoumata Leye, Kitambaa Program Manager, Senegal**

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VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



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