Empowering young women in Haiti through Days for Girls

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Imagine being a woman without access to hygiene products during menstruation. While hard to fathom, millions of girls and women in low-income countries face this issue every month, preventing them from going to school or work. Without access to feminine hygiene products, or the money to purchase them, women resort to using old rags, mattress foam, newspapers, leaves, even tree bark. These are not only ineffective methods, but leave them vulnerable to disease and infection. The stigma and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation in many countries compound the problem, leading women to feel ashamed and isolated.

Days for Girls International, a non-profit organization, was founded in 2008 to address this issue with the development of a reusable, cost-effective, personal hygiene kit that can be produced in local communities around the world. The organization, which includes more than 555 volunteer chapters in 85 countries, partners with communities to train local women how to produce and distribute menstrual education information and personal hygiene kits that can be washed with very little water and reused for up to three years. Days for Girls provides training and supplies, as well as sanitation, safety and women's reproductive health education.

When Patty Coker-Bolt, Ph.D., OTR/L, an associate professor in the MUSC College of Health Professions, was asked by a colleague from the Episcopal University of Haiti to assess the feasibility of operating such a program in the Léogâne region of Haiti, she gladly accepted the challenge. Now working with the Episcopal University of Haiti and Helping Haiti Work, a local women's community group, Coker-Bolt's goal is to translate the Days for Girls International menstrual education and feminine hygiene program into a culturally sensitive format appropriate for Haiti and develop a research study to gain an understanding of how different educational levels and ages might impact the acceptability of using personal hygiene kits.

"It's important to teach women how to take care of their reproductive health, but the first step is to gain the buy-in of the local women in the community," said Coker-Bolt. "This program has the potential to improve the lives of hundreds of women throughout the country."

Using Days for Girls' workshop materials, the collaborators will conduct a training workshop in Léogâne for in-country collaborators and the seamstresses who will produce the personal hygiene kits for this study. The workshop materials include specific patterns, instructions and videos on how to assemble the kits, along with a handbook translated into French, one of Haiti's two official national languages. The kits consist of a drawstring bag that holds eight absorbent tri-fold pads, two moisture barrier shields, visual instructions and a gallon-size Ziploc bag containing a washcloth and soap.

The study will enroll girls from both the local high school and university. Each participant in this study, which includes 40 young girls (ages 10 to 18) from the École Sainte Croix High School and 40 young women from the Episcopal University of Haiti (ages 18 to 25), will be provided a hygiene kit produced by the seamstresses.

Through surveys and interviews, the investigators will be able to gain insights that enable them to determine ease of use, feasibility, impact on the quality of life and school attendance. The program has the potential not only to improve women's health but also to contribute to efforts that will improve waste management and sanitation. Haiti has a lack of infrastructure to deal with sanitation. As such, streets are filled with trash and waste, which when mixed with the water system, leads to an increase in infectious diseases such as cholera.

"In addition to the overarching impact this new program will make on the lives of girls and women in Haiti, we're excited about empowering women around the impact they can have in helping their country reduce trash and waste," said Coker-Bolt.