

A national assessment found that six in 10 school-going girls miss classes during their periods because they lack sanitary materials and proper sanitation facilities.

BY PHOEBE MASONGOLE

Ms Esther Nabalwa, 19, says she loves school, but every month is a struggle because she cannot access sanitary pads.

"When in my periods, sometimes my clothes would stain and my classmates would laugh at me," she says.

She adds: "The pads are expensive, and without them, you live in constant fear of embarrassment. So, missing classes feels easier than facing humiliation that can force you to stop attending school, even though our hearts long for the classroom," she says.

Ms Josephine Muduwa, 22, an orphan, says she often has to choose between buying food and getting sanitary pads.

Ms Muduwa says most days she improvises using pieces of mattress and cloth, which are uncomfortable and unreliable.

"They could shift, they could leak," she says, adding that she is so scared of embarrassment during her periods that she sometimes decides to stay home.

For girls like Nabalwa and Muduwa,

Why Bugisu girls drop out of school

menstruation does more than interrupt school, it puts their future at risk.

National crisis

Across Uganda, thousands of girls miss school every month because they cannot afford sanitary pads.

A national assessment found that six out of 10 school-going girls miss classes during their periods because they lack sanitary materials and proper sanitation facilities.

In eastern Uganda, especially in Bugisu Sub-region, the problem is worse due to high poverty levels, limited access to menstrual health information, and cultural taboos.

Ms Linus Nasimiya, the education officer for Mbale City, says: "About 30 percent of girls in some schools miss classes every month due to lack of sanitary pads. Overall, approximately 15 percent of girls drop out of primary school before completing it due to financial or social barriers. Every girl has the potential to shine when communities, schools, and leaders work together."

Ms Mary Goretti Kitutu, the Woman Member of Parliament for Manafwa District, says: "Many households, especially in rural communities, still view

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sanitary pads as non-essential, leaving girls with no option but to miss school."

She adds: "Repeated absenteeism lowers confidence, affects performance, and sometimes causes girls to abandon school entirely."

Ms Asha Nabulo Mafabi, a candidate for Sironko District Woman parliamentary seat on the NRM flag, says menstrual poverty continues to deny many girls their right to education.

"Lack of sanitary pads forces girls to miss school or drop out, affecting their

learning and future opportunities," she says.

She adds: "This is not just a health matter, it is a key factor in gender equality. The government and stakeholders must take urgent action to ensure every girl can attend school with dignity."

Ms Gift Kirabo, the executive director of PathWay Foundation, says one of the biggest challenges girls face is the silent pressure to grow up too fast.

"Many girls are expected to act like adults before they are ready. They care for siblings or manage homes. When menstruation begins without support, shame takes over, and school becomes painful instead of safe," she says.

Mr Uthman Mugoya, Local Council 2 chairperson for Kilulu Ward, says lack of sanitary materials has exposed young girls to danger, including loss of life, because they are left vulnerable without support or protection.

"When girls lack access to basic needs like sanitary pads, some feel forced to turn to older boyfriends or risky situations to meet those needs," he says.

However, Mr Rogers Wanda, the programmes director at She Leads Tomorrow Foundation, says poverty alone does not explain why girls drop out of

school.

"Lack of confidence, harassment, and limited guidance contribute. Education succeeds when girls feel safe, believed in, and supported both at home and school," he adds.

Hopeful

In response to these challenges, the Bakhana Bamasaba Association has stepped in to support girls' education.

The association empowers women and girls, improves health and well-being, promotes economic empowerment, supports education, provides legal support, engages in advocacy, and promotes community development.

By addressing menstrual health challenges, financial hardship, and social barriers, the association helps girls stay in school and reach their full potential.

Recently, the association held its inaugural run, bringing together members and stakeholders to mark its launch.

Ms Irene Mwagunzi Wasike, the president of the association, says: "Our goal is to ensure that no girl misses school simply because of poverty, lack of resources, or social barriers. Through education, health support, and community empowerment, we create opportunities for girls to learn, grow, and achieve their dreams."

Ms Joy Wanyenya, a student at Nkoma High School and a beneficiary of the initiative, says she had stopped attending school because she could not afford sanitary pads.

"I feel happy and safe to go to school again, and I can focus on learning without fear or shame. I am back at school, and I am determined to finish my education," she said.