



# We're talking *periods*

---

How One Girl's LaunchPad program  
is eliminating menstruation myths in Sierra Leone.

---

**ONE GIRL**



# Introduction

In Australia, most of us learn about menstruation from a young age.

Sure, there may have been a bit of giggling during Sex Ed when the diagrams came out. Yeah, there might have been some red faces and a bit of teasing from the boys.

But in general, kids in Australia have a pretty good idea of what getting your period means. We know it's normal and healthy. We know 50% of us will experience it. We know pads and tampons are readily available to us at the local shop (even if we do still cover them with a magazine at checkout).

## *Not so* in Sierra Leone

In countries like Sierra Leone, menstruation is a taboo topic. This means dangerous misinformation has been allowed to spread, putting girls at risk of early marriage or being reprimanded by parents who believe menstruation is a sign of sexual activity.

Items like pads are expensive and hard to get, forcing girls and women to use scraps of fabric (which they call "pieces") when they have their period. Pieces act like a very basic reusable pad – they're scraps of material or rags.

If they're used incorrectly, they can be ineffective and messy – which means girls often miss out on school rather than face the ridicule of their classmates if an accident happens. And without access to clean water, the washing of pieces is often done in open sources that are full of bacteria, and then dried indoors out of the sun due to cultural taboos around menstrual blood. Hot and humid inside, the materials rarely dry out, and women have to wear damp cloth; a breeding ground for disease, painful rashes, sores and infection. *Yikes!*

## We're all *orary* it

As an international Non-Government Organisation (NGO) made up mostly of women (except for the odd fella), we at One Girl said this won't stand. So in 2012 we rolled out our LaunchPad program, which has three big aims:

1. make sure women and girls in Sierra Leone have access to affordable, hygienic sanitary products;
2. educate communities on menstrual hygiene management, and dispel the myths that cause girls and women to live in shame and silence; and
3. empower local women — LaunchPad Champions — to run the program themselves, giving them a source of income and the ability to lead the change within their communities.

## But is it as *good* as it sounds?

Yeah, we wondered that too. That's why we asked seven young Sierra Leonean researchers — through our partner Restless Development — to evaluate the program and represent the voices of their fellow citizens. The team were led by Alice Chadwick, a PhD candidate at the University of Bath, to design and conduct the research.

By holding focus groups with Champions, as well as in-depth interviews with Head Champions of five LaunchPad groups, the team were able to get an understanding of the impact the program has had on communities, as well as the sustainability of the program beyond One Girl's involvement. They also carried out ad-hoc interviews with male community members to gauge their views and understanding of what LaunchPad does and how it has affected their relationships with the women and girls in their lives. Here's what they found out.

# 1

## Knowledge is key to *destroying taboos*

During the focus groups, researchers used vignettes — a fictional scenario with corresponding questions — to open up genuine discussions about menstruation. One vignette triggered a Champion's memory about her first period:

“One day I went to school and my period started, so I rushed back home. I was scared to tell my aunty ... if I had told my aunty at that time, she would say I have started sleeping around with men.”

Her story shows that the link between starting your period and the presumption of sexual experience has been deeply ingrained in many communities in Sierra Leone for a very long time – even amongst women.

Another common misconception shared by the groups was the idea that the start of menstruation signifies the end of childhood. Community members — not LaunchPad members — generally believe that once a girl gets her period, she should drop out of school and get married. There is a feeling that men think when girls get their periods, they are now mature and ready to have sex or to become lovers. Others thought that periods equated to ill health and that girls needed to rest or lie down for the duration. A very common belief held in Sierra Leone is that disposable pads could cause infertility, which is why many women are hesitant to adopt sanitary pads as a new material to manage their periods.

### **It's OK to talk about it**

These types of harmful or unhelpful attitudes towards menstruation can prevent women and girls from living healthy lives. And being shamed into silence about their experiences is how these sorts of beliefs have permeated for so long.

That's why the best people to challenge these misconceptions and set the record straight are the women themselves. With the Champions leading discussions with girls and other women in their communities, they have been able to shift the attitudes of what is acceptable to talk about and with whom. The women interviewed felt that their work had brought about a real change in this area:

“It is not hidden anymore, so it [is] simple to talk about it.”

– Group member, Tonkolili district.

“We, as Launchpad members, make it easy for women to talk about it, because we do a lot of sensitisation to draw their attention for them to feel free and comfortable to talk about it.”

– Group member, Freetown

### **LaunchPad is *eliminating menstruation myths***

Attitudes and social norms are notoriously difficult to study; however, using a vignette about a fictional girl named Adama who gets her first period at age 13, researchers were able to gauge the likely reaction a community would have to this scenario.

What they found was there was no single likely reaction from the communities studied. Some group members said their community would insist that Adama is now ready for marriage and she should drop out of school and stay at home; others said Adama would be considered sick or weak and she should be resting or lying down during her period.

However, when LaunchPad group members were asked what they personally thought about Adama's situation, they were unanimous – Adama should stay in school as education is important and menstruation is not a sickness.

“Your period is not a sickness so there is no reason why she should not go to school.”– Group member, Tonkolili district.

This shows that LaunchPad group members see themselves as having different attitudes to their community at large. It also tells us that the more people who are involved with the program, the less likely it will be for girls to be expected to drop out of school and get married when they get their period.

### **Thankfully, word is *spreading***

Women in the groups talked about going door-to-door in their communities, going to public places such as parks and markets, and travelling to neighbouring communities to share what they have learnt from LaunchPad. Some even spoke about reaching neighbouring villages with their message of menstrual hygiene and education.

“I went all the way to [next village] which is two miles away, to tell people.”

“I told 10 young girls in Mapasha and they are there right now – even the pads have now reached Mapasha!” – Group member, Tonkolili district.

These awesome ladies are going above and beyond to make sure their message is heard. In Freetown, group members talked about the short plays they devised and performed for their community; in Tonkolili, a group member who is a market trader spoke of doing demonstrations to others in the market on how pads worked using the underwear she sold:

“I sell pants, so I usually take one pant and fix a pad on it, then I show them how it is worn.”



LaunchPad group members in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo: Restless Development.

## 2 Behaviours are *changing*

As a highly inspirational Pinterest quote once said, discussion paves the way to action. Once the Champions' communities were comfortable with women talking so boldly about a previously unmentionable subject, tangible change started to occur.

### **Women's health and dignity is being restored**

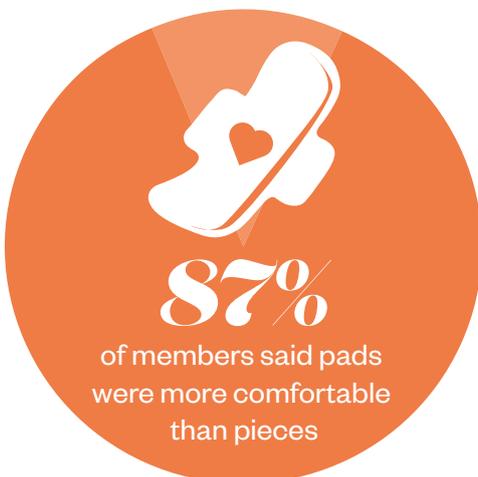
One overwhelming takeaway from the study is that the Champions and women in their communities feel bloody great wearing the pads – that pun was intentional.

“Before when we were using the pieces, it gives us wounds and rashes and infection, but now when we are using the pads, we are okay and free ... ever since when LaunchPad came, things have really changed.”  
– Group member, Tonkolili district.

The study also clearly shows that wearing pads goes beyond improving the women's physical health – it has restored their sense of dignity. This was something that every single one of the Champions in the study commented on.

“When we were using the pieces, it won't even take us 2–3 hours, then we start having offensive smell or odour. It's not like that anymore; now we feel clean and fresh.”

“Now I am free to wear any clothes I want to; I don't have worries when going out too.” – Group member, Tonkolili district.



### **It's no longer just a women's issue**

While the core focus of the program is for women to understand their bodies and how to manage one of its perfectly natural functions, we also knew that educating men and boys on the topic would be fundamental to the program's success. Not only can fathers and partners play a key role in making sure women and girls have a safe and dignified period; it's important for them to understand that young girls don't become an adult overnight once they get their period.

*"As a man, it was very difficult for me to sit amongst women to talk about menstruation because in those days, they said it's an insult for men to even mention the term menstruation – but things have changed now. Now, there is nothing hidden; what women know, men know as well."* – Male village elder, Tonkolili district.

Furthermore, men in Sierra Leone traditionally handle the household decisions and are usually in charge of how money is spent. By including them in the conversation, they are more likely to be willing to purchase sanitary pads for their wives and daughters – in fact, an earlier quantitative study we conducted showed that 85% of group members had at some point sold pads to men, signifying that there has been a shift in the stigma of men being involved in menstrual health management.

*"I was not confident to speak to my dad about menstruation, but now he is the one that buys pads for me, and also buys painkillers for my stomach ache."* – Group member, Freetown.



Engaging male community members, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo: Restless Development.

### **Communities are listening**

Participants gave researchers examples of how even older people are listening to this new information and are willing to change their thinking about ideas they previously held, such as pads causing women to become infertile.

*"Before, people believed that using pads causes women to be barren, but ever since we started sensitising them, they changed their mindset on that."* – Group member, Tonkolili district.

*"The old people always believed that if a woman uses pad during menstruation, she is throwing away her baby. Now we don't have scenarios like that anymore because we now have great knowledge about menstruation."* – Group member, Freetown.

There is also a sense that with the LaunchPad training, and with access to sanitary products, girls don't feel like they have to stay home from school when they have their period.

*"Before some girls leave school and go home because of their menstruation, but now they don't because they have been taught to always kit up well – take an extra pad before going to school."* – Head Champion, Freetown.



## Women are taking their *power back*

One of our main aims with this program is to make sure the women we work with take ownership of it. By empowering them to not only deliver life-changing messages to their community, but also to earn a small profit to invest in other ventures, we hoped we would see the LaunchPad Champions soar in confidence and gain a new social status.

Not to sound braggy – **but we were right.**

### **They are economically empowered**

While the profits the women earn from selling pads isn't a lot (given we need to keep prices low to make buying pads affordable for the community), the savings groups they have created gives all group members access to credit. And in a setting like Sierra Leone, access to credit can be the difference between life and death.

We know that the groups have used the money to dispense essential loans, supporting women and their families to access emergency medical care, as well as more routine expenses like school supplies for their children and repairs to community resources like roads.

“We learnt something very key from One Girl, and that is how to manage and save after sales, in case of emergencies” – Group member, Freetown.

“If any of us are pregnant and in labour, but your husband doesn't have money with him, we can take from the savings.” – Group member, Tonkolili district.

There is also evidence that training in financial literacy and small business management from One Girl has introduced new ideas for women to use a loan to start their own small businesses.

“One Girl has really empowered us because they have taught us how to buy livestock and take care of them and sell them in the long run.” – Group member, Freetown.

In some communities we've seen women invest in rice and groundnut farming with their collective profits from the program!

### **They are growing in confidence**

Head Champions report that the training they received pushed them to use their voices, which has made it easier for them to present information and support women to feel like more valued community members and to even become leaders.

“[LaunchPad] has built my self-confidence. I can stand in front of people to address them and I even have the ability to lead them well, and I even feel [I] am a stakeholder [respected dignitary or leader] in my community.” – Head Champion, Freetown.

For Champions, the experience of selling pads has helped them to overcome shyness. For some, this experience also expanded their social networks and they have made friends in different communities.

“I feel more confident now ... through the training, we were encouraged and focused to stand in front of people and talk – being bold.” – Group member, Tonkolili district.

### **They no longer feel shame**

Relatedly, we see that women's relationship with themselves has shifted. Group members and Head Champions talked about how having new knowledge in menstrual hygiene management and being able to use pads to manage their periods has made them feel fundamentally different about themselves.

The feelings of shame or embarrassment, especially around their husbands, when they have their periods are reducing.

“I used to be ashamed of people and even my husband when I am on my period, but now I am not ashamed because of LaunchPad.” – Group member, Freetown.

“We were not practicing hygiene before but now we are. I used to be ashamed around my husband because of the pieces I was using before. LaunchPad has really helped us to practice cleanliness.”  
– Head Champion, Tonkolili district.

## To learn is to *grow*

The purpose of any evaluation is to learn what works, what doesn't, and where there are opportunities for growth. This evaluation has meant we've been able to learn all about the overwhelmingly positive effects this program has had on the communities we work with. It has also given us some great lessons that will help us shape the next chapter of this incredible program.

### **More *accountability* of Head Champions**

Head Champions in more than one location reported that they had access to the savings box and were able to use the money and pay it back without interest. Head Champions did not seem to consider this an abuse of their position; however, it was unclear whether all members knew that this was happening. To be clear – our ladies aren't shady. All cash was paid back with no problems emerging, but it is worth reflecting on whether this 'perk' is appropriate and could it be more clearly communicated to all members of the savings group. We are currently reviewing the Head Champion and Savings Group model to make sure they are more transparent and accountable with their group.

### **The safe disposal and supply of pads**

This research suggests that the shift to disposable pads from pieces quite clearly brings incredible benefit to the physical health and quality of life of women and girls in Sierra Leone. However, the safe disposal of pads remains a challenge, as does the supply of pads once support from One Girl is no longer needed.

Given the challenges around refuse collection in Sierra Leone, as well as the broader environmental challenges with disposable plastic at the global level, finding a sustainable alternative to disposable pads is important for LaunchPad going forward. One Girl is already piloting reusable pads in two LaunchPad communities and we've added environmental education to the training programs there. If these pilots are successful, we'll be sure to build upon this training!

However, the use of reusable pads is also highly dependent on access to water for washing so this is something else that needs to be considered in plans for rolling out reusable pads to other communities. Another challenge may be that the LaunchPad savings groups are built upon continued profits coming in from selling disposable pads. If there is a shift to reusable options, this continued income stream may be affected as women would make one purchase for a product lasting up to three years.

### **Water and sanitation remains a *challenge***

Even though most people now have the knowledge that pads are safer and more hygienic than pieces, they still face barriers in terms of access to water and safe toilet facilities. This was a significant issue in both urban and rural communities where a lack of access to water makes it hard for women and girls to safely and hygienically manage their menstruation.

To overcome this, One Girl is considering partnerships with other NGOs who are working in these areas to make sure our education and training program corresponds and aligns with efforts to address a lack of water and sanitation infrastructure in these communities. We're passionate about collaborating with these NGOs so that our work and messaging isn't duplicated – because together, we're stronger!

### **Keeping the women in *power***

Although men buying pads for their wives and children is a positive step, it still suggests that the control of financial resources is often held by men. In some cases, a potential challenge arose where men in communities were overstepping their role within the program by speaking on behalf of some women and offering to control the group savings.

We're committed to looking deeper at how to shift norms in terms of women and men's roles within communities. This is a long-term goal, but it's an important part of empowering women and girls in LaunchPad communities to have access to, and control over, resources within their households.



LaunchPad group member in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo: Restless Development.

## Conclusion

Let's just say it – periods are awkward. And they're messy.

But they are (or will be or were) a fact of life for the 3.73<sup>1</sup> billion girls and women currently on this planet. For that reason, we can't afford not to talk about them. We can't afford to let women and girls miss out on their fundamental human rights (such as access to an education) or experience a breach of those human rights (such as child marriage) because of them. **The cost is too high.**

That's why LaunchPad is so important. It's giving women and girls their power back. It's destroying dangerous myths that keep them silenced and shamed. It's challenging men and boys to be part of the solution. It's restoring health and dignity and it's bringing whole communities together.

Because the truth is – periods are here to stay, friends. And LaunchPad is helping to make sure they are the least intrusive monthly visitor they can be, so women and girls around the world are no longer held back from reaching their greatest potential.



LaunchPad group member in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo: Restless Development.



WASHINGTON



D.

ONE GIRL