

The Experience of Menstruation at School: A Study with High School Girls in the Northern Côte D'Ivoire

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is increasingly cited as one of the leading causes of girls' absenteeism in African junior and senior high schools. In Côte d'Ivoire there is currently no public policy mentioning menstruation and there are still significant gaps in the knowledge and understanding of the experience of menstruation in school. This study pursues two complementary objectives: To understand the extent of the personal, interpersonal, biological, environmental and societal challenges that girls face during menstruation in junior and senior high schools of Korhogo and also to identify the specific educational impacts of menstruation. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through life stories, individual interviews and focus-groups with 672 willing menstruated girls in the 18 junior and senior high schools in the city of Korhogo to which were added direct observations during the month of April 2018. The results show a lack of psycho-social and medical support within the institutions during menstruation. They also highlight a failure of sanitary infrastructure, difficult access to water in school toilets and the existence of negative perceptions of menstruation. Finally, every girl has missed at least one day of school in the last three months because of their periods.

Keywords: menstruation, beliefs, impact, school, Côte d'Ivoire

Introduction

It is now well known that investing in women's human capital, especially girls' education, is one of the most effective ways of promoting development¹. It increases their opportunities and facilitates their participation in civil life and global decision-making. This allows them, consequently, to be more productive actors in society and also to champion the cause of human development for their families. Girls' education has positive social and economic consequences that can be appreciated from their impact on the rate of economic growth and well-being of the population².

In Africa, despite recent educational successes and efforts to educate and keep girls and young women at school, there are still many challenges to overcome. One of the major challenges faced by girls starting high school at twelve or thirteen is the management of their menstruation at school.

According to UNICEF³, African women of school age miss class during menstruation. Data from the World

Bank⁴ also report girls' class absences of about four days every four weeks. An important link of cause and effect seems to be established between school absenteeism, that is, the voluntary renunciation of girls to education and the period of menstruation. Studies have shown that girls miss classes during periods of menstruation⁵ or that the distribution of sanitary napkin in Ghana reduces by half absenteeism and keeping girls at school⁶.

Menstruation at school is an important issue because it affects gender equality and girl's education. These are Millennium Development Goals that mobilize the policies of many countries and particularly biological anthropology, especially human growth and development, because of its more pronounced interactions than other aspects of puberty with learning, school environment, the symbolic environment and girl's biology. It also includes current reflections about the place of women in African society and women's leadership, the management of menstrual hygiene in training and curricula, sanitation and access to water in schools.

Recent studies and interventions relating to menstruation at school have largely focused on the management of menstrual hygiene. The topics addressed include behaviours and practices of hygiene management^{7,8}, infrastructure, needs, sanitation and access to drinking water^{9,10,11}, awareness on cultural and social practices¹², social representations elaborated and related to the management of menstrual hygiene in schools^{13,14}, and finally the training and involvement of educational and health personnel¹⁵. They are also common to come from most English-speaking African countries and from East Africa such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Malawi.

Except for Burkina Faso and Niger, which are pioneering countries benefiting from menstrual hygiene management programs involving sanitation and access to drinking water³, there are still significant gaps in the knowledge and understanding of the experience of menstruation at school in French-speaking Africa. The subject has not received adequate attention in Francophone Africa. Till today, there is no public policy mentioning menstruation. In Côte d'Ivoire, it is almost impossible to find data on the issue. No in-depth urban or rural surveys were conducted in the educational structures. Despite a recent progress mentioned by the official estimates¹⁶, the completion rate of girls schooling remains questioning. During the school year 2016–2017, female school completion rates of junior and senior high schools are respectively 49.2% and 24.4%. This study attempts to fill this gap. Also, the theoretical perspective adopted is less directly concerned with the management of menstrual hygiene but will instead favour a socio-ecological construction¹⁷ more encompassing and holistic on menstruation at school.

This approach will use as pillars in the analysis the various psychological, interpersonal, biological, environmental and societal factors that constitute challenges during menstruation and affect girls' education. The study therefore has two complementary objectives: To comprehend the extent of personal, interpersonal, biological, environmental and societal challenges that girls face during menstruation in Korhogo high schools; this will help to appreciate the specific educational impacts of menstruation.

Materials and Methods

Site and population of the study

The study took place in the city of Korhogo, located in the northern Côte d'Ivoire at 635 Km from Abidjan, the economic capital of the country. This city is part with those of Dikoudougou, M'bengue and Sinematiali of the area covered by the government body of National and Technical Education (DRENET) of the Poro region.

According to the high school statistical year book (2017,p21) of the academic year 2016–2017, this region comprises twenty two (22) State high schools against

thirty (30) private ones, with a total number of 488366 students including 20757 or 42.50% of girls. The city of Korhogo particularly counted during the academic year 2017–2018, eighteen (18) public and private high schools, with a total of 30816 students among which 24879 were girls.

Selection of study participants

A support from the government body of National Education and Technical Education (DRENET) in the Poro region initially facilitated the access to the eighteen (18) high schools of the city of Korhogo. The participants were recruited from within these institutions through a volunteer sampling procedure. Information on the girls' application for participation had previously been given in all schools and classes and therefore accessible to the largest number of pupils. The girls' eligibility criteria were to be menstruating and to show agreement to participate in the study. On this basis, 672 voluntary girls who have started menstruation from the eighteen (18) high schools in the city of Korhogo were enrolled.

Techniques and tools of data collection

In line with the perspective of the study which is a part of the model of socio-ecological analysis as described by Ouedraogo¹⁷, it was necessary to form a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators on societal factors (traditions, cultural beliefs, social norms) environmental (water, sanitation and school resources), personal (knowledge and skills, girls' beliefs), interpersonal (family influence, teachers, pairs) and biological (age, age menarche, symptomatic, duration and intensity of menses) that can be appreciated as challenges during menstruation. The specific educational impacts of menstruation were measured both qualitatively and quantitatively through girls' behaviours and attitudes towards learning and in response to societal, environmental, personal, interpersonal and biological challenges during this period. Data collection was based on individual interviews, focus group discussions, girls' life stories, and direct observations in the institutions during the period from April 4th to 22nd, 2018.

Data analysis method

The quantitative data were processed with the software STATISTICA version 10. For qualitative data, information processing was based essentially on the thematic content analysis of the testimonies collected¹⁸. This technique of data analysis allowed establishing significant categories from the evidence by carrying out a series of steps in order to distinguish and name different classes of elements with certain homogeneity. It is under these different categories that the contents of the different utterances collected were then classified, in the form of an information unit corresponding to words, sentences or general ideas, from the transcribed utterances presented as results.

Results

Description of the participants

The sample of the study was composed of 672 girls from junior and senior high schools of Korhogo. These girls were recruited from every level from junior high level 1 to the senior year according to the distribution in Figure 1. Their ages range from 13 to 22 years (Figure 2). The average age of menarche for these girls is 13.14 years \pm 1.46 (Figure 3). The minimum age for menarche in this sample is 10 years while the maximum age is 18 years.

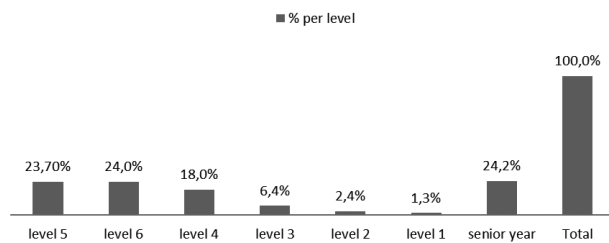


Fig.1. Distribution of participants according to their educational level

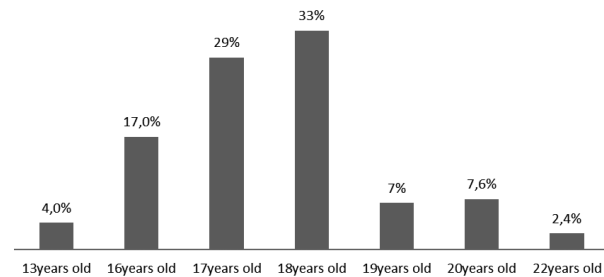


Fig.2. Distribution of participants according to the age

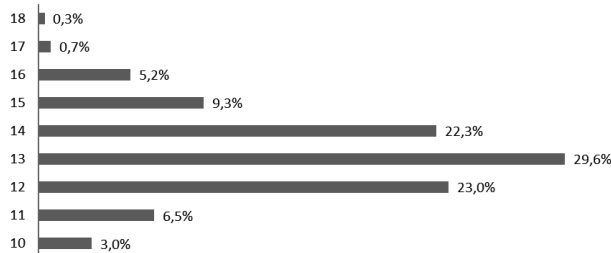


Fig. 3. Age of menarche.

The existence of negative perceptions of menstruation in schools

Due to their taboo character in the popular imagination, fear and shame are always associated with menstruation. For our respondents, menses have an “evil” power that should be kept at a distance from people es-

pecially male: Men should not even see menstrual blood or touch all things related to it. Women must do everything to get them away. It is the woman's responsibility to keep menstrual blood out of reach. It is thus carried out at distance, put away from men. Worship ceremonies are forbidden to women in menstruation. It is forbidden to cook for her father or her husband. Men should not touch her. Traditional hunters “dozos” avoid chairs for fear that they have already been used by a woman in menstruation. In a word, during her period of blood, such a woman is isolated as if the menstrual blood condenses all the dangers, comes to “extinguish” men the fetish. Menstrual blood is associated with “defilement”, “impurity” and “dirt” that can harm anyone who comes into contact with it. This period is associated with social, religious, and food restrictions. Testimonies of this study reveal that the mere sight of menstrual blood can “put in danger”, “cause curse or bad luck in the life of the man who faces it and also his family”, especially because of its origin which is the “receptacle of life”, annihilating all kinds of fetishes or mystical protection. The mystery of menstrual flow is as much related to life, construction as to death and destruction. The Fodonon, Senoufo of Korhogo, use it in fertility rites as well as to cast spells such as to cause sterility or punish the unfaithful woman who as punishment will be continuously in menstruation. Also, according to the Muslim religion prevalent in Korhogo, a woman in good standing cannot pray, nor go to the mosque because she is unfit and her prayers cannot reach the heavens. These socio-cultural beliefs lead teachers, boys, school managers to adopt negative attitudes of stigma and social exclusion towards girls in school during menstruation.

According to the respondents, all the actors in school life, when they are male, have an attitude of “rejection”, “exclusion” or “avoidance” of girls whenever they evoke their menstruation or in case of leaks or stains on their uniforms. Boys move away from girls during menstruation; they share fewer things with them and often avoid shaking hands with them. The story of this 16-years-old girl in the second grade is eloquent: “My neighbour last year did not come to class each time he knew me in menstruation. Even when he had to be there because of class-work, he did not speak to me. It bothered me a lot. I had to change places”

A lack of psychosocial support and medical care during menstruation

The results of the study showed that girls were subjected during menstruation to different types of physiological constraints. These constraints include: the duration of menstruation, which can range from four days (43%), five days (37%) to eight days (1%) (Figure 4). The intensity of menstrual flow and various types of symptoms during but also before and after menstruation are given in Figures 5 and 6. Girls experience abdominal, hip and joint pain, headache, fever, vomiting, loss of appetite, and so on.

Menstruation is a time of anxiety, stress and fear for these girls who must do everything to manage this situ-

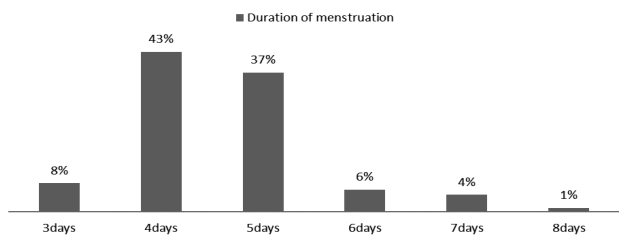


Fig. 4. Duration of menstruation

ation discreetly because it is poorly perceived by themselves and those around them. The study also shows that respondents lack knowledge and skills to better understand this period and approach it with much greater serenity. Although 91% of them find it “normal” or “natural”, 73% of respondents do not know why women menstruate every month. Interviews and focus group discussions revealed that these girls feel alone during this time and without support for the management of menses at the school as expressed by this 13-year-old girl of level 5: “At home, my mother told me that menstruation is related to maturity and fertility. At school, we have never addressed this issue in class. We cannot even approach it with the teachers or the supervisor. We have no co-speaker on this issue; every month it's all alone that we are entering this period”. Menses are poorly perceived and boys adopt girls' avoidance attitudes during this period. Girls are often teased by boys when their clothes are spotted with blood from menstruation. The boys also accuse them of producing during this period a nauseating, repulsive odour which indisposes and justifies the

setting at a distance. Respondents have repeatedly expressed their need for support, understanding and especially medical care during this period as expressed in the biography of this 15-year-old girl at level 4: “At the beginning of the year, my French teacher kicked me out because I did not follow the course well. Indeed, the occurrence of my periods that day gave me terrible pain in the lower abdomen. I did not feel well. How to make it understand to my teacher? With sedatives I could have finished my course”, or else, these words gathered during the group discussions: “female teachers on the other hand because they know the menses better understand the girls. They are more willing to help us sometimes discreetly manage menstruation”.

Failure of health infrastructure and difficult access to water in school toilets

Field visits have shown that Korhogo's various high schools and colleges have functioning toilets. However, there is no precise distinction of toilets according to the type of users. The toilets observed in public and private facilities are poorly lit and most often lack maintenance due to the almost permanent shortage of running water in the city. They give off odours that are hard to bear. 87% of the girls in the survey believe that: “the school environment is an unhealthy space, unsuitable during menstruation”, while 7% say that “our school has safe latrines, usable during the menstrual period”, (Figure 7). Some toilets lack doors, other keys or simply hook to close properly from the inside to ensure girls safety and privacy. Only 9% of girls said that “our school has adequate spaces to change during menstruation”.

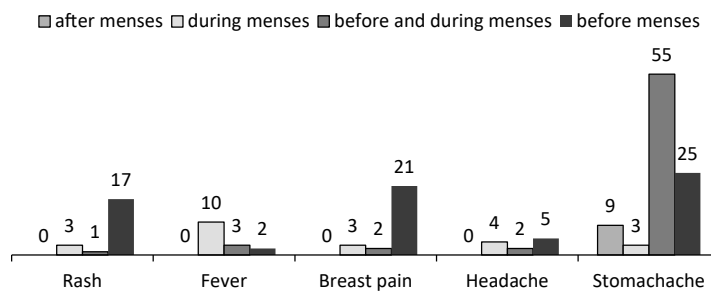


Fig. 5. Main symptoms before, during and after menstruation

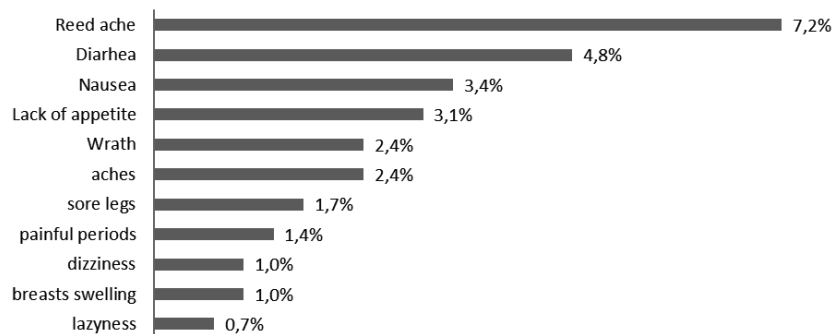


Fig. 6. Others symptoms

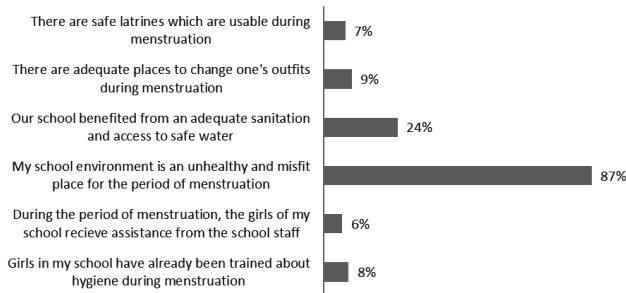


Fig. 7. School environment and psycho-social assistance

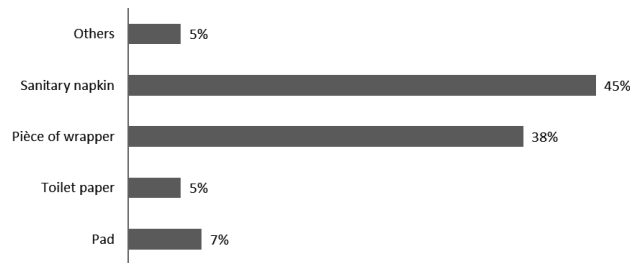


Fig. 8. Protecting instruments used during menstruation

The data show that 38% of girls use a piece of loincloth, 45% sanitary napkins, 5% toilet paper and 7% pad as protection (Figure 8).

Several interviewees revealed during the group discussions that they needed water and soap to wash the piece of loincloth that serves as a protection and a discreet place to dry it as indicated by a high school girl of 18 years and in senior year: *“after the sport I had leaks on my shorts. I took refuge in the toilets to avoid the pupils' eyes. Clean water and soap would have helped me wash my protection. But unfortunately I had to go home to change.”*

The plumbing devices are far from the toilets. There is virtually no hand washing device, soap, bucket, or kettle in the toilet to allow girls to bathe or have a minimum of toilet. There is no sanitary napkin in the toilet, no bins for towels or waste disposal devices.

The impact of menstruation on girls' attendance and learning

The results of this work show that three months before this study, 100% of girls missed at least one day of school due to menstruation. 52% and 8% of girls said they also missed 3 days and one week (7 days) of school over the last three months, respectively, because of menstruation. (Figure 9).

11% of girls claim to *“come with difficulty in class or not at all during menstruation”*. The interviews with the respondents revealed that the main reason given to justify this demotivation of girls to attend school during menstruation is the set of challenges related to the school environment. For most of them, school is an institution, an environment unsuited to this cyclical period of their

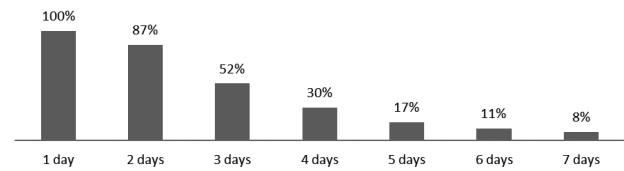


Fig. 9. Percentage of school absenteeism due to menstruation during the last three months

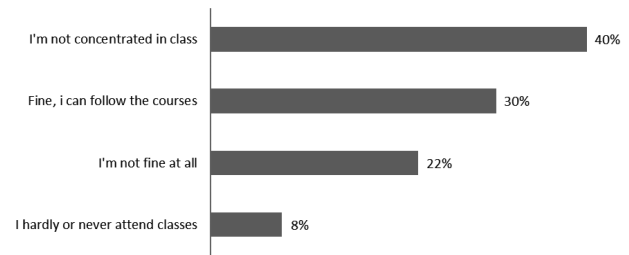


Fig. 10. Attitudes and behaviour towards learning

biological life. They prefer staying at home in order to satisfy especially the constraints of cleanliness related to this period (Figure 7).

Data from this work also show that menstruation affects girls' participation and performance at school. 67% of girls said they *“cannot concentrate in class during menstruation”* compared to 22% who say they *“do well in class during this period”* (Figure 10).

Group discussions showed that most girls are shy or stressed at school at the time of menstruation and participate less because of shame, fatigue or pain. They are eager to go home. The experience is particularly traumatic when they are not prepared for the event as reported by a 13-years-old schoolgirl: *“It was the second month just after the start of the school year. I was surprised to feel a liquid towards my knees. I did not know what it was. And I pulled up my skirt to see. It was blood. I was scared and wanted to go out but the math teacher had just entered class. I did not want my neighbour to be informed. At the same time it was necessary to hide the blood. I was able to do it for a while. But, I ended up going out without the professor's permission. After, I was ashamed to come to class. So, I came back a week later”*. In this case, we can observe an immediate trauma; a feeling of vulnerability. The learner is unbalanced in that she loses her self-control and adopts avoidance behaviour. The revelation of the idea of menstruation pushes the learner to prefer the risk of failure linked to a week's absence compared to the suffering of shame. These feelings during the period of menstruation cause a huge disruption of the emotional state of the learner and poses new situations (cognitive overload) to manage in addition to learning tasks.

Discussion

The average age at menarche in this sample (13.14 years \pm 1.4) is close to those reported in some African countries, particularly in urban Cameroon¹⁹ (13.18 years) and Nigeria²⁰ (13.19 years \pm 1.32). However, it differs from results obtained in other environments such as Brazil²¹ (11.52 years \pm 1.35) and developed countries²² in which age at menarche has stabilized at age 13 years \pm 0.5.

This work also showed the importance of socio-cultural beliefs related to menstrual blood in social exclusion and the stigmatization of girls at school. Many studies in Africa^{3, 23} have also shown that girls experience shame when menstruation occurs because of perceptions associated with it. In Niger, Souley²⁴ has shown in schools that menstruation remains somewhat taboo, hidden and that there is a lack of communication on the subject between parents and children. The culture of discretion surrounding menstruation increases the perception of menstruation as a shameful thing that must be hidden, and can reinforce misunderstandings and negative attitudes towards it^{25, 26}.

Respondents revealed various types of physiological symptoms associated with menstruation. It is now known that menstruation is an aggravating factor of physiological disorders. It acts according to Loirac²⁷ as “*revealing pre-existing disorders*”. It is also known that menstruation in addition to physiological consequences leads to psychological disorders. According to Beauvoir²⁷, menstruation causes

“a decrease in automatic control by the central nervous system which releases reflexes, convulsive complexes and results in great instability of mood: the woman is more emotional, more nervous, and more irritable than usual and may have serious psychological problems”.

In Côte d'Ivoire, there are still no public policies on the management of menstruation at school. The efforts of the rulers are for the moment centered on health, reproduction and more particularly on AIDS, sexually transmitted infections and the precocious pregnancies. This explains the observed lack of psychosocial support in schools. Keihas³, however, showed elsewhere that 14%

of schools in Burkina Faso and 35% of schools in Niger are people who could advise girls.

The School environment studied had no health facilities with adequate accommodation for girls to manage their menstrual periods. The same finding was also conducted in Nigeria²⁸ and in Sierra Leone²⁹. Many studies have already reported on how the lack of safety, privacy and cleanliness of latrines, lack of water and soap, as well as mechanisms for waste disposal, such as a closed and separate bin, or an incinerator on the school grounds that burns menstrual defences, prevents girls from enjoying their right to education and undermines the quality of their learning³⁰. This work has shown that menstruation negatively impacts class attendance, but at the same time participation in school activities and girls' performance. The work of Mc Mahou et al.¹⁵ also shows that parents and girls confirm that they are often used to staying home for menstrual periods at least a few days each month. Mc Mahou et al.¹⁵, Sommer and Ackatia¹¹ also reported that girls stayed at home because of the pain of menstruation, lack of menstrual hygiene products, inappropriateness of equipment, water and sanitation schools, lack of academic support and fear of a menstrual accident.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study revive the debate on equal opportunities and the promotion of girls in the Ivorian educational system. The speeches and utterances produced by high school girls in Korhogo lead to two conclusions: school environment does not allow girls well-off during menstruation; Constraints and challenges have implications for school attendance and girls' performance during this period.

Also, to allow a deeper insight on the phenomenon and to complete these outcomes, the future research perspectives must take into account the social and regional disparities between the students, and also direct their observations towards junior and senior girls' high schools and top schools.

Finally, these outcomes argue in favour of the need to establish policies, and to encourage practical and programmatic innovations in girls' education.

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ISKUSTVA S MENSTRUACIJOM UČENICA SREDNJIH ŠKOLA U SJEVERNOJ OBALI SLONOVAČE

SAŽETAK

Menstruacija se sve češće navodi kao jedan od glavnih uzroka izostajanja djevojčica iz nižih i viših srednjih škola u Africi. U Obali Slonovače za sada ne postoji javna politika povezana s menstruacijom a znanje i razumijevanje iskustva s menstruacijom na skromnoj su razini. Cilj ovog rada je doprinijeti razumijevanju raspona osobnih, interpersonalnih, bioloških, okolišnih i društvenih izazova s kojima se za vrijeme menstruacije suočavaju učenice srednjih škola u gradu Korhogo i utvrditi utjecaj menstruacije na edukacijski proces. Kvalitativni i kvantitativni podaci prikupljeni su kroz narrative, intervjuje i fokus grupe sa 672 djevojčice u 18 srednjih škola u gradu Korhogo uz izravna opažanja tijekom travnja 2018. Rezultati pokazuju izostanak psihosocijalne i medicinske podrške u institucijama za vrijeme menstruacije. Također ukazuju na nedostatak sanitarne infrastrukture, otežan pristup vodi u školskim nužnicima te prisutnost negativnih stavova o menstruaciji. Konačno, svaka djevojčica izostala je barem jedan dan iz škole u posljednja tri mjeseca zbog mjesečnice.

