Cultural Context and Challenges:

Zambia, the second largest copper producer in Africa, home to the Zambezi, and the Mighty Victoria falls faces many social and economic challenges, among them is period poverty. Like other parts of the country, many families in Chongwe district, a small rural town in Zambia, struggle to meet their daily needs and access to menstrual products for a girl child is the least priority. Extreme period poverty has forced girls to use unhygienic products such as old pieces of clothes that often lead to period leakage. In a school environment, this has been a source of bullying that distorts self-esteem, and leads to social anxiety, and the risk of mental health issues among girls. The negative misconception, beliefs, and stereotypes surrounding menstruation have subjected girls to gaslighting. They are often accused of being weak in their pain tolerance or using their menstrual cramps as an excuse not to engage in activities such as agriculture, sports, or house chores. Further, the taboo pertaining to menstruation has left many girls learning about menstruation and female health from their peers. Consequently, period poverty has created a hurdle for girls to exercise their human right to education because they abstain from class when they are menstruating. Thus, they often lag in their academics and eventually drop out of school. Overall, this contributes to inequality as males continue progressing with their education and obtain better opportunities compared to females.

Apart from period poverty, girls especially in rural areas like Chongwe, are subjected to labia elongation, a form of female genital mutilation (FGM). Long labia are believed to increase sexual pleasure for men. During rites of passage, young girls are initiated into womanhood by undergoing labia elongation using traditional herbs, putting them at a health risk. Initiators, usually elderly women, often do not take health safety precautions when demonstrating to the girls how to use herbs or techniques of stretching the labia. During this process, girls are physically and verbally abused if they do not comply. In extreme cases, females without stretched labia often face societal stigmatization which may eventually cause mental health issues.

Project Description:

This project aims to teach girls how to make and manage reusable pads using needles and threads to empower them with better menstrual hygiene. The project shall be conducted at Chilyabale Primary School, one of the few schools available in Chongwe. Each participant shall be provided with a mini sewing kit, a small plastic bucket, and a laundry bag to make and maintain the pads. The plastic buckets and laundry bags shall be used for storage and rinsing off the used pads until the rinsing water is clear enough for the pad to be touched with bare hands. This project hopes to restore and build a girl child's self-esteem by eliminating the burden of access to menstrual products. It will enable girls to menstruate with comfort and peace of mind as they would not have to worry about their period leaking through their clothing.

In addition, the project will create awareness on female genital mutilation (FGM), and other traditional vices that hinder the academic and professional ambitions of girls in rural Zambia. Further, because FGM is a human rights violation, it puts the health of females at risk. To curb this, voluntary health professionals will be invited to teach and interact with the girls so they can be educated on female health, and the dangers associated with labia elongation and provide knowledge about the support resources available to them. The project will also include educational sessions on issues such as female hygiene and health, career options, and the effects of early marriage and pregnancy. These sessions will not only create awareness about issues affecting girls but also provide a platform for more discussions on such issues.
Project Objectives and Targeted Outcomes:

This project's objective is to provide girls with the skills to make their own reusable pads using affordable materials. This will enable them to embrace their menstrual cycle and menstruate with dignity and comfort. It will help build their confidence and interest to participate in activities such as sports. In addition, the project aims to create awareness on menstruating, female health, female genital mutilation, and resources and support available to the girls. The long-term objective is to build schoolgirls into ambassadors of change in their society.

Project Timeline:

Prior to departure for Zambia, the project leader will contact suppliers to check for material availability and Chilyabale Primary School, partner school to discuss the details of conducting the project at their institution. In addition, through social networks voluntary speakers from the health and other industries will be recruited to provide relevant health and education information to the young girls.

July 17 – 21:
- Purchase materials and travel to Chongwe.
- Meet the school head teacher to complete arrangements and conduct introductory project sessions.
- Educational Discussion Session: Female Health and Female Gentile Mutilation.

July 24 – 28:
- Pad-making Session: make pad templates and cut the materials.
- Educational Discussion Session: Female Hygiene Practices.

July 31 – Aug 4:
- Pad-making Session: make at least two pads.
- Educational Discussion Session: Impacts of Period Bullying and Ways to Address it.

Aug 7 – 11:
- Pad-making Session: make at least two pads.
- Educational Discussion Session: Impacts of Early Marriages and Pregnancy.
- Project evaluation and closing remarks.

Project Impact and Sustainability:

End Period Poverty in Chongwe will provide young girls with the skill to make their own reusable pads. Thus, eliminating the financial burden of buying non-reusable pads or use of unsafe products. With the provision of small plastic buckets and laundry bags, the girls will be able to maintain and care for their reusable pads. Unlike other menstrual products, reusable pads are eco-friendly and have a lifespan of about 5 years if they are well maintained and are of decent quality.

To keep the project running, a Reusable Pads and Cloth Club will be formed. Two sewing machines shall be donated to the club to help the girls make long-lasting reusable pads and other items from thrifted materials such as waterproof raincoats that would otherwise end up in landfills. The club will promote creativity and leadership, as it will be run by the girls. The girls shall become agents of change in the community as they will teach the next generation about female health and how to make reusable pads. As part of the project, the girls will be encouraged to conduct various community activities and share their experience with this project. To ensure that the club runs smoothly, one staff member from the partner school will oversee its activities and serve as the club “advisor” that the project leader will maintain close communication with after the completion of the Davis Project for Peace summer project.