

2020 Davis Projects for Peace

Bard College: Sanitary Pads for Homeless Women in Informal Settlements in Kenya: Leader: Peace Okoko Bard College '21, Afua Anim Rutgers University '21, Ajshe Sulejmani Bard College||, Nairobi, Kenya|| July 2020- August 2020

Summary: The initial goal of the project was to provide homeless women in the Kenyan cities with access to sustainable menstrual products and educate them on their proper usage. However, due to the coronavirus our plan changed to providing menstrual cup access and education to Kenyan school girls using the National Girl Guide Association.

Due to Corona there have been many restrictions on gathering sizes. Thus, the original idea of holding a concert to lower the stigma on menstrual health and allow people to simultaneously receive education on menstrual health could not occur. Additionally, throughout the summer access to Nairobi has been limited to stop the spread of corona. Thus, it was virtually impossible to reach the target demographic of the original proposal. Moreover, the travel restrictions made it impossible for us to physically go to Kenya. Because of this, I had to rethink the target demographic as well as the method of distribution.

Many Kenyan school girls struggle to get the access to the sanitary products they need. Menstrual products are very expensive, and often the cheaper options are not reusable or sustainable. Efforts to supply menstrual products to low-income women in Kenya often supply products that are not reusable. A few years ago there was a law passed by the government to provide access to sanitary pads to all school aged girls. However, sanitary pads are not sustainable and need to be refilled often. A further complication is the lack of accessible education for women and girls in Kenya on the use of reusable menstrual products, in addition to access to these materials themselves. In my own experience growing up in Kenya, I received virtually no education on menstrual health. Further, there is heavy cultural stigma around menstruation, and I remember feeling unable to ask any adults questions about menstrual health.

Because of the inability for me to go through with my initial project plan due to Covid, I decided to instead address the problem of limited menstrual products and education for school girls in Nairobi and surrounding areas. To do this, I coordinated the gradual distribution of 700 menstrual cups in schools, along with a coordinated educational program on how to use and maintain them. To facilitate this distribution, I worked remotely with two main groups in Kenya. These groups were the Kenyan Girl Guide Program, and BFree.

The Kenyan Girl Guide Program is a program that is at every primary school in Kenya. Girl Guides do outreach work such as volunteering to meet the community's needs. BFree is an organization affiliated with Women's Global Health Innovations that creates antibacterial menstrual cups, which are easy to clean and more sustainable than regular menstrual cups. I worked with BFree to set up a program, using a school liaison (either a BFree representative, or a health worker from the Kenyan Ministry of Health), that teaches Kenyan Girl Guides about the antibacterial menstrual cups. The Girl Guides then communicate the information to the students in their respective schools and pass the knowledge to them. Girl Guides act as midway points for communication between the students and the liaison that would educate the girl guides. After educating students on the uses of the menstrual cups, girl guides would keep the student liaison updated on problems that the student body is going through. Additionally, the Girl Guides are able to act as both peers and educators to fellow students at their school, helping to answer any questions that may arise on the cups or menstrual health in general.

To coordinate this distribution, I communicated throughout the summer with local community contacts in Nairobi to figure out how the products would be distributed after my original plan was cancelled due to

Covid. I spent a lot of time searching for an organization to partner with to help carry out this project in-person while I helped with coordination remotely. Finding this partner was particularly challenging this summer, as many organizations in Kenya were either non-functional due to Covid, or overwhelmed with delayed projects. Eventually, I was able to partner with BFree to help supply the menstrual cups for distribution. Through virtual meetings, I set up the plan for distribution that would involve the Girl Guides, ensuring that the project would be sustainable, accessible, and educational. Coordinating all of this with multiple people and organizations across time zones proved challenging logistically, but taught me a lot about effective communication and organization. Conducting my project entirely remotely also meant that successfully scheduling and utilizing these meetings was essential, as they provided my primary means of organizing the distribution. However, I was grateful to be able to see the project through during the pandemic, as when Covid initially hit I wasn't sure if the project would be able to continue in any form. This taught me about perseverance despite seemingly impossible circumstances, and I learned the importance of staying flexible and positive while working towards a goal that I am passionate about.

Menstrual health and access to sanitary products is a global human rights issue that impacts people in every place in the world. Limited access to menstrual products and menstrual health education can affect every aspect of an individual's life and health, and make everyday existence exponentially more difficult. The need to be clean and healthy is fundamental to a person's health and success, and being unable to access the needed resources to maintain health and hygiene during menstruation can cause difficulties in education, job opportunities, and quality of life overall. By providing sustainable sanitary products to students in Kenya, as well as educating and supplying student representatives to facilitate their distribution and act as educational resources to their peers, my project aimed not only to distribute much needed sanitary products, but also to reduce the stigma of and facilitate open conversation around menstruation in Kenyan communities like my own.

To me, the project of promoting peace is inseparable from ensuring individuals' and communities' basic needs are met. My project helps work to help women in Nairobi meet their basic sanitary needs, as well as empowering them and the community generally to pass on menstrual health knowledge and resources. As a Kenyan woman in the diaspora, I find myself in a unique position to help others that don't have the same access and education that I have been fortunate enough to receive. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity, and truly believe that this project has and will continue to profoundly impact the lives of hundreds of Kenyan girls like myself as they grow to become women.

Through coordinating the peer-lead distribution of menstrual products and providing menstrual educational resources in Kenyan schools, I learned the importance of facilitating sustainable, community-lead solutions to health, and connected with my own community from home despite not being able to go there in person.