A cup of freedom?

A study of the menstrual cup’s impact on girls’ capabilities.

A Bachelor’s thesis by

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Abstract

Managing menstrual hygiene is a problem for many women around the world, especially in developing countries. The lack of access to sanitary products, clean water, knowledge and other necessary resources leads to taboos and health implications, as well as have negative impacts on girls’ education. This thesis investigates if this problem may be improved by the distribution of menstrual cups, by seeking to answer the two following questions; can the usage of the menstrual cup strengthen girls’ participation in education? And; can the usage of the menstrual cup have a positive impact on girls’ possibilities of engaging in social interactions during menstruations? In order to answer these questions, 15 recipients of menstrual cups in Tanzania have been interviewed.

The thesis’ point of departure is within the capability approach, to understand if the girls’ capabilities within the spheres of health, education and social interactions have been strengthened or not. With this approach, the thesis can fully explore the girls’ well-being and opportunities, as the theory defines this as the opportunities they have, not only the ones they choose to pursue.

The findings show that all interviewed recipients chose to continue to use their menstrual cups as they felt that it improved either their economy, health or gave them increased confidence in school as it lowered the risks of visible leakage. Nearly all girls felt less restricted in school and more able to participate in class, talk and play with classmates regardless of menstruating or not. Furthermore, the thesis concludes that the living conditions of the recipients may have affected the positive result, and that it cannot be ruled out that a similar result would have shown with any other sanitary product used correctly.

Key words: menstrual hygiene, menstrual cups, capability approach, girls’ education
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Joanna Sundqvist,
Madrid, 31st of December 2014
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EEPA</td>
<td>Europe External Policy Advisors</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
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<td>MHM</td>
<td>Menstrual hygiene management</td>
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<td>SSWM</td>
<td>Sustainable sanitation and water management</td>
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<td>TZS</td>
<td>Tanzanian Shilling</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>WASH</td>
<td>Water, sanitation and hygiene</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Menstrual hygiene and its impact on development

All over the world, menstruation is seen as something private and hush-hush. Although the extent varies, depending on country, culture and religious beliefs, the message is the same to most women in the world; menstruation is something, albeit inevitable, quite embarrassing and to be kept to oneself (Farage and Maibaich, 2006). As a Western woman this may only affect you in the way that you feel ashamed of talking about your menstrual pains with your male co-workers, whereas for girls in developing countries in Asia or Africa the implications often are far more severe. The notion of girls’ and women’s impurity and uncleanliness during the menstruation is found in several religions, from a passage in the Bible clearly stating that a menstruating woman and all she touches is unclean, to the widespread rule within Islam that women are not to touch the Qu’ran or go to the mosque during menstruations (EEPA, 2007). These ideas still permeate many societies and cultures.

The taboos surrounding girls’ and women’s menstruation often lead to misconceptions and ignorance on the subject of menstrual hygiene and menstrual hygiene management (MHM). This, in addition to the many practical problems that exist, turns menstrual hygiene or the lack thereof into a problematic obstacle for women’s empowerment and development. Due to its effects on girls’ health and education, menstrual hygiene is one, sometimes overlooked, part of the matter of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – a problem area that the United Nations (UN) has included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2015. The UN states that although the goals for drinking water have been achieved globally, the goals for sanitation have not (UNICEF, 2013).

One implication is, as mentioned above, its negative effect on girls’ schooling. This has been researched by both United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and reports show that parents and girls in many development countries say that most girls miss some school days every menstruation due to lack of sanitary products and access to clean, safe toilets in school where the girls can manage their menstruation in privacy (UNESCO, 2014; UNICEF, 2012). There are also studies showing that even if the girls do go to school during menstruations, it often affects their studies negatively since the girls choose to not participate fully in class by, for example, being unwilling to answer questions on the blackboard in front of the class. This has been explained by fear of leakage, as it would reveal the menstrual status of the girl in front of
the other children which is considered shameful among many (House et al, 2012; The Netherlands Development Organization/IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, 2012; World Health Organization, 2009).

In addition to the education aspect of menstrual hygiene, there are also health implications. The risks of infections increase when girls do not have access to clean water to be able to manage their hygiene, as well as when lack of resources forces girls to use unsanitary old cloths or similar instead of pads or tampons to absorb the blood (House et al, 2012). The practice of douching; a practice where water is flushed into the vagina several times per day, common in Afghanistan and a number of different countries, also increases the risk of pelvic infections (ibid.).

### 1.1.2. The menstrual cup

The menstrual cup was first designed and patented in the 1930s by Leona Chalmers. The cup was very similar to those of today; a small cup that were to be inserted into the vagina to collect, instead of absorb, the menstrual blood. As it is reusable, instead of disposable, it would save money for women and be more environmentally friendly. The cups of today come in many different colours and materials and are being marketed as hygienic, environmentally friendly and money saving (Museum of Menstruations and Women’s health, 2006). In 2011, the Danish menstrual cup company Ruby Cup received Sida’s Innovations against poverty grant on 128,000 USD to fund an initiative that had been started a few years earlier. The company wanted to distribute their product to girls and women in Kenya, with an estimation of reaching 100 women during the year of 2014, 20,000 by 2015 and to have sold 1 500,000 menstrual cups in Kenya within five years (Sida, 2014).

A survey conducted by the company prior to the launch in Kenya, showed that a high number of girls in Kibera answered yes to the question of whether or not they had ever sold their body for sex to be able to afford menstrual hygiene products (ibid.). This is just one out of several initiatives where the founders believe the menstrual cup to be a potential solution to many problems related to menstrual hygiene. The alleged advantages of the cups, compared to disposable pads and tampons, are that the cups last up to ten years (depending on manufacturer, maintenance of cup, etcetera) and therefore serves well in countries where the income is low and pads and tampons are difficult to afford for many people. Furthermore, it

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1 The menstrual cups are being sold in Kenya for a symbolic sum; 100 Kenyan Shillings (approximately 1 USD) per cup. (Ruby Cup, 2014).
can be used up to 12 hours without emptying, which could be very helpful in situations where access to toilets is limited, and to sanitise the cup it only needs boiling after each menstrual period (House et al., 2012).

One of the main disadvantages of the cup is that it is not accepted in all cultures for girls to insert anything into their vagina before being sexually active, thus making it an unlikely option in some countries. Also, although the cup’s lifespan may be long, the initial cost is high in comparison to pads or tampons. In addition to this, it is common that women go through physical changes due childbirth or ageing, which causes the need of getting a new cup in a different size. Lastly, the lack of access to clean water to use for rinsing the cup during the menstruations as well as inadequate storage in between menstruations may impact negatively on the hygiene of the menstrual cup (ibid.).

### 1.1.3. The “Lingonsystrar” Initiative

In 2013 a Swedish initiative, “Lingonsystrar”\(^2\), was launched by LadyCup, a Swedish menstrual cup retailer, and during the fall and winter of 2013 menstrual cups were handed out to girls and women in the Tanzanian cities of Arusha, Dar es Salaam and Moshi. In addition to this, the girls and women also received one class with information on menstrual hygiene and how to use the menstrual cup. This information was given in groups of different sizes; ranging from small groups of just two or three girls or women, up to the largest groups of girls at Msiriwa Secondary school where 60 girls received the training together.

The initiative was started after LadyCup decided that they wanted their cups to reach girls and women in other countries, who could benefit from using cups but were unable to buy them for themselves. For this, a fundraising was initiated, where a percentage of each sold cup in Sweden would go to the menstrual cup initiative. This way, the Lingonsystrar project managed to fund 279 cups in total. These cups were distributed in Tanzania, since one of the partners of the initiative had carried out her Bachelor’s thesis on the island of Zanzibar, where she investigated school dropout rates and learnt about the connection between menstrual hygiene and education (Lingonsystrar, 2013). Because of this, Tanzania became a natural country to choose, with the initial idea to target the already interviewed girls.

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\(^{2}\) “Lingon” in Swedish means lingonberry, and the menstruation is often called “lingonberry week” by women in Sweden. “Systrar” means sisters, thus the meaning of the name can be interpreted loosely as “Sisters in menstruation”.
1.2. Aim and research questions

With the point of departure in the capability approach, this thesis is an abductive study where the menstrual cup’s usefulness as a development aid will be examined through interviews with participants of the menstrual cup initiative Lingonsystrar which took place in Tanzania. Additionally, this thesis is based in the theory of feminist post-structuralism, where gender, and concepts of typical ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviour, is understood as socially constructed and re-constructed through language, taught ‘gendered’ behaviour and societal norms (Butler, 1990). The purpose of the study is to investigate if the distribution of menstrual cups in development countries can have positive impacts on girls’ possibilities within education as well as a positive effect on their social interactions with friends. If the recipients are actually using the menstrual cups – do they feel that it is giving them greater freedoms to attend classes and be active in class regardless of if they are menstruating or not? Are they able to spend time with friends, or do other things in their spare time, which they may have been unable to do previously due to feelings of being restricted by the menstruation? If they are not using them – why is that?

Furthermore, this study aims at researching if the menstrual cup is a useful tool to further strengthen women’s empowerment through education; being mentioned as a possible solution to at least parts of the problem with menstrual hygiene in developing countries, it is highly relevant to research the actual outcome for the participants of an initiative. By evaluating Lingonsystrar’s project and talking to recipients of cups, conclusions may be drawn on what the weaknesses and strengths are with this particular hygiene product as a development aid.

Questions to be researched within this study:

*Can the menstrual cup be a useful tool to strengthen girls’ participation in education?*

*Can the usage of a menstrual cup have a positive impact on girls’ possibilities of engaging in social interactions and activities during their menstruations?*

1.3. Limitations

Prior to commencing the field study in Tanzania, a few limitations had to be made. Firstly, the study does not seek to answer the question on whether or not the participants of this specific initiative are in general actually using their cups. Ergo, the ratio of non-users to users among
the interviewees does not in any way attempt to make generalised assumptions on the actual usage, neither within this group, nor in general. The objective is strictly to investigate if the menstrual cup can or cannot increase capabilities in different aspects of life, not to answer the question of ‘success’ of the initiative. However, the reasons for why different individuals choose to use or not use the cup is interesting; an informed choice of not using the cup still means that the girl’s capabilities have indeed increased as she can, if she so wishes, use the cup. If the reason for not using the cup is lack of information and understanding of how to use it however, her capabilities have not increased as she does not have a real possibility of actually using it. Secondly, there are many capabilities that may be affected by the usage of certain hygiene product but in this study I have chosen to limit my investigation to three spheres in life; social interaction, education and health. In the chapter of theoretical framework, this is explained more at length. This limitation has been made to make the thesis doable, since trying to cover all possible capabilities simply would be too big of an assignment for 10 weeks of thesis-writing.

1.4. Previous empirical studies

As shown in the introduction, there are several studies made by prominent organisations that conclude why menstrual hygiene is an important matter to take into account when understanding girls’ and women’s challenges in their daily lives. For example, a study commissioned by UNICEF on menstrual hygiene in Bangladesh researched women’s and girls’ thoughts on menstruation and menstrual management. The study shows that the women and girls typically used folded cloths to absorb the blood and that they were struggling to avoid leakage. In addition to this, it also proved to be difficult for the women and girls to manage the used cloths, as they needed a secluded place for washing and drying them. Especially the drying process was difficult, as it required the women to place the wet pieces of fabric out in the sunshine where others risked seeing them. This made the girls and women leave them out for as short time as possible, thus having to sometimes use damp or even wet cloths as menstrual protection (Bharadway and Patkar, 2004).

Furthermore, empirical studies have been made on the subject of sanitary products and their usability. For example, in 2008-2009, research teams from University of Oxford conducted research in Ghana, where disposable sanitary pads were handed out to girls who previously had not had such resources (University of Oxford, 2009). Among their findings were that a majority of the girls claimed to feel less inhibited and restricted by their periods, and that the overall absence from school was cut by a little more than half. In addition to this,
the study also shows that the disposable pads come with what was perceived as a disadvantage by many of the girls; that someone may see the used pads in the bin and understand that the girl is menstruating. This was perceived mostly as a problem by the girls living in rural areas and sharing their toilets with several families (ibid.).

In collaboration with Uganda Red Cross society, a study was conducted in 2012 by Danish organisation WoMena, where menstrual cups were handed out to 31 women, between the ages of 18 and 32, living in Kitgum, Uganda. After having tested the cups, a majority of the women said that it was better than whatever menstrual solutions they had had in the past, and that they felt more comfortable and less restricted when using the cups (Tellier et al, 2012). While some women had experienced storage issues in between usage, with rats chewing on the cups, most said that they kept them stored in metal boxes or drawers to keep them safe. The women emphasised that information and recommendations on how to store the cups are essential. Another important finding was that several of the participants found it difficult to insert or remove the cups in the beginning, but that they after some time found it easier and more comfortable (ibid.).

Another study on menstrual cups, conducted in Nepal in 2006-2008, had a different outcome than the abovementioned study. After having distributed menstrual cups to adolescent girls from four schools, approximately 60 per cent of the recipients were still using the cups six months after distribution. In addition to this, the study showed that the average rate of classes missed was almost unaffected (Oster and Thornton, 2009). Although the majority of the participators of the study said that they found the cup to be convenient and comfortable, it did not have a notable impact on their actual participation in school. This may be explained by the fact that the main stated reason for absence from school during menstruations was menstrual cramps, a problem left unaffected by the menstrual cup, rather than vaginal pains or issues with leakage (ibid.).

1.5. Structure

The structure of the study is as follows; in Chapter 1 - Introduction, the research problem is presented with background on the issue of menstrual hygiene, menstrual cups as well as a short presentation of the initiative whose participants I have interviewed. It also contains the objective of the thesis, the research question that it aims to answer, limitations of the study, the previous empirical studies that have been conducted on this subject, and lastly the structure of the thesis. In Chapter 2 – Analytical framework, the theoretical framework is outlined, with a presentation of the capabilities approach, and is followed by Chapter 3 –
Methodology where the methodology used for the thesis is being explained, including what type of interviews that have been conducted, how the interviewees were selected as well as necessary ethical considerations. In Chapter 4 – Presentation of research results, the findings of the study are presented. In Chapter 5 - Analysis is the analysis of this study, where the data collected is analysed through the chosen theoretical framework. In the final chapter, Chapter 6 – Conclusion and recommendations for future research, the thesis and its findings are concluded. The chapter ends with a few recommendations for future research.
2. Analytical framework

In the capability approach (sometimes called “the capabilities approach”), Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, together with other well-reputed theorists such as philosopher Martha Nussbaum, has formulated an approach where well-being and advantage is defined "*in terms of a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being*" (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993:30). According to this approach, each person is to be considered as an end, not a mean, when we are discussing human development and well-being. Whereas in for example human capital theory, people and their capabilities are seen as means to achieve economic growth, in capability approach all capabilities an individual has are valuable as it is increasing this person’s freedom of choice and opportunities, regardless of if these capabilities or opportunities will lead to economic growth or not (Nussbaum, 2000). Thus, with this theoretical framework, this thesis can research whether or not these girls perceive that their capabilities and freedoms have increased or not by the usage of the menstrual cup.

In addition to this, the notion of considering each person as an end may be very beneficial when it comes to researching women’s rights and possibilities. In theories where a person is a mean to economic growth, women and their well-being may be reduced to their function within the family, i.e. care-givers and reproducers, with little or no focus on whether or not the women themselves are fulfilled and have the opportunities that they consider to be valuable (*ibid.*). Instead, what becomes important to pinpoint is if the family as an entity, and the woman as a function within the family, produces and increases economic growth. With the capability approach, these women are not to be seen as solely a part of a family, but as individuals with their own capabilities or lack thereof. Thus, it allows us to focus on each individual and the state of their well-being, with the women’s possibilities and freedoms being just as important as those of their husbands or children. According to Nussbaum, too many approaches are “male-focused” in their way of valuing and understanding development issues, and by being so miss out on important aspects of the problems that women actually face and struggle with in their daily lives (Nussbaum, 2000).

Another important part of the capability approach is its take on ‘agency’; where agency is understood as being able to act and create change that the agent her- or himself feels is necessary and good. According to this approach, this action should be evaluated and valued through the goals and opinions of the agent, rather than whether or not it brings about what is considered by others as a good choice for the agent (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).
2.1. Functionings and capabilities

The capability approach has two main concepts that make out the core of the theory; *functionings* and *capabilities*. “Functionings” can be described as beings and doings, i.e. the parts of the state of a person, everything an individual may be or aspire to be (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). The term “capabilities” on the other hand signifies the opportunities to achieve these beings and doings. As stated by Sen; “[t]he approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various ‘doings and beings’, with quality of life to be assessed in the terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings” (Sen in Nussbaum and Sen, 1993:31). This means that the well-being of a person, according to this approach, should be understood through whether or not an individual has the possibilities to achieve, to do or to be, what is perceived by this individual as valuable in their life. This stands in contrast to other theories, where well-being may be defined in for example financial or material means, such as wealth. These opportunities can also be described as freedoms, i.e. having the freedom to achieve something if the person so wishes. This makes these capabilities valuable regardless of if the person decides to pursue them or not, as merely having the choice is understood as increasing the person’s overall well-being.

2.2. Nussbaum’s list of central human functional capabilities

Although Sen has never argued that there is a need to formulate any specific functionings or capabilities, since these have a wide range and may cover any doings or beings perceivable, he has mentioned for example education to be one of the few functionings crucial for well-being (Walker and Unterhalter, 2010). Nussbaum on the other hand argues that there are a certain set of fundamental capabilities that should be supported by governments all over the world to be able to strengthen people’s possibilities of achieving these opportunities. The list is called “Central human functional capabilities” and make out in total ten categories ranging from “Life” (i.e. to be able to live a full life and not die prematurely) to “Control over ones environment” (both politically, being able to be politically active and have freedom of speech, and materialistically; being able to hold property) (Nussbaum, 2000).

Other items on the list are “Bodily Integrity”; to be able to move freely, without having to fear sexual assaults or domestic violence, as well as having the opportunities to decide over matters of reproduction and sexual satisfaction, “Emotions”; to be able to love, grieve and to experience longing, gratitude and anger, “Practical Reason”; to be able to critically reflect on one’s life and how to plan it, and “Affiliation”; to be able to concern for others, to have the capability of friendship and justice, to engage in social interactions, as well
as being treated as an equal, to not be discriminated against and to be treated with dignity \textit{(ibid.)}. These are interesting categories that can all be related to different development issues, however there are other items on Nussbaum’s list that may be of more significance for understanding the capabilities that may be improved by using the menstrual cup. Such items are “Senses, Imagination, and Thought”; a category that includes both the capability of thinking, reasoning, and imagining, in a way that is strengthened and encouraged through education, as well as being able to have pleasurable experiences, to contemplate and search for the meaning of life. In addition to this, there is also the category called “Play”; to be able to have recreational activities, to have fun, to laugh and to play. These are the two categories that will function as foundation within this thesis for investigating how the menstrual cup may or may not have strengthened the girls’ and women’s capabilities. The item called “Bodily Health”; to be able to be of good health, is also relevant and although not a primary focus in this thesis, it is naturally brought into the thesis as our health status in many ways affects our life in general. Being of good health is very much a prerequisite to be able to go to school, see friends, and enjoy your daily life thus influencing the other items on the list of capabilities.

According to Nussbaum, the most controversial category on the list is “Other species”; \textit{“Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature”} (Nussbaum, 2000: 80). Indeed, the list itself is being discussed and critiqued among theorists. Both the universality of it, as well as the need for it is being questioned. Nussbaum argues that there is no culture where \textit{“people do not ask themselves what they are able to do, what opportunities they have for functioning”} (Nussbaum, 2000: 100), and that there is a need for a list of basic human capabilities, a list that may be altered and improved during time, as it can function as a fundament for understanding quality of life, and to pin point what governments should focus on to increase the well-being of their people \textit{(ibid.)}. Regardless of whether or not the Nussbaum’s list of capabilities should be considered universally applicable or relevant for all governments and countries, it is still an interesting point of departure for a study based on the capability approach, as it in a neat manner narrows down all possible combination of capabilities into a more concrete set of possibilities to use as a starting point.
3. Methodology

The interviews will be the main basis for data collection, where the interviewees’ opinions are at centre. With the fundamental idea that it is the girls themselves who are the most fit to answer the questions of what they need and gain from, it is with the girls that this knowledge is to be found. Being an inductive study, through a bottom-up perspective, it attempts to draw conclusions from these interviews on the usability and effectiveness of the menstrual cup as a development aid for girls and women. With the focal point of both examining its usefulness in school as well as its potential as development aid, both school girls and older women who have children have been interviewed, to not only gain understanding of the adolescent girls’ point of view but also to see if it is probable that women may recommend the solution for their daughters.

3.1. Interviews

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually. Given the nature of the matter, interviewing the girls individually may have been the only way to get the interviewees to feel comfortable enough to answer questions on what is viewed by many as such a sensitive and private topic. Only one group interview was conducted and that was with a group of four female teachers. The women felt relaxed and unashamed to discuss menstruation and hygiene and all spoke freely and openly about the matter. None of the women asked to be interviewed individually, and the group discussion progressed smoothly and in an unconstrained manner.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. A semi-structured interview is a mixture of the two different types; structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews, which may include closed format questions (i.e. questions that can be answered simply by yes and no), give us the opportunity to steer the interview, where it is heading and what needs to be answered (Walliman, 2011). However, it may give little space for the interviewees to reason and contribute with their own ideas and thoughts, as it does not necessarily encourage the interviewee to think more freely and answer anything but the formulated question.

An unstructured interview has no closed format questions, and is more flexible in its manner (ibid.). In this setting, the interviewer may ask questions that will encourage the interviewee to speak freely and to talk about whatever he or she finds most interesting or important on the specific topic. By choosing to conduct the data collection through semi-structured interviews, I as an interviewer could start off with specific questions that I needed answering, and after that have conversations more loosely based on different themes, thus
allowing the interviewees to speak more freely. This gave me the chance of gaining useful information that I did not ask for, as well as get a more in-depth understanding on what the interviewees find to be most important (Fontana and Frey, 1994).

The interviews were carried out with the help of an interpreter, since I do not speak Kiswahili and most of the interviewees have a limited, if any, knowledge of English. The interpreter was chosen in agreement with the representatives of Lingonsystrar and the choice has both weaknesses and strengths. To start with, it was essential to choose a female interpreter given the nature of the subject. Although it is not impossible to find female interpreters, it does narrow down the potential candidates for obvious reasons. Lingonsystrar hired a university educated woman as a translator during the distribution of the cups, as well as the trainings on how to use them, and recommended her as suitable for this study as well, since her proficiency in English is high and she is efficient and good to work with. The potential advantage of hiring an interpreter that has already met the interviewees is that, having already met and talked to them, there is a greater chance that they will feel relaxed and comfortable talking to him or her. Also, this specific interpreter already had an understanding of the subject of menstrual cups and menstrual hygiene, which means that she is already knowledgeable on the matter and the risks of misunderstandings are lower.

The disadvantage is that there may be a risk of the girls feeling obliged to answer in a certain way, since they may associate the interpreter with the project. Also, if the interpreter him or herself feel strongly about the project, there is a risk that they unintentionally influence the interviewees in how to answer the questions; i.e. that the interpreter does not only translate but reason with the interviewees. However, there is always a risk of difficulties when interviewer and interviewee do not share the same mother tongue and the interview has to be conducted through a translator, so what is very important is that the researcher is aware of the risks (Fontana and Frey, 1994). In the case of this study, the final choice of working with the recommended interpreter was made when I found out that she does not work with the project on a daily basis and has not been involved in it since the fall of 2013. Furthermore, the problem of bias and influence exists within the researcher as well, not only the interpreter. As a Swedish middleclass woman, my cultural background varies substantially from those of the interviewees, which puts me in a position where I as a researcher must be wary not only of my

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3 Kiswahili and English are both official languages of Tanzania, but the knowledge of English varies depending on level of education, class etcetera (Rubagumya, 1991).
4 Interview, September 2014, Lingonsystrar’s representative Sanna Järtstjö
own bias but also of how I interpret and understand the answers that I am given. Not only am I missing out on small, cultural “clues” when interviewing, I am also seeing the world through my cultural perspective (Fontana and Frey, 1994).

To ensure that the interviews had been translated correctly for me, and that the questions were not argumentative when translated into Kiswahili, I asked for a second opinion after having conducted a third of all interviews. A native Kiswahili speaker, with high proficiency in English, listened to parts of several interviews and judged them to be adequately translated and the interpreter to have done a correct and unbiased job.

3.2. Selection of interviewees

As mentioned previously, close to 280 girls and women have been reached by the Lingonsystrar initiative. Out of these 280 I have interviewed 15 girls in total; all of them 14 or 15 years old. How many that was to be interviewed depended on two factors; my time frame and limitations, as well as the ongoing results of the interview. Being a qualitative inductive study, the findings of a small number of people may be sufficient to draw conclusions for the topic all depending on the quality of the data. Due to this, the number of interviewees was not set but was adjusted on place as I saw fit for the study.

The 15 girls belong to two different school classes at the Msiriwa Secondary School and have together all received their training on how to use the menstrual cups. Within the two school classes, interviewees were selected randomly after asking if there was anyone who was interested in being interviewed. To be able to ensure that the interviews gave as much information as possible, I also intended to use the so called snowball or chain sampling, a sampling method where the interviewer ask knowledgeable persons to, based on their insight in the matter, recommend other individuals that may be suitable for interviewing (Patton, 1990). In this case, this could apply to teachers, representatives of the initiative or the interviewees themselves. By doing so, my idea was to be able to select my interviewees in a manner to gain more information. If for example all interviewees that I talked to so far were not using the cup, thereby not giving me any information on how using the cup can affect their school life, daily life, etcetera, I could by snowball sampling increase my chances to reach girls or women who may actually have been able to provide this information.

In addition to the 15 girls, nine older women have also been interviewed, some of them in their role as teachers of a primary school, some as mothers who have been introduced to the menstrual cups. These women have all been selected through the method of snowball sampling, where I and the interpreter have gotten in touch with them through
recommendations from the representative of the Lingonsystrar initiative as well as women in the area.

3.3. Ethical considerations

When conducting a study there are always ethical considerations that must be taken into account (Fontana and Frey, 1994). There may be issues of ethics when it comes to how the interviews are conducted or how the interviewees are treated and perceived, to mention just a few. Within this study, I as a researcher have made my utmost to be as aware as possible on how my presence as a white European woman may be perceived, as well as show respect and humility towards everyone I met. In addition to this, all interviews were of course voluntary and optional and conducted with highest discretion and confidentiality. All interviewees were asked if they felt comfortable with me using a recorder to record their answers, and told that I would be happy to use pen and paper to take notes instead. The minimum amount of personal details were noted on each person, and no names have been used – instead the interviews are named in notes and thesis after the number of the interview (1 for first interview, etcetera) and where it took place (for example “Msiriwa” for the interviews with the girls at Msiriwa Secondary School).
4. Presentation of research results

The area of Uru belongs to the municipality of Moshi, and is situated in northern Tanzania. Uru is divided into several small towns and villages, one being Msiriwa which also has its own secondary school; Msiriwa Secondary School. Here, approximately 60 teenage girls have received a menstrual cup through the initiative of Lingonsystrar, together with a few female teachers. I visited the school on several occasions, and had the chance to discuss the menstrual cups with 15 girls, some of the teachers as well as the headmaster.

4.1. Elementary findings

Out of the 15 interviewed girls, all 15 were regularly using the menstrual cups they had been given. The majority said that the cleaning and managing of the cups was easy and that they followed the steps they were taught during the training. When asked how they cleaned and took care of their cups, everyone answered in a similar way; they would boil the cup regularly at home during menstruation and before storing until their next period. In school, they could easily empty the cup and rinse it with water before inserting it again. The restrooms in school were described as good by all girls; private and with access to water. In between their menstruations, all girls said that they keep their cups stored in the bag they received with it and always safely tucked away in their underwear drawers or cupboards.

Previous to the cups, close to all girls had been using different types of pads (brand depending on price and availability), and only a few said they had used kargas. Kanga is the name of the typical Tanzanian garments that women usually wear. It can be a beautiful, colourful fabric used as a skirt, wrapped around the waists, as well as an old piece of cloth used for cleaning or similar. When used during menstruations, girls and women normally take two pieces of kanga and fold them several times before putting it in their underwear. It creates a thick and quite rough protection to keep the blood from escaping through the underwear and skirt. Typically, the girls using kargas come from families for whom the pads are simply too expensive to buy. The types of pads being sold varies depending on where they are being sold, with prices ranging from 2500 Tanzanian shillings (TZS) which is approximately 1.5 USD for one pack of eight to ten pads, to 2000 TZS (just over 1 USD) for one single pad.

None of the girls had used tampons before and in general tampons are hard to come by in rural Tanzania. Although sold in some stores in bigger towns, they are expensive and difficult to find. In most stores in the villages of Uru-West, where Msiriwa is situated, tampons are not available for purchase.
To be able to get information from girls who were not using the cups, I tried to talk to the girls and teachers to see if they had heard of anyone who were not happy with the cup or had experienced any sort of problems. However, no one had heard of anyone. The interpreter emphasised that this does not necessarily mean anything, since it is very likely that the girls do not discuss these matters with each other. The biology teacher of the school also said that he had on several occasions inquired in class if the girls were happy with the cups, but not being able to get any information. Being male, he was not surprised since it was unlikely that the girls would share this information with him.

4.2. The girls’ initial thoughts of the menstrual cups

When being introduced to the cups, the girls received education on how to use them. As previously stated, this training was conducted by a Swedish representative for Lingonsystrar together with the interpreter. Divided into two big groups, the girls got to see and touch the cups, and get information on how to use them, clean them, store them and what to keep in mind when using one. All 15 interviewed girls stated that they were present during this training and that they felt that they had understood what had been said. The reactions and thoughts of the cups naturally varied among the girls, some of them were quite relaxed and unconcerned;

“The first time I saw the cup, I thought it was actually a good idea.”

Whereas others expressed that they in the beginning thought it was very strange, mostly because they had never in their lives heard of this type of product, and because of that did not know anyone using them;

“I thought it was a strange thing, I had never seen it before. I had never heard about it […] I felt it was very strange.”

A few girls had initially thought it was very weird and felt reluctant to try them but were then reassured in different ways. One of them said that the education helped her understand;

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5 Interview, November, 2014, teacher, Msiriwa, Tanzania.
6 Interview, November 2014, girl 2, Msiriwa, Tanzania
7 Interview, November 2014, girl 3, Msiriwa, Tanzania
“The first time I saw the cup I didn’t understand, I was even thinking how to place it. I had never heard of anyone who uses it. [...] But with the education I started to understand.”\textsuperscript{8}

Another girl said that she had felt worried after participating in the training and that she needed to discuss it with her mother before trying it, since she was scared of possible implications of using the cup. Her mother had then told her to at least try it, and that if she did not like it, she would not have to use it again\textsuperscript{9}. According to the interpreter who carried out the training, many of the girls were initially worried about using the cup. The most common questions asked about the cups were if there was any risk that the cup would harm their virginity, if the cup could get lost in the body and be impossible to get out, or if the cup could in any way affect the possibilities of getting pregnant\textsuperscript{10}. Other questions were more practical; regarding whether or not the cup could fall out, if it would be difficult to keep clean as well as if the girls could trust it to not leak blood. The risk of the cup falling out was brought up by one of the girls in the interview;

“I thought it was strange, first time I thought maybe it will fall out.”\textsuperscript{11}

But as she kept on talking, she explained that the initial feeling of the cup falling out eventually went away thus allowing her to actually enjoy other effects of the cup, positive effects, and because of this she kept on using it. Seven of the girls expressed that the cup in the beginning felt uncomfortable and awkward to use, but that after having used it several days during menstruations it gradually started feeling more comfortable until they felt no discomfort. One girl for example, said that she did not like the cup in the beginning and when asked why she kept on using it, she answered;

“I thought I had to try to because during the education they said that it can feel weird in the beginning but if you repeat and repeat it is better. So I was thinking, I should repeat and repeat and then it started feeling fine.”\textsuperscript{12}

Another girl answered the following to the question on why she kept on using the cup even though she felt it was very awkward and weird to use it to start with;
“The first time it was very awkward and annoying, very annoying [...] I could not even play but when I got more used to it, I could even jump.”\textsuperscript{13}

She explained that the awkwardness she felt initially gradually went away and that after a while, she did not feel the cup at all after inserting it.

On my first visit to the school I was approached by two girls who had not received a cup, who asked to be interviewed by me. After some talking, I found out that they thought that by being interviewed by me, they would also get a menstrual cup. When asked why they wanted one, they said that they had heard that they were good\textsuperscript{14}. Any more information than that was impossible to get, since the girls were both shy and reluctant to talk, especially after finding out that I did not represent the initiative and had not brought any more cups with me.

4.3. Expressed reasons for using the menstrual cup

Among the 15 girls, there were three main areas that were brought up as reasons for using the cup; positive financial effects, positive effects on health, and increased protection against visible leakage. Some of the girls mainly mentioned one of the three, and others two or all three.

4.3.1. Financial reasons

The financial aspect of using the cup was repeatedly brought up by the girls. Even among girls who saw no or few other advantages with the cup compared to the pads stated that they used it because it would save them and their family money. One girl for example said that she found the cup a little bit more complicated to use in school than pads, preferring the pads and that they can be thrown away easily after usage instead of having to be “dealt with”, but she still used the menstrual cup every menstruation since it would save her money\textsuperscript{15}. Another girl explained;

“When I [attended] the education of the cup I was thinking that the pads are expensive for me and that the cup will not be expensive for me, so I thought it’s better to learn to use it and save money.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Interview, November 2014, girl 7, Msiriwa, Tanzania
\textsuperscript{14} Interview, November 2014, girl 1 and 16 [not recipients of cups], Msiriwa, Tanzania.
\textsuperscript{15} Interview, November 2014, girl 2, Msiriwa, Tanzania
\textsuperscript{16} Interview, November 2014, girl 3, Msiriwa, Tanzania
This girl also explained how she had problems during menstruations when she was using the pads, as the pads would get very full and require changing, which could be difficult some months if she had no money to buy more pads. Then, the only solution would be to re-use the old pad which by then would be way too worn to function well. The cup, she said, is better as long you know how to take care of it and explained that you can empty and rinse the cup when needed, which meant that it would not get too full or need changing for a new one. Instead, it could be used as many times as you like.

Another girl happily explained how she now can use the money she used to spend on pads, on other things instead:

“Before I used the pads but it was very expensive, because sometimes I even had to ask my mother for extra money. Now, I can use the money for pads to buy new underpants and school material.”17

The financial reason was not brought up by girls who were using kangas, naturally, since the kangas cost the family practically nothing, if anything at all. Instead, they had replaced one free of charge solution with another to enjoy, as they saw it, the advantages of the cup.

4.3.2. Health reasons

One strong reason for many of the girls to use the cup instead of pads or kangas was that they experienced that the cup had much more positive effects on their health compared to the other two available solutions. One of the girls who used to use kangas said that she preferred the cup instead, since she would get bruises and wounds previously during her menstruations when using the folded kangas. She explained that the kangas would get heavy and warm when they start to get wet from the blood, causing itching, chafing and pain18. This was also said by girls using pads – that the pad would, when wet, cause chafing and bruises. When asked why the girls preferred the cup to the pads, several answered in a manner similar to this girl;

“Because it doesn’t give bruises or blisters. You feel more comfortable, you feel free.”19

The girls who had previously worn pads during menstruation all explained how they would re-use pads to save money. Instead of changing to a new one when needed, the girls would

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17 Interview, November 2014, girl 7, Msiriwa, Tanzania
18 Interview, November 2014, girl 5, Msiriwa, Tanzania
19 Interview, November 2014, girl 12, Msiriwa, Tanzania
simply keep on using the same one although it was very full which, would make the pads feel warm, heavy and unpleasant to wear. In addition to this, the pad, when overly full, would cause itching and an overall feeling of not feeling ‘fresh’. One of the girls also said that she used to have yeast infections earlier, and had been struggling with it during quite some time, especially during menstruations. However, since starting with the cup, she no longer suffered from these issues during her periods;

“With the cup I have no problems if I compare with the pads. Before I used to get [yeast infections] but not with the cup. I clean it well, and I keep it in the bag. So I have no problems, and I’m very happy about it.”

In total, there were two girls mentioning what they believed to be yeast infections. Both of them had previously used the pads and claimed that they have not had any such problems since starting with the menstrual cups. Neither of the two girls had ever been to a clinic for their problems, but described symptoms very similar to those of yeast infections. Both of the girls explained how they, due to these problems, in the past had felt very restricted during their periods. Both of them had on several occasions stayed home from school or gone to school but asked their teachers for permission to leave early as they felt that they were not well enough to be in school. If in school during the menstruation, they would go straight home after school and not play with friends or stay out.

Several girls mentioned health issues that the menstrual cup did not affect, neither positively nor negatively; stomach aches, back pains, overall feeling of being very sad, tired or in a particularly bad mood. Two of the girls expressed that they felt very badly affected by their menstruations, so badly that they would occasionally ask for permission to leave school earlier. In addition to this, these two girls would go straight home after school as they would usually be in no mood to play with their friends due to their stomach pains. This was unaffected when using the menstrual cup.

4.3.3. Protection against visible leakage
All girls expressed the same opinion regarding menstruation and privacy – that menstruation is something very private and that it is not to be discussed with anyone. If needed, they could possibly talk to their mothers or a female teacher but they preferred to not talk about it with

20 Interview, November 2014, girls 11 and 13, Msiriwa, Tanzania
21 Interview, November 2014, girl 9, Msiriwa, Tanzania
22 Interviews, November 2014, girls 9 and 10, Msiriwa, Tanzania
friends, and talking to boys or men about it was absolutely out of the question for each and every one. As one girl put it;

“You don’t even tell your friends you are on your period, it is something you keep in your heart.”

Due to this highly shared opinion, the girls felt that the risk of having blood leaking through their pads or kangas was particularly problematic. Having blood showing on the skirt in school would show everyone that you are menstruating, creating a very shameful situation for the girls. Among the girls who used to go straight home from school when they had their periods, this was one of the most mentioned reasons for not playing with friends; that they felt that they did not want to risk the blood coming through and that it therefore was safer going home to change clothes and manage their period. One girl explained how she would take precautions in school to minimise the risk of anyone finding out she was on her period;

“When I was using the pad I waited until everyone had left the classroom before I stood up and left. Because the pad can move aside and the blood shows […]. When you are with girls or ladies it is OK, but if you are with boys there is a lot of shame.”

Having the blood “come out” seemed to be one of the worst things during menstruations, even worse than the stomach aches that some of the girls described, or the feeling of being sad and of low spirits among others. Most of the girls struggling with stomach aches or feelings of sadness explained how they would try to stay in school or play with their friends, even if it was tough. However, if the blood had shown on the skirt all of the girls said that they would go home. One girl said that she preferred the cup to the pad and when asked why she answered;

“Because when you put the cup, the blood cannot come out. But with the pad, it can move aside so you get blood on the outside, you get dirty and feel ashamed.”

One of the girls who had previously been using folded kangas answered in a similar way;

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23 Interview, November 2014, girl 5, Msiriwa, Tanzania
24 Interview, November 2014, girl 15, Msiriwa, Tanzania
25 Interview, November 2014, girl 14, Msiriwa, Tanzania
“When you use the cup, it can be full, but the blood doesn’t come out. Different to the kanga, because when that is full, it passes out through the skirt.”

She also explained how she before used to make sure to go straight home from school in order to not risk showing any blood. Since starting with the cup she felt that she could choose herself if she wanted to stay and play with school friends or not. Another girl answered in quite a different way however. Although never having had any sort of leakage with the cup, one of the girls still felt that this was a concern for her, so much that she would go straight home after school. The girl explained that the feeling of having her period made her uneasy and that she usually wanted to go home as soon as she could to manage her periods and clean the cup. She answered the following to the question on whether or not she feels that she can stay after school and play with friends;

“I prefer to go home because of the blood, I feel it’s better to go home and take care of it.”

Having never experienced leakage with the cup, she still felt that she could not entirely relax. The cup was “safe” enough to make her go to school, but not so much that she felt that she could stay longer than absolutely necessary.

4.4. The women’s thoughts

A smaller number of cups had also been distributed to a women’s group in the village of Uru-Mamba, a village situated a few kilometres from Msiriwa. There, five women were interviewed who had all received cups but only two had kept them for themselves. Three of the women had instead given them to their granddaughters. These three women were not in need of a cup since none of them were menstruating any more due to age. The two women who were in fact still menstruating both claimed to have tried the cups but did not feel comfortable using them anymore, although it was difficult to tell whether or not they had in fact tried the cups or if they just felt obligated to say so. Both women were asking many questions regarding how to use the cup and what the potential risks are when using the cup,

which indicates that the education they had received may not have been sufficient. All five women said that they thought the menstrual cup could be a good solution for girls in

26 Interview, November 2014, girl 4, Msiriwa, Tanzania
27 Interview, November 2014, girl 3, Msiriwa, Tanzania
28 Interview, November 2014, woman 1 and 4, Uru-Mamba, Tanzania
Tanzania, mentioning the potential money to save for the families as a strong advantage. All said that they would recommend the menstrual cups for their daughters, at least to try it and see if they would feel comfortable with it.

Two female teachers at a local school, Uru Primary School, had also received cups. Neither of them received a cup in a size that was appropriate for them so both had given their cups to their daughters. In a group interview together with two female teachers who had not received a cup, all women agreed that they thought that the menstrual cup should be distributed in Tanzania, mainly since they saw the kanga solution as particularly problematic for girls in regards to health reasons, but also since it would save families a great deal of money. The financial aspect of menstrual hygiene was emphasised, with one of the teachers explaining that pads will be the lowest priority for most families, especially if they have several daughters who have all reached puberty\(^\text{29}\).

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\(^{29}\) Group interview, November 2014, Uru Primary School, Tanzania
5. Analysis

5.1. Impact on the girls’ capabilities

The different categories of capabilities may affect each other and be intertwined. However, for clarity’s sake, the different capability categories are presented individually and separately. The second part of this chapter goes through the external factors that may have affected the outcome.

5.1.1. Health

“Bodily health: Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter” (Nussbaum, 2000:78)

As seen in Chapter 4 – Presentation of research results, several girls expressed that the one of the reasons for them to continue using the menstrual cup was because of its positive effects on their health. Even if only two girls expressed that they had had a more severe health problem, i.e. with the assumed yeast infections, it is not possible to rule out that more of the girls did not suffer from the same problems without knowing what to call it. With the most typical symptoms of yeast infections being itching and pain, some of the girls may have experienced infections without knowing. Furthermore, the chafing, itching and pain itself is bad enough regardless of diagnosed infections or not. The girls described how they had previously been limited during their menstruations, something they felt was not a problem anymore since they started using the cups;

“The pads were giving me bruises so I didn’t feel comfortable [in school], but now I don’t notice. Because I put the cup and it works well, I don’t have pain.”

The interesting part here is that she says she does not “notice” the menstruation anymore, i.e. that she can be in school without thinking about the menstruation. Previously, due to the pain caused by, in this case, using overfull pads, she would be reminded during the day that she was in fact menstruating which would create a certain discomfort. Apart from the fact that it may be difficult to focus and be productive and ambitious when you are in physical pain or discomfort, in a setting where menstruation is so much of a taboo and sensitive topic as here, having a constant reminder of being in this ‘embarrassing’ state may very well add to the feeling of not being at ease.

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30 Interview, November 2014, girl 7, Msiriwa Tanzania
Similar thoughts were expressed by other girls as well, that is, that the cup’s ability to minimise pain, itching and chafing in the vagina affected them positively as it made the menstruations easier to disregard, to forget, while in school or with friends or family. However, as stated in the presentation of the findings, there were girls that suffered from other physical problems during their menstruations, such as stomach or back pains, and these problems were naturally unaffected by the menstrual cup since it is not a medication, but a sanitary product. The menstrual cup does not itself eradicate pains. It merely functions in such a way that, when correctly used, it does not affect the vagina in a negative way by causing itching or pains or similar. These girls would not say that their bodily health during menstruations had been changed to the better since starting with the cup, as they were still having the same problems as always. Nevertheless, using the menstrual cup was not negatively affecting any of the girls’ bodily health, and although not solving all physical problems related to menstruation, it did in fact affect several girls in a positive way.

By making parts of the discomfort during menstruations, i.e. the vaginal pains that some of the interviewees had experienced when using kangas or pads, a non-issue, the menstrual cup has in this sense increased these girls’ capabilities of bodily health. Instead of having to struggle with different physical problems, due to limited access to sufficient sanitary products, the girls now have strengthened possibilities to live fuller lives even during their menstruations. Regarding the girls who did not have physical problems during their periods, the consequence is similar. Although they have not had problems earlier, the possession of a menstrual cup still creates another solution for how to manage their periods, and should they choose to use pads or kangas instead of the cup and then later on discover physical problems due to this, they will know that the menstrual cup, having not affected their health negatively in any way previously, is a reliable option.

5.1.2. Education

“Senses, Imagination and Thought: Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education [...]” (Nussbaum, 2000:78)

As is evident from the presentation of the thesis’ findings, many of the interviewed girls expressed problems of having been restricted and limited during their menstruations. Apart from the typical problems with menstruation pains, the girls also suffered from vaginal pains due to insufficient sanitary products, as well as fear of having blood showing on their skirts. Due to these two issues, some of the girls had previously stayed home from school or
left school early after asking for permission from the teachers. One of the girls explained how this may be a problem;

"First if you ask for permission to go home you have to think of your lessons [...] because if you get permission you might miss important classes."³¹

This was something next to all girls mentioned who said that they had asked for permission to go home; even if the teacher allows you to leave, you may miss classes that are important and may be impossible to retake or catch up on. However, missing out on classes that were important seems to not have affected the girls’ tendency to go home during menstruations, as the other options – e.g. staying in school with blood on your skirt – were considered even worse.

In addition to actually missing school due to menstruations, some of the girls explained how their behaviour in school was also affected. This meant that even when managing to go to school, the probability of the girls actually performing well, or as normal, was low. The girl who was quoted on page 22 saying that she would wait until everyone had left before getting up after class also explained how, with the cup, she had more freedoms in school;

"I think the cup is better for me because I can make discussions with the others, even with boys. With the cup, I have never had the blood come out."³²

Thus, knowing that the blood will not show made this particular girl feel relaxed and safe enough to be able to speak more freely and engage in discussions in school, regardless of if there were boys present or not. This indicates that previously, when using the pads she did not rely on for not letting out blood, she was less inclined to participate in class and less able to focus on the activities that were actually going on. Seeing that the girls were not going to class with only girls, but in mixed groups, the problem of not being able to relax enough to talk and participate during menstruations when there were boys around affected all classes. Naturally, it is more beneficial for the girls to be able to not have to worry about showing blood but instead being able to participate in class without feelings of being restricted and limited. By explaining that this is something that has changed, and that it to her is a positive change, it also indicates that it is something that she has previously felt was a problem that

³¹ Interview, November 2014, girl 13, Msiriwa Tanzania
³² Interview, November 2014, girl 15, Msiriwa Tanzania
now is fixed. That the ability of being able to focus on school while in school, and to have
discussions with her classmates, was an ability that she previously wanted but did not have,
thus a capability that has now been enabled.

Another girl who had previously used pads explained how she earlier had felt
uncomfortable in school but that she felt better with the cup. When asked why, her response
was;

“If you put on the pad, it can move aside and the blood can come. But with the cup
no one can know you have your period.”

With these words, she is expressing something similar to the girl above; namely that the cup is
ensuring that no one will find out that she is currently menstruating and by doing so makes
her feel more comfortable in school. By not leaking in the way the pads would after having
been worn for too long, the cup enables her to not worry about the blood showing. This puts
her in a position where she is able to participate in class in a similar way as when she is not
menstruating, as she is now able to keep something, that to her is indeed very private, all to
herself. She can now to a greater extent choose who should know and not know. Just like the
boys of the class, she can now be as active, or passive, as she wants regardless of what day of
the month it is. The key here is that she is now able to act more freely, as the constraints of
worrying about leakage have been removed, and that her level of activity in school is more up
to her than to the circumstances of her menstruation. Or as one girl put it: “Now, I feel fine
[...] I just feel like other days,” which suggests that the menstruating has become a non-
issue for this girl, at least in the school setting.

Before receiving the cup, one of the girls had on several occasions asked for
permission to leave school early. She said that when her pad had become too full she would
be forced to go home, as the risk of the blood escaping would be so big that she felt unable to
stay in school. This led to discomfort throughout the day, as she would worry about how
much she would be bleeding, and that she would not notice in time when she had to leave.
However, since starting with the menstrual cup, she said that she felt fine during her periods,
and that she nowadays is able to stay in school all day, regardless of how much she is
bleeding.

33 Interview, November 2014, girl 10, Msiriwa Tanzania
34 Interview, November 2014, girl 4, Msiriwa Tanzania
35 Interview, November 2014, girl 11, Msiriwa Tanzania
5.1.3. Social interaction

“Play: Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities” (Nussbaum, 2000: 80)

Like the categories of health and education, the aspect of “Play” - of social interaction and recreational activities, i.e. in this setting; playing with friends after school, being able to relax and enjoy oneself around friends and classmates - had a fairly straightforward outcome. As shown in the previous chapter, some of the girls did indeed feel freer and more unlimited in general when using their menstrual cups. None of them felt hindered by their cups, or that the cups per se added in any negative way to their feelings during their menstruations. However, one of the girls felt, at least when it came to social interactions in her free time, that it did not have a positive effect either. As mentioned in Chapter 4, this girl managed to go to school during her menstruations and felt that she had increased protection against leakage with the cup, but still did not feel comfortable enough to actually stay after school for example to play with her friends;

“Sometimes my friends are playing but I don’t want to join, I just stay by myself. I feel uncomfortable. If I play with the others and the blood comes out of the skirt it is too shameful.”

Thus, this particular girl’s capabilities within this specific sphere may be understood as unaffected. Even though the cup may actually provide the protection she needs, she is not able to benefit from it as she does not have the feeling of having more opportunities or choices than before. Just like before when she was using the pads, she feels that she is unable to enjoy herself by playing with her friends after school even if she would want to. To her, it is as if she has no other choice than to go home, instead of being, as some of the other girls, enabled to decide for herself what she wants to do.

Other girls expressed other feelings when it came to playing with friends after school and participating in the games during breaks in between classes. Besides the girls who usually would experience stomach or back pains and for that reason preferred staying by themselves as much as possible, several girls said that with the cup their days in school are very different compared to earlier. When asked if she would play with her friends after school and during breaks, or go straight home or keep to herself, one girl answered;

36 Interview, November 2014, girl 3, Msiriwa Tanzania
"I don’t feel anything special now, I can go wherever I want and it doesn’t even feel like anything will show."\(^{37}\)

This does not necessarily mean that there is any difference when it comes to her activity in school during menstruations, maybe she was fairly passive previously and has stayed the same or vice versa. However, it is obvious by her answer that she has indeed had her capabilities strengthened; nowadays she is able to choose for herself – if she wants to play, she feels that she can do it. This is a great difference, as she is one of the girls who said that she felt uncomfortable using the pads as she was very worried about blood showing, and because of that was reluctant to stay and play with friends. One of the girls, who used to use the folded kangas before, seems to have been affected in the same way. She said that earlier she would always go straight home after school as she felt very uncomfortable with the kangas as protection. It was difficult for her to rely on the kangas to not allow the blood to come out, as it had done so on several occasions. With the cup however, it is now different;

"It is not a problem anymore, I can stay with my friends and the other students if I want to."\(^{38}\)

The key here in her response is that if she wants to spend time with her friends or the other classmates, she is in fact able to do so. Like the girl above, her capabilities have been strengthened in this aspect as she is now less restricted and more enabled to choose freely. This is also the outcome when regarding the group as a whole; apart from the one girl who felt that the menstrual cup did nothing for her in terms of enabling her to play with her friends, the group as a whole has either had their capabilities strengthened and reinforced by the use of the cup, or have not had problems on beforehand and thus being unaffected. As stated earlier, no one had bad experiences with the cup; no one felt that the cup in any way restricted them from playing with friends or being active and participating in games during recess. The effect it has had on the group was instead positive; by making them feel less worried about blood leaking or having to suffer chafing, itching or vaginal pains, the girls were now enabled to play more freely and decide for themselves if they wanted to interact with the other children or not.

\(^{37}\) Interview, November 2014, girl 10, Msiriwa Tanzania
\(^{38}\) Interview, November 2014, girl 4, Msiriwa Tanzania
5.2. Factors affecting the result

The results displayed in section 5.1. are indeed interesting but there are some aspects that need to be taken into account to understand how the overall results could be so positive. These factors may have influenced the results to different extents, and although the end result for the girls is the same, it may be able to create an understanding of how these results have been brought about.

5.2.1. Access to water and adequate facilities

Apart from the educational training that the girls have received, which all said was useful and gave them a good understanding of how to use the cup, there is one other main factor that the girls have brought up when explaining why the cup is so easy to use: the fact that they have access to water both in school and at home. At school, all girls said that the restrooms were of acceptable standard, that they felt safe and relaxed there knowing that they would not be disturbed by anyone but have sufficient privacy. In addition to this, the restrooms had access to clean water. Had this not been the case, the outcome of the menstrual cup project by the Lingonsystrar initiative, as well as this thesis, may very well have been quite different. Although it is possible to use the cup without rinsing it every time you empty it, the girls seemed to feel more comfortable with it since they were in fact able to clean it in a sufficient way before reinserting it. Many of the girls stressed the importance of cleanliness during menstruations, and because of this it is unlikely that they would feel comfortable reinserting a cup that has not been at least rinsed with clean water.

In their homes, it was equally easy for the girls as they all had access to water and were able to boil it. Boiling the cup with water is essential for the hygiene of the product, thus a prerequisite to be able to make use of it. For these girls, this was not a problem – they could all access water to boil and were able to get enough privacy to be able to have it boiling for a few minutes. This may not be the case for other girls, as it requires that their families are either supportive of them using the menstrual cup, and cleaning it on the stove or over the fire, or that they get sufficient amount of time by themselves in the house.

5.2.2. Financial aspect

Another important aspect is that of money. The menstrual cup that was distributed in Msiriwa Secondary School is sold in Sweden for 349 Swedish kronor (SEK), approximately 46 USD. The cost for the retailers is 110 SEK (approximately 15 USD) per cup. As long as the cup is given away for free it is a valuable product for many girls, but if it were to be sold very few
would be able to purchase it. Many of the girls in this study said that the main reason for them to use the cup was to save money, and had they been forced to actually pay for the cup, that reason would no longer exist. Even though it in the long run would save money for some of the families, at least those where the girls were using pads and not kangas, the initial cost would simply be too high. When asked, the interpreter and the teachers interviewed said that, for the families in Uru, a reasonable price to pay would be maximum 5000 TZS per cup\textsuperscript{39}, which corresponds to close to 3 USD. If sold at a higher price than that, they deemed it unlikely that any families in the area would feel that a purchase was actually feasible.

5.2.3. The girls’ need for sufficient sanitary products

Although it may seem like an obvious prerequisite, the fact that the girls had no access to sufficient and well-functioning hygiene products has also affected the outcome. Indeed, the girls as a group have benefited from using the menstrual cup, but this may have been more because of the fact that they for the first time had access to sufficient sanitary solutions, rather than the cup itself. It is difficult to say if the girls, regardless of if they previously used to use kangas or pads, would prefer cups or pads if they would have the financial means to actually purchase enough pads for each menstruation. It is true that in this setting, where the girls have insufficient funds and therefore use kangas or reuse the pads in a way they are not supposed to be used, the girls prefer the cup.

A similar result may have been achieved by simply providing any type of menstrual hygiene solution (disposable pads, reusable pads, tampons, cups etcetera) as long as sufficient amounts were given, together with information on how to use the product in the correct way, in order for it to be able to function in the way it was intended to. Hence, the solution to the problem of menstrual hygiene and its impact on girls’ capabilities may very well be interpreted as ‘access to sufficient hygiene products’ rather than the menstrual cup specifically. Nevertheless, the menstrual cup has the advantage of being environmentally friendlier than other products in addition to being inexpensive when considering the actual lifespan of the product, making it a logical choice of product for distribution for charity and aid projects.

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\textsuperscript{39} Group interview, November 2014, Uru Primary School, Tanzania
6. Conclusion and recommendations for future research

With the point of departure in the capability approach, this thesis sought to investigate if the menstrual cup can be a useful tool to strengthen girls’ participation in both education and social interactions. The findings from the interviews with 15 girls in northern Tanzania, who all had received a menstrual cup a year earlier through a charity initiative, show that the overall impact on the girls has been very positive. Not only has it been an economic aid, as the girls do not need to buy other hygiene products now that they have the cup, but it has also had positive effects on their bodily health as well as their abilities to feel relaxed and unrestricted while in school during their menstruations. Through increased capabilities in the important spheres of education, social interaction and health, these 15 girls have all, in different ways, been positively affected by the menstrual cup. This shows that if distributed correctly, along with sufficient education, to groups where suitable conditions apply, the menstrual cup can strengthen girls’ participation in education as well as in social activities and interactions.

With the cultural taboos regarding menstruations and cleanliness, the risk of having blood showing on your skirt was considered by all interviewees to be utterly shameful, and the girls described how they previously, if going to school at all, would not engage much in class activities during menstruations, as they had felt uncomfortable talking to the boys or standing up in class so everyone could see them. This clearly shows how much the girls were affected by their periods, and how big of a change it has been for them to instead use the menstrual cup. As none of the girls had experienced leakage with the menstrual cup they all felt that they could feel more relaxed in school knowing that no one would be able to tell that they were menstruating; a luxury they previously had not been able to enjoy.

The previous problems of leakage also lead to that many of the girls would go straight home after school instead of playing with their friends, as they felt the need to quickly get home and “manage their blood”. With the menstrual cup, only one of the girls was still doing this. The rest of the group all expressed how they nowadays felt free to stay and play with friends, and to engage in social interactions without having to think about the bleeding. It can therefore be concluded that in this sense, the capabilities of the girls have been strengthened, for all but one, since they now are free to choose for themselves if they want to play with friends or not. Regardless of if they choose to do so, they today have a choice that they did not have before the menstrual cup. This freedom, and opportunity, was enabled by the cup and the sense of security that it gave the girls.
In addition to the abovementioned findings, another important conclusion was also made; that of the impact on the girls’ health. As several of the girls expressed that they had previously been suffering from health implications, and that now, since they started using the menstrual cups, their physical problems caused by the sanitary products had ceased, it is evident that the cup in this sphere too has substantially influenced the girls’ health and well-being to the better. Even though there are menstrual pains that are not affected by the menstrual cups, the usage of the cup had indeed strengthened the girls’ bodily health by eradicating the physical problems caused by kangas and overused pads. With these vaginal pains gone, the girls’ overall well-being has been affected for the better, as they now do not need to struggle with pain every time they are menstruating. In this sense, the menstrual cup has had a very good impact on the girls’ daily lives, as well as their capabilities and freedoms.

All interviewed women expressed that they believe the menstrual cup to be a useful product for girls in Tanzania. As only a small number of women were interviewed, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on whether or not this is true for women in Tanzania in general. However it may give a small indication, an indication that indeed is interesting. If more women would support and believe in the menstrual cup, the chances are greater that the cups would work well for the girls using them, as the girls would be able to ask their mothers for advice, and the acceptance for the cups would be bigger. This would also be a possible way of introducing the cups to young girls; in joint trainings with their mothers.

For future studies there are interesting questions to be researched; if cups have been distributed to both women and girls, are there any differences in how they have been received? If provided with other sanitary products, such as reusable pads, are the cups more or less favoured? The first question was not answered within this thesis as it unfortunately proved to be impossible to collect enough data. Cups had been distributed to both younger girls and older women, but regrettably the local representative of the initiative did not manage to locate more than a few adult recipients of the cups due to lack of written records. Among the located recipients, five out of seven were either unable to use the cup (due to having received the wrong size) or not in need of it (due to having reached menopause). This could be an interesting comparison to make though, as the acceptance of the cup may vary not only between cultures and regions, but also ages of the recipients. Also, since many of the studies made on the subject of menstrual hygiene have been focused on its effect on education, it would be interesting to investigate if working women may benefit from using the menstrual cup when being at work during menstruations. As the cup has the potential to be a useful tool for working women as well, that is an aspect worth researching further.
7. Bibliography

7.1. Literature


7.2. Publications/Articles


Joanna Sundqvist


7.3. Internet


