

## **Background and importance**

Growing up in Eswatini, poverty was a glaring reality, apparent at every corner I turned. According to the World Bank, 39.7% of the population of the small Southern African kingdom lives under the poverty datum line of \$1.90/day. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1 in 10 Sub-Saharan African young women miss school when they are on their period because they can't afford sanitary products. To reduce the number of times they miss school, these young women usually resort to using inefficient and unsafe alternative materials such as toilet paper, newspaper or rags as low-cost sanitary products. Using ineffective menstrual products is not only unsafe but often culminates in bullying and stigma whenever they get menstrual leaks, adding an extra layer of emotional trauma on these vulnerable young women. Furthermore, with a formal unemployment rate hovering around 30% (ILO), young women and girls are left to resort to illicit sex with older men to afford their menstrual hygiene supplies (US Department of Labor). This augments their tragedy to unwanted child pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

The HIV pandemic has played a significant role in increasing the poverty rate in Eswatini and consequently complicated the menstrual health predicament among young girls in Eswatini. The rampant infection and consequent deaths of many adults has left a lot of children orphaned thus increasing the number of child-headed households who are left with no means of supporting themselves. This means that many young girls are forced to grow up with no female mentor to teach them about women's health. While the country has made a lot of progress in the diagnosis and management of HIV, COVID-19 has undone most of this progress. Adults are dying disproportionately, small businesses are closing shop and unemployment is skyrocketing, compounded by the closure of schools which has left countless young girls isolated and vulnerable at home with no means nor access to the menstrual care aid they would normally get from school programs.

While poverty is the main reason that many young women in Eswatini don't have access to proper sanitary products, the culture plays a significant role as well. Swazi culture is deeply patriarchal, which means women and women's issues are not prioritised, menstruation being one of them. As much as menstruation (or the concept of) is appreciated as something special that women go through, most of the time menstruation is viewed as taboo, defiling and a bad omen. For example, women on their period are customarily prohibited from coming to close proximity with the cattle kraals as it is believed that will make any lactating cows miscarry. This among numerous other superstitions has made women feel ashamed of and disgusted by their own menstruation. My project seeks to revolutionize societal norms around menstruation through extensive education, dispelling misconceptions and stigma around menstruation, as well as fostering fiscally and environmentally sustainable menstrual health habits and products usage-the multi-use menstrual cups!

## **Project Summary/Objectives**

Through the *Take Charge of Your Period* initiative, I want to contribute to ensuring that every young woman, regardless of financial status, has access to effective, safe and sustainable sanitary products. But this starts with education.

I plan to partner with three public schools in impoverished parts of Eswatini; namely Our Lady of Sorrows School, Nhlengano Central High School and Maphalaleni Community Primary School. I chose these schools because I have a personal connection with them so I can be able to have a sustainable relationship with each of them. I strategically chose to partner with these three schools for starters, they are fairly distant from each other, and serve as focal points for their respective communities from which my initiative can easily radiate to surrounding areas. These schools are located in the highveld region of the kingdom where there is significant access to clean water, which is vital when using a menstrual cup.

With the understanding that the issue is highly driven by the deeply patriarchal Swazi culture, it is important for me to host forums in these schools. I will compile my research and develop a learning curriculum/pedagogy that will incorporate reflections and consultations with various community

stakeholders-- mothers, fathers, teachers, traditional leaders, religious leaders and the students themselves. I plan to host forums for the young women in each school with the help of their career guidance teachers. The main objectives of these forums will be to dispel misconceptions and stigmas around menstruation, reinforce and empower young women to take charge of their menstrual health and hygiene, and educate them about the benefits and proper usage of the reusable menstrual cup. For a clearer understanding of the usage of the menstrual cup, I will use a female reproductive system demonstration doll to show how and where exactly the menstrual cup is to be inserted. Furthermore, in my experience Swazi girls are not normally encouraged to deeply acquaint themselves with their reproductive organs so the demo doll will be useful in countering that. Participants will then be given the opportunity to try a menstrual cup, if they are willing. I will coordinate to have the youth educators from Family Life Association of Eswatini (FLAS) come to educate the girls about reproductive health. This will allow the participants to learn things that might otherwise be not covered in the school's science curriculum. This way I hope to help the girls see that menstruation is a normal body process and there is nothing to be ashamed of about it. Additionally, I will court the help of various community leaders and stakeholders (traditional, religious) and career guidance teachers to facilitate an interactive panel whereby the young women will have a safe space to raise questions, concerns and obstacles they face as young women in Eswatini. Notably, founder of Yati Eswatini and Standard Bank ambassador Nomsa Mbuli has agreed to a collaboration with me and will be co-facilitating these forums with me. Yati Eswatini, short for Youth Action to Improve Lives, is a grassroots organization that focuses on educating young people about gender based violence (GBV). This partnership will serve to compound the value of my project scope and impact by addressing a comprehensive set of topical womens' issues from menstrual health to gender based violence. Moreover, their experience in working with schools will definitely improve the quality of my forums.

At the end of each forum, participants will be given a "goodie bag," each containing sanitary care and self-care products for them to use during their periods. While there will be only one forum per school, I will make arrangements to be a sit-in co-tutor for each grade's career guidance and science classes, thus formally and informally availing myself to students for questions, concerns and mentorship. Finally, I will purchase several boxes of single-use sanitary pads to be left at the schools for those who are not ready to try the menstrual cup to access for free or at a subsidised price during the course of the school year. The career guidance teachers will be in charge of distributing the pads to anyone who needs them, including young women in the community who might not be attending the school I worked with, as these teachers serve as the mother-figures in Swazi communal schools.

### **Project Timeline**

Upon receiving the grant, I will start purchasing the menstrual cups. In April 2021, I plan to coordinate with the schools to decide on days on which forums will take place and finalize the learning curriculum and rollout/execution plan. In June, I will travel from the USA to Eswatini and do the final preparations for the forums. The whole of July will be dedicated to forums; 1 week in each school, starting with Our Lady of Sorrows School and ending with Maphalaleni High School. I plan to host these forums on Wednesday afternoons as these schools usually have shortened school days on Wednesdays to allow time for sports. The Monday and Tuesday before the forums will be reserved for me to get well acquainted with the teachers I will be working with in the school and for them to get a better understanding of what will be covered in the forum. I will also use this time to see the COVID-19 precautions that each school has in place and figure out ways to strengthen them if there's a need. This includes securing a venue that allows for social distancing, providing hand sanitizer at each entrance and ensuring that every participant and facilitator has a face mask.