

Schoolgirls empowered to fight for menstrual rights

Previously shy and fearful of asking her father for sanitary towels, a school girl is now empowering her peers to speak out and fight period poverty.

BY ANTHONY WESAKA.

At 17, Lovence Angecheri Manjeri should be worrying about her preparations for Senior Four examinations that are due next year at Dabani Girls' School in Busia. Instead, for years, she dreaded a single biological reality—menstruation.

One afternoon, her monthly flow came unexpectedly. With no sanitary pad, blood stained her school uniform. Whispers spread across the classroom. Some male classmates laughed openly.

"I felt so ashamed," Angecheri recalls softly. "From that day, that period of the month scared me to the bone marrow."

Like many girls her age, Angecheri often skipped classes during menstruation. It was not because she did not understand her body, it was because she did not have pads.

Her mother, she explains, rarely had money. Her father did—but asking him was very difficult, almost impossible due to fear of being embarrassed.

"I feared approaching my dad for money to buy pads or even knickers because he is a man," Angecheri says. "I thought those things were only to be discussed with my mother."

When her mother sent her to ask her father, Angecheri would retreat into silence. The result was predictable: missed lessons, falling grades, and growing anxiety.

A shared silence

Angecheri's experience mirrors that of several schoolgirls across Uganda, where menstruation remains cloaked in silence, shame, and cultural dis-



Lovence Angecheri (right) with her fellow champions of change in Tororo District. PHOTO/ANTHONY WESAKA

comfort—especially within the father-daughter relationship.

In Tororo District, 15-year-old Sheila Anyokorit, a Senior Two student at Great Aubrey Memorial College, says she once believed asking her father for money to buy pads was "an abomination".

"I used to dodge classes whenever that time of the month came," Anyokorit says, smiling now, but admitting it was not funny then.

The silence came at a cost. Without pads, some girls turned to men outside their families who offered to buy them sanitary products—often in exchange for sexual favours.

Change came through conversations in the community.

In May, Uwezo, in partnership with ALiVE, held community dialogues in Sheema, Tororo, Oyam, Kanungu, Kam-

pala, and Mukono districts. Parents, guardians, and caregivers met weekly for 10 weeks, focusing on life skills—particularly problem-solving and open communication at home.

Fear.

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- Lovence Angecheri, schoolgirl

For Angecheri, the impact was immediate. "After the training, my mother advised me to approach my dad," she says, her face lighting up.

"She told me, 'He is also a human being. He knows girls menstruate.'"

Summoning courage, Angecheri finally spoke to her father.

"When I asked him, he wondered why I had feared him all along," she says. "From that day, everything changed."

Fathers stepping in

Community leaders say such conversations are quietly reshaping family dynamics. Mr Christopher Arojo, 65, a community leader in Kasipodo Trading Centre in Tororo District, says the new boldness among girls is a turning point.

"Before, there was distance between fathers and daughters," Mr Arojo says.

He adds: "Girls would instead run to men who exploited them."

Mr Arojo explains that following the community dialogues, fathers are increasingly providing essentials like

MENSTRUAL HEALTH

In a 2024 Value for Money Audit report on primary and secondary schools (both public and private), the Auditor General said 64 percent of the female learners (138 out of 216) said they had been absent from school or class because of menstruation.

The main reasons given included harmful myths and cultural belief, especially in the eastern and northern regions of Uganda; lack of menstrual materials and sanitation facilities, whereby a total of 22 schools, of the 48 visited (46 percent) did not provide any emergency pads and lacked access to water and appropriate sanitation and menstrual disposal facilities.

pads, knickers, and bras.

Ms Mary Mutonyi, 60, a mother of eight and grandmother of five, agrees by saying: "Our girls are now empowered... They are no longer prey for men who exchange pads for sex."

Becoming champions

Angecheri has formed a group of 15 girls who move from school to school, encouraging fellow students to speak openly with their fathers about menstrual needs. They call themselves Champions of Change.

David Oteba, a student at Nagalama Secondary School in Mukono District, admits he once mocked girls who stained their uniforms. "After the lessons, I stopped," he says. "Now I understand what they go through."

Despite these grassroots gains, the bigger structural problem remains unresolved. In 2015, during presidential campaigns in Lango Sub-region, Mr Museveni pledged to provide free sanitary pads to school-going girls nationwide if he were re-elected.

The promise, expected to take effect in the 2017/2018 financial year, has never been fulfilled, largely due to funding constraints.

For girls like Angecheri, that promise remains distant. But change, she says, has already begun—at home.

"I no longer miss school because of pads," she says. "I just ask my dad."

And that, she believes, is a quiet revolution.