

Summary report on the *Harness Your Cycle* project to National Organisation for Women in Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation (NOWSPAR)

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Introduction

This project was conducted in the Goal programme at NOWSPAR partner schools in Lusaka, Zambia. The four lessons of the *Harness Your Cycle* project were conducted from July through September, 2018. The Goal curriculum is designed and funded through the Women Win foundation. This project replaced and expanded the previous lesson on menstruation, which was based on a role play activity. In this project, the participants were given a diary with lesson content and asked to complete questionnaires in the diary. Project facilitators also had a guidebook/journal for each lesson. The lessons and materials were designed in collaboration with NOWSPAR staff and Dr Sarah Zipp. The educational content was drawn from Dr. Liita Iyaloo Cairney's programme on www.firstperiod.org.

Goal of the project:

This project aims to (a) better understand how adolescent girls in SfD experience menstruation, (b) examine a holistic menstrual health education programme rooted in sport and physical activity and (c) develop resources to better support adolescent girls stay active and engaged in sport, school and their communities.

Executive Summary

Key findings

We collected thousands of data points, from a total of 79 participants and three (3) facilitators. Analysing the varied and complex data, four themes emerged. The first three themes address the first goal, to understand how girls experience menstruation. Those themes are (1) understanding/learning about the menstrual cycle; (2) pain, discomfort and coping with menstrual cramps; and (3) stigma, fear and embarrassment surrounding menstruation. The last theme is (4) the evaluation of the programme itself; its impacts, likes/dislikes and recommendations.

It is difficult to synthesize all of the data into any singular, overarching conclusion. However, it seems clear that there are many benefits to this programme. I propose this conclusion:

Menstrual health education should be provided in and out of schools before the age of 12, with a holistic focus on understanding the full menstrual cycle (four phases), approaches to coping with pain and discomfort (e.g. stretching and breathing exercises, medication) and challenging the stigma of menstruation that begets feelings of embarrassment and shame. Such education should include school staff, families and other community groups (e.g. churches) so that girls have a strong support system. Finally, while it is important to teach about and discuss methods for keeping clean and using menstrual hygiene products, this should not be the central focus to menstrual health education.

(1) Understanding and learning about the menstrual cycle

They want to learn more

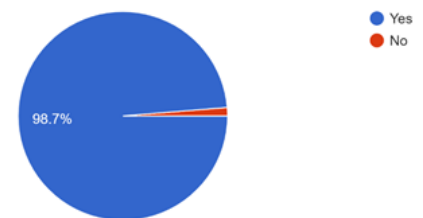
Throughout all of the lessons, the participants indicated a strong desire to learn about the full menstrual cycle, changes in their bodies and what is “normal” menstrual health. In the first lesson, they were given an open-ended question: what is your biggest question about menstruation? Of the 70 questions asked, 46 of them were focused on understanding the menstrual cycle. They asked about when it should begin, how long it should last, where the blood comes from, why menstruation happens (to girls and not to boys), etc. (Table 4). They consistently asked about or told stories about understanding the menstrual cycle and selected the Understanding Your Body lesson (1) as the most helpful (Figure 20).

They have a keen interest to learn more and expressed appreciation for the lessons provided.

For example, in Lesson 2 there is a diary section to: ask a question, tell a story, share a worry . . . it’s up to you (see Table 10). They filled the lines with more questions about how periods work, what is normal, etc. above all other categories. Table 5 displays the types of questions they had, which tended to focus on understanding menstruation

understanding how menstruation happens, coping with pain and more. Later, in Lesson 4 they wrote about how important it is for girls to be able to learn (and openly discuss) menstruation. They also felt that these lessons should be taught in schools (Figure 21). They also indicated very strongly that learning about menstruation helped them feel less worried, less confused, more likely to be active during their period (Tables 16, 17 & 18). In sum, these lessons helped 76 of 77 participants “feel more empowered in my life.”

I feel more empowered in my life.
77 responses



Better to learn earlier (before age 12)

We learned that many girls were not prepared for their first menstruation, as 46 out of 72 participants did not know what their menstrual period was when they first got it. Most of the girls did not learn about what menstruation was until after the age of 12, yet they believe girls should learn before the age of 12 (Table 3). This point is key because 12 was the median age the participants got their periods, with 44 out of 69 responding that they had their first period before age 13 (Figure 5).

I was at school the first day I got my menstruation and I felt really worried because I never had anyone to tell and what to wear (Age 15)

What these data reveal is that many girls are getting their periods at a time they have not learned about menstruation or were unsure about what to do. This problem compounds fear, confusion and embarrassment, as described in many of their stories about getting their first period (Figure 6 and Lesson 2).

(2) Pain, discomfort and coping with menstrual cramps

Concerns about pain

The participants frequently asked about and indicated that they were concerned with the pain, discomfort and cramps that often accompany menstruation. Next to questions about

Sometimes when (I) am on my period I develop menstrual pain and can't even walk

understanding the menstrual cycle, questions about pain and menstrual symptoms were the next most common response to: what is your biggest question about menstruation? (n=13 of 70, Table 4). It was also a common topic amongst their questions selected from a menu (Table 5). The topic of pain and pain relief was also widely discussed in their stories about menstruation (n=11 of 49, Table 10). The girls wanted to know more about how to cope with pain, in particular if it is good to take medication. They also were curious as to why they felt such pain.

This topic is important because the pain negatively impacts their quality of life. Furthermore, it may contribute to bad feelings about menstruation and support harmful myths and restrictions. It might also keep them from engaging in many school, sport and social activities. Table 11 illustrates some of the activities they skip or quit due to their periods. However, we cannot draw a clear causal relationship between pain and skipping activities, as concerns over leaking or cultural restrictions may also be at play.

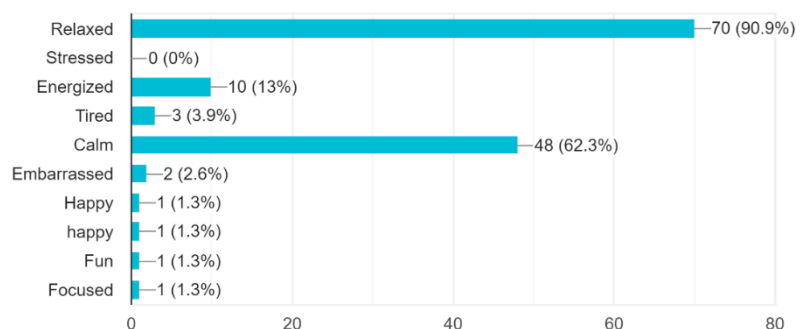
Breathing and stretching for pain reduction

The Harness Your Cycle programme is innovative as it is built on learning about physical and emotional experiences of the menstrual cycle to help participants better understand and *listen to their bodies*. While quality menstrual health education can take many forms, this approach seems particularly well-aligned with programmes like Goal, which use sport and physical activity as learning methods. The response to the breathing and stretching activities taught in Lesson 4 were very positive. The exercises helped them feel “relaxed,” “calm,” and “excited” (Figure 15) and all respondents (n=70) said they would try the exercises at home (Figure 16). It was also the second popular choice of lessons that “should be taught in school” (Figure 21).

Although we cannot draw a direct line between these activities and pain reduction, the positive response to this activity indicates that we should explore how breathing, stretching and simple physical exercises might help menstruators cope

How did the breathing activity and stretches make you feel?

77 responses



with pain. There is [evidence](#) in sport science that exercise can help reduce cramping, stress, fatigue and improve mood. Furthermore, encouraging physical activity through menstrual periods may help dissuade people from quitting sport or skipping physical education, which was common in this study (Table 11) and amongst adolescents in [the UK](#). There are many reasons why girls shy away from sport and physical activity during their periods, such as embarrassment and fear of leaking. While pain may be only one factor, setting the model to exercise might have a positive impact. More research is needed to better understand how these exercises might be helpful, but the preliminary findings point to positive impacts in general.

(3) Stigma, fear and embarrassment

Menstruation stigma

It is becoming increasingly understood and discussed that the secrecy, stigma and fear of embarrassment about menstruation are a problem for people around the world and can lead to negative consequences. Chris Bobel's new book, [The Managed Body](#), explores the challenges of menstrual stigma in the Global South (Bobel, 2018). Her concerns are reflected in the data from this study, with many girls pointing to concerns over leaking or finding ways to conceal their periods. One passage from a participant displays this quite clearly:

“Because I was scared that maybe they would shout at me for telling or not telling them, I was so scared to death. How I felt that day was that I was in so much pain that I can't explain myself on this piece of paper, right now what I can say is that managed to face my fears of not telling them. I just forgot about them shouting at me, went ahead and told my mom and sister that I have stated my periods...”

She went on to describe how she received support from her family, namely her mother, sister and aunt. Her fear is reflected in others' concerns. Many of the stories they wrote about in Lesson 2 were centred on feelings scared, embarrassed, nervous or having no one to talk to when they got their first period (see Lesson 2, below Figure 6). When asked how they felt the day they got their first period, negative emotions such as “scared,” “worried,” and “nervous” were the top three responses (Figure 6). Most girls, 63.7% (n=44, Table 11) felt embarrassed because of their periods. Challenging the secrecy and stigma surrounding menstruation is key to supporting girls and unlocking access to education about the menstrual cycle.

When asked about the taboo and secrecy of menstruation, most of them (64%, n=29) indicated that menstruation *should* not be taboo (see Lesson 4). Some of those responses remarked that it was a taboo, but should not be. Of those participants, twenty-two (n=22) thought menstruation should be talked about so that people can learn about their bodies, growing up and how to manage their cycle. As one girl put it, “. . . when we keep it a secret, no one will help you.” By contrast, five (n=5, 11%) participants felt that it is a taboo topic and should be kept secret.

Menstrual health education should include tackling stigma as a key goal. In this programme, the Kicking out the Myths activity was designed to do just that. From our data, the results are unclear. The questions about the activity asked them restrictions they felt about menstruation (e.g. activities they should “avoid”). It seems, however, the word avoid confused the questions and the results are unclear. However, they overwhelmingly evaluated the activity as “fun,” “helpful” and “supportive.” It may be difficult to get better data on this topic, because of the nature of secrecy and the tendency for these “myths” to be told by (well-intentioned) family members. In future, we should clarify questions on this topic and be sure to collect the myths they wrote about and discussed during the activity.

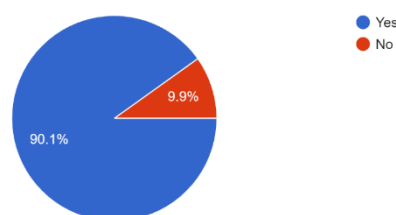
Fears about leaking, feeling embarrassed

Many of their first period stories included discussions about leaking (see Lesson 1, after Table 6). In many cases, someone noticed a stain on their clothing and offered help (e.g. got them a pad, told them to go home from school, etc.). Most girls had had a leak on their clothes (85.7%, n=60), worried about leaking (90.1%, n=64) and felt embarrassed to change menstrual products at school (75.7%, n=56) (Table 14). Many had been teased by boys (49.3%, n=34, Table 14) and others had noted that both boys and girls tease others about their periods (more boys than girls, Table 7). These are (likely) common experiences for girls everywhere, yet certain factors, such as not knowing what a period is, may make their fears and experiences worse.

“One of my friends her periods started and everyone started making fun of her, how can one deal with such situation?”

Throughout the lessons, girls described worries that other people, particularly boys, might discover they had their periods. Fear, embarrassment and shame about leaking or being discovered was a common theme when they were asked to tell a story or share a worry about menstruation in Lesson 1. Eight (8) of the 49 responses were about this topic (Table 10). One girl shared a story about her friend being teased and asked for help in coping with the situation (see inset and Table 10).

Do you worry about leaking at school or in public?
71 responses



Discussing menstruation with others

We inquired about who they are talking about and learning about menstruation with, which helps us better understand how they experience menstrual stigma and shame. Most girls rely on female family members; mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts. Many girls also discuss it with friends, making peer education an interesting concept to explore. Teachers, programme leaders (e.g. Goal facilitators) and teachers are also important sources (Tables 6 and 15). In sum, their responses indicate it important to engage their family and social

circles in menstrual health education to ensure that they feel supported and have consistent access to information. One interesting finding is that there seems to be a disconnect between what they want to know more about (e.g. full menstrual cycle, pain reduction and coping with feelings of embarrassment) and what they are hearing from adults (e.g. using menstrual products, restrictions on activities) (see section on Lesson 4 near Table 15).

Better engagement with family members, peers and educators can help combat stigma, fears of leaking and common restrictions of what they should or should not do during menstruation. Such engagement should include boys, to avoid teasing and feelings of embarrassment (Tables 6 and 14). Many of the girls specifically asked why boys do not also learn about education (Table 4). We should take this question to heart!

(4) Evaluating the Harness Your Cycle programme

Evaluating the lessons

The response to the programme seems overwhelmingly positive. Nearly all participants indicated that they “learned something new” in each lesson (between 97%-100% for each lesson). All participants said they would recommend these lessons to a friend and said the diary information was helpful (Figure 17, Table 16). The notes from facilitators concur that the girls were engaged, interested and asked many questions throughout the lessons. Nearly all agreed that they would refer to the diary again (76 of 77) and found that it helped them talk to others about menstruation (76 of 78) (Table 16). This last item is key, as it shows that the programme is helping to break the stigma and secrecy of menstruation. Table 17 further describes how they feel differently following the lessons, including feeling more empowered, less worried and more likely to be active during their periods. However, some found it “embarrassing” to write in the diary (67.9%, n=53) and we should work toward creating a comfortable environment for them to discuss this difficult topic.

Table 16

Question	Yes	%	No	%	N=
The information in this diary is helpful to me	78	100	0	0	78
Would you recommend these lessons to a friend?	77	100	0	0	77
Did it help you to talk to others about menstruation?	76	97.4	2	2.6	78
Will you look at this diary again for information?	76	98.7	1	1.3	77

We also asked about how the lessons helped understand, track and notice different aspects of the menstrual cycle (Table 18). These data indicate attitude changes, but more research is needed to understand and track any behavioural changes.

Table 18

Have these lessons helped you to ...	Yes	%	No	%	N=
keep track of your period days?	68	90.7	7	9.3	75

notice different physical feelings during your period?	70	93.3	5	6.7	75
notice different emotions during your cycle?	65	87.8	9	12.2	74
feel confident to play sports during your period?	68	93.2	5	6.8	72
attend school during your period?	71	97.3	2	2.7	73
feel confident in school during your period?	68	94.4	4	5.6	72

While the lessons were very well-received, there were some that were more appreciated than others. In particular, they seemed to prefer Lessons 1 and 3 (Figure 20). Lesson 1 focused on understanding changes to the body during puberty, taught anatomy of the reproductive system and introduced the menstrual cycle. Lesson 3 focused on managing menstruation, how to tell when your period is coming, how to stay clean and healthy, different menstrual product options and tracking your menstrual cycle.

It was heart-warming to read the messages of gratitude they included about the programme. These notes were sprinkled throughout, including these unprompted messages of gratitude from an open-ended question in Lesson 2:

“Who is the owner of this program who has great thinking, I just want to say thank you for bringing this book to us I have learnt a lot I didn't know.”

“The 4 phases of menstruation helps us a lot because we understand how to undertake different situation during menstrual cycle such as how to control mood swing and become creative.”

At the conclusion of the diary, we asked if there was anything they did not like or disagreed with. All 31 responses agreed that they liked the lessons and there was nothing they disagreed with or wanted to change. This information is important, as their feelings of comfort are vital to breaking down the stigma of menstruation and supporting education.

Recommendations for future programming and research

Although they felt very positive about the programme, there is always room for improvement. Small changes such as wording and grammar in the diary can help clarify the lessons and research. As discussed above, the word “avoid” may have confused some of the questions. It would be helpful to have a thorough review of the diary from NOWSPAR staff, to find where we might make further improvements.

The Kicking out the Myths activity, in particular, had mixed results. Although the participants generally liked it, it was rated less highly than the others. It might be better to move this activity to later in the programme (it was the very first activity of Lesson 1). We should also take care to capture the “myths” they wrote down and be sure to carefully discuss them, as many of these stories come from loving family members, such as grandmothers.

Other points of reflection and change:

- Spend more time working directly with facilitators to get their feedback. This will help ensure the content is relevant and understandable. It will also ensure that the facilitators are confident in the lesson material.
- We do not have sufficient data to compare this programme to the previously used Goal lesson on menstruation. The data from Women Win is not as detailed. It would be helpful to conduct a study of Goal programmes at NOWSPAR that are not using this programme to see if there are differences and what those differences are.
- Engage with families and teachers to better understand the immediate context of the participants.