

Understanding Menstruation Through Boys' Perspectives and Experiences of Puberty and Menstrual Health: A Qualitative Study Across Primary and Secondary Schools in Kafue and Lusaka, Zambia

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Introduction:

Puberty and menstrual health interventions often focus primarily on girls, overlooking the experiences, perspectives, and important role boys can play in creating supportive environments during adolescence. To improve menstrual health outcomes, it is important to understand boys' awareness and knowledge as essential players in schools for girls' menstrual experiences. This study explored primary and secondary school boys' awareness of pubertal changes and their knowledge of menstrual hygiene management in 2 peri-urban schools, aiming to understand boys' perspectives.

Methods:

This qualitative study was conducted in three peri-urban primary schools in Kafue and Lusaka, Zambia. We conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with 7 primary boys per group (21) from 7th grade, aged 11-15 years. Additionally, three FGDs were conducted with 7 secondary boys from 8th and 9th grade, aged 14-16 years (21), totalling 42 boys. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from upper primary (7th grade) and lower secondary (8th and 9th grade). Discussions were conducted in both English and the local language to capture (i) boys' awareness of changes that both boys and girls face from adolescence until adulthood and their coping mechanisms; and (ii) boys' knowledge of menstrual hygiene management and their support toward adolescence and adulthood. Thematic analysis was performed to generate themes and codes.

Results:

The study's findings underscore two themes that emerged from the key questions: basic pubertal changes and coping with changes, and menstrual knowledge and access to accurate information. Schoolboys demonstrated basic awareness of puberty-related changes, including changes in voice, breast development, and emotional shifts. Notably, secondary schoolboys' discussions revealed a distinctly more complex understanding of puberty, gender, and menstrual health compared to their primary counterparts. Secondary boys openly discussed sex, pregnancy, and romantic relationships, demonstrating a more advanced comprehension of male-female dynamics both within the home and in the broader community. Their narratives extended beyond biological changes to include reflections on gender roles, increased social freedoms afforded to boys compared to girls, and how they relate to and support female family members, particularly sisters, in managing menstruation at home. , Primary boys' knowledge about menstruation and access to accurate menstrual hygiene information were limited because society perceives younger males do not need to know about menstruation. This is because boys are perceived to be unaffected by menstruation, and this is often based on hearsay or cultural taboos, and may lead to bullying, stigma and shame. Despite this, participants expressed willingness to support menstruating girls if accurate information and guidance are given.

Discussion:

The study highlights a significant knowledge gap among male peers. Although boys recognise menstruation as a natural process and wish to be supportive, they are typically excluded from menstrual health education because of prevailing cultural restrictions and gender norms. The contrast between primary and secondary boys suggests

that as boys mature, they develop greater awareness of the social and relational dimensions of menstruation, yet they remain inadequately equipped to translate this awareness into effective support due to persistent informational and cultural barriers. Boys are typically excluded from menstrual health education due to cultural restrictions and gender norms. This exclusion reinforces misinformation and stigma and limits boys' ability to contribute to a period-friendly environment actively.

Conclusion:

Evidently, boys lack accurate information and gender-inclusive opportunities to participate. Secondary boys showed readiness for nuanced conversations about puberty, relationships, and gender dynamics, suggesting developmentally tailored interventions may be effective. Addressing this gap by including boys in menstrual health discussions and educational programs could help reduce stigma and foster supportive school environments for all adolescents.