

*Short Communication*

## Adolescent boy's attitudes toward menstruation and implications for adolescent girl's access to education in tanzania

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The link between menstrual health management, or the lack thereof, and adverse schooling outcomes for adolescent girls is well established. Policy solutions generally address access to biomedical information or sanitary materials, and target adolescent and pre-adolescent girls. Surveying of male and female students across four secondary schools in Tanzania, published in Plos One, revealed that another factor must be considered: Period teasing. Teasing is common according to both girls and boys, and affects girls' presence, participation and concentration in the classroom. For boys, teasing is generally rooted in peer pressure and home-sphere social norms that stigmatize periods. However, the majority of boys do not condone period teasing but report that they would intervene if they witnessed it. Such positive factors ought to be leveraged in future policy research to improve girls' access education.

**Key words:** Period teasing, menstrual hygiene management, adolescence, education

### INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan African girls are falling behind the rest of the world in terms of secondary school enrollment and out-of-school rate. While primary school enrollment was just below parity in 2018, the disparity in enrollment of older female students in sub-Saharan Africa is more disheartening: in 2018, there were 8.8 girls enrolled in secondary school for every 10 boys. This is approximately ten percentage points lower than the global average of 9.9 girls per 10 boys (The World Bank et al., 2018).

Enrollment disparities, while important, do not to fully represent the lack of equitable educational access among girls in sub-Saharan Africa. Only 10% of sub-Saharan African students reach a minimum level in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2018). In other words, even if gender-based school enrollment disparities were eliminated and the female out-of-school rate dropped to zero, adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa may still not be learning at an adequate level. The question is why.

One factor that sets adolescent girls and boys apart is related to puberty and Menstrual Health Management (MHM). There is plenty of evidence from countries in sub-Saharan

Africa including from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, South-Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, that points to inadequate menstrual hygiene affecting education (Adinma et al., 2008, Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2021, Grant et al., 2013, Mason et al., 2013, Miiro et al., 2018, Sommer et al., 2009, Sommer, 2010, Tamiru et al., 2015, Tegegne et al., 2014). A global review by Hennegan et al., (2019) confirms these patterns.

Lack of sanitary products, including access to sanitary pads, is the aspect that has received the most attention from scholars and policy makers (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2019, Montgomery et al., 2016, Muthengi et al., 2018). We argue that period teasing, and the fear of teasing, are additional drivers that cause adolescent girls to reduce both attendance and concentration in the classroom. However, there is scant evidence on male attitudes toward period teasing which hinders our opportunities to tackle these issues.

### SURVEYING OF ADOLESCENT MALE STUDENTS

We conducted surveys with 432 male and 524 female students in four secondary schools in northern Tanzania. It is among the first large quantitative surveys of adolescent boys on attitudes toward menstruation, and follows a limited literature from the US, Australia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and India (Allen et

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al., 2011, Chang et al., 2012, Mason et al., 2017, Peranovic et al., 2017, Wong et al., 2013). The results have been published in PloS One (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020).

## **LEVERAGING POSITIVE FORCES AMONG ADOLESCENT BOYS**

We confirm positive forces that can be leveraged: 35% of boys report that boys tease because they are immature or don't understand, 77% would intervene by talking to the boy who they saw teasing, and 4% of boys report they would talk to the girl in private. The overwhelming majority of adolescent boys do not condone period teasing and would take action to ensure their female peers' safety (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020).

## **WAY FORWARD: THE NEED FOR MULTIFACETED PROGRAMMING**

Policy makers need to ensure girls' equitable access to education using multifaceted approaches. These should include addressing access to sanitary infrastructure, sanitary products, and reduce social stigma. Leveraging the positive forces that already exist among schoolboys can hopefully do the latter. Future research on menstrual health management should consider the overall environment within the school, including attitudes and behaviors of students of all genders, teachers and administrators.

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