

**Reusable Female Sanitary Pads and Issues of Accessibility in Times of Conflict:
The Case of Tigray Region**

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Introduction

Background and Context

Mensuration is a taboo subject in much of rural Ethiopia. Rather than a biological event which starts at puberty and occurs monthly for two or more decades, it is viewed as an unpleasant manifestation that females have to endure. Although more pronounced in rural areas, urban Ethiopia is not immune to shunning of the subject of menstruation despite its occurrence in every household where a female in her reproductive ages resided.

A broader view allows comprehension of the psychosocial stress and physiological discomfort that females have to bear globally on account of the near-universal stigma associated with menstruation [1,2,3, 4, 5]. The costs for rural women in Ethiopia include missed school days [6] or dropping out of school all together [7] – a highly consequential decision with negative impacts on trajectories of impacted females’ future career paths, economic standings, and overall happiness in life.

In 2005 Freweini Mebrahtu designed and patented a game-changer cost-effective menstrual pad [7] for which she won CNN’s person of the year award in 2019. The pads she invented, are highly cost-effective for girls and women whose financial means are very limited. The pads are produced currently by an organization known as Mariam Seba Products Factory (MSPF) [8] - a social-impacts organization. They are cost-effective because they can be reused. Impressed by Frewoini’s work, Dr. Lewis Wall, a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology from the US and his wife created a non-profit called Dignity Period [9] to support her.

In an unfortunate turn of events, war broke out in Tigray region between fighters of the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and government defence forces which, mercifully, ended quickly in the month of December 2020 with the government side gaining the upper hand in a series of swift but decisive battlefield victories. As wars go, however, life in Tigray faced significant disruptions as sections of communications and power systems were destroyed. Although, no reports exit of the impacts on MSPF and its production capabilities, it is clear that manufacturing and distribution had to stop while power and transportation systems were being restored.

Problem Statement

It has been reported that over a million girls and women have benefited from Freweini’s invention since 2009 [8]. There are a lot of unknowns, however. In particular, the ease or difficulty of use of the sanitary pads, most notably, among girls in the youngest age groups that are just starting to have their periods, and how their experiences compare with that of older girls and women, is not known. On a theoretical level, one would think that short histories of

having periods would equate to insufficient readiness to use menstrual pads. On the other hand, girls in the youngest age groups are technology savvy and adept at using social media platforms for learning and for exchange of information and experiences with their peers. Crucially, the impact of Frewoini's MSPF sanitary pads on school attendance, absenteeism, school dropout rates, and completion rates are not known. Research findings about ease of use among girls in the youngest age groups and impacts on school attendance will serve as crucial starting points for product tweak, supply-chain redesign and, most importantly, for policy proposals aimed at nation-wide dissemination of information about MSPF products as a prelude to building factories in the remaining nine regions and two city administrations of the country. Additionally, no study findings exist revealing trends in cultural attitudes toward menstruation and, in particular, the acceptance of this biological occurrence among men and boys as normal. The overall goal this proposal is therefore to receive funding that will enable research in Tigray region in order to generate findings that can be used to shed light on all of these unknowns.

Research Questions

- What is the age distribution of women and girls currently using MSPF products and how long have they used them?
- What difficulties – both psychosocial and physiological - do women and girls encounter in their use of these products?
- What is the level of satisfaction among women and girls in the use of these products and does the level of satisfaction vary by age and length of use?
- Have the attitude of men and boys toward monthly periods and their view of the difficulties females face in dealing with social taboos about menstruation changed in Tigray Region since the introduction of MSPF?
- What impacts are the disruptions caused by the recent conflict having on women and girls in general, and their abilities to maintain adequate levels of hygiene through access to menstrual pads and other feminine products?
- What are the policy implications of answers to all of the above questions?

Relevance and Importance of the Research

This research is extremely important and timely. It is important because very little, if any, is known about the links between accessibility to sanitary pads and educational outcomes for women and girls in Ethiopia, and whether or not there are age differentials and regional variations in those links. It is also timely because the answer is needed now as Ethiopia has embarked on an ambitious national plan of socioeconomic transformation to make the country the second most powerful nation in Africa by 2050 [9]. This cannot be accomplished without the full participation of females representing a majority (50.2 percent) of the country's population [10]. Globally, unrestricted access to menstrual pads shows strong association with educational outcomes for women and girls through reduced absenteeism during menstruation [11, 12, 13] thereby signifying the links between this biological phenomenon on the one hand, and a country's ability to meet its socioeconomic goals through equal participation of adequately educated male and female workers.

Literature review

The literature review summarizes, compares and critiques the most relevant scholarly sources on the topic. There are many different ways to structure a literature review, but it should explore:

Key Concepts, Theories and Studies

Compare, contrast, and establish the theories and concepts that will be most important for your project.

Key Debates and Controversies

Identify points of conflict and situate your own position.

Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Show what is missing and how your project will fit in.

Research design and methods

Here you should explain your approach to the research and describe exactly what steps you will take to answer your questions.

Research design

Explain how you will design the research. Qualitative or quantitative? Original data collection or primary/secondary sources? Descriptive, correlational or experimental?

Methods and Sources

Describe the tools, procedures, participants and sources of the research. When, where and how will you collect, select and analyze data?

Practical Considerations

Address any potential obstacles, limitations and ethical or practical issues. How will you plan for and deal with problems?

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