



“Moving the Goalposts” sanitary pads project

By Sarah Forde

Abstract

Girls and women in Kilifi District, Kenya are some of the world’s poorest and most disadvantaged people. Low retention in school, early and unwanted pregnancies and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS trap them in a cycle of poverty. Moving the Goalposts Kilifi (MTGK) uses local and youth centred approaches to tackle these issues ensuring girls’ participation as leaders and decision makers. MTGK aims to promote football excellence, youth leadership, reproductive health rights and economic empowerment. As part of this, the organisation is embarking on a project to provide girls and women with affordable sanitary pads, which will not only make this necessity more affordable, but also be an income-generating project for young women soccer players.

Key words

sports, reproductive health, gender

Moving the Goalposts – tackling gender inequality

I play football during my monthly period. Nobody can know because I put cotton wool then two pairs of underwear and then biker shorts. Then I play without any worries. Some girls don’t want to play during their period but they don’t say why.

- Juliet

Juliet is a football player in Kilifi district, Kenya. She is also a member of Moving the Goalposts, a girls’ youth football for development programme based in coastal Kenya. Moving the Goalposts (MTG) was set up in 2002 in an attempt to address issues of gender inequality that face girls and young women in some of the poorest rural districts in Kenya. In Kilifi and the surrounding districts, girls have far fewer opportunities than boys do in terms of education, despite the government’s introduction of Free Primary Education in 2003. Girls carry the burden of early pregnancies and motherhood, as well as illegal and unsafe abortion



Moving the goalposts for gender equality

Photo: Sarah Forde

and are seven times more likely to be living with HIV than their male counterparts are. Unemployment is high amongst all young people, but girls are much less likely to become self-reliant, working as house girls, in catering, the informal sector and as seasonal workers in the tourism industry – all low paid, casual and insecure work with few career opportunities.

It was against such a backdrop of gender inequality that a group of teachers, researchers and football coaches joined and came up with football as a route for girls to take more control of their lives and opportunities. Strange choice, you may be thinking, when girls' problems are related to poverty, inequality, poor health and lack of opportunities. However, the theory behind the approach was that there was a need for more creativity in addressing such issues and that a slightly subversive idea could kick start people into taking more notice of the potential of girls and young women rather than focusing on the problems they encounter. Football was also put forward because of its own problem with inequality; despite it often being referred to as "the global game" it is anything but, and remains skewed heavily towards men in its global outreach. If girls could take part in football, organise their own teams and activities and show everyone that "Tunaweza!" (Kiswahili for "We can do it" – the MTG slogan) then the underlying assumption was that people would start to believe that girls could also achieve more in other areas of their lives.



Girls play, coach and referee all the games

Photo: Sarah Forde

Why football for girls?

Challenges for girls	Through football she can:
Not free to attend meetings, go out	Be reached, mobilised in safe places, socialise positively
Early marriage	Stay longer in school
No schooling	If out of school, delay early marriage
No decisions, even for herself	Build confidence, "If I can play football I can do lots of useful things in my life"
No access to sexual health education	Learn life skills, discuss reproductive health issues with trained peer educators
No leadership or management skills	Learn how to organise leagues, tournaments
Cheap labour (house girls)	Opportunities to gain work experience as volunteer/staff

That theory remains the foundation of MTG's programmes seven years later. As of 2009, MTG employs 16 girls and women and one man – 14 of those staff members are girls and young women from the area who started as volunteers in the organisation. Its activities reach out to close to 3000 girl players at 23 football fields. Girls' empowerment and participation is central in MTG's approach - girls coach their own teams, referee all the matches, provide the first aid and make up the field committees who ensure matches are played and other activities take place.

Football, health, education and training

Once MTG was running, girls were playing, and organising their own football leagues and tournaments, people in the community began to ask MTG, "what else now?" There was general agreement that MTG was providing opportunities for girls and that being involved in football could have an empowering effect, but more was expected from an organisation that had spread its tentacles out to some of the most remote rural spots in the province. So, in 2004 MTG launched its first peer-led health programme focusing on reproductive health and HIV/AIDS by training 10 peer educators, who then went out to discuss teenage issues with girl

footballers. This programme has grown over the years and over 50 peer educators have been trained alongside 12 peer counselors who provide social support and counseling services at the football fields.

Reproductive health and sexuality

With reproductive health and sexuality taking a more central role in MTG's activities, a whole range of complex issues arose as girls had a safe platform to air their adolescent concerns. Questions came flooding in during the health sessions run by the peer educators who documented all the questions they received during the first year. Hundreds were collected, such as - What causes the pains during my periods? How are sanitary pads used? Why do I get angry when I'm menstruating? If I get my period today, miss it tomorrow and get it the day after, do I have a disease? Why, if a boy has approached me, can I spend the whole night thinking about him? What does a girl feel that makes her go to bed with a boy? What can someone do to stop herself having sex, even if she feels like having sex? Why is it that some girls can't do without having sex? Why don't boys get seduced by girls?

In response to some of these questions, MTG published two reproductive health resource books in Kiswahili - the first on menstruation and adolescence and the second on relationships and decision-making, distributed amongst the girls who are members of MTG.

Sanitary protection – an unmet basic need

Menstruation – as the first topic covered by peer educators – became a focal point for a new initiative for MTG. Time and again girls talked about the impact of menstruation on their lives, their education and their participation in sports. It is common knowledge in East Africa that many girls and women in rural and urban areas do not use sanitary pads when they are menstruating because they cannot afford them. As one girl, Ragda, from MTG said, “The next month there was no money for pads so I used pieces of cloth. My mum showed me how to use them. We cut several pieces. She told me to wash them after using them. We call them ‘special’ pieces and I would take them during my periods and put them away after.” It was also becoming increasingly clear, through research and the work of organisations such as MTG, that some young girls and women were having sex in exchange for money so that they could cover the cost of sanitary pads:

*“I go to his place to have sex,
normally every Saturday.
I wouldn’t say I love him but it’s
important that he gives me
money because you could be
having your monthly periods
and you don’t have money
to buy sanitary pads.”*

- Kanze, MTG player, primary school girl,
talking about her boyfriend.



Young girls put their heart into the game Photo: Sarah Forde

Teenage girls are putting themselves at risk of unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, STIs and HIV infection in their search for money to cover their basic needs. In response to the growing evidence that menstruation is having a negative effect on the education aspirations and vulnerability of girls the government of Kenya and NGOs have taken action. In the last budget the finance minister announced the cutting of value added tax (VAT) off the cost of sanitary pads while UNICEF and the Girl Child Network, an NGO in Nairobi, alongside numerous other smaller groups have given out sanitary pads to needy girls. Whilst all these initiatives have created awareness and gone some way to alleviating the problem on a short-term basis the reality is many girls still cannot afford pads.

Cheaper sanitary pads – a social enterprise

With support from the Ford Foundation, MTG has taken the first steps towards finding a longer lasting and sustainable solution to the problem by starting a project to produce affordable sanitary pads out of locally available materials. Dr Moses Kiiza Musaaazi from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda has developed technology to make low cost sanitary pads using papyrus grass and waste paper. The Ugandan

Bureau has approved the pads and they are currently undergoing tests by their Kenyan equivalent. The pads use low technology and can be produced using local labour and minimal equipment.

MTG's project has two wider socio-economic aims: the project will include girls as the marketing points in the community ensuring that they receive the profit from each packet that they sell, improving their economic independence. As Urdang points out, "for younger women there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that when women and girls gain control over economic aspects of their lives, then in turn, the power derived from this control translates to other domains of their lives, including their bodies and reproductive control" (Urdang 2007).

However, MTG, with eight years experience of working with vulnerable young women in coast province, Kenya, recognises that economic status is not the only factor at play in determining the sexual health of young women. Its social aim is to provide information and social support regarding their reproductive health, relationships, pregnancy, safe sex, HIV and AIDS. Each packet of pads will contain information sheets developed in collaboration with various ministries such as health, gender, youth and sports and the provincial administration. A system will allow girls to raise their reproductive health concerns and have them accurately and confidentially dealt with by MTG. This is likely to use mobile phone technology through SMS and a free phone service. A comprehensive research project to monitor the socio-economic impact of the initiative will be developed and piloted in year one. The aim of the research project is to reduce the reliance on anecdotal evidence regarding young women's economic status and their sexual health. It will produce robust information on the project's impact and the possibilities for replicability and scale up of such projects.

MTG's feasibility study carried out in 2008 found that there was a ready market for the sanitary pads if sold at 35 Kenya shillings (US 25 cents) per packet of 10. They were particularly popular in the more rural parts of the district with primary school girls, unemployed

young women and women engaged in small business i.e. making and selling charcoal, selling water etc. Over the next year, MTG will develop the business plan, research plan and source funding for the first three years to initiate production and distribution. MTG expects many challenges and opportunities along the way. Disposal of pads is a big concern. Pit latrines can fill up very quickly, especially in schools, if all girls are using pads. While the pads are almost completely made of natural materials they are enclosed in a plastic mesh cover, which is obligatory for approval by any national Bureau of Standards. Musaaazi also developed an incinerator, which could be installed at schools, but many rural girls and women do not use school facilities and do not have pit latrines in their homes. Finding a way for girls and women to dispose of their pads discreetly and with as little environmental impact as possible will be a challenge.



Empowering girls through sport

Photo: Sarah Forde

Meanwhile MTG's vast network of girls who play football is a huge opportunity. The girls and young women can be extremely effective marketing points in the community. They are well known and respected and they will be able to sell the sanitary pads at the football fields, from their homes and in schools creating a marketing network that can be replicated in other rural areas and provide young women with more opportunities to become self reliant.

References

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Writers Bio

Sarah Forde is the Director of MTG. She is a development professional with experience in sports and development programming, gender and social justice. Her research interest lies in the sexual and reproductive health of teenage girls and the impact of sports participation on their adolescent experiences. She is also a trained radio journalist and worked with the BBC for six years. For more information on Moving the Goalposts <http://mtgk.org>; for more information on sanitary pads made from papayrus grass <http://t4tafrica.com>