

I developed “Take Charge of Your Period” with the aim of alleviating period poverty among young women in Swazi high schools. Upon understanding that period poverty encompasses more than just the lack of sanitary products, I knew that my work had to go beyond the provision of free sanitary products, I also had to include menstrual health education.

Growing up in the poverty stricken village of Maphalaleni in the Kingdom of Eswatini, I always had the desire to do more for the less fortunate, especially women. 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. When my friend introduced the menstrual cup to me, I knew this would be an excellent product to bring to Eswatini. Because the menstrual cup is reusable, I would be providing a more sustainable solution to the pains faced by these young women in a way that I wouldn’t be able to if I was only providing single-use sanitary pads or tampons. Furthermore, using the menstrual cup would help the young women feel more comfortable throughout the day as the cup doesn’t need to be changed as frequently as single-use sanitary products and the chances of experiencing leaks are significantly reduced. While I was very excited about introducing the menstrual cup to Swazi young women, I was also aware of the possibility that it might be received with very little to no enthusiasm. I expected the young women to be hesitant to try the menstrual cup due to the fear of getting infections in their reproductive system as they insert and remove the menstrual cup. Also, the invasive nature of the menstrual cup might cause the young women to fear for their virginity, which is a concept that is deeply ingrained in Swazi women. These anticipated challenges, however, provided a perfect opportunity for the educational component of my work. As I introduce the menstrual cup I would have to foster conversations that debunk all the myths around menstruation and allow young women to be more comfortable with their menstruating bodies thus revolutionizing societal norms around menstruation.

I chose to partner with three public schools in impoverished parts of Eswatini; namely Our Lady of Sorrows School, Nhlanguano Central High School and Maphalaleni Community Primary School. I chose these schools because I have a personal connection with them so I would be able to have a sustainable relationship with each of them. I strategically chose to partner with these three schools because 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. However, coordinating the project remotely with local partners meant that I had to compromise some elements of the project upon my partners’ request. Maphalaleni Community Primary School proved to be hard to access by car so we switched them out for Florence Christian Academy, a school near Our Lady of Sorrows. This compromise was pretty disappointing because this Maphalaleni Community School is very dear as this is the primary school I attended. I, therefore, plan to apply for more funding in order to bring this project to Maphalaleni.

Due to COVID-19, I couldn’t travel back to the Kingdom of Eswatini to complete this project. A way around this obstacle was collaboration; I researched people who were doing similar work in Eswatini and BAWSS foundation fit my criteria very well. BAWSS Foundation is a non-profit organization focused on ensuring that every woman and girl in Eswatini has access to menstrual hygiene products wherever they are. They work in communities, schools and correctional facilities and they raise funds and provide young women with sanitary products and menstrual hygiene education. It was important to me that me and my collaborators had equal power in the project. Allowing my co-collaborators to have an equal voice in the project definitely added value to the final product. BAWSS foundation’s field experience helped them counsel me on what types of interventions are most needed in the schools. For example, from the time they spent in different communities they explained to me how the young women might not be receptive to something as invasive and intimate as the menstrual cup. Upon further reflection and

realizing that it would be hard to effectively introduce the menstrual cup through remote instruction, I decided to focus on providing single-use sanitary pads for the meantime and saving the menstrual cups for a later iteration of the project. The Lilambu Foundation, which was founded by HRH Queen LaFogiyane of Eswatini, expressed interest in partnering with me in my effort to introduce the menstrual cups. BAWSS Foundation also helped me figure out the pace at which the project should be carried out since they were more in touch with what was going on in Eswatini in real time. This was especially crucial due to the political unrest that erupted in the kingdom and everything was shut down as we were ready to go to the schools. I had no way of knowing how things were going on-site all the way from the USA, so I had to rely on my co-collaborators to keep me updated on what was happening. On top of the political unrest, Eswatini was also experiencing a third wave of Covid, which made it impossible for us to carry out the project as schools were closed during that time. Fortunately, the government ordered a gradual opening of the schools the first week of August and we took that chance. Because of all the uncertainty we had to accelerate the whole program, spending one day in each school instead of the proposed week. While I took my partners' council as it came, there were times when I had to be firm and stand my ground, especially when I felt that my vision was being compromised too much. The budget is one of those areas where I had to be firm. Looking back, I would advise young PfP grantees to not fully share their budget with their co-collaborators, especially if they were not involved in the grant application process. You can be transparent about how much money you have access to but it is important for you as the grantee to remain in full control of the distribution of the funds and keeping the specifics of the budget to yourself is one way to accomplish that.

Nelson Mandel once said, "Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference," and that is how I define peace. Through this project I want all young women, regardless of their class status, to have access to safe and sustainable sanitary products. This not only allows the girls to be able to fully attend school and thrive but it also helps to restore and maintain their dignity as they are now able to manage their menstruation. In the short term, through this project, I was able to provide 300 young women with 3 packets of pads each, which should be able to last most of them 3 menstrual cycles. Each girl received a package containing 3 packets of pads, a packet of pantyliners, hand sanitizer, a disposable mask and a bar of chocolate, all contained in a drawstring bag with the "Take Charge of Your Period" and "Bawss Foundation" logos. We called these packages *Dignity Packs*. These packs contained more than just the "bare minimum" to highlight the fact that every young woman is deserving of a comfortable period, no matter their financial conditions. We also left boxes of extra pads to be given to other girls throughout the school year. In the long term, this project will bring a change in how menstruation is perceived among Swazi women. There will be more open conversations around it, thus breaking down myths and misconceptions about it. Right now I am fostering long-lasting relationships with the girls' groups at these schools and plan to visit them in-person when I am back in Eswatini. I have also availed myself to mentor the young women as they are navigating their way through high school and into college.

Personal Statement

My main motivation is my deep desire to celebrate, heal and empower African women through my social justice work. By fighting period poverty, through this project I not only got the chance to try and eliminate one of the barriers that prevent young women in Eswatini from attending school but I contributed to restoring and preserving every menstruator's dignity.

Photographs



Students from Nhlanguano Central High School posing with members of Bawss Foundation



Anele Shabangu of Bawss Foundation distributing Dignity Packs to student from Our Lady of Sorrows