



Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) Kenya and the Girl Child Network (GCN): uncovering a hidden cause of girls' exclusion¹

Despite the Kenyan government's abolition of user fees, more than 800,000 children continue to miss out on an education, particularly girls. A CEF partner, the Girl Child Network (GCN), investigated why girls were still out of school despite free education. A key finding pointed to something that no policy maker had previously identified. During menstruation, girls refused to go to school because there were no appropriate or adequate sanitation facilities. Because of the high cost of sanitary towels, girls from poor families continue to use unhygienic sponges, mattresses, tissue paper and even leaves – and most avoid school all together during their menstrual period. The study indicated that, “a girl absent from school due to menses for four days in a month of 28 days loses 288 lessons in a calendar year – that is 192 hours of missed learning due to absence from school.”

The CEF/GCN initiative became a major campaign dubbed the “sanitary towels campaign”, targeting policy makers and the general public to raise awareness and demand action. The campaign was widely aired in the national media, resulting in the Ministry of Finance agreeing to cancel the 16% VAT on sanitary pads. The private sector also stepped in and distributed free sanitary pads to 500,000 school-going girls to improve their attendance. The media and public debate helped to de-stigmatise the issue and helped girls break their silence on other sexual and reproductive health issues. GCN mentored schoolgirls on sexual maturation and their rights, as well as helping demystify the use of sanitary towels in communities that had previously refused to stock them in shops.²GCN lobbied the government to allocate budget for provision of sanitary towels to girls in schools, successfully gaining an allocation of Ksh 165,000 (about US\$2,300) for 2007/2008.³

The Ministry of Education (MoE) felt compelled to formulate a gender policy in education to address the issues raised. Thanks in part to the role of CEF, the policy is now in place. In partnership with the MoE, GCN produced materials addressing factors that hinder girls' performance and retention in schools. GCN worked with communities to build girl-friendly latrines in 25 schools. The MoE has taken this up as an example of best practice in promoting gender parity in education and GCN has used the success of the sanitary towel campaign to influence others in Zambia, Uganda and Ethiopia to do the same.

¹ Extract from Hart, J. (2009). *CEF Final Report* using source material from Mwendwa, J., J. Munene and A. Kibui for Iceberg Africa (2008). *Commonwealth Education Fund – Kenya (CEFK) End of Project Evaluation Report*. Reports available at: <http://www.commonwealtheducationfund.org/resources.html>

² Mwendwa et al (2008, p20)

³ Mwendwa et al (2008, p17)