Background

Access to safe and high-quality menstrual products is a fundamental need for the well-being of women and young girls. However, significant barriers to menstrual hygiene continue to be a major challenge in Kenya, primarily affecting low-income women and girls. Poor menstrual health and hygiene as a result of social and economic inequalities has a negative impact on their health, education, and human development, ultimately perpetuating the global poverty cycle. Previous studies show that this challenge has further aggravated other issues, such as school dropouts and teenage pregnancies due to the interrupted school days.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to poverty and social inequalities such as cultural taboos and discriminatory social norms, has played an additional role in limiting access to menstrual products. Not only did the pandemic cause supply chain issues, store closures, and quarantine restrictions, but the majority of Kenyan schools that served as the primary access point for menstrual products for low-income students were closed for more than six months. According to a 2020 Lancet survey, 52% of Kenyan adolescent girls and young women have had difficulty obtaining menstrual health products since the pandemic began. Approximately 45% of the young women polled, stated that they did not have enough money to purchase the products. Furthermore, 69% of those polled were in secondary or primary schools.¹ These realities highlight the need to address this issue through the provision of sustainable menstrual products that provide young girls with the opportunity to receive consistent education.

Mentoring within schools promotes consistency and improves student achievement. Mentors support students to become more aware of their abilities and inspire them to imagine futures for themselves that previously seemed unattainable. As a result, having access to menstrual products and mentorship opportunities will eliminate a major impediment to the education of young girls and allow them to envision a future for themselves.

Project Proposal

Our project aims to increase access to menstrual health education and products for underprivileged adolescents in Kenya. We plan to launch a mentorship program to provide guidance and advice to low-income students in order to improve their educational outcomes and personal development.

We propose to collaborate with a local organization in Kenya to provide reusable menstrual cups to hundreds of girls and hold workshops that center menstrual and reproductive health awareness, career development, and financial literacy. Through these workshops, we aim to educate the young girls about their menstrual health, expose them to successful community role models, and encourage them to aspire to various career paths so as to stay in school longer.

We intend to work with Cross World Africa (CWA) as our primary project partner. The mission of this organization is to provide hope and opportunities to communities in need through various programs. To make our project a reality, we will collaborate with Ruby in the Rift, a CWA program that focuses on

menstrual education for Kenyan youth. Their goal for 2021 was to reach 10,000 girls with reusable menstrual cups. Through our collaboration, we will use the funds to reach more girls and help achieve this goal. We aim to work with at least 1,000 students from 4 different schools in the Rift Valley and Kisumu regions of Kenya through a series of workshops.

The project will begin with collaboration with Ruby in the Rift project representatives between March and May to create a comprehensive outline of the project. During this time, we will narrow down the primary and secondary schools in the regions we intend to visit. We will then contact school administrators to determine the number of students and specific dates we expect to visit. This first phase of the work will also include contacting menstrual service providers to put in orders for the reusable cups, developing the framework for the educational workshops, and reaching out to female leaders within the target areas to volunteer as speakers for the events.

The second phase of the project will begin in June and continue through early July. During this time, we will visit select schools to distribute the Ruby menstrual products and educate young girls on how to use them. In conjunction with this, we will implement a mentorship program featuring a series of interactive workshops in which participants will learn about career and professional development, mental health, and financial literacy.

We will host at least four one-hour workshops in each school, with ourselves as workshop presenters, along with female community members who have relevant expertise and interest. To complement the presentations, we will create printed booklets that will guide the interactive discussions. At least one workshop at each school will be a walk-in that will allow students to speak with us individually and form personal connections. Following the success of the mentorship program, CWA has agreed to consider continuing this program, using our curated framework and curriculum to ensure the project's sustainability.

Sustainability and Project Outcomes

Menstrual cups are becoming more popular compared to other types of menstrual products. This product's longevity not only benefits women's health but also promotes environmental sustainability. In general, one cup can be used for one cycle and has a lifespan of up to 10 years with proper care. The access problem can be solved for a long time if each girl has at least two menstrual cups. Furthermore, we hope that organizations like CWA will continue to provide these safe and sustainable products after our project is completed.

The mentorship program is designed to provide guidance and motivation on the advantages of furthering one's education. Program topics such as pursuing higher education, mental health, financial literacy, and reproductive health are not commonly covered in Kenyan rural schools. We anticipate that exposure to them within a mentorship framework will be highly motivating for participants, inspiring them to apply themselves in school and pursue their goals.

We both look forward to staying connected with the young women with whom we will be working as this project is dear to our hearts and important for the future of young girls in our country.