Examining the barriers to attending and completing school for girls in Namugoga, Uganda

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Abstract
The purpose of our research, as representatives of GlobeMed at Northwestern, is to understand the barriers that girls face to attending and completing school at rates compared to boys in Namugoga, Uganda. GlobeMed at Northwestern partners with the Adonai Family Child Development Centre, a school and orphanage that works to serve the surrounding Namugoga community. To investigate this issue, we conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with school-aged girls and teachers in Namugoga. While much of the literature and subsequent actions by NGOs have focused on the lack of adequate menstrual management capabilities as a significant barrier to school access for girls, our findings from the field suggest that the issue is much more complex. The girls and teachers we interviewed cited a multitude of interacting factors contributing to this trend, most notably stemming from high school fees and deeply rooted socio-cultural gender biases. This mainstream focus on menstrual management is problematic, as it does not address the root causes that negatively affect a girl’s ability to succeed in school.

Methodology
We worked directly with the Adonai Centre staff members throughout the development and execution of our research. In particular, we met with the Centre staff members throughout the development of the study, and completed their education. The three of us are members of GlobeMed at Northwestern, whose partner organization is the Adonai Family Child Development Centre in Namugoga, Uganda. This study could provide useful information and feedback to the Adonai Centre in order to implement future programs and obtain necessary resources to address the gender education disparity in the community, and resultantly, improve the livelihood of young girls in the community.

Discussion
The preliminary results of our interviews suggest that there are a multitude of significant factors that interact to negatively affect a girl’s ability to attend and succeed in school at rates compared to boys in Namugoga, Uganda. Much of the academic literature on the subject of girls’ education in Sub-Saharan Africa has focused on the need for better menstrual management techniques, leading to the influx of organizations that aim to distribute sanitary pads and educate communities about their usage into the region. However, the on the ground realities of this issue in our community of study are much more complex. Menstruation rarely came up as a significant factor in our interviews with the school aged girls. Instead, girls only referenced it in association with other issues. This can be a reflection of the social stigma surrounding menstruation, or could suggest that menstrual management is not a primary concern on their minds in relation to school attendance. Deeper structural issues rooted in communal perceptions perpetuate the tendencies for girls to drop out of school at higher rates than boys. The immense poverty in the Namugoga region makes many families unable to afford school fees for their children, and for those families who are able to, a boy’s education is prioritized over that of a girl. If a girl does not have parental support or pressure to attend school, she is at risk of being lured in by older men to engage in sexual activities in exchange for gifts or money, which most families are unable to provide. Due to a lack of contraception and reproductive health awareness, many girls become pregnant, and resultantly are forced to drop out of school or may never return. While the focus on menstruation by Western NGOs has allowed for the introduction of sanitary materials into remote parts of the world, it may inadvertently detract attention from other structural concerns that sustain the education gender disparity.

Conclusion
The preliminary results of this study suggest the need for collaborative action by different community agents in order to begin to effect change and expand access to long-term education for girls in Namugoga, Uganda. Future research could examine secondary school attendance, exam, and graduation records to gather further empirical data surrounding the issue. From this data, we may determine the specific contexts in which girls are most vulnerable to dropping out of school, which would be useful in creating more targeted school attendance programs in the future. We hope that the final data compiled from our research can be used by the Adonai Centre in partnership with local leaders to begin to address the gender education disparity in the community.

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References

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