

Reaching the Poorest: Supporting Quality Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

Annex 4: Stories of Change

Homemade reusable menstrual pads reduce discomfort during menstruation



Catarina teaches her adolescent daughter how to make reusable menstrual pads using a pattern taught by the Ungumi project

Catarina Garcia, who is 35 years old, was already prepared to teach her second oldest adolescent daughter how to take care of herself during menstruation. Catarina's plan was to teach her daughter the same method she was taught by her mother when she had her first period. Despite knowing that the method that she and others traditionally used was very uncomfortable and even caused sores on the waist and in and around the genitals, she believed that she had no other option.

“The way I learned it, and as almost everyone does, is to use a rope to tie around the waist and a capulana (cloth) that is held in place with the rope so that it doesn't fall. The rope makes cuts and creates sores because it must be tied very tightly, but we were forced to do that. We really suffered, but we had no other options.”

Before her daughter had her first period, Catarina was lucky to learn a new way of managing her period from her neighbour, Angelica Brito, a teacher who is part of the School Hygiene Committee in Tunduzi Primary School. Angelica participated in the Ungumi workshop on how to make reusable, homemade menstrual pads.

“Professor Angelica explained to me how it was done, and we sat down and made the pads together, so I experienced it myself. I liked it a lot and now I only use these new pads. When my 13-year-old daughter had her first period, I taught her how to sew the pads by hand.”

As a mother of five children, three of whom are girls, Catarina says that learning how to make homemade menstrual pads was a great opportunity for her, as she was never able to buy disposable pads for herself or her eldest daughter. “I had to teach my eldest daughter to use the way I learned. I was sad because I never had the money to buy her disposable pads, but now she is happier with the new pads we learned to make,” she added.

Adolescent Winete Arcécio also learned how to make homemade menstrual pads with teacher



Angélica. However, in her case, she was used to purchasing disposable pads and initially the homemade pads didn't interest her. She says: *“I used to use disposable pads and when I saw the homemade pads, I doubted that I would like them. I thought they couldn't hold a lot of blood there and that it could be uncomfortable. Aunt Angelica said to try it when I was menstruating, which I did and I liked it a lot. I started making more pads for myself and even taught a friend,”* Winete said.

Winete (right) speaks with her friend, Ana about the pads

For Ana Laisse, learning how to make homemade menstrual pads was the end of her constant worry about money to buy the disposable pads. She says, *“I used to have to ask my aunt for money to buy pads, but she didn't always have money, so I had to have a strategy to save the pads I had. I tried to only use one or two pads a day, depending on the flow. Now with the homemade pads, I don't worry anymore - they are safe and comfortable and easy to make.”*

For Professor Angelica, sharing her knowledge about how to make the menstrual pads is a way to help alleviate some of the pain and discomfort that girls face during menstruation. It is also a way for girls to gain control over their body and resources and to act according to their best interest. *“The girls complain about the pain and discomfort because of the rope and the worry that the cloth would fall down while walking, so many isolated themselves and even missed school. It's very sad to see 11 or 12 year old girls going through this. This pad has a button that fastens under the underwear, so it is not necessary to wear the rope around the waist or worry that it will fall off. In addition to my*

neighbours, there are still others who want to learn. For now I don't have material, but as soon as I get it, I'll teach other girls."

Teacher Angelica was trained on how to make homemade reusable pads by the Ungumi project using cotton cloth for the exterior (such as *capulanas*), cotton towels for the inside, a needle and thread, and a button to secure the pads to the girls' underwear. The homemade pads ensure that girls have access to comfortable, safe, menstrual hygiene methods that cost very little money and can be reused. The training included the female Tô Na Boa mentors, female initiation rites providers, and female teachers who are part of the school hygiene committees. This learning has successfully cascaded down to many other girls within the communities.



The school hygiene committees in schools not only teach girls how to make the pads, but they also advise them on issues related to hygiene, including how to wash the pads and leave them in the sun to dry. Traditionally, girls were taught that no one must see the cloths used during menstruation and once washed, these were hidden away, meaning that many girls and women were using damp cloths, which could cause infections and add to their discomfort. Part of the work of the hygiene committees and Tô Na Boa boys and girls mentors is to normalize and destigmatize menstruation so that girls and women do not need to hide their pads or exhibit harmful behaviour during their periods.

Community savings and loans ignite dreams of a better future



Sofia, a member of a community VSL group

Dependence on subsistence agriculture and the lack of alternative sources of income has been one of the main causes of food insecurity and vulnerability of families in rural communities. Poverty is also a key driver in school dropouts and CEFM. Girls are typically the most vulnerable individuals in poor households.

The Ungumi Project introduced Village Savings and Loan (VSL) groups to help poor families save their money and have access to credit so that they can meet essential needs, and start income generating activities or small businesses, whereby reducing their vulnerability.

When she was invited to join the community savings group, 23-year-old Carlinda from Morrumbala district depended on the small jobs she did on local farms and earned only 50 meticais (\$1CAD) per day. *“I couldn't buy anything, because what I earned was very little, besides the work was very heavy. I had to work in other people's fields, weeding from 7 am to 12 pm and earned only 50 meticais,”* said Carlinda.

After joining the savings group, Carlinda took out a loan and started selling fish. She was able to purchase a freezer with the loan to preserve the fish and is already reporting changes in terms of her well-being and improvements in her 4-year-old daughter's nutrition. Carlinda is also thinking

about going back to school and completing her schooling, which she had to abandon because of her family's precarious financial conditions.

“With the sale of fish, I earn 500 to 1000 meticaís a day in the market. I can give my daughter a good diet and pay off my debt to the savings group. I want to go back to school to finish 12th grade. Then I want to take a course to be a nurse - that's my dream.”



Carlinda, with the freezer she purchased with a VSL group loan

With four children, including three girls, Hortência struggled to provide for her family with her small business of buying and selling tomatoes. When her husband died, the situation worsened. She needed to increase the volume of her business, but there was nowhere she could access a loan at an interest rate that would allow her to pay off her debt. *“I heard from some people that a savings group was being formed here in Pinda where you can save money and ask for loans from the*



Hortência and her daughters organizing tomatoes to put into baskets to bring to the market

group. I joined the group and started saving, and later, I asked for a loan and increased the amount of tomatoes I bought to go sell in Quelimane”

Hertência also teaches her daughters important life and business skills. *“When I go to Quelimane to sell tomatoes, I always buy wheat flour and teach my daughters how to bake cakes that they can sell so that they have a skill that can help in the future,”* added Hortência.

Also in Pinda, Sofia, who has five children, decided to participate in community

savings to increase her tomato business. *“Before I was only able to buy 1,500 meticaís worth of tomatoes to resell. Now I've doubled the amount of tomatoes I can buy because of savings group. I can pay for notebooks and uniforms for the children and I even started buying bricks to build a house”.*

Alfredo Amosse, from the Amosse community in Milange also decided to join a community savings group to start a bakery with his wife. Although he had been working on this idea for long time, Alfredo only managed to make his bakery a reality after he took a loan from a VSL group. *“I had the idea of running a bakery for a long time, but I always gave up because I didn't have any money and other loans have very high interest rates. When you borrow money, you have to pay almost double the amount borrowed”.*



Alfredo Amosse and his wife show the production process

With seven children, he says that the bread-making business has helped him better provide for his family. *“I did have a business before, but it was very difficult to ensure that everyone had school supplies. Now at least it's easy to help when a child needs a notebook or pen.”* Alfredo Amosse still has dreams that he hopes to realize through the savings group, *“I also have the dream of starting the business of manufacturing and selling burnt bricks to make my family's life even better”.*

José João is a member of the Community Committee for Child Protection (CCPC) in Chilo



José João with his chicken and duck business

community in Derre district and had also decided to join a VSL group. Although the group started a short time ago, José João is already reaping the results. *“After 4 months of savings, I decided to take out a loan and I started a chicken and duck business. I also bought a second-hand bicycle to help with the sales. With the profit, I pay rent and food for one of my children who went to continue his studies in the Derre district capital, as well as to cover the costs at home and buy school supplies for my children who go to school here in the community.”*

The Chilo savings group has a social fund and plan to use this money to support orphaned children by providing school supplies and buying seeds to grow

vegetables for them.

The Ungumi project has helped establish and train VSL groups in 19 rural communities to date.

“It is important for girls to have information about sexual and reproductive health from the start”



Irene with the Tô Na Boa mentoring manual

Early pregnancy is one of the greatest barriers to girls' education and development in Mozambique, affecting one in every two girls. In rural areas, girls are in a more vulnerable situation due to poverty and poor access to information and services.

Irene, who is currently 21 and a resident of Morrumbala, fell pregnant at the age of 16. As in many cases, the child's father, also an adolescent, denied that he was the child's father. *“I found out I was pregnant at 16 years old. The child's father was only one year older than me. When he found out I was pregnant he said he wasn't the father. He has never helped out or interacted with the child at all,”* said the young mother.

In addition to being abandoned by the child's father, as her pregnancy began to show, Irene began to face contempt from her schoolmates and friends in the neighborhood *“Some people understood the situation, but other people started to despise me because I got pregnant and some friends stopped talking to me. It made me very sad”.*

Due to the stigmatization she felt at school, Irene thought about dropping out. However, her mother insisted that she continues with her education. *“This year I'm finishing high school, thanks to my mother who always forced me to go to school, even though I was pregnant. She wouldn't let me miss classes. I would have given up because of the way some classmates treated me.”*

After participating in the sessions on sexual and reproductive health by an Ungumi-trained mentor, Irene began to understand how the lack of information led her to an early, unwanted pregnancy. *“I was too old to become a member of the group, but I was invited to participate. I liked chatting with the other girls. Whenever sister Ilda (the Ungumi mentor) talked about things like early marriages and early pregnancy, I felt very touched - it was like she was talking about my life.*



By participating in the mentoring sessions, I began to realize that it is important for girls to have information about sexual and reproductive health from an early age to avoid the same path that I followed and harm their lives. That's why I started advising some girls about ways to prevent unwanted pregnancies in the neighbourhood,” she added.

When Irene's community mentor left the district to continue her studies, Irene did not want the group to stop so she made herself available to continue holding sessions. *“I was already talking to some girls about the issues I heard with the mentor, so when I heard that she would no longer be here in the community to give sessions, I spoke to Save the Children and asked if I could continue the work,” she said.*

The Ungumi project provided training to Irene in her community and she says she is constantly receiving technical support from them. She already has a group of girls enrolled for her next classes. *“I've already started doing sessions. I work with younger girls aged 10 to 14 - these little ones are the best to teach and I help them make good choices and advise them to stay in school.”*



Irene, conducting a mentoring session with girls with support from an Ungumi staff member

PeriodPanties improve the lives of girls in school



Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in Mozambique is still a challenge due to cultural beliefs and harmful gender norms, in addition to a lack of infrastructure and products to help girls manage their MHM. This affects girls' self-esteem and mobility, as well as compromises their education and health. MHM further deepens inequalities in terms of opportunities for development and participation compared to boys.

In order to improve the way girls manage their menstrual hygiene and ensure they feel comfortable staying in school during their periods, the Ungumi project has adopted various approaches, including the distribution of [PeriodPanties](#) at the primary school level for girls aged 11 to 14 years old.



Maria,¹ who is 13 years old only ever had one option before: she used an old capulana (fabric) and another cloth used as a rope. “I used an old capulana when I was menstruating, and I put a rope around my waist, but it wasn't easy. The cloth was heavy and I was afraid that it would fall down,” said Maria.

While in school, Maria's insecurity increased. “I never missed school but it was really hard. I always stayed alone in the classroom. I never went out to play with the other girls during the break

because of this fear that my pad would fall if the rope wasn't really tight and well tied,” she added.

After she received the PeriodPanties from the Ungumi project, Maria says that her experience of having her period has been transformed. “Now that I wear the PeriodPanties I feel very good. I can play with my friends when I want and I'm not afraid that my pad will fall off because the PeriodPanties have a pocket for the pad and it doesn't move,” said the adolescent.

Marcela, a 14-year-old, said that before wearing the PeriodPanties, she had problems concentrating in the classroom when she had her period. “In the classroom, my only concern was if I was soiling myself. I didn't hear anything about what the teachers were saying,” said the 7th grade student. With the underwear,



Marcela says that her fear of soiling her clothes no longer exists and she can go back to paying attention in her classes. “The PeriodPanties are plastic so it doesn't let the blood get through and dirty my clothes. I can come to school and go home again without worrying.”

Raisa, who is 12 years old, also used a capulana and rope. She says that this method caused her to get sores and she always felt uncomfortable. “When my period started my mother only gave me a capulana and it was my friends who taught me how use it. But the cloth gets wet and heavy very quickly and soils your clothes. Also, it gave me sores. Now with the PeriodPanties I feel safer because it doesn't let the blood out”.

¹ All of the names in this story have been changed to protect the identity of the girls.

Although she hasn't started menstruating yet, 13-year-old Laura believes that the underwear will help to manage her period. *"I haven't started menstruating yet, but once I start, the underwear will help me a lot. My friends who are already menstruating say it's very good, so I feel I'm already prepared,"* she said.

In addition to receiving the PeriodPanties, the girls learned about MHM in school, including debunking all the myths related to menstruation.

"I learned that we have to wash our underwear and pads with soap and let them dry outside in the sun to make sure they are completely dry otherwise they can cause infections. But before, people told us that after washing our pads, we have to hide them and they never really dried well," said 14 year old Elisa.

The Ungumi project distributed 1,600 menstrual panties to 800 girls, aged 10 to 14 in various schools as a way to help them better manage their MHM so that they can feel comfortable staying in school.