

Dignity kits – 47
Publish date 21st September

Dignity kits impact in South Sudan / Anne Kuria

Reusable pads, along with other hygiene tools in a bucket, can make a big difference in a girl's life. It can be a part of keeping her in school and adding to her education. At Loreto Rumbek School in South Sudan, Anne Kuria shines some light on the bigger context of why these simple hygiene tools are needed and impact they have.

Audio from distribution with Anne

Somebody is saying its big yeah? But it's actually the size of the pad. Yeah? If your using one its like its that small pad that people use. If you're using two it means that your using two because your flow is heavy so its just the same as using the maxi pad that you use, yeah? I assume that most of us maybe, may not be able to afford constantly buying the pads, yeah? But if you can be able to clean, use like this and put, use it when its clean. Then you save yeah? After that are there any questions?

Christy Kauffman

The audio you just heard is from the moment when we had just stepped into the tent where MCC's dignity kits are being distributed to a class of secondary school girls. Ann Kuria is showing the girls at Loreto Rumbek how to use the reusable pad system.

I'm Christy Kauffman and you are listening to Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Theme

Today on the show we are talking periods, menstruation, pads and the challenges that come along with those things in places like South Sudan. MCC volunteers and sewers have been producing a newer kit the last few years that is called the dignity Kit. Inside the bucket of each kit is a reusable pad system, underwear, soap, a towel, nail clipper, comb, and a chart to mark the menstrual cycle.

I spoke with secondary student Jenifer about her context, experience and challenges in South Sudan as a woman.

Jenipher Bill

At our home. Yeah, because my father died in 2017. I remained with my mother and my sister, my sister was not yet married. Now the time I came to school here. My mother can support me. But my mother is not educated. She's illiterate, she's just a farmer.

And the other one, which is going on currently, I don't go for holidays. Because I'm under forced marriage. Yeah. Then now they would like to marry me off.

Then I reported it to the administration. The school administration said that I should be staying here in the school. I didn't go for holidays because if I go for holidays I will not come back again. I have no problem because I know I am in safe environment. Like in Loreto here. Even though your parents decided to take you off and you decided to remain here, there's no way they can get you.

Christy Kauffman

Jennifer is at risk of being under forced marriage, which means she cannot return home while she is in school here because she is at risk of being forced to marry the man who has offered her uncle the most cows. Once she is married she would not be allowed to continue going to school. Not all girls in South Sudan are in this situation, but Loreto Rumbek school knows that this is how some families still think about marriage, valuing the things they may gain from a marriage of their daughter rather than the things she might gain from an education. I asked her a bit more about these traditions and what it means for a girl to receive her menstruation in that context.

Jenipher Bill

For the parent they will do not consider the girl because they know what they can do. They can get the cows and take off the girl whether you like it or not, it is a must.

In our community, even though you are young or what, so long that you have received your menstruation they can consider you as mature enough.

If you just receive your menstruation and there is a man who comes to come and marry you, not refuse and just give you off. Like men today in our community. They can feel happy when the girl receive menstruation because they know they will get their wealth. And as the girl you can have distress because you know very well if you receive menstruation now, it is you are ready to go home to go to be responsible. Even though you are young you will not know anything but for them they just concentrate for the things they will gain. Because you have no choice. You have no chance.

Christy

Jennifer along with her classmates at Loreto have been receiving dignity kits from MCC for three years now. I asked her about how this might make a difference in her daily life and in the community.

Jenipher Bill

Yeah people now are used to it because they can say like if your daughter has received menstruation in the community what they can do. Women can tell the young one, "you will start to go to secondary school and be getting this one for free."

I was really comfortable with it because I didn't waste my time again to go and buy like always in the market. And it really gave me a simple time I can use, I wash, I keep, and I wait for my menstruation.

And this thing also give parents chances, some parent then don't afford money to buy Always all the time all the time. Which can give the student in the school hard time also some can come without and it will be hard time for them. And now people can get them and they are happy for, for it because they know very well. If you don't have an Always you will not be comfortable in case it comes, you will not attend classes. You will not do anything.

But now you can receive them you can keep them nicely. You can be happy for it.

And also many parents are happy for it. Because if you go home now, they will be like a they can buy for you something apart from pads because they know you can use this one.

Musical Transition

Christy Kauffman

While I was at Loreto I sat down with Anne Kuria who you heard at the start of the episode leading the distribution of the dignity kits and training on how to use them. She is the school counselor and part of her role is to educate the students on menstrual health and give them these kits each year. Now to that conversation

Anne Kuria

So my professional is actually a counseling psychologist. I see students from both the primary and the secondary school. And I also see people within the project site.

Christy Kauffman

How long have you done this work?

Anne Kuria

This is two years now since I joined Loreto.

Christy Kauffman

Are you from this community?

Anne Kuria

No, I'm not from this community. I'm from Kenya. Yeah. So, and so far, I don't think there's a psychologist within the Lake state. So basically, I think that's why they contracted me to come. Yeah. And there's need for it. Yeah. Because a community working with actually needs psychological services, mental health care. I think it's because of the years of conflict. Yeah. So and also just general, other issues that are going through like, like, No, we're talking about menstrual health. Yeah. So it's also an issue. It's the smaller things that go with it, like, probably the issues of mental health, there are issues that sometimes would come from just having your menses as a lady. Yeah, that are more psychological. They can actually they will come from just being a lady and having that every month. So I think for me being here, first of all, is a plus for them, that we are able to teach them these things we're able actually to explore with them. So it's a it's actually a need here.

Christy Kauffman

How have you seen that? After having someone like you to fill that need? Have you seen improvement in the girls?

Anne Kuria

Yeah, I think the first time we came, I thought, you know, maybe they would not see people. Yeah. So but when we started, and we started talking about we started from a psycho, psychosocial and psycho education point. Yeah. So when we started, we actually started engaging them on, let's say, for example, the issues of health. And then we can approach the issues of menstrual health. And that's where now we started seeing student coming in and saying, you know, I'm going through this, could it be from what you taught us? Yeah. And then you realize it's actually because of that, so you help them. Yeah. But it had to start from somewhere, it had to start from you know, psychoeducation, that this is what you're going through as a woman. Yeah. Every month, you're having a cycle. And sometimes you might have painful ones. Sometimes you may need this hygienic stuff to use, and this is how you use them. So it had to start from a psychoeducation point for them to actually open up and say, "this is what I'm going through."

Christy Kauffman

Would the girls talk about it before? Or was it a taboo to talk about? Menstrual health

Ann Kuria

Within? Well, first of all, if you understand Loretto, you really let her we have students from all over different communities within South Sudan. Yeah. So some of these topics are taboo in some community, and some communities not a taboo, so they talk about them. Yeah. So we have two groups of people here, people who is a taboo, and people who can talk freely about them. So for some years, it was it took it took time. Yeah. But for others, it was the curiosity of wanting to know, how do you also do? How, how is menstrual health or hygiene in your country? Or in other places? What do they use? Yeah. Is it a problem as it is here? Yeah. So for some I would say it comes from a curiosity point. For others as a point of, yeah, I'm going through this, but I don't know how to speak about it. We can't speak about it from Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

Do the dignity kits bring out those conversations?

Anne Kuria

A lot, yeah, it's actually a way of us starting a conversation. Yeah. Sometimes when actually you're issuing them, it's it can be as part of a compensation for them. So you know, they shy off at first, but then they start asking questions. And for us, we take advantage of that to actually now bring in those issues and actually try to offer a model for them. Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah, I saw the curiosity at the distribution.

Anne Kuria

It's a lot you know, the first if now, you actually meet the second group, you realize the second group is more familiar now they can actually speak freely. So for us, when we start we start from a point of you know, we are bringing this in so that they start a conversation so we will still meet with them. And now go deeper and explain like for example, the cycle, you saw that sheet for the cycle, so that is a conversation for another day. We can't actually have it's the same day. Yeah. So and we need actually to talk about the cycle in a sense that they also need to protect themselves, you know. You know, about your cycle, but what what, what is it about the cycle? Yeah, am I safe? Am I not safe? Yeah. Because then it brings in the issue of sex. Yeah, I would say it brings in the issue of sex, they're somewhat curious. They know that when you you're having you cycles at this point, maybe you're not supposed to, to have sex, or maybe you're supposed to have sex. So it's something that we handled with a lot of care. So we, we prefer having a topic on its own on its own day so that as much as you are giving them a choice, you're also giving them options available for them. Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah a lot of the girls actually mentioned how they liked that chart. Its not something I would have thought about too much, but I think its interesting how much they value that.

Anne Kuria

Yeah, that's interesting. And that's why I'm telling you, it's interesting for them, because this, that chart alone would also be a point of a conversation or sort of a conversation. Yeah. And now it

would be a sort of a conversation, it will go another way. So we need to actually handle each, like when you issuing, this is what we tell them. And then when we are having the cards, we also have something for them during when you're giving them the card so we can explore the card on its own. Yeah. So that we offer them on what they will because to be honest, there is a lot of information that the girls don't have. It's not like other parts of the world where the information is available. It's accessible. Yeah. So especially matters to do with sex. It's like a taboo here. Yeah. So when you're opening that conversation, how are you going to close the conversation? How are you not going to harm them? In a way yeah? There's a lot of misinformation out there. Yeah. There's some who tell you, we can't use this, maybe it will harm you. The others will tell you if you use this will not get children, you know, because of what they've been told maybe from their the information they have from maybe their community or Yeah. So. And also, you know, we cannot actually go away from what they were taught within their community about now their about the menstrual cycle. So we also have to actually learn what is there within the community, so that when we are handling it, we also we are contextualizing it according to fit them. Yeah. So that we're not throwing away everything, but you're picking that which is useful, so that they are also able to accept what you're bringing in. Yeah. Yeah. So there's a lot of misinformation. But I'm happy that we actually work also with the clinic staff in terms of information, sometimes we do we run some, some program for the adolescent, where we talk about these things, really. Yeah. And our own psycho education classes. Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

How do you see the dignity kits contribute to the overall health of the students?

Anne Kuria

I'll say there's a lot, there's a lot of impact. One, within the primary school, we used to have like, their children who not attend school. So when you ask them to, you're told, maybe somebody's sick, but when you explore more, you realize this person wasn't sick, actually, they were having their periods. And because it's a taboo, they don't want to talk about it. They did not come to school for maybe a week here. So they miss out. So you find like, they would, if you miss lessons for a whole week, you you you drag behind the others. Yeah. So with the dignity kit, and with constant talking about these things, nowadays, they're able to be in school throughout. So at least, and when they miss, you can actually they can actually tell you miss because of this. Yeah. And apart from that the ones who have the information when they're younger sisters begin. They're able actually to help them. Yeah, so it's not actually the older ones. Even the younger ones get help from the older ones. Yeah. And then the ones in the secondary school, I find like we receive students from very far places. Some don't actually go home for four years. Yeah. So you can imagine four years when you're here, and you know, your parent is not there. And you can't go and just approach anyone and say, I need hygiene items. Yeah. But you know, the school is always issuing them. Yeah. So this this person is it's someone who someone who gets them. And I think from the fact that you've been issued with it, and you're getting them you're able to be comfortable. One problem is sorted. Yeah. The ones there are others. There are others who are not able to afford not because they don't. They actually can't afford because of economical issues. Yeah. You see, you're here, you're being sponsored. Yeah. Even school fees is a problem in itself. Yeah. So if you're issued with this, at least, I mean, you're able to stay in school, because you're not embarrassed about your cycle. No one will know you at least have you have your hygiene tools. Yeah. And you can always wash them and pack them for the next use. Yeah. So and with that, they're also comfortable. They can continue with your education. When you're comfortable. Actually, you can learn Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

What did you think of the kits when you first saw them?

Anne Kuria

Yeah, I mean, for me at first, when I saw them, I was really happy. I was happy for them. Because I can understand as a lady here, when you don't have this, and I know these places. Such items are very expensive. I will tell you for sure its cost, it's actually like having one meal for the family. Yeah. So you can imagine if I'm the only one in the family and I'm, yeah. And if it costs a meal, the parents will pick a meal rather than buying for me. Yeah. And then the stories that I used to hear from them. That you, you heard the stories, yeah, you either wear two panties, or wear too many clothes. Yeah. And I remember my first encounter was with the group that left the ones who were in senior four. So they were telling me stories and telling me that back then some of them actually, were in the cattle cups yeah?. So you're telling me they would use leaves? They would use things like dried cow dung, or sand or clothes pieces of cloth. So I thought to myself that is not very hygienic. Yeah. And it could lead to other diseases. So for me seeing and actually participating in giving them it was a kind of relief. And there's some mix of excitement knowing that I know, for now, these are the things the issues that we have already dealt with. Yeah. Yeah. And I think, I would really thank the donors over for that. Yeah. Yeah. Because there's a big impact here. For a pad. It could cost around that is, I think it's 1,500 or 2,000. That is SSP. So I don't know if you change it to dollars, how much. But I also know that according to, according to their life, most of them live beyond below \$1 a day. So maybe five hundred SP could buy a meal for me in a day. Yeah. So if the pads could cost like 1,500 or 2,000. Those are like four meals. Yeah. Yeah. So I and most of them actually, to be honest, can only afford a meal a day. Yeah. So if even if it was me in this community, and I have to feed my family, I'm torn between buying pads and feeding my own family, I would pick feeding Yeah, yeah. So I'm not going to condemn that. But I would say it's, it's, it's something that is a need. Yeah. So yeah, it actually has an impact.

Christy Kauffman

What are some of the changes in like how a community looks at a woman after she receives her period? Are there changes in how she is treated or...

Anne Kuria

Oh yes, a lot. Within actually the community here. Yeah. Because I've told you, like, we have different communities live within the school. What I understand within the community here, the outside of the Dinka community, majorly is when you receive your menses, it's a celebration. But it's not just a celebration like that. It's a celebration, they're calling out the suitors they're also telling the suitors you're now ready for marriage. Yeah. And it can be anybody a 17 year old or 16. Yeah. So. And that's why I say within the when we're issuing that part of the cards, we actually are very sensitive when it comes to that, because what we're teaching them is you're teaching them responsibility that comes with that. Yeah. So a woman is viewed very differently. Once you receive your menses, you first of all, you're ready for marriage. You're ready to bear children. Yeah, that's, that's what menses say here. Yeah. And then they actually do a celebration for you. Yeah, they slaughter a bull and all that. And then from there, you younger ones will be the one working you, you will not be doing the chores that you used to do before. Yeah. So you are being prepared for doing the chores in your own home. Yeah, so actually, you treated differently. And then I've seen what I've seen is that, you know, it's usually the parents who raise the children. Yeah. So the father can be very distant from you as you're growing up. But then when you start receiving your menses your uncle and your dad become very close, because they know you already know to be married off, and they will receive cows. So they

become very close to you here. So actually, you receive a different kind of treatment, a special kind of treatment.

Christy Kauffman

Does that add to the challenges that women face?

Anne Kuria

Actually it does, because you see, culturally, that is information you're given. Yeah. But for us, we still seeing you as a young child, we still you still have years ahead of you, you still have education. So it also boils down to now child protection issues. Which now becomes a challenge because of the customary laws, yeah. It also needs you need to actually pass the correct information that yeah, you're you have received your menses, but you still have to finish your school. You still have to make a choice because you're a woman and you make your own choice. Yeah. You also still have dreams ahead of view it's it's not only marriage yeah.

Christy Kauffman

Have you seen situations with women here where they are not given that choice?

Anne Kuria

A lot, yeah. A lot. And that's why we are here, the center is here because I believe it's actually protecting the girl child education. Yeah. Not only education, actually against forced marriages and early marriages. Yeah. So we have seen such cases where girls start their menses and then when they go home, you know, you have to actually the way the culture is you have to actually tell someone when you're starting you menses, since you cannot, the first day, the culture says you cannot take any, anything you cannot eat before saying, yeah. And there's a with, I think, a curse attached to it, if you don't say. So actually, you have to tell an older woman that you have started your menses. So that already tells you there's a lot of things going on. Yeah. And this woman cannot just keep it. And that's why these are celebrations. So you get you get to get married. Yeah. We have seen some girls here when they go home, and probably they've started we will see their parents trying to actually marry them off. Yeah. And so the girls, we have this policy where we allow them to run back to school. Yeah, we also have a policy where we tie we make an understanding with the with the ones when they come in the first day they come in, there's an understanding we make, it's like you signed a memorandum of understanding that you're not going to take your daughter out of school until they're done with S4. But unfortunately, sometimes it's not the parent to embrace them. It's the uncle so or maybe a relative, yeah. But then you find like, marriage is more community communion. It's the uncle that's marrying you off. Your mother has no say. Yeah. So even if the mother stands up and say, you know, my daughter cannot be married, the uncles will be the one we you we contributed cows to marry, we need our cow. So we will say, we will marry off your daughter to get our cows back. Yeah. So that's why we make that understanding. And we also allow the girls to run back here, once they're in this compound. They're protected. Yeah. So sure you have heard of girls who are not going away during holidays, they don't go home, because maybe there's that danger risk of them being married off. So we keep them here at school. Yeah. And such things as dignity kits help us because you're able to maintain her here until she finishes Yeah. So of course there is there is that we have had such cases here.

Christy Kauffman

Why does everyone want cows so bad?

Anne Kuria

I think cash cows represent well within their community. And they also have ritualistic representation. Yeah, yeah. I think cows is everything within this community. For example, marriage, they will use cows, I think burial the will, any of the cultural rights they use cows. So it's very symbolic, and it's very, very close to the Dinka community. In this community, once you start your menses, you're supposed to be married off. Yeah. So if you've started your menses, and you've not been married off, trust me, you'll be shunned. When you go out there, they will be saying, you know, your, your group started the people you started with menses in some moons back, we actually say moves back, you are married and have children and you don't have children. So women can call can call you can insult you on the way. Yeah. And it's interesting because these girls have to face this every every now and then when they go home for holidays. Yeah. But the important thing is we've kept teaching them we even teach them on how to actually like carry themselves out because they will get these insults. Yeah. And the changes that has happened within the community, the fact that after a while when they come back and they are able to help members of their community, when the community see that they also want to take their girls to school. Yeah. And they also long to, to actually be part of part of this changes. So in some way it helps but in some way it also have some psychological issues. Yeah. On the dignity kits. Some have actually, some students tell me when they reach home and the able to train or you know, just pass the information to the younger ones here because truth some are here, but their friends at home, we can't have all of them here. So when they go home, they actually now talk to their, to their friends. I know of a class that has a girl who has she actually has held talks with the primary school back at home. Yeah. Yeah. So this information is actually spread. Yeah, spread. You can imagine those like 300 girls within the secondary school. So if they go home, each goes to their family. And here we have, most people are polygamous. So they are big families. Yeah. So you can imagine if you have 13 girls in your family, you go share with your 13 sisters, those 13 sisters who shared with their friends. So it's like we're also passing on information to a bigger crowd. Yeah. Or more people, yeah. The only thing maybe you're not sharing is this dignity kits, you know, giving to all of them, but you're sharing the information, which is, for me, it's an impact in itself. And the impact also changes, how they actually now view menstrual health, more so ever grateful that this information is reaching to that person in the village, who are not able to reach or the school is not able to reach, but their daughter is here and is able to take the information back.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah. It's far beyond these walls

Anne Kuria

It's far beyond these walls. Yeah. It's really far beyond these walls. Yeah.

Christy Kauffman

Yeah. Is there anything that you would want to share with us that I haven't asked?

Anne Kuria

I think you've asked all, for me. Just maybe gratitude to the MCC? Yeah. And just know that you're making a difference? Because from the curiosity of the children from their, this is happening to me, could it be related to menstrual health or hygiene? Yeah. For me, it's, it tells me that there's a lot that is happening. Yeah. And it's also opening up the wider community on this conversation about hygiene, menstrual hygiene. So I'm grateful for the kits. I'm grateful on behalf of the children on behalf of that management and on my own behalf. If I'm dealing with those psychological issues, and I really don't have pads and I don't have even the hygiene tools. It's even more stressing. Yeah. So for me, to be honest, on my part, that is one part that is

sorted out. The fact that I have this dignity tool that I can give someone for the first days before I handle the other issues that are coming up. Then it's a plus. It's a plus for me. Yeah. So I'm grateful for that. Yeah. That's how you say it for me. The dignity tool is a tool that is what comes in hand.

Christy Kauffman

Thanks for listening. If you contribute to the dignity kits in any way, this is a story of a community and women who are impacted by your gift of time, skills and donations. MCC is always looking for more sewers to be a part of the community of volunteers working on the base units and bags in these kits. If you or someone you know has the sewing skills, let them know about this opportunity to be a part of this bigger story. You can get more information about that on our website page on dignity kits, linked in the show notes.

This episode of Relief Development and Podcast was produced on the traditional land of the Algonquin, Lenape, Nanticoke, Piscataway, Shawnee and Susquehannock people groups.

It was recorded and produced by me, Christy Kauffman, and the head producer is Emily Loewen.

I want to credit our new theme music you might have noticed in the last few episodes, composed by Luke Litwiler and mixed and mastered by Stephen Angello.

May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.