

MENSTRUAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING IN ZIMBABWE

TACKLING STIGMA TO IMPROVE GIRLS' REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH



THE PROBLEM

In Zimbabwe, menstruation is surrounded by stigma and taboos; it is treated as negative, even shameful, and is widely misunderstood. Mothers, health extension workers, and teachers often fail to discuss menstrual health (MH) due to shame, secrecy, and other negative social norms. Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) have limited autonomy, making the attitudes of their gatekeepers crucial. The taboo around menstruation combined with inadequate access to MH products and information impedes girls' rights and results in millions of AGYW having a limited understanding of what is happening to their bodies when they menstruate and how to respond in a positive, healthy way.

The challenges that AGYW face in accessing MH information exist within a broader culture of secrecy and shame around sexual and reproductive health & rights (SRHR). The lack of dialogue on MH, limited knowledge, and poor understanding of menstruation have negative impacts on AGYW's experience of this normal biological process. Low menstrual awareness leaves them poorly equipped to manage their menstrual health successfully, to understand their bodies, and results in girls being ill-prepared or unempowered to make decisions related to sexuality, relationships, and health—reinforcing the cycle of poor SRHR and broader development outcomes.

THE PROJECT

In 2018, with support from the Swedish Embassy, Population Solutions for Health (formerly PSI-Zimbabwe) received funding to develop a menstrual health campaign for AGYW aimed at reducing taboos and stigmas, improving knowledge about MH and its connection with SRHR, and improving product access to support the overall wellbeing of AGYW in Zimbabwe.

THE APPROACH

The programme used PSI's Keystone Framework, a rigorous approach to applying marketing discipline to the design and implementation of public health interventions to understand the MH landscape in Zimbabwe. This approach keeps the user at the centre while recognizing that she's part of a wider system which often requires more complex interventions. User-centred inquiry and immersion into AGYW's lives, experiences of menstruation, and product preferences; investigation of AGYW's social spheres of influence; and analysis of MH market dynamics and barriers informed the programme design.

THE PROGRAMME



MH MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Launched a multi-media campaign addressing community stigma and normalizing menstruation.



COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

Integrated MH messaging into peer mobilizer interpersonal communications to drive client flow across programmes,



MARKET FACILITATION

Worked with key stakeholders to improve youth-friendly guidelines and recommendations to include MH and supported improvements at the service level.

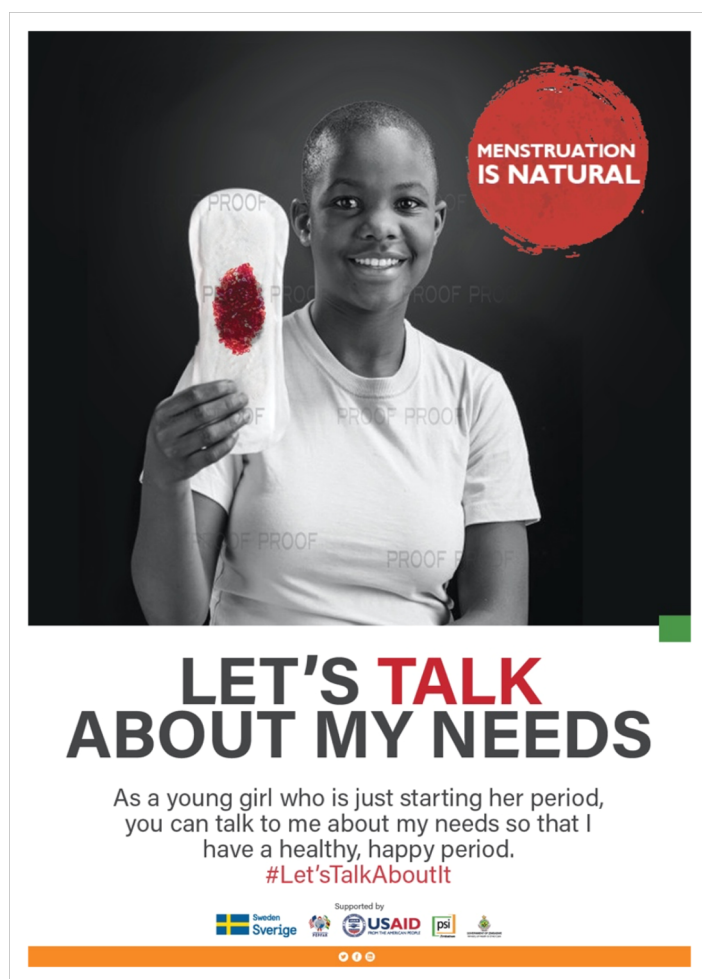
MH MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Let's Talk About It was a multimedia intervention aimed at addressing community stigma that perpetuates shame and prevents open discussions

about MH and its link with sex and sexuality. The campaign de-stigmatized menstruation by igniting and normalizing dialogue about it. For AGYW, the goal was to help them understand menstruation, encourage them to accept that it is normal, and empower them to take ownership of their changing bodies. For influencers, the goal was to help them recognize the need to break the silence and shame around menstruation, encourage them to accept that menstruation is normal and that AGYW need their support, and to empower them to create a movement of people who support AGYW through their menstrual journeys.

The campaign portrayed AGYW and their experiences as well as role models such as religious leaders, men, and boys to convey support for girls and ignite community discussion around the topic. The campaign generated community discussion through radio, television, social media, and printed media. A total of 502 radio spots encouraging family and community support for AGYW in their menstruation journey were developed in English, Shona, and Ndebele and placed on three national radio stations and three community stations with high listenership and coverage. Facebook and Twitter were used to reach young girls and their influencers using short, memorable video clips, and live online shows featuring popular media personalities to trigger discussion. Campaign digital banners were posted on several popular social media pages, and videos titled "Men Speak" were developed with men through street interviews to encourage familiarity around menstruation. These were complemented by posters and brochures for communities with limited access to digital and social media. The campaign also included a collaboration with the Swedish Embassy to broadcast a live show, "Unpacking the Period Silence" on Zimpapers TV Network, focusing on menstrual health issues and how they affect both men and women.





COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

The media campaign was accompanied by interpersonal communications work, which incorporated MH messaging as an entry point for discussion about contraception and HIV, driving HIV and SRHR client flow across programmes. Prior to incorporating MH messaging, the peer mobilizers faced challenges in initiating conversations of a sexual nature with AGYW who were afraid of the related stigma. Using MH as a starting point helped to reduce these fears and provided a safe cover for

girls to discuss issues of a sexual nature, while also receiving MH education and information. From August 2019, when the mobilizers were deployed, monthly uptake of modern contraception services increased by as much as 150% from the previous month.

Peer mobilizers also distribute the menstrual cup to AGYW during integrated small group discussions on MH, modern contraception and PrEP, as most cannot afford sanitary pads and resort to using cloth, resulting in leakages, loss of self-esteem, and sometimes missing school. Menstrual cups have been well-received in Zimbabwean communities and are seen as luxuries along with other sanitary products.

MARKET FACILITATION

To address market constraints including a lack of confidential MH and SRHR services and limited product choice, the programme worked with the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council (ZNFPCC) to improve youth-friendly guidelines for MH and to provide recommendations about the possible scale-up of the menstrual cup and reusable pad provision in future Government and donor investments for AGYW and marginalized people who menstruate (for whom other MH methods may pose a particularly difficult financial burden and/or health risks).

The programme also addressed service-level barriers by locating youth-friendly outreach providers in contexts that are appealing to young people; creating environments for AGYW to have questions answered in safe, non-judgmental spaces; and creating opt-out opportunities for all people present to have a private moment with a health provider, as necessary.

