

# Menstrual Health Management: Breaking Menstruation Stigma with Adolescents

In most communities in Cameroon, it is not strange to hear that a woman is not allowed to go to the farm or sleep on the same bed with someone when she is menstruating. Menstruation is viewed as something to keep secret and not to be discussed with people. These absurd taboos and myths lead to the stigmatization of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) when they are menstruating.

In this light, with support from IREX International, Vision in Action Cameroon (VIAC) is committed to educating the public and sensitizing people of the dangers of menstruation stigma in schools and society at large. Also, contributing to one of the pillars of the organization improving knowledge and understanding of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights among young people.

## Launching of the Comic Book

Cover of the comic book, Siewe The Period Angel

As a means to break the menstrual stigma, Vision in Action Cameroon launched its first comic book titled, “Siewe: the Period Angel” with

students with hearing impairments at the Buea School of the deaf. The book acts as a tool aimed to drill adolescent students on proper menstrual health management and practices with the goal of breaking the menstruation stigma. It addresses menstruation topics like menstrual accidents, menstrual materials, menstrual hygiene while menstruating and the stigma associated with menstruation.

Mbwaye Mary Ewokolo, a teacher, at Buea School for the Deaf explains *“the knowledge will help her students better manage their menstruation and avoid accidents. So, I feel very grateful because many of these students get into some kind of menstrual accident because they don’t have an understanding of how menstrual hygiene and the cycle works. I hope and wish that these girls will be able to practice more menstrual hygiene to prevent*

*infections during their menstrual cycle”.* ([link to the online post](#))



# Breaking Menstruation Taboos and Stigma

The launch made use of safe space discussions to sensitize students on MHM and practices. However, during the course of the focus group discussions,



VIAC Staff Giving a Talk on the Comic Book with Students at Buea School of the Deaf

there was evident discomfort and reluctance among several participants who decided to share their personal experiences with menstruation.

*“I can’t freely talk to my parents about any issue about my menstruation, I will not feel comfortable”,* said one participant.

*“Whenever we get stained the boys will laugh at us”* added another.

All these exchanges underlined the different themes of the focus group discussion and made it possible to:

- Educate participants on the health risks associated with the improper body and menstrual material care during menstruation.
- Implement ways to dispute rumours and taboos associated with menstruation
- Provide ways boys can comfortably talk about menstruation and make menstruating easier for girls.
- Point out the distress of millions of adolescent girls due to ignorance and lack of information about a natural phenomenon called menstruation

At the end of the safe space discussion, the enthusiasm was staggering. One

participant concluded the launch by saying: *“We just want to thank VIAC very much for what you have educated us on today and we have understood very well. We now know better how to handle menstrual health. All of us here want to say a special thank you for the opportunity”*.

We drew the curtains of the launch by distributing sanitary pads, menstrual beads and comic books to the students.



*VIAC Staff discussing the comic book with students*

## **Involving boys in menstrual health management in schools**

In addition to the launch of the comic book as a tool to teach menstrual health, VIAC's other approach was to train students irrespective of gender as peer to peer educators or school champions from schools who would educate other adolescents on their knowledge on menstrual health management. The training of peer to peer educators by MHM trainers addressed both adolescent boys and girls. The MHM trainers came from Vision in Action Cameroon.

At the theoretical phase of training of peer to peer educators, the discussions focused on using tools like peer to peer education,

recognize and debunking menstruation myths and promote MHH in schools. The intention was to break the stigma, encourage both boys and girls to speak freely on menstruation and create an environment where menstruating girls feel comfortable in.

The practical phase of the training provided an opportunity to introduce various MHH tools like the comic book to counter rumours and stigma attached to menstruation, calculation of the menstrual beads and safe space discussions with adolescent girls and boys in schools. These safe space discussions, conducted with previously trained peer-educator adolescent boys and girls, were very elucidative. The ease and absence of taboos among these adolescents discussing MHH helped some participants to break down barriers and open up about their menstrual health experiences.



## Commitment to Menstrual Health Management



Some VIAC MHM Trainers and Peer to Peer Educators at STAMOTEC Tiko

In the past months, these new trainers have promoted menstrual health and hygiene for adolescent girls in six schools supported by the IREX programme, funded by IREX International and implemented by Vision In Action Cameroon. In each of these schools, peer-to-peer educators has been trained, alongside school officials who have set up spaces for dialogue to enable adolescents to engage with each other on issues related to menstrual health management.