

Sanitary freedom keeps African schoolgirls in class

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Sue Barnes had no problem getting sanitary pads while she grew up in South Africa. But not every girl, she came to realise, is so lucky and their periods weigh over daily life.

In 2010, Barnes learned that girls from poor families were skipping school each time they were menstruating, because they cannot afford sanitary pads.

"I just couldn't believe it, it blew my mind," said Barnes, 49, wearing a black shift dress and a pearl necklace. "Girls were missing a week of school a month."

Since then, Barnes has dedicated her life to making sure that no young girl in South Africa has to skip school just because she is menstruating.

"I realised there was a much bigger need," Barnes said in a classroom with yellow walls and a green chalkboard at a school in Diepkloof, a poor suburb of Johannesburg.

"I just don't think people were aware of it. It's easy to say 'Ah, shame,' and walk in another direction."

Barnes, who previously worked in the clothes industry, designed a reusable pack of pads and panties.

At 190 rands (\$16, 15 euros) for a set of three panties and nine clip-on

pads, Barnes' product is considerably cheaper than the drugstore equivalent because her product is reusable for years.

In South Africa, a pack of 10 pads sells for R23 (\$1.80), which adds up to an exorbitant sum for the average black employee in the country, who earns just R2,167 (\$183) a month.

"The girls were using sand, leaves, plastic packets, newspapers to contain the blood," said Barnes, shaking her head with disbelief. "One girl said her mother told her to go sit on a cow patty."

Barnes is now manufacturing packs of panties and clip-on reusable pads for schools in neighbouring Lesotho and Swaziland.

The pads, which are washable, attach onto the panties with snaps and last approximately five years.

Barnes works through her non-profit organisation, Project Dignity. She approaches non-governmental organisations or corporate clients who donate money to produce packs of the pads for different schools.

"My vision is to have every girl educated," said Barnes. "Not only that, but give (them) dignity and self-respect."

'A useless government'

The menstrual problem is widespread. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that one in 10 female African youngsters still "do not attend school during menstruation".

But in some countries like Uganda, the figure is estimated to be more than 60 percent.

Yet people like Barnes are starting to make a difference, heading up a raft of initiatives across the country—and the continent—to help girls stay in school by providing economical sanitary pads.

The African Water Facility in February announced it is providing a million-dollar grant to help improve sanitation and menstrual hygiene in South Africa's Eastern Cape province with the goal of improving school attendance, paying "particular attention to the needs of girls."

In Kenya, entrepreneur Barclay Paul Okari is meanwhile producing inexpensive, reusable pads for the east African market. In Rwanda, non-profit organisation Sustainable Health Enterprises is making cheap pads from banana trunk fibre.

Uganda's government, meanwhile, has ordered schools to provide girls with what it calls "emergency" sanitary towels as well as spare uniforms, underwear and pain killers. But with no extra money to pay for the items, schools administrators say it is a cost they cannot afford.

Despite being Africa's most developed economy, South Africa struggles to provide basic services—including flush toilets and trash collection—to its schools.

In 2011, President Jacob Zuma promised free sanitary towels to cash-strapped women, but teachers on the ground say that the government has not seriously followed through on the undertaking.

Every month, teacher Florence Radebe sees a handful of her girls skip school because they are having their periods.

"It's because some of them don't have sanitary pads," says Radebe, a member of a trust that offers extra classes on Saturdays to Diepkloof children.

Similarly, Moses Odongo, head teacher at the private, co-educational primary Lwerudesco Learning and Coordinating Centre in Uganda's rural Lwengo district, said girls missing school during menstruation was a "big problem" that led some to fall behind or even abandon their studies altogether.

Lwengo student Violet Nalubyayi, 14, remembers her first period last year when her mother handed her an old rag and then she skipped school for five days.

Unable to afford sanitary pads, Nalubyayi was afraid she might end up humiliated in front of her classmates. "I was scared. I may be running, it may fall and they laugh," she said. So for the duration of her menstrual periods she stayed home, worrying how it would affect her academic performance.

Occasionally reprimanding rambunctious students playing in the concrete school courtyard, 63-year-old South African teacher Radebe explains that she has tried to approach the government about this issue before.

"I don't know why they are dragging their feet," she said, clicking her tongue in disapproval. "My darling, it's a useless government."

So Radebe was happy to see Barnes, who was distributing packs of her panties and reusable pads at the Diepkloof [school](#) on a cool Saturday morning.

The girls, in their late teens, squealed with excitement when they received the pads, saying they would definitely use them.

"They will let me feel much more comfortable, and much cheaper," said Mbali Nhlapo, a 15-year-old wearing tight jeans and black Converse

running shoes, who adds that the pads sold in stores are costly.

"It's very expensive because I'm still a day schooler," Nhlapo said. "This will save me money."

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