

OPINION

Why girls drop out of school

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The enrolment ledgers at schools across our country tell a story. Among young students, the ratio of boys to girls is nearly equal, but as age increases girl enrolment decreases.

We know many of the reasons for this: pregnancy, early marriages, poverty — even the lack of “girls-only” latrines. New research on behalf of our institutions — the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, Emory University’s Centre for Global Safe Water, CARE International and Water.org — reveals that there is another barrier: menstruation.

We have begun researching this issue in interviews with girls and school staff throughout Nyanza Province. Consistently, we hear the same thing. Girls report that it is too difficult to manage their menstruation in a school setting. They lack sanitary towels.

They are confused by changes in their bodies and unsure of how to maintain personal hygiene and prevent stains on their uniforms. Rather than endure embarrassment, teasing from boys or feelings of shame, girls stay home. As time passes, monthly absences add up.

Eventually girls fall behind academically and often drop out. These underscore a 2005 Unicef report stating that one in 10 Kenyan girls do not attend school during menstruation. The severity of this problem was mentioned in a recent *Nation* story — Teenage sex study shock for parents. Girls as young as 12 have sex to get money for sanitary supplies.

We ask parents to break the silence attached to this topic. Teach your daughters how to manage their menses. Mothers need to say how they manage theirs. Bread winners, often fathers, need to provide sanitary towels and to speak to boys about periods as a natural reality for all women. They are the future boyfriends, husbands and fathers.

OLDER SIBLINGS SHOULD BE COMPASSIONATE to the girls. They need to encourage your friends to support their siblings too. In school, we need to teach reproductive health, and discuss puberty, menstruation. We need to incorporate reproductive health issues into school-wide debate clubs and health club activities.

Teachers need to be people girls can look up to for guidance and mentoring. We ask non-governmental organisations to make the distribution of reusable sanitary pads a component of future interventions. Single-use sanitary towels are not sustainable in most settings. We even ask shopkeepers to stock sanitary towels, and display them prominently.

We thank MPs who voted to reduce taxes on single-use sanitary towels. But more needs to be done to even subsidise the cost of sanitary towels. This problem merits more attention. Unmet potential among young women means unmet potential for half of our population.

Improvements in the number of girls receiving and completing education develops a nation. Girls face significant struggles. Let’s not allow the process of becoming a woman to further hinder their pursuits.

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