By Catherine Dolan

Education is essential for all children, whether boys or girls. Yet nothing has proven more important to global development than educating girls. Educated women tend to earn more, be healthier, marry at a later age, and have fewer children. They also raise healthier and better-educated children.

This is why educating girls is also crucial in the fight to eradicate global poverty. Countries that invest in girls' education typically enjoy faster economic growth and lower rates of poverty, and benefit from positive public health outcomes such as lower rates of HIV transmission and of infant and maternal mortality.

Yet, despite considerable progress over the past two decades, there are still over 130 million girls out of school worldwide. The main reason is poverty. For example, in Nigeria, only 4% of girls in the poor North West can read, compared with 99% of girls in the wealthier South East. But poverty also compounds other obstacles to education such as child marriage, early pregnancy, a girl's household responsibilities and social restrictions, as well as the cultural preference for sons.

In recent years, another barrier to girls' education that has gained increased attention is infrastructural constraints such as a lack of latrines, water, and sanitary supplies. Menstruation, in particular, has been found to influence the rates of school participation among adolescent girls. Data show that less than half of girls in lower- and middle-income countries have access to basics such as sanitary towels or tampons, soap and water, or facilities to change, clean, or dispose of hygiene products.

In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, girls often manage their periods in unsafe, uncomfortable, and unhygienic ways, using mud, leaves, or old cloth for sanitary protection, because sanitary products are unaffordable, unavailable, or too shameful for girls to purchase. And schools often lack adequate latrines or separate latrines for boys and girls.

Unable to manage their menses privately and hygienically at school, many girls choose not to go at all. A UNESCO report estimates that 10% of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa miss school during their menstrual cycle, with many dropping out altogether once they begin menstruating.

So what can we do? The solution lies in Menstrual Hygiene Management – ensuring

that girls have access to adequate information, sanitary care, and soap and water with which to manage menstruation in a healthy, safe, and dignified manner. A joint SOAS-Oxford study in eight schools in Uganda found that when girls were given reusable sanitary pads and education about menstruation, their attendance rose by an average of 17%.

In other words, educational outcomes can be improved through a simple solution like a sanitary pad. But this is just a start. Addressing the problem of girls' education requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles the financial, logistical, and cultural barriers to schooling. It's the right thing to do for girls and women – and for the health and wellbeing of society as a whole.

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