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Les soins palliatifs ne sont pas un luxe mais un droit de l'homme et un élément essentiel d'une couverture sanitaire universelle (CSU)

We need to combat the stigmatization, myths and taboos of menstruation

Menstruation a monthly horror for rural/peri-urban girls in Cameroon

De Doreen Bieri

Around the world different organizations work collaboratively on the untold stories centered around the stigmatization, myths and taboos of menstruation. The global aim is to give menstruation a more realistic view, encourage people to talk about it openly and help crave solutions to manage menstruation in a more dignified way in order to help break the taboos centered around this topic. These organizations all strive to promote menstruation as a natural phenomenon and support girls. Menstrual needs remain critical for us to achieve global health and gender equality. One of such organization working to fight the taboo in hard to reach different communities in Cameroon is the Cho Ngafor Foundation in Cameroon.



Dorena pad arrive in Cameroon Photo: © Doreen Bieri

My name is Doreen Bieri, the CEO of Cho Ngafor Foundation. I come from Cameroon. We have been supporting girls in Cameroon to manage menstruation with dignity, to overcome the taboos, to fight the stigma and above all with the production and procurement of Washable pads (Dorena Pads) to use during their periods, instead of cow dung, leaves of trees or pieces of unclean and uncomfortable cloths. The importance of this neglected aspect of a girl's life has largely been demonstrated in our communities by the absenteeism from school, social exclusion, shame, and embarrassment.

Being a mother of three girls, I stand up to uphold and support girls especially those living in hard to reach communities in Cameroon to manage their menstruation with dignity. Working today as a Geriatric Nurse, in Bern – Switzerland, I could not help but feel the pain and destitution in the eyes of the girls every time I visited Cameroon.

My journey and passion of serving humanity became real as I watched girls marveled through endless battles with their family in Cameroon to fight the monthly “horror” every Girl and women faces. Menstruation.

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Cho Ngafor Foundation (www.cnfoundation.ch) with international headquarters in Bern and regional Africa headquarters in Bamenda Cameroon is working hard both abroad and on the ground in Cameroon to address this problem. As an African living abroad, I remain very passionate about my continent of origin. I promote the socio-cultural values of this continent and strive to help when necessary.



Pad production training Bamenda. Photo: © Doreen Bieri

Situation in Cameroon

My father passed away when I gave birth to my daughter, and I could not attend his funeral. I visited his grave three years later. There, I met many children that he taught freely in our dining room. In honor of my father, I founded the Cho Ngafor Foundation in April 2012. Every year on my late father's birthday, I organize activities for children and schools. In 2017, two of the girls were unable to participate in the activities due menstruation. They had to stay in the class; I saw blood dripping. Another girl had the same scenario in the playground. These two girls were sent home through the window. I felt bad about it.

Because of this, *cnfoundation* decided that during every health and sensitization campaign program, we will administer questionnaire as a form of research of women and girls experiencing menstruation in other to better understand how they deal with this topic of menstruation in Cameroon. Our findings identified overarching sociocultural differences, including menstrual stigma, gender norms, limited knowledge on menstruation, limited social support, and externally enforced behavioural expectations, and no access to affordable menstrual hygiene materials.

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Their menstrual experience included shame and distress, and containment of bleeding and odour. This had negative impacts on women's and girls' lives. Our research was limited because it was carried out more in the hard to reach communities where we work. Towns and cities were not included. Owing to these localities where accessibility is very difficult, we saw the need to help the girls and women fight this monthly natural phenomenon otherwise seen as horror with dignity by supplying them with materials for menstruation.



Girls learn how to sew their own pads. Photo: © Doreen Bieri

Washable pads (Dorena-pads) for girls

After returning to Switzerland, I started collecting the unused and leftover sanitary pads from my jobsite. Two years later I was able to send bandages to 321 girls in 3 different villages. But this was not a permanent solution. I could no longer afford them financially. I needed solutions. I started sewing a washable bandage in Switzerland in February 2019, and now I have many

helping hands, and many women who have taken their time to support the project. Today, 1311 girls in various villages in Cameroon have received washable sanitary napkins from *cnfoundation*.

As a result, *cnfoundation* has started training centers in Cameroon so that the washable sanitary napkins can be produced locally. There is availability of material on the market, but lack of resources and sewing machines to help these girls regularly is one of our challenges.

In Switzerland, we sew in the Reformed Church in Bethlehem because there are sewing machines on site. I transport the sewed washable pads in Switzerland to Cameroon by flight, and this even cost us more... My goal is to combat menstrual stigma and to make sure these girls manage their menstruation with dignity. This Stigma also exist in Switzerland despite the availability of varieties of menstrual products.



Sensitization campaign. Photo: © Doreen Bieri

Breaking cultural Taboos

So far, we have reached 3011 girls with washable pads produced in Switzerland and 78 in Cameroun. We want to do more. As of now, 85% of the total production takes place in Switzerland and transported to Cameroon. This is great but not sustainable nor cost effective. To ensure sustainability we the CNFoundation want to support the population in Cameroon with a sewing center so they can produce the pads locally in Cameroon. This will be economically and environmentally friendly, cost effective, create jobs and above all help girls to fight menstrual stigma and attend school regularly.

We are looking for support to realize this dream. We are open and ready to share and partner with everyone interested. We have just shaped a platform and highlight consistent challenges and developed a pathway that could serve rural/peri-urban girls and women in Cameroon on a

long-term basis, to combat the monthly horror.

We want to give them the materials and teach them how to produce these pads alone for themselves and for the immediate communities in need. The Dorena pads will be a long-standing solution to combat the monthly horror these girls face in Cameroon.



Doreen Bieri-Ngafor is Founder and Co- CEO of the Cho Ngafor Foundation. Our vision is to empower the deprived. Presently I am focused on developing sustainable solutions to contribute to menstrual hygiene management especially in rural communities in Cameroon and beyond. I also graduated with a Diploma in Geriatric Nursing from the Swiss Nursing Berufs-Fach und Fortbildung School and the Swiss Red Cross in Bern. Besides this I also earned a Bachelor Degree in English Literature from the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon as well as a Diploma in Computer sciences. For the past thirteen (13) years, I have been working as a Geriatric Nurse and gaining experience in different Health Institutions in and around Bern. Besides working as a Geriatric Nurse, I have close to 12 years of working experiences with as a Philanthropist and Non Governmental Organizations includes: Afro-European Medical and Research Network, and Bridgehead Bern. Email

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