

# A Cry for Dignity: The Struggle for Menstrual Hygiene as a Refugee.

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## Monthly challenge

"As a refugee, managing my period in a camp with community-shared toilets and bathrooms, sometimes with no water, became a monthly challenge in this new life. Some months, the blood came unexpectedly. I tried to anticipate it, but the pattern kept changing and made me very frustrated. If there was a leak through the clothes, I would know it by hearing the mockery of boys in the camp. Even my own brothers laughed at me sometimes. Some people said it was a curse. I began to hate my body", says the young refugee.

**A**s a refugee in a camp in Uganda, Josephine, a young South Sudanese woman, fears the onset of her period every 28 days. How can she manage this inconvenience without sanitary towels or access to water, in a context where menstruation is perceived as a taboo?

In the crowded Nyumanzi 1 camp in the Adjumani district of Uganda, a young woman feels fear and shame. She stained her skirt. She cannot hide. For a second, she considers returning to the family tent, but her brothers and mother are inside. Tension mounts inside her, if only she could remove the stain with her bare hands... Josephine Kiden is 18 years old. She fled the war in South Sudan in 2015 with her family. Since arriving in Uganda, her main concern has been to find food and water every day... until the day she got her first period.



As talking about menstruation is considered taboo, Josephine had to learn secretly, with the help of other girls, what to do. "I once heard that the United Nations was giving out nice sanitary pads for girls and women, but I never got any." In the absence of accessible sanitary products, young women must improvise with leaves, old rags or pieces of old clothing. This rudimentary method undermines the girls' confidence and makes them dread this time of the month.

In 2016, the family was moved to Palorinya, in Moyo district, some 30 kilometers to the west. It was there, at the age of eleven, that Josephine received her first pack of disposable sanitary pads. "Can you imagine?", she throws back her head in laughter, "For several months I got sanitary pads, women even showed us how to use them. It was like a dream." But the dream did not last long, because a year later, the family was once again moved to another camp: Bidibidi, in Yumbe district, where no menstrual hygiene measures were available at the time. The Bidibidi refugee settlement in northern Uganda is one of the largest in the world, with a population of circa 190,000 people.

Josephine's story is not an isolated one. Teachers have noted a high rate of recurrent absenteeism among young girls, who no longer dare leave their homes when they menstruate.

As part of an ongoing program BidiPads implemented in partnership with YUGNET, HEKS/EPER staff Deborah Nabukeera has mobilized women to form a cooperative producing reusable sanitary pads. The cooperative brings together residents, refugees, pupils and teachers from all over the region.

## Breaking the stigma

With the support of the Swiss Water and Sanitation and ACORD-UG in past interventions, and the introduction of BidiPads, HEKS/EPER has enabled many pupils, such as Josephine, to regain their dignity.

Through its advocacy campaigns, a menstrual technical committee was set up in Yumbe and HEKS/EPER in collaboration with the office of the prime minister and YUGNET continues to promote access to menstrual products, ending menstrual stigma, driving the conversation on menstrual hygiene, and helping young girls stay, and flourish, in school. In fact, Josephine has become President of her school's Health Club.

What if similar initiatives could be launched in other refugee camps?



- HEKS/EPER works in 38 countries around the globe with focus on conflict transformation, WASH, Livelihood and Climate Change Adaptation.
- HEKS/EPER also works in humanitarian response whilst contributing to development in community and societal levels.