



Attitudes towards, and acceptability of, menstrual cups as a method for managing menstruation: Experiences of women and schoolgirls in Nairobi, Kenya



The menstrual cup may be an appropriate technology for poor women and girls.

The Situation

Menstruation is a significant stage in the development and maturity of adolescent girls. Despite the onset of menstruation being an important landmark in the transition to adulthood, it can present serious problems and concerns among adolescent girls and women who cannot afford sanitary towels or similar materials needed for menstrual management. This policy brief is based on the project entitled 'Research and Feasibility Study to Explore Menstrual Practices and Investigate the Suitability of Menstrual Cups for Adolescent Girls and Women in Kenya.' The project was designed to explore knowledge of and attitudes towards menstruation and associated practices of adolescent girls and young women in Kenya, including their experiences and the significant problems that they encounter.

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Who is this policy brief for?

Policymakers, program managers, their support staff, doctors, researchers and other professionals dealing with reproductive health, people with interests in gender issues and women affairs, educationists, school principals, teachers, parents and people who are interested in education outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa.

Why was this policy brief prepared?

To highlight key findings from a feasibility study on the menstrual cup as a method for managing menstrual flow among adolescent girls and women in Nairobi, Kenya. The findings provide insights into their attitudes towards the menstrual cup prior to use, their acceptability and experiences of using the menstrual cup. It aims at providing evidence for better understanding of the menstrual cup as a method of managing menstrual flow, and whether it is an appropriate and acceptable method among adolescent girls and women in Kenya. This evidence aims at encouraging the formulation and implementation of policies and programs aimed at improving access to reproductive health services and technologies.

What does this evidence-based policy brief include?

A summary of the study – methods, findings, and implications of using the menstrual cup.

Not included

Recommendations for implementation

Full report and references

The evidence that is summarized in this policy brief is described in more detail in the report entitled: *Research and Feasibility Study to Explore Menstrual Practices and Investigate the Suitability of Menstrual Cups for Adolescent Girls and Women in Kenya. Final Report, 2010.* The report is available upon request.

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This policy brief was written by the Menstrual Cup Project Team within the Population Dynamics and Reproductive Health Theme, in collaboration with the Policy Engagement and Communication Unit, APHRC.



The Problem

Despite the onset of menstruation being an important landmark in the transition to adulthood, it is viewed in various settings as a major concern. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, millions of girls who have reached puberty are highly disempowered due to the lack of access to sanitary wear. Many women and adolescent girls from poor families cannot afford to buy sanitary towels, and resort to using strips of old cloth and other unhygienic methods.

In collaboration with the Division of Reproductive Health (DRH) of the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, and with funding from UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) carried out a research on menstruation with adolescent girls and women in Kenya. The project entitled '*Research and Feasibility Study to Explore Menstrual Practices and Investigate the Suitability of Menstrual Cups for Adolescent Girls and Women in Kenya*' sought to provide policymakers and program managers with a better understanding of menstruation and associated practices of adolescent girls and young women in Kenya, including their experiences and attitudes as well as the problems they encounter. The ultimate goal of the project was to promote the reproductive health and education rights of adolescent girls and women by tackling problems associated with menstruation and by improving access to appropriate menstrual products.

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 was a qualitative research to explore beliefs, attitudes, practices and problems associated with menstruation among women and girls in informal settlements of Nairobi. Based on the findings summarized in the **Policy Brief No. 20, 2010** (Experiences and problems with menstruation among poor women and schoolgirls in Nairobi, Kenya), Phase 2 was designed as a pilot study to assess the cultural, practical and health-related appropriateness and feasibility of the menstrual cup as a method for managing menstrual flow. Policy Brief No. 20, 2010 is available upon request.

The menstrual cup (cup made of medical silicone rubber that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood) may be an appropriate new technology for poor women and girls in Kenya. The menstrual cup has been used since the 1930s in Europe and North America and are manufactured commercially in those regions. The Mooncup®, one of the manufacturers of menstrual cups,

has received regulatory acceptance from the Food and Drug Agency (US), which regulates menstrual flow management products (<http://www.mooncup.co.uk/>). For more information about the menstrual cup, refer to the document **Menstrual Cup: Frequently Asked Questions** (available upon request).

Methodology

The study used quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data at baseline before the use of the menstrual cup, and at endline after four months of use of the menstrual cup.

- **Quantitative component:** A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on background information, access to clean water and sanitation facilities, menstrual beliefs, practices and reported symptoms of reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs); consistency of use and discontinuation rates and reasons for discontinuation.
- **Qualitative component:** In-depth interviews (IDIs) were used to explore menstrual experiences, problems and needs, personal and social practices, norms, attitudes and beliefs, and their attitudes towards menstrual cups, perception of social acceptability and their experiences upon using the cups.

The menstrual cup (cup made of medical silicone rubber that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood) may be an appropriate new technology for poor women and girls in Kenya.

This policy brief is based on Phase 2, which was conducted between May and September 2010.

A scientific review working group and an advisory group of experts on new technologies in reproductive health, adolescent health and feasibility study methodologies provided input into the design of the study. Clearance was obtained from the Pharmacy and Poisons Board's Expert Committee on Clinical Trials, the Kenya Medical Research Institute's Ethical Review Committee and the National Council for Science and Technology.

Data collection was conducted in Kiswahili and/or English. Qualitative information was recorded on digital recorders and later transcribed in English and coded for data analysis and report writing. Sensitization and ongoing support for participants was provided by nurses from the Division of Reproductive Health over the four-month period. Table 1 presents a description of the study participants.

Table 1: Description of the study participants

	Quantitative Component		Qualitative Component	
	Baseline	Endline	Baseline	Endline
Schoolgirls	60	55	24	22
Our Lady of Fatima, Korogocho	25	24	11	10
Jogoo Road School, Harambee	35	31	13	12
Women	36	35	17	17
Korogocho	15	14	7	7
Harambee	21	21	10	10
Total	96	90	41	39



MENSTRUAL CUP USE: Some were skeptical about using the menstrual cups for the first time.

Key Findings

1. Attitudes towards menstrual cups at baseline

Table 2. Summary of the quantitative results

	Women (N=36)	Schoolgirls (N=60)
1. Main reason why respondent decided to participate in this study		
Problems with existing menstrual products	19 (53%)	45 (75%)
Curious about trying the menstrual cup	13 (36%)	11 (18%)
2. How respondent felt about the menstrual cup		
Very excited to try it	29 (80%)	52 (87%)
Somewhat excited but a little afraid	6 (17%)	6 (10%)
Neutral; you wanted to wait and see	1 (3%)	1 (1.5%)
Mostly afraid, but you were willing to give it a try	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)
3. Participants who Liked:		
the way the menstrual cup looks	32 (89%)	49 (82%)
that you can reuse it many times	36 (100%)	60 (100%)
that hands must be washed before removing/inserting the cup	36 (100%)	59 (98%)
That it goes inside the vagina	28 (78%)	30 (50%)

Summary of the qualitative results

- Participants, especially schoolgirls expressed feelings of anxiety at the idea of using the menstrual cup. Some were skeptical about using the menstrual cups for the first time. There was fear of trying it for the first time; participants mentioning that the menstrual cup was very big at the top/ mouth and seemed impossible to insert into the vagina.
- There was the belief that the menstrual cup would expand the vagina and deform their reproductive parts. Some schoolgirls held the view that menstrual cup would break their virginity.
- Some participants had fear that if the cup is inserted it would disappear into their bodies and consequently they would require surgery to remove it.

“There were some participants who expressed positive views that menstrual cups were solutions to problems they frequently faced during menstruation.”

- One common perception especially among the schoolgirls was the fear of pain and discomfort prior to use of the cup. However, this perception changed after using the cup; and some even expressed that the menstrual cup was comfortable.

- There were some participants who expressed positive views that the menstrual cup was a solution to problems they frequently faced during menstruation. They reported that sanitary pads for example, often caused skin irritations and, burning sensation when worn for long.

- Initially some participants said there would be an attitude of non-acceptance in the society by nature of how the menstrual cup is used, that is by inserting into the vagina a new practice which to some was uncommon and in some areas/

societies just talking or touching of private parts is almost taboo.

- Some women also expressed the view that use of the menstrual cup seemed a potential source of conflict among spouses who may not approve their wives or girlfriends using the menstrual cup.

2. Acceptability of menstrual cups

- At the first attempt of trying on the menstrual cup, most participants encountered discomfort. Some complained that they could feel the cup in their vaginas or some pain (an indication as explained by the project nurse that the cup was not properly inserted). This opened up the opportunity for further explanations and directions on how to use the cup. Acceptability of using the menstrual cup increased with increased awareness and knowledge of the cup by participants. Some of them mentioned that they understood their bodies better and gained experience using the cup after every subsequent use. With every new attempt

using the cup, they become better in inserting and removing it hence getting more confident and comfortable using it.

- Acceptability was also won over after participants carefully questioned about the menstrual cup. During the education sessions with the project nurse, they explored issues on the sizes of menstrual cups, the type of material used to make them, and the health effects that could arise from their use. Such sessions led to better understanding and buy-in by participants.
- Menstrual cups were more appreciated because unlike before, participants no longer feared staining their clothes.
- Menstrual cups were viewed as prestigious being the latest technology in the market and therefore using them symbolized some higher status and hence they were well received by girls and women.

Acceptability of using the menstrual cup increased with increased awareness and knowledge of the cup by participants.



Schoolgirls participating in the study, their teachers and APHRC's Menstrual Cup Project team members during a dissemination meeting.

3. Use of the menstrual cups

Table 3. Summary of the quantitative results

	Women (N=35)	Schoolgirls (N=55)
1. Did you use the menstrual cup as a method for managing menstrual flow?		
Yes	33 (94%)	49 (89%)
2. During the menstrual cup trial, did you use any other methods for managing menstrual flow?		
Yes	8 (23%)	31 (56%)
3. Did you use the menstrual cup in the first period?		
Yes	33 (94%)	32 (58%)
4. Did you use the menstrual cup in the second period?		
Yes	32 (91%)	41 (75%)
5. Did you use the menstrual cup in the third period?		
Yes	30 (86%)	40 (73%)
6. Why did you stop using the menstrual cup?		
Didn't like the fact that it needed to be inserted	2 (6%)	3 (5%)
Found it difficult to insert	2 (6%)	14 (25%)
Found it uncomfortable	2 (6%)	3 (5%)
Leakage	2 (6%)	1 (2%)

Summary of the qualitative results

- Some participants reported that their first experience with the cup felt like something was holding them inside; but with the second and third attempt, the cup was more comfortable.
- There was no leakage whilst using the menstrual cup. Leakage was a common phenomenon when using other methods like piece of cloth, cotton wool, tissue paper or low-quality sanitary pads.
- Health issues normally experienced with other methods, namely sanitary pads or pieces of cloth include skin irritations leading to scratching and bruising the skin on the thighs. Participants said using the menstrual cup did not have such effects.
- Participants also mentioned that menstrual cups were very appropriate and helped conserve the environment since their disposal was safer compared to the other methods used previously such as sanitary pads which could be thrown carelessly causing land and water pollution.
- With the use of the menstrual cups, there was awareness and sensitization on the risk of infections if proper hygiene was not followed. Thus, participants felt they were more aware and eager to ensure they maintained high standards of hygiene to prevent infections relating to their reproductive health.
- All the participants agreed that owning the menstrual cup was a worthwhile investment since having one meant it was always available should the need arise unlike before when every time of the month during menstruation, the worry on how to obtain sanitary pads or pieces of cloth was a major concern.
- Introduction of menstrual cups and subsequent use was a great opportunity for many women and girls to learn about their bodies. Participants reported that the menstrual cup has helped them learn about themselves and explore their womanhood, and in the process many of them have overcome the fears of touching areas in their bodies considered sensitive or private and thus even taboo.
- Many participants also said that the menstrual cup was a new concept and provided the women with the opportunity to talk and discuss issues about reproductive health. It was also perceived as an avenue where women could explore further issues and seek health services on sensitive areas like screening for cancer, sexually transmitted diseases or communicable diseases related to reproductive health.
- Using menstrual cups improved the chance of making menstruation a private affair for girls and women because there was little that could give away that a girl is menstruating hence girls could participate in their daily or normal activities without fear of being self-conscious or embarrassed that they are likely to stain their clothes; or be subject of gossips.
- Menstrual cups were considered beneficial in boosting the confidence of women and girls since there was less fear about social problems which previously arise when using other methods which were prone to leaking and staining clothes, thereby causing embarrassments.



With the use of the menstrual cups, there was awareness and sensitization on the risk of infections if proper hygiene was not followed.





Some women expressed the view that use of the menstrual cup seemed a potential source of conflict among spouses who may not approve their wives or girlfriends using the menstrual cup.

4. Intention to use the menstrual cups after the pilot study

Table 4. Summary of the quantitative results

	Women (N=35)	Schoolgirls (N=55)
1. Will you use the menstrual cup in the future?		
Yes	33 (94%)	53 (96%)
2. If you didn't have a menstrual cup, would you buy one or ask for money to buy one??		
Yes	35 (100%)	55 (100%)
3. If Yes: How much would you be prepared to pay for a menstrual cup?		
Kshs. 50-299	15 (43%)	16 (29%)
Kshs. 300-500	13 (37%)	20 (36%)
Over Kshs. 500	7 (20%)	19 (35%)
4. In your opinion, is the menstrual cup an acceptable method for managing menstrual flow?		
Yes	34 (97%)	55 (100%)
5. If Yes: What are the reasons?		
It's economical because it saves costs	20 (57%)	34 (62%)
It's easy to use and maintain	3 (9%)	6 (11%)
It's hygienic and environmentally friendly	6 (17%)	3 (5%)
It lasts longer/reusable	9 (26%)	18 (33%)
It is expensive	1 (3%)	0 (0%)



Menstrual cups were considered beneficial in boosting the confidence of women and girls since there was less fear about social problems.



Helping women and adolescents to manage menstruation: Are menstrual cups a part of the solution?

The menstrual cup may be an appropriate and feasible technology for poor women and adolescents girls in Kenya. It needs to be removed and emptied less frequently than sanitary pads or tampons which need replacing. It reduces the problems young women face in lacking privacy and facilities to change and dispose of sanitary products in schools and other contexts. This technology may offer a sustainable, practical and cost-effective alternative means of sanitary protection for women in environments where tampons and sanitary towels are too expensive and where the use of cloths, newspapers and other local methods of protection present women with many problems.

It is recommended that when using the menstrual cup one needs to maintain a high standard of hygiene especially during insertion, removal and general cleaning. Although water shortages could present challenges for its use, the amount of water required when using menstrual cups is minimal compared to the other methods.

Most schoolgirls experience problems with insertion and removal of the cup. They need to be properly supervised.

The menstrual cup presents a good opportunity to educate and impart knowledge on reproductive health issues which in the process become a platform for initiating dialogue and discourse on reproductive health issues otherwise never discussed.



A Community Leader gives his views during a dissemination meeting in Korogocho.



Both the intravaginal product trial specialists and the nurse adviser at Mooncup® emphasized that good hand hygiene when inserting and removing the menstrual cup is the most important requirement for safe use.

Conclusion

These findings on the use of menstrual cups among adolescent girls and women bring closer the efforts to promote the realization of reproductive health and rights in Kenya. As information and acceptability of the menstrual cup become more widespread nationally, distribution methods that could be considered include social marketing and distribution through youth-friendly services to offer proper guidance on its use and uptake. Other interventions include the provision

of information on menstrual flow management, production and distribution of cheaper menstrual flow commodities and guidance and counseling programs for young girls.

In the context of the study, useful information has come to light some of which requires further research to increase evidence about menstrual cup use, its appropriateness and acceptability among women and girls in various parts of Kenya.



WOMEN LISTENING KEENLY TO A PRESENTATION AT A COMMUNITY DISSEMINATION MEETING: Introduction of menstrual cups and subsequent use was a great opportunity for many women and girls to learn about their bodies.

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