

No Pads - No School.



"Madam, my skirt is not OK," Anna told me at the end of a school day in February 2010. She stood shyly with her back against the classroom wall. "What do you mean?" I asked her; not immediately understanding what was wrong with her skirt. "My menstruation," was all she told me in explanation. She turned around to show me the stain that had been spreading for hours on her skirt, but there had been nothing she could do. "Wait a minute, I'll bring a shitenge," I told her as I left the classroom to quickly go to my house. She wrapped herself in it and went home. I didn't see her for two days.

Patti proved a promising grade six learner. I learned that she lived only with her younger sister and their grandmother who didn't work. In grade seven, she began regularly missing school and her studies suffered. On a Thursday in period four, math class, she called me over to her table.

"Madam, my menstruation." She had no pads with her and none of the teachers I asked could help either. She had to go home. When the bell rang for break 20 minutes later, I sent the other learners out of the classroom. Patti washed her chair, turned her skirt around and carried books in front of the stain as she walked home. I didn't see her until late the following week. I finally realized what was happening – girls were missing more school than boys because there were no pads for sale in the village and they were too expensive in town for many families to buy regularly.

"You menstruate, right?" I asked Melita the following week. She was one of my best friends, a grade seven learner. Her sister, Coletta, was with us too. "Yes." It was a random, out-of-the-blue question, and she had no idea where I was going with it. "What do you use?" I asked her. I knew that her mother worked when she could, but her family often didn't have enough to eat so buying sanitary pads would have been a financial stretch.

She responded with an unfamiliar word. I gave her a look of confusion. "I don't know the word in English," she explained.

"Where do you get them?" I asked. "From the hospital." "Pads?" I asked, knowing they sometimes had them there. She nodded, yes. "Are they free?" Another nod. "Every month?" I asked, wondering how the hospital could keep enough free pads in stock for an entire village and the surrounding areas. "I don't know. My mother, she got them. But they're finished now." "What will you do next month?" "I don't know." "Can you come to school if you don't have pads?"

"Sometimes. If you use toilet paper or a cloth. But many, they won't come." "What if you had pads that were cloth, so they were made to be used for your menstruation, and you could wash them again and again so you never had to

worry about where you would get pads from next month? Would this be a good thing?" I asked.

"Yes!" they both told me with conviction, Coletta just now joining the conversation. "It will be better," Melita continued.

This was the first conversation I had about the potential of having cloth pads available in rural Namibia. Since then, Empower Women in Africa has been founded and has been able to get pads to over 1,800 girls at various schools in Namibia, primarily with the help of Peace Corps volunteers teaming up with local teachers and clinics to provide them to girls in their area. Now we're working with a group of women in Rundu who have started sewing cloth pads. We are exploring ways to get them into the hands of those who need them.

The most important thing we've learned is that the further from town a girl lives, the greater the potential impact these pads can have, and the higher chance that she is missing school for lack of sanitary pads. One girl, upon receiving pads and a health lesson about menstruation and puberty, said, "I would climb a hundred mountains and cross a thousand rivers to get one of those!" To learn more and to get involved, please visit www.EmpowerWomenInAfrica.com, join our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/empowerwomenin-africa or email Lori at Lori@EmpowerWomenInAfrica.com. Reaching all girls who are in need of menstrual hygiene management products will be a challenge we need to approach together.