



# EVIDENCE on KNOWLEDGE and USE of MENSTRUAL CUPS in MALAWI

COMPILED IN NOVEMBER 2020  
by **MAGGA & UNFPA**



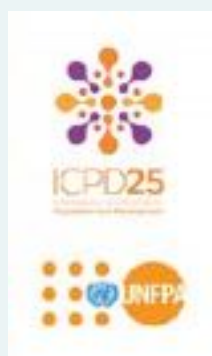
## Acknowledgements

UNFPA would like to sincerely thank all the key informants for the generosity in sharing their time, knowledge and experience with us during interviews, responding to information and resource requests and more broadly of their continued partnership with MAGGA and UNFPA on topics related to menstrual health and hygiene particularly in the use of Menstrual Cups.

Sincere gratitude to MAGGA Secretariat, represented by the National Coordinator, Mrs Mphatso Baluwa Jim, MAGGA Volunteers represented by the Deputy Chief Commissioner, Miss Lucy Nkhoma. Parent teacher association representatives of Mkomachi and Chimwa schools, learners and students of Chimwa, and Mkomachi schools.

Illustrations © by K. Palana, Unfpa

Photos © by MAGGA and UNFPA



## Contact

MAGGA: National Coordinator, Mrs. Mphatso Baluwa Jim; P.O. Box 1264, Lilongwe – Malawi; [girlguides@gmail.com](mailto:girlguides@gmail.com); [baluwamphatso@yahoo.com](mailto:baluwamphatso@yahoo.com)



UNFPA: UNFPA Country Representative UNFPA Malawi, Mrs. Won Young Hong; PO Box 30135, Lilongwe – Malawi, [general-inquiries.malawi@unfpa.org](mailto:general-inquiries.malawi@unfpa.org)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	2
Contact.....	2
Abbreviations and Acronyms.....	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	5
MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT (MHM) IN MALAWI – A brief evaluation of the situation on the ground .....	6
Menstrual Cups – A VALID CHOICE?.....	7
Pricing Structure and Availability for Malawi and Globally .....	8
Advantages when using a Menstrual Cup .....	8
The Environment and Menstruation.....	9
Menstrual Cups and Education.....	10
MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT STATUS – Evidence on the use of Menstrual Cups in Malawian rural and urban settings, MAGGA March 2020 .....	11
Participants Information.....	12
Starting to use a Cup .....	13
Handling the Cup.....	14
Cleaning & Access to Water .....	14
Technical issues .....	15
Economic Issues.....	16
CHALLENGES .....	17
Key Findings of the MAGGA March 2020 Questionnaire Session .....	17
Listing of Various ORGANISATIONS’ ACTIVITIES ON MENSTRUAL CUPS IN MALAWI.....	18
2016 .....	19
2017 .....	20
2018 .....	20
2019 .....	21
2020 .....	21
2021, planned.....	22
THE MENSTRUAL CUP COALITION .....	22
EVIDENCES ON MENSTRUAL CUP USE IN Several COuntries in SUBSAHARAN AFRICA.....	23
Acceptability.....	23
Starting to use a Cup.....	23
Continuing to use a Cup .....	23

Impact.....	23
Economy.....	24
Family and community.....	24
Medical .....	24
Technical.....	25
Challenges .....	25
Cleaning and storage .....	25
IUD .....	25
Virginity.....	25
LESSONs LEARNT.....	25
CONCLUSION.....	27

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

MAGGA	Malawi Girl Guides Association
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
MHM	Menstrual Health Management
MHH	Menstrual Health Hygiene
M.cup	Menstrual Cup
R H	Reproductive Health
TSS	Toxic Shock Syndrome
GOVTs	Government
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Globally, around 26 % of the population are of menstruating age, spending on average 65 days a year dealing with menstrual blood flow. For Malawi, this accounts for about 4.8 Mio girls and women.**

Not only availability of choices to manage the menstrual flow can hinder girls and women from testing the full range of products available, also ignorance, prejudice, costs and safety fears are prevalent.

Menstrual Cups are infrequently mentioned in online educational materials on puberty and menstruation for adolescent girls. The lack of information appears to be global. However, Menstrual Cups are available in around 100 countries.

In this paper, **EVIDENCE in KNOWLEDGE and USE of MENSTRUAL CUPS in Malawi** will be presented. An analysis of various

M.cup activities carried out in several Malawian regions between 2016 and 2020 and an extensive evaluation on the use of M.cups from more than 50 girls and women from 16 to 45 years of age on the short and long term use of several brands of Menstrual Cups shows the safe use of a Menstrual Cup; and as a consequence suggests the M.cup to be a valid option for hygienic and safe management of menstrual flow for girls and women of all ages.

*When we asked if a cup user would recommend the use of a Menstrual Cup to her friend, she replied: 'Yes, because it is very easy to use and you do not spend your money'.*



*Women in Mzimba talk about their experiences in the long-term use of the Menstrual Cup*

## MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT (MHM) IN MALAWI – A brief evaluation of the situation on the ground

**Malawi has a female population of 9.44 million. In Malawi, girls and women have little or no access to hygienic menstrual products, and may be exposed to reduced education, sexual harms, pregnancy, HIV infection. Lack of menstrual information, resources and hygiene facilities mean menstruating females suffer shame, discomfort and social exclusion. In Malawi, more school days are lost by girls to periods than from malaria. (Pilliteri 2012)**

Most of the 4.8 million women menstruating in Malawi use rags: which are ineffective, unhygienic, un-comfortable and linked to poor school attendance.

Commercial menstrual pad brands in Malawi include locally made *Purity*, and imported *Always*, *Soft n Free* and *Kotex*. Prices range from K750.00 to 3,000.00 each from supermarkets, pharmacies, hawkers and markets. Disposable single-use menstrual pads cost about a dollar which is less than how much an average Malawian earns per day and take up to 500 years to decompose, presenting an increasing environmental problem.

Tampons are available in cities but expensive and not much used.

Washable menstrual pads promoted by many NGOs, are often uncomfortable, leak and use much water to wash. Some NGOs encourage income-generating projects to make washable pads. However, these require sewing skills, are best stitched with a sewing machine and should be done from 3 layers of specialized fabric – which is often difficult to find in Malawi. The cloths often leak, they need up to 14 liters of water per period to wash, facility to dry them in a safe, discrete place and at most they last two years.

In 2019, the Malawi Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WESNET) identified 57 organizations

across Malawi carrying out some kind of menstrual health intervention but there were no national stand-alone policies or standards or central coordination of information.

Discussions with women in Ntchisi in 2019 revealed that the majority of the women participating at the event were farmers or vendors, their ability to walk and move freely are central to economic opportunity and empowerment. 33% had missed up to four days of work a month due to periods prior to receiving the cup. Over half the girls missed school 3 days a month due to their periods, with some missing 5 days; fear of leaking, no suitable products to use, nowhere to change their products at school, and embarrassment are some of the experiences the girls and women shared during the talk. 72% of girls said they felt shame during their periods, primarily linked to the fear that they might leak, smell or be unable to do certain activities.

**Menstrual issues are not openly talked about.** Schools girls would only discuss menstruation with their female family members and friends; and the topic should never be discussed with boys. Menstruation is associated with womanhood, pregnancy and sexual maturity. For many, the onset of menstruation was also associated with being viewed as sexually available to men in the local villages, whether the girls themselves wanted this or not. While discussing

menstruation, adolescent girls shared their experiences of sexual assault, often sanctioned by village elders as a rite of passage.

**Female school learners attribute their menstruation-related school absenteeism to lack of absorbent materials,** fear of leakage, odor, as well as discomfort, and an inability to concentrate during class (Mason, 2013). While evidence that girls miss school because of menstruation is variable, studies of girls using menstrual cups have shown that their concentration in lessons improves as does their performance. (Mason, 2015; UNICEF, 2012.) In Malawi, 70% of girls miss one to three school days a month due to menstruation, more than they do from malaria. (Pilliteri, 2011)

The 2019 ActionAid cup project in Ntchisi revealed menstrual taboos such as: 'A menstruating girl should not add salt when she is cooking, enter her parents' bedroom, or eat eggs.' 'Menstrual blood can be used for witchcraft, and if touched by a man will kill him.' In Ntchisi school girls claimed that, 'if you share bathing water while on period with your father, that is dangerous. His genitals will grow too big and he will die.

**Prohibitions faced by menstruating girls in Malawi** state that they must not plant seeds, enter their parent's room, or add salt to cooking. (Irise, 2013; Pilliteri, 2012; Hampton, 2017). Because menstruation is shrouded in shame, and so dealt with in silence, females have had to put up with inadequate, uncomfortable unhygienic solutions such as mattress stuffing, piece of old blankets, rags and tissues, or hiding away until the bleeding stops. (Mason et al 2015; Fehr et al, 2015). Girls using traditional materials fear physical education classes, personal odour, discomfort, and the risk the menstrual protection falling out in public causing shame, embarrassment or humiliation. (Mason et al, 2013). Cloth rags leave sores, cuts and rashes on the inner thighs and vulvas. Most women dry their menstrual cloths and rags inside, hidden underneath a mattress or clothing.

Girls and women in Malawi are often ignorant of the biological facts about menstruation (Chindime, 2012). More than half those interviewed described surprise, anxiety and fear, at their first period. (Hampton, 2017.)

Menstrual cups provide a safe and sustainable solution to menstruation but are still little known in Malawi.

## MENSTRUAL CUPS – A VALID CHOICE?

**A menstrual cup (M.cup) is a feminine hygiene device, which is shaped like a bell. The M.cup is inserted into the vagina during menstruation periods to collect menstrual fluid and prevent it from leaking on clothes. They are made of flexible medical grade silicone or thermoplastic elastomers (TPE).**

The cup holds about the same volume of liquid as 3 pads or tampons and when placed correctly cannot be felt when inside. Hygienic, safe, comfortable, and producing no smell, the menstrual cup is emptied every few hours and washed in clean water. The material is hypo-allergenic and contains no additives, perfume or chemicals, so there are

no side-effects, and with no open pores or edges to harbor bacteria. Some cups are manufactured to ISO 13485:2003 standards (Medical device directive), and some have approval from the US Food and Drug Administration.

In 2019, Technical Specifications for cups have been further defined by UNFPA Malawi, this in order to procure quality products that fit the purpose of the Malawian market.

**The Technical Specifications** are available upon request from UNFPA Malawi or from UNFPA Procurement Services Branch in Copenhagen.



### **Pricing Structure and Availability for Malawi and Globally**

**In order to prepare roll-out activities, UNFPA has conducted a small tender exercise in October 2019.**

As a result, several cup producers, of which most are meeting the technical requirements for Menstrual cups, are willing to supply to Malawi. The pricing of the individual cup varies between 4 and 7 US Dollars plus shipment. Most products are made from Silicon, also available are cups made from Thermoplastic Elastomers (TPE).

The product catalogue for Reproductive Health Commodities by UNFPA Procurement Services Branch Copenhagen will make Menstrual Cups available for global procurement in the first half of 2021.

### **Advantages when using a Menstrual Cup**

**Menstrual Cups yield considerable programming savings by eliminating the costs associated with having to resupply disposable products each month. Cups are used by women in over 100 countries in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Russia, and Africa (including South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia and Malawi. They can be used by girls from their first period and before first sexual intercourse. (Philips Howard, 2016.)**

**M.cups are reusable and last up to 10 years**, so saving the cost and pollution of the 2,500 disposable pads or tampons a woman would use in that time.

instructions or containers, costing as little as K1,000, to quality branded cups with instructions and cotton bags costing from e.g. K5,000 (Sirona Cups), K10,000 (Ruby Cups) to K39,000 (Tampax). Up to date, none are for sale in shops in Malawi.

Some 150 different brands of cups are produced around the world, ranging from poor quality cups made from plastic without

**Medically, the use of Cups is very safe.** While use of cloths or rags has been associated with bacterial vaginosis in Tanzania (Baisley, 2009) and India (Das, 2015), cups do not disrupt the normal vaginal microbiota (North, 2011) which is protective against the acquisition of STI,<sup>0</sup> and HIV. (Cohen, 2012. Philips Howard, 2016.)

**Many studies now show that menstrual cups are acceptable in most settings** and any concerns about cultural objections (e.g. virginity) are overcome with adequate training.

**A recent study of 509 female students aged 18-24 years in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa reported** that 80% achieved comfort after 2-3 insertions and over 90% would continue to use the cup. It concluded: 'The menstrual cup was well accepted among this student population and should be

considered as a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable option in menstrual health management initiatives in South Africa.' (Beksinska et al, 2020)

**Question asked at workshops reveal myths around cups** such as they are 'satanic' and may be used to harvest women's blood for witchcraft or blood transfusions. Questions often asked include 'Can a menstrual cup get lost inside the body?' 'If a girl uses a menstrual cup will she lose her virginity?' 'Will it fall out?' 'Will my vagina stretch and disappoint my husband?' (The answer is No to all.)

A pilot study among school girls in Kenya, concluded that menstrual cups are a good solution for menstrual health 'in economically challenged settings.' (van Eijk AM, 2018)

## The Environment and Menstruation

**The production and disposal of menstrual products is an increasing environmental problem. (Mazgaj, 2006.) Disposable pads are lined with plastic, made with non-biodegradable, petroleum-based polyacrylate super-absorbent polymer gels and packaged in plastic. Tampons are made from rayon, polypropylene and polyethylene often with non-biodegradable plastic wrappers and applicators.**

As women earn more, demand in Malawi for disposable menstrual products will expand, especially if the media and organizations present them as the only socially acceptable, 'modern' methods of menstrual management. Each menstruating woman uses about 250 pads or tampons every year; or from puberty to menopause, 14,000 disposable pads, enough to fill two mini-buses. If all menstruating women in Malawi used single-use menstrual products, there would be over 2 billion to dispose of every year, plus about 100 million plastic bags or boxes. All of which could take up to 800 years to decompose, or release toxic gases if burned.

The delivery of free pads to schoolgirls and vulnerable women has ongoing cost, sustainability and environmental implications. In 2017, the Kenyan government announced a budget of US\$5million per annum for school girls to receive free disposable menstrual pads. For that sum, one million schoolgirls could be provided with menstrual cups, lasting 10 years. Where schools have received free pads, the latrines are soon filled and toilets blocked.

Many NGOs working on menstrual health are offering only disposable or washable pads to girls.

## Menstrual Cups and Education

**While introducing menstrual cups to girls and women, the opportunity can be used to educate about the body, the biology of menstruation, busting myths, and with this reduce stigmas and taboos.**

The use of cups requires confidence in the body, understanding of simple anatomy, and overcoming taboos about touching genitals. Although embarrassing, *menstrual health education* in schools carries less stigma than discussions about HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy or contraception. By opening on the subject of menstruation, group conversations often lead to other related sexual and reproductive health topics such as family planning, HIV prevention, unwanted pregnancies, gender violence, etc.

Participants of menstrual cup projects benefit from improved knowledge and

understanding of their bodies and menstrual cycles. Schoolgirls will be less likely to miss school during their period, and will feel more confident, and able to concentrate better in class during their menstruation.

In 2016, Mothers groups near Mzimba were trained on using Menstrual Cups and encouraged to share the provided M.cups in their communities. During a follow up talk in November 2019, the women reported that the men in their community appreciated the use of menstrual cups by their women, because it makes the menstruation more discrete.



*Menstrual Cups can be a valid choice for the safe management of menstrual flow.*

## MENSTRUAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT STATUS – Evidence on the use of Menstrual Cups in Malawian rural and urban settings, MAGGA March 2020

**In March 2020, 50 women and girls met at MAGGA, Lilongwe to share experiences with long and short term use of menstrual cups. Some girls and women came from urban setting, whilst most of the participants live in rural areas. The group was covering all ages and educational levels.**



*Meeting with short- and long-time Menstrual Cup users from 16-48 years of age. MAGGA, 21 March 2020*

In Malawi, menstruation is shrouded in secrecy because it is viewed as dirty and therefore it is concealed. There is a widespread anxiety about menstrual blood being used in witch craft (ufiti), which affects how girls and women dispose their menstrual products. Menstrual products pose a major challenge in delivery and access. It is commonly known that the available menstrual materials that are widely used by girls are Nyanda (old piece of fabric), and re-usable washable pads.

Menstrual materials are used to catch menstrual blood. Women and girls in often time lack regular access to safe menstrual materials, and lack of access is due to lack of series of systematic barriers that prevent them from having control of resources at the household and community levels, and from having a voice in the allocation of state resources. As indicated in the graph most women and girls use cloth to absorb menstrual flow. The cloth is frequently washed and re used, but sometimes disposed of as waste. Though as a commonly used material the women and girls complain of irritation and fungal infections as the clothes are not purchased specifically for menstrual hygiene purposes but rather cut out from old pieces of clothing materials in the household.

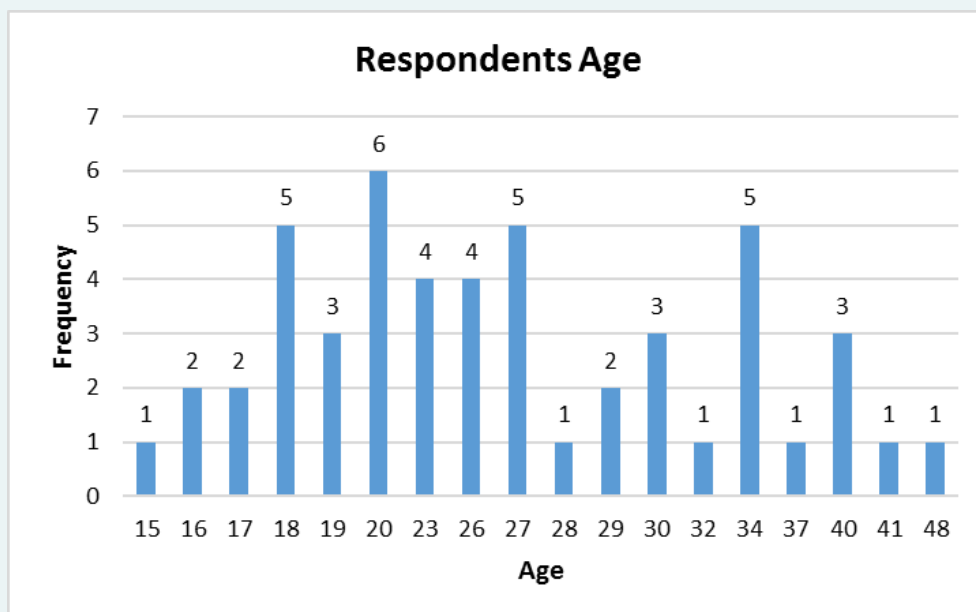
Other menstrual material options are mostly supplied through the super markets and grocery shops. Disposable pads are the most common of these products, with great variation in quality and price. Commercially produced re-usable pads are also increasingly available, in different

qualities. The other menstrual materials include tampons, menstrual cups, both which are not commonly available for purchase in the communities.

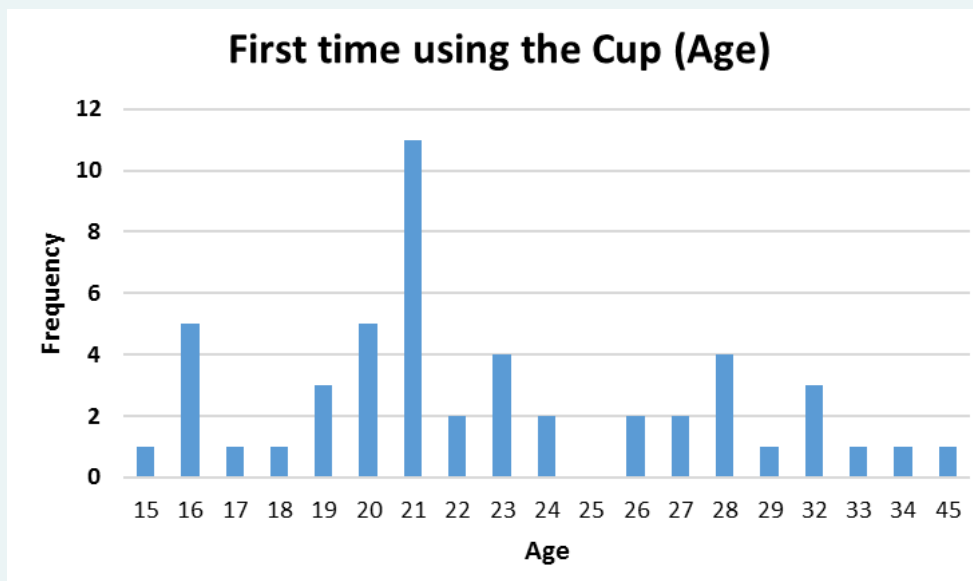
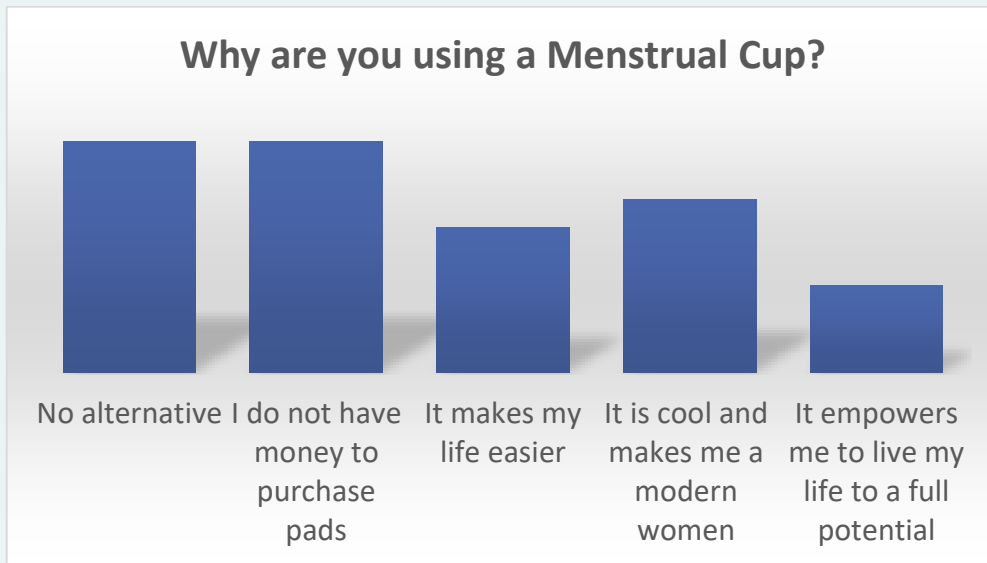


### Participants Information

The survey had engaged school going girls of age and women who are parents and guardians who were part of the respondents. These ranged from 15 to 48 years of age.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the participants live in rural settings. The different ages of participants represent also the different experiences women and girls have about menstrual management and the menstrual products used as menstruators.



## Starting to use a Cup



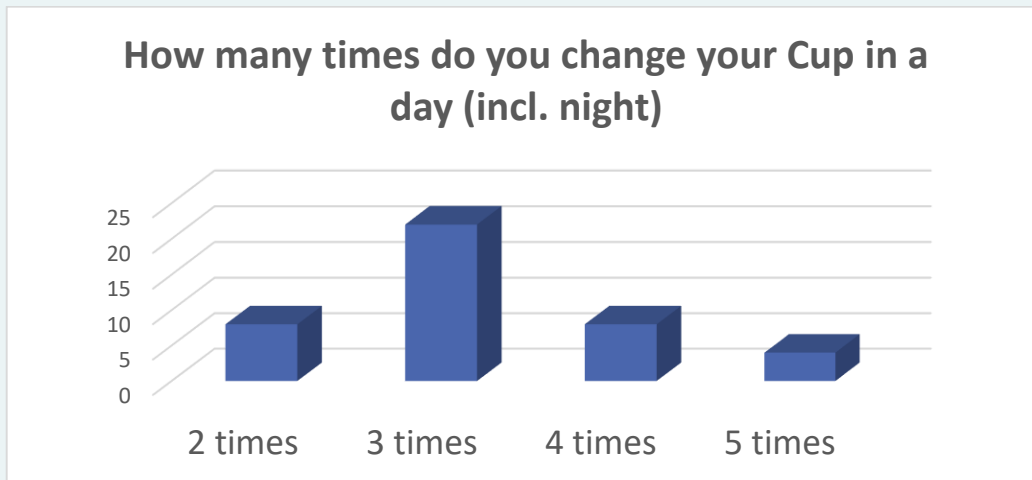
A Menstrual cup can be used by any one at any age provided they have reached menarche. M.cups are like any other menstrual products and should be trusted by all.

*'I do not miss school because I wear a Cup!'*

*'I use the Cup because I have confidence now!'*

*'Let it reach the majority!'*

## Handling the Cup



The Menstrual cup is efficient and reliable. It has to be changed between two to five times in 24 hrs, depending on one's flow. These are suitable conditions to enable women and girl's participation in activities and improve school attendance.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the participants use the cup during the night.

## Cleaning & Access to Water

When women and girls menstruate, they risk infection and diseases due to lack of clean water. Cleaning a menstrual cup is very simple, it does not require a lot of water, but it needs to be cleaned with clean and safe water. Only with a 300ml bottle of water you are good to go. A menstrual cup by its make up is hygienic, and safe and does not require a lot of water to be washed and cleaned.

### How is a M.cup cleaned?

*'Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before handling a n M.cup. Avoid fragranced soaps that may alter the pH of the vagina. While using the M.cup simply just rinse it with water each time it is emptied, before reinserting while menstruating, there is no need for disinfecting your cup between uses.'*

It is also recommended that an M.cup be disinfected before storage each month. The M.cup should be rinsed, boiled in a pot of boiling water for 3-5 minutes. When boiled, it should be cooled, ensure it is dried thoroughly and stored in a cotton bag. When boiling the M.cup users are cautioned not to over boil to more than 10 minutes otherwise the silicone will lose some of its bounciness and not open up easily anymore when inserted, thereby leading to potential troubles with leakage. The M.cups are stored in a cotton bag or pouch because there is an allowance for airflow. This is so to prevent Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), an infection caused by bacteria which enters the body through mucous membranes from M.cups which is not properly dried and disinfected.



*'The space for changing room is not enough.'*

*'I do not change in school because of lack of water.'*

*'School toilets should have a drain to wash away the liquid.'*

*'I bring along water in a bottle to clean the Cup when changing in school.'*

## Technical issues

When handling a Menstrual Cups, 25% of users report from discomfort or pain during the first two cycles of use. After getting used to the M.cup, 20% of cup users report that the cup is too big, too small, too soft or that the stem was causing discomfort, however they are still continuing to

use the M.cup. 4 out of 34 cup users report having problems with stool or urine during the use of the M.cup.

This report shows that training and follow up with M.cup users after some time of use is very important to give the girls and women a chance to acknowledge problems when using a M.cup, received information on how those can be solved, e.g. by adjusting the fit and position of the M.cup or by exchanging the M.cup to a smaller or bigger size.

*'The Cup is flexible and it makes life easier!'*

*'Some people say don't use the menstrual cup because it is bad in our body'*

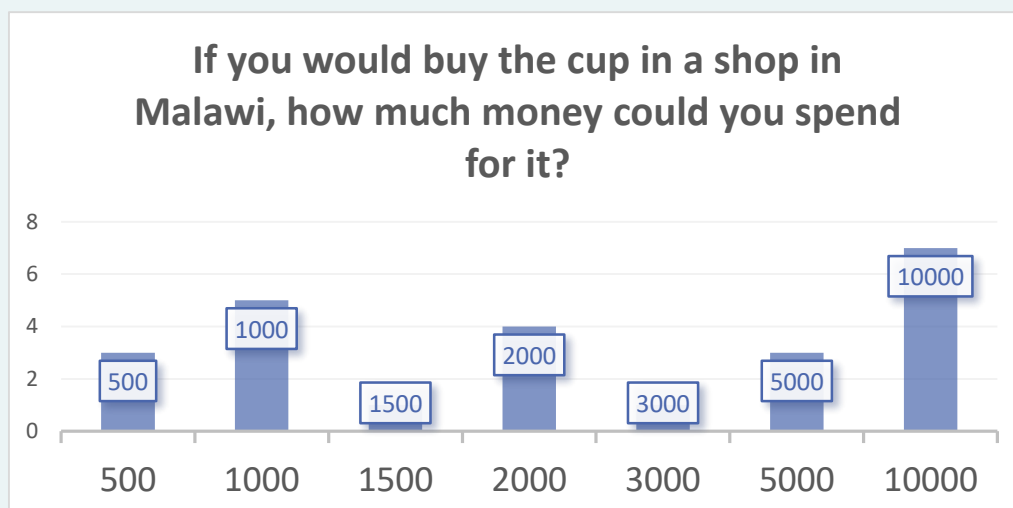
*'Cup reduces the bad smell which I had before and it makes me to move freely!'*

## Economic Issues

*'We need more Cups for our friends.' 'Friends want to have the Cups!'*

*'Yes, because it is very easy to use and you do not spend your money.'*

*'Easier to use Cup and safe money.'*



M.cups are cost effective and sustainable. A Menstrual cup can be used for up to ten (10) years.

An M.cup is purchased once off. A market price for Malawi is not yet known as M.cups are not yet widely commercially available. The Everest Project in Blantyre is selling M.cups for around 10.000 MKW. Cups of high value could possibly be available for a lower price than that. Given that a M.cup can be reused for many years, the savings for menstrual hygiene materials are still significant.

## CHALLENGES

### Limited access to water

Participants mentioned that they found it problematic to change then there was no water, preferring to remain with the cup the whole day so that they could change at home.

### Technical challenges

Challenges to remove easily the M.cup in the first months of use. Most girls believed that the stem on the M.cup is used for removing of which it takes long for one to successfully removing the M.cup through pulling the stem. (The M.cup has to be removed by squeezing the bottom of the cup and through this releasing the vacuum)

### Limited access to toilets, privacy and security

Participants reported that they could not access toilets at night because they are built very far away from their houses. It is necessary to have some privacy when changing the cup. Sometimes changing the cup needs extra caution and care which means one can take longer in the bathroom/toilet. This can easily raise suspicion among other people who also need to use the toilet, for instance in schools.

## Key Findings of the MAGGA March 2020 Questionnaire Session

**The key findings presented in this report are harboring three (3) areas of: economic benefits, health benefits and social benefits**

**The participants reported that the menstrual cup collected the blood before it left the vagina** and was not felt by the user as they walked or did their business. As a result, there was no occurrence of skin irritations as caused by sanitary pads. Additionally, there was no smell with the use of menstrual cups as no blood came into contact with air, women and girls recommended that a cup is more hygienic and can be worn for a much longer time without worrying that they could smell nor get bruises or lesions from skin irritation.

**There is less stress about leakage** when using a menstrual cup which is a common problem during menstruation attributed to not so appropriate methods of managing menstrual flow. This is to compromise on the major social implication of menstruation mentioned as being embarrassment after staining clothes when using methods which are not appropriate. The survey revealed that embarrassments are no longer the case because cups are worn inside the vagina and capture blood before it gets outside the body. Consequently, there is less worry or fear of leakage and embarrassments there is reduced opportunity for being victimized or stigmatized.

**The respondents indicated that education given to girls at menarche was fragmented, with the approach being more cautionary or admonitory**, leaving girls more disturbed about menstruation and forced to discover things for themselves. However, when the menstrual cups were introduced in the schools and communities they were accompanied by educational sessions on how to use them and issues about reproductive health including body anatomy. These introductory sessions provided a platform and forum of discussion where girls were educated,

given an opportunity to discuss health issues, reproductive system, misconceptions, taboos and beliefs surrounding periods.

**Thus menstrual cups provide an avenue which could be explored to open discussions** about female maturity and growth, and what steps or measures girls or women can take to address changes in their bodies and the reproductive system. The participants expressed gratitude to learn a lot about their reproductive health and have opportunities to raise questions on menstruation, an area that is not mostly talked about and deemed as a taboo.

**Previously, during menstruation women and girls opted to forfeit their activities to defer their plans until a later time** especially when they knew chances of staining clothes were high given the methods they used in managing menstrual flow. However, using the menstrual cup, they could stay with it for longer and did not require frequent change. This provided them more time and less worry about changing or leakage, hence some could stay longer at their business or do work which they could have deferred or forfeited hence more productivity. As a result, the use of the menstrual cup has resulted in a reduction in the women's productivity loss as women and girls shared that having their periods stopped them from doing their everyday activities.

**Water used to clean menstrual cup was less compared to water that could be consumed if one used other methods.** For instance, washing pieces of cloth for re-use used more water and detergent and was time consuming requiring the pieces of cloth to dry before re use. Other methods often alike need more baths than usual because they perceive they smell and feel uncomfortable being wet.

**Owning a menstrual cup reduces the temptation to solicit money through transactional sex or boyfriends.** Participants attested to the fact that investment into the menstrual cup solves the problem of purchasing pads on monthly basis and takes off the worry about where to get money to buy pads for the next period. The participants expressed that the issues now have shifted on how to manage the pain during menstrual periods.

## LISTING OF VARIOUS ORGANISATIONS' ACTIVITIES ON MENSTRUAL CUPS IN MALAWI



*Mentor Felicia Monjeza is introducing Choices for MHM to secondary school girls in Lilongwe District*

**Menstrual cups were first discussed in Malawi in 2016 when several organizations were interested in trying them, but did not have supplies. There have been a number of organizations that have been working in MHM products amidst thriving to find sustainable, comfortable hygienic products that can be used with dignity.**

The following is what has been done by various organizations with menstrual cups:

1. **Malawi Girl Guides Association (MAGGA)** partnered with **The Cup Effect**, a UK based cup training programme; and Dorcas International, a UK based charity who supplied 1000 Ruby Cups.

Between November 2016 and May 2017, a feasibility study was run in two peri-urban schools (students aged 15-19), and a rural national park (24 mothers age 25-40), in partnership with **African Parks & Wilderness Safaris**.

Six months later, 100% of women and girls who were followed up were using their menstrual cups. Mothers found first-use easier than schoolgirls. They all found cups were more comfortable, used less water, rarely leaked so raised their confidence, and saved money for school fees, books and food. The schoolgirls with parents who attended the training, were better supported and found use easier.

The women in the national park were keen on reducing the environmental impact of single-use pads. The mothers said they would like their daughters to use them, 'from their first period.' there was demand for more cups, information and workshops for all ages, their friends and family. All groups would pay for cups if they were available.

2. **Jesuit Refugee Service in Dzaleka Refugee Camp** Dowa, hosted a cup training workshop for 16 female refugees from Congo, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Uganda age 20-30 run by The Cup Effect. The participating girls and women reported later that they preferred cups to the single-use pads distributed by UNHCR and Plan International, for which there is no disposal system, and many are sold to visiting traders.
3. **UNFPA in co-operation with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health Malawi** ran a menstrual cup project with 4500 M.cups (*MyOwnCup*, manufactured in South Africa). Several train-the-trainers' workshops on MHM and introducing the Menstrual Cup took place in Blantyre and Mzuzu. University students got trained in Blantyre and representatives from Mother Groups in Mzuzu.

Together, more than 100 mentors received training with the purpose to be well equipped to pass on the knowledge to peers and protégés. The focus of the training lay on learning about Menstrual Hygiene including Facts & Myths and introducing the menstrual cup as a valid choice for the management of menstrual fluids. The use of the Cup had been extensively trained. Each of the mentors received between 50 and 200 menstrual cups to distribute.

This pilot initiative was the rewarded winner of a joint UN Agencies' research on initiatives that can best benefit women. The goal of the pilot was to introduce the Menstrual Cup as an additional choice to Malawian Women and Girls who already use alternative MHM products, through advocating the Cup's socio-economic and environmental advantages.

At the time and within the forum TWG Safe Motherhood, it was decided to target adolescent - as of secondary school level age - and young women.

**In total, 4500 Cups were distributed: Adolescent girls = 3200, Women (25+) = 1,300**

---

2017

1. **Menstrual cup workshops and information meetings** were held with staff from international NGOs, including Malawi Girl Guides; Plan International; UNHCR; Population Services International; and ActionAid Malawi.
2. **World Menstrual Day** on 28 May 2017 celebrated with the world's first-ever Girl Guide menstrual cup camp, with 60 Guides.
3. **Dorcas International** funded the Malawi Girl Guides Association to distribute 900 cups to Girl Guides and schoolgirls.
1. **Ingenieure ohne Grenzen**, Engineers without Borders (a German NGO) hired The Cup Effect and MAGGA to train 20 teachers and learners in Chikhosi, Kasungu district.

---

2018

1. **ActionAid Malawi** partnered with **Dorcas International** for a one-year cup project as part of their recent "ActionAid Malawi Country Strategy Paper, 2018-2023" which focuses on school learners and women farmers. A full-time cup facilitator undertook 42 menstrual cup training developed by Action Aid, The Cup Effect and Menstrual Cup Coalition. 1,240 cups, packed in a cotton pouch, and metal pans for boiling were distributed in Chimwa and Mkomachi community secondary schools in Lilongwe; in Kasakula and Katete community secondary schools in Ntchisi, to girls aged 15-20 years and their mothers, both Christian and Muslim. Twenty parents and teachers who used menstrual cups, went on to train 125 more adults and 313 schoolgirls under guidance.

After 9 months, over 95% of women and girls interviewed prefer them to any other menstrual product, and teachers commented on improved attendance and concentration. Only 5% of girls now missed school due to menstruation, and cup distribution to 1,115 pupils resulted in 18,000 extra school days a year, an average of over 16 days per girl.

Mothers who had received the cup reported an improved standard of life with few disruptions to work and household chores due to menstruation. They also used less water and spent less money on soap or time washing rags or cloths. Both women and girls commented on the reduction of odour and leaks, which had previously caused them shame and embarrassment. As one girl said, 'I can now forget I am on my period and just get on with what I want, including Netball!'

All appreciated money saved from pads, or soap for washing clothes. Users found that cups are easier to wash in privacy and to store safely in its bag on a hook. Thus avoiding both embarrassment and infections from reusing damp cloths. Sport, school attendance and being able to dance and play with friends all dramatically improved with the use of cups. For women in the community, being able to work, do household chores, visit friends and walk long distances while menstruating was no longer impeded by menstruation.

As distribution increased, the girls nervous of trying a cup were encouraged by their peers and aunts. The girls were pleased that the project had also taught boys about menstrual cups and periods so they are less likely to be teased about periods. Also when using cups, boys are less likely to know when a girl is menstruating. In boarding schools, cups created

a sense of community and broke down menstrual shame. The study clearly showed that support during the first few months of use is vital and much supporting the girls in getting used to the new product.

A clear need and appetite for cups was observed. People who are trained and using cups will be able to support others, so the training, while still monitored, can be handed over to the community, and eventually there would be little required from the centralized project implementers beyond providing the cups and periodic monitoring.

---

## 2019

1. **Mnembe, Bangola and Phokela camps**, Nsanje, of post-flooding emergency situation Assessment by Dorcas International. Displaced women and their daughters had been given a few single-use pads but nowhere to dispose them; they would like cups. 15 were trained by an independent menstrual cup user and given cups.
2. **Ripple Africa**, based in UK, working on Lake Malawi. 100 M.cups distributed to rural women.
3. **St Peters' Malawi Education Trust & Medic** Malawi, Mtunthama, Kasungu. 400 ruby cups distributed free to school learners.  
Safe Hands for Mothers made two films about cups: 'Malawi Girl Guides Love Cups' with MAGGA <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIrwlfN67Ug>; and 'From Rags to Cups: Dzaleka Refugee camp' with UNHCR and Plan International. [link]  
BBC World Service News featured a video about menstrual cups for World Menstrual Health Day, on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-48389920/this-invention-from-the-1930s-is-cutting-period-poverty> and BBC World Service's 'People Fixing the World' series in May 2019. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0780l9l>)
4. **Prison**: 60 menstrual cups were distributed to 60 female inmates at Maula prison in Malawi

---

## 2020

1. **Project Everest**, based in Australia, working in Malawi, Fiji & India. Business based model on promoting and selling menstrual cups in Malawi, based in Blantyre.
2. **Ufulu** 1,400 cups distributed free on Likoma Island, to teachers, school learners. Began September 2019. Each pack consists of a Ruby Cup (in an organic, cotton bag) a bar of antibacterial soap, instructions in Chichewa, and a recycled food tin for boiling her cup.
3. **Blantyre region** - 300 Flow Cup M.cups distributed free, in small groups.
4. **Campaign for Health Education Sanitation and Hygiene** received menstrual health training with a display of different menstrual products and the women are keen to try cups.
5. **MAGGA gathered some 50 short and long time Cup users (women and girls, rural and urban)** to gain evidence on Menstrual cup knowledge and use, March 2020.

---

2021, PLANNED

1. **St Peters' Malawi Education Trust & Medic Malawi, Kasungu. Partnering with Dorcus International** to train more trainers and distribute 2,000 more cups to reach many of the schools in Kasungu District.
2. **Ufulu Malawi** will be starting more cup workshops in 3 areas in southern Malawi, waiting 1 month for the women to try out their cups and then go back to identify women within those trial groups to train up to run cup distribution workshops in their local area. Each trainer will be mentored for the initial 20 workshops, to ensure that correct information is given out to cup recipients.
3. **Cova Project** has plans to distribute 900 cups around Mzuzu and partner with local NGOs who have requested support with menstrual health initiatives.

## THE MENSTRUAL CUP COALITION



In January 2018 the Menstrual Cup Coalition (<https://menstrualcupcoalition.org>) was founded in Kenya, for organisations, companies and universities around the world who work with cups, including Liverpool school of Tropical Medicine, femme international, Columbia university etc.

The Menstrual Cup Coalition supports the safe use of affordable menstrual cups by sharing knowledge and good practice globally on cup provision and use.

Members of the coalition have been developed monitoring and evaluation questionnaires and training curricula for trainers and users. The coalition currently has 46 member organisations, 12 of which work in Malawi.

The coalition is hosted by Mannion Daniels agency based in UK and Kenya, who provide pro bono administration and technical advice; and host the annual Menstrual Cup Summit.

## REFERENCES



THE LANCET  
Public Health

In August 2019, the Lancet published an article about the use of Menstrual Cup, looking into leakage, acceptability, safety and availability.

Studies took place mainly between 2009-2018 in low-income and middle-income countries, some in high-income countries. Participants of some studies were school girls (12-19), other studies focused on women.

<https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667%2819%2930111-2/fulltext>



The NGO WoMena collected data and evidence in a *Menstrual Cup interventions follow up study* in Uganda, published on March 2018.

<http://womensdk/new-publication-menstrual-cup-interventions-follow-up-study-report-uganda/>

## EVIDENCES ON MENSTRUAL CUP USE IN SEVERAL COUNTRIES IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

### Acceptability

#### STARTING TO USE A CUP

Parents observed a positive change in their daughters' behavior: more confident, and less fearful when menstruating. (Phillips-Howard, 2016.) In the same study, 69% of girls reported they had never had sexual intercourse before using menstrual cups.

Schoolgirls using cups in rural western Kenya enjoyed being active, and were confident that the cup would remain *in situ*. (Mason et al, 2015.)

The adoption of the menstrual cups required a familiarisation phase over several menstrual cycles. User familiarisation with the cup over time, practice, peer support and training seems to be the key to success. Uptake of using the cup was 75% after 10 months of introduction to the cup (The Lancet, August 2019).

#### CONTINUING TO USE A CUP

Dropping of the menstrual cup decreased with increasing experience, approx. 23% in the first 3 months and 10% at or after 12 months. 73% of participants wished to continue the use of the menstrual cup at study completion. Challenges in resource constrained setting, e.g. lack of sanitation hygiene and privacy, did not stop women from using the cup (The Lancet, August 2019).

### Impact

#### Social

All qualitative and some quantitative studies reported a positive effect of use of menstrual cup on participants lives, decrease stress concerning staining and leakage and improvements in mobility.

School Participation: 3 qualitative studies implied that school attendance, concentration and performance improved after participants were given a menstrual cup (The Lancet, August 2019).

Studies have shown good peer and adult counselling during the familiarization phase increases uptake and acceptance. (Oster and Thornton, 2012; Phillips-Howard 2016; Mason, 2015.)

---

## ECONOMY

Use of MC saves time (Nepal) and water, because of less leaking and washing of cloths.

An economic advantage of a menstrual cup emerged in qualitative studies with participants – and families – citing mostly cost savings from not needing to purchase pads or soap for laundry.

Two qualitative studies included quotes from participants showing that menstrual cups might decrease the need for transactional sex to purchase pads. This finding might be supported by results from a randomised controlled study among schoolgirls aged 14-16 in rural western Kenya that noted significantly lower prevalence of STI among participants who were provided with either menstrual cups or disposable pads versus i.e. using usual practice, citing lower exposure to transactional sex as a probable reason (The Lancet, August 2019).

In the same study it was reported that HIV incidence rises sharply among adolescent girls, again because 10% of girls 15 years or younger admitted having transactional sex to obtain money to buy pads. This may contribute to girls' exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STI), HIV, pregnancy and subsequent school dropout. (Oruko, 2015; Das, 2015; Balkus 2015)

---

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Privacy is a problem when boiling and storing the cup. However, in comparison to re-usable pads, the MC is preferred. A

challenge when using re-usable pads is the privacy to dry these pads.

Participants mentioned that they are afraid that the cup gets stolen, because girls that have not participated in the study and have no access to a cup might wish to use them as well (WoMena, Uganda March 2018).

## Medical

The evidence that using menstrual cups lowers the rate of bacterial vaginitis prevalence, is postulated due to cups maintaining a healthy vaginal microbiome and pH. This has wider implications for protecting against HIV, STI, and maternal complications. (Phillips-Howard, 2016.)

Use of menstrual cup showed no adverse effects on the vaginal flora.

No mechanical harm on the vagina was evident.

Infection risk did not appear to increase compared to pads or tampons, in some studies it was lower.

Urinary infections and Toxic shock syndrome have been reported in some studies, however it is not clear that this was related with the use of the MC.

Decrease in candidiasis in some studies reported, no study showed increased candidiasis.

Effects on reproductive, digestive or urinary tract: not proven. Problems had mostly to do with the wrong positioning of the cup leading to internal pressure or variations in the pelvic anatomy.

Allergies to materials used are not common. (The Lancet, August 2019)

Monitoring of safety in Kenya showed cups do not increase staphylococcus aureus compared with single-use pads (Juma et al 2017).

No participant of the study was diagnosed with any medical related issues related to the use of the menstrual cup.

(WoMena, Uganda March 2018).

## Technical

Leakage was similar or lower for menstrual cups than for disposable pads or tampons.

Difficulties in removing the cup appeared (The Lancet, August 2019).

The study reports that users are afraid of losing the cup into the latrine when changing (WoMena, Uganda March 2018).

## CHALLENGES

### CLEANING AND STORAGE

Difficulties with cleaning and storage of the menstrual cup in low-income and middle-income countries. Other challenges were associated with emptying the cup on school or public toilets, which was also reported by participants in high-income countries.

When toilets have lack of water, girls and women reported carrying a bottle for hand and cup washing at time of emptying MC (The Lancet, August 2019).

Some cups have been eaten by rats. (WoMena, Uganda March 2018).

### IUD

A possibility of dislodgement of IUD seems to be there. Using of cup and IUD at the same time might have to be looked into (The Lancet, August 2019).

### VIRGINITY

Despite often being perceived as an important community level concern with MC, the risk of 'losing virginity' for younger girls was not mentioned by either menstrual cup recipients, relatives or community members in Uganda (WoMena, Uganda March 2018)

In Kenya, parents and girls considered the need for menstrual care, over-rode any taboo regarding virginity; (Mason, 2013) while in Malawi both parents and girls raised the issue, but were reassured by the answers provided in response to their questions.

## LESSONS LEARNT

- ✓ Menstrual cup projects can be integrated into an organization's existing work. Possible fields are education, WASH, health, community development and others.
- ✓ Menstrual health projects provide a socially acceptable entry point to learn about and improve women's sexual health, to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence and to discuss family planning and sexually transmitted diseases.
- ✓ Successful menstrual cup interventions require up-front investment of time and training to overcome initial reactions to the product such as concerns about size, fear of the unknown and lack of confidence and body knowledge.
- ✓ Cup projects are more successful if elders, chiefs, health workers, teachers, colleagues, parents and local politicians are involved from the start. They need to understand and appreciate the advantages of menstrual cups before distribution of cups starts.
- ✓ Schools in general but especially boarding school staff need to understand cups and provide privacy for changing and clean water. Once after each cycle a cup should be boiled or disinfected.

- ✓ Teaching facts about menstrual myths helps to reduce period-stigma and improve menstrual health and acceptance of cup use.
- ✓ Baseline survey questionnaires should be designed, distributed and the information collated, *before* the training begins.
- ✓ Monitoring & evaluation questionnaires and surveys should be developed and made available for any training.
- ✓ Trainer should have used a cup herself, for at least 3 to 6 months.
- ✓ Sub trainers or influencers should also use cups.
- ✓ Container of cup must not be water and airproof screw top box. If tin or plastic, should have air holes. If fabric, breathable, such as cotton.
- ✓ Instructions must be written for local use. e.g. Cup users in many settings would not have access to sterilizing tablets or microwaves.
- ✓ All information given or printed must be field-tested with a small group before general distribution.
- ✓ Lessons for using cup must be appropriate to country and knowledge level of group.
- ✓ Cleaning instructions should be appropriate to the environment and available funds. Some projects favor issuing users with a small cooking pan, others a used food tin.
- ✓ Cups should only be given out when each girl or woman understands how to use them.
- ✓ New users need 24/7 follow-up contacts (who are competent users themselves).
- ✓ New users may take a few months to use menstrual cups successfully, depending on the extent of the support.
- ✓ Cup users should be contacted after 3 & 6 months for offering support and also to learn from their experiences.
- ✓ Training and follow up with M.cup users after some time of use is very important to give the girls and women a chance to acknowledge problems when using a M.cup and for receiving information on how problems can be solved, e.g. by adjusting the fit and position of the M.cup or by exchanging the M.cup to a smaller or bigger size.
- ✓ Evaluation should be done by independent assessor.
- ✓ Younger women may take 3 or 4 months before using the cup – do not evaluate too soon.
- ✓ Check local media are presenting correct information on cups and menstrual health.

## CONCLUSION

The findings on menstrual cups among adolescent girls and women highlight the efforts to promote the realization of reproductive health. As information and acceptability of M.cups become more widespread nationally, distribution methods that could be considered include social marketing and distribution through youth – friendly services to offer proper guidance on its use and uptake. Other interventions include the provision of information on menstrual flow commodities and guidance and counselling programs for girls.

No evidence emerged to indicate M.cups are hazardous or cause health harms among girls and women. It will not do any harm if the post marketing surveillance should continue to evaluate M.cup safety.

In the context, useful information has been highlighted that may require further research to increase evidence about menstrual cup use, and its appropriateness and acceptability among women and girls.

Women and girls who use cups successfully can be expected to experience improved wellbeing and quality of life, be able to participate more fully in their social and community lives with reduced shame, stress, and during menstruation, and feel more in control of their bodies.

**Menstrual cups have the potential to improve comfort and dignity for girls and women; contribute to increased female school attendance; improve confidence and concentration and thus support better educational outcomes; allow greater participation in sport and physical activities and reduce environmentally damaging waste. Quality, appropriate information and education supports uptake. With the correct information, the demand for menstrual cups is high; while accessibility due to lack of trainers and affordable cups, is low.**



*Two Girls and a Mother in Malawi discussing Menstrual Health Issues*

---

This Report has been compiled by MAGGA and UNFPA, both Lilongwe, Malawi

MAGGA: National Coordinator, Mrs Mphatso Baluwa Jim, P.O. Box 1264, Lilongwe: [girlguides@gmail.com](mailto:girlguides@gmail.com);  
[baluwamphatso@yahoo.com](mailto:baluwamphatso@yahoo.com)

UNFPA: UNFPA Country Representative UNFPA Malawi, Ms. Won Young Hong; UNFPA Malawi Country  
Office, PO Box 30135, Lilongwe – Malawi, [general-inquiries.malawi@unfpa.org](mailto:general-inquiries.malawi@unfpa.org)