



MENSTRUAL HEALTH PROGRAM EVALUATION

JOIN FOR JOY ZAMBIA



January 2025

THE MENSTRUAL HEALTH PROGRAM

At Join for Joy, our mission is to ensure that every primary school child in Sub-Saharan Africa experiences the transformative power of playful learning. By doing so, Join for Joy aims to increase school attendance and foster the development of healthy, educated, and empowered individuals within their communities.

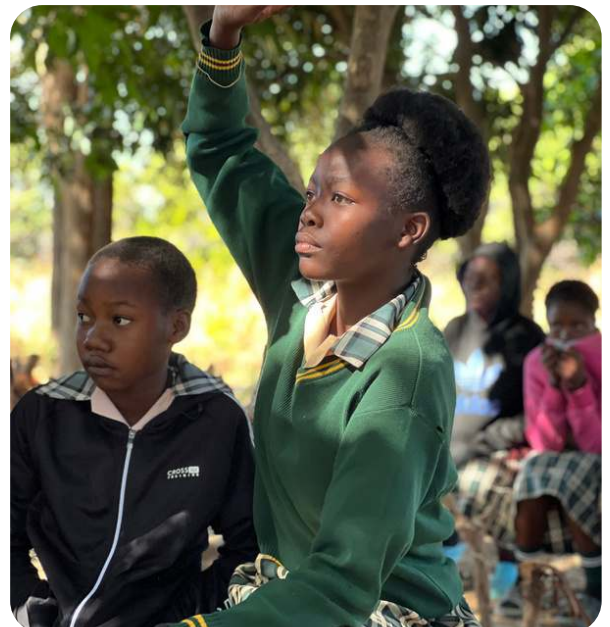
Introduction

While our programs have achieved remarkable progress, evidenced by reduced dropout rates and improved attendance - one critical issue persists: girls missing school due to lack of access to menstrual products. Menstrual-related school absenteeism disrupts learning and erodes confidence (Chinyama et al, BMC Public Health 2019). Furthermore, menstruation remains a taboo topic in many communities, perpetuating stigma and limiting open discussions about girls' needs.

To address these challenges, Join for Joy developed the Menstrual Health (MH) Program. This initiative provides essential menstrual health and hygiene education while breaking the silence surrounding menstruation. By fostering open discussions and involving teachers, parents, and girls, the program aims to create a supportive environment that empowers girls to manage their menstrual health with confidence and without shame.

The cornerstone of the program is the introduction and distribution of the menstrual cup; a sustainable, safe, and reliable menstrual product. The menstrual cups distribution is accompanied by menstrual health education provided through menstrual health / girls clubs at schools led by teachers that have been trained by the Join for Joy coaches. This comprehensive approach ensures that girls can attend school consistently, free from monthly disruptions due to their period, as the menstrual cup can be used for up to ten years.

In 2024, Join for Joy Zambia reached 14,752 girls with MH education sessions through the school based playful learning program. In addition to the school sessions, in 2024, 1601 girls joined as members of the MH clubs with 87% of those girls (#1394) opting to receive a menstrual cup



Evaluation Objective

To evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the Join for Joy menstrual health (MH) program in rural Zambia by analysing the experiences and feedback of adolescent girls who participated in the program.

Specifically, the study aimed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on the use of menstrual cups and participation in MH clubs, to inform future program improvements and increase the long-term impact of the program.

Methodology

The data collection was carried out in October and November 2024, involved 377 girls from 49 rural government schools in Chongwe, Zambia.

The participants were girls who had started menstruating, attended MH clubs, and had received a menstrual cup from Join for Joy. The participants were adolescent girls in grade 5 to 7, aged between 12 and 20 years, with the majority being 12-16 years. No names were taken to ensure privacy and to encourage honest answers.

The interviews were held individually in private and secure settings, were conducted by trained staff and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. While quantitative responses were analysed statistically, open-ended responses were examined using AI-driven thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes and insights.

Key Findings and Analysis

Menstrual health (MH) clubs at school:

Sentiment analysis of participant feedback from the open questions revealed overwhelmingly positive responses in regard to MH clubs, underscoring the success of the initiative. Participants highlighted the opportunity to learn about menstrual hygiene, the practical use of menstrual products, and the introduction of the menstrual cup as key benefits. These responses demonstrate the program's effectiveness in addressing critical knowledge gaps and equipping participants with essential tools for menstrual health. Neutral feedback, often observational, reflected practical suggestions for improvement, while negative comments were minimal, indicating strong overall satisfaction.

'The menstrual health club has transformed my life. As an introvert, it helped me break out of my shell and connect with others while learning valuable lessons on cleanliness. When I received the menstrual cup, I initially had concerns about its impact on my virginity, but I was reassured after the sessions. After using it, I found it comfortable, easy to clean, and surprisingly unnoticeable. The best part? No more worrying about odours like with pads! The menstrual cup has been a game changer, especially since my family struggles to afford monthly pads..'

Raphella, 15 years. Grade 7-Bimbe Primary School



Suggestions for improvement focused on expanding access to diverse menstrual products, such as tampons, pads, and pantyliners, to better meet individual preferences. Some participants also expressed a need for more detailed demonstrations and step-by-step guidance during sessions to boost confidence in using the menstrual cup. Despite these suggestions, many respondents expressed complete satisfaction, affirming that no changes were necessary.

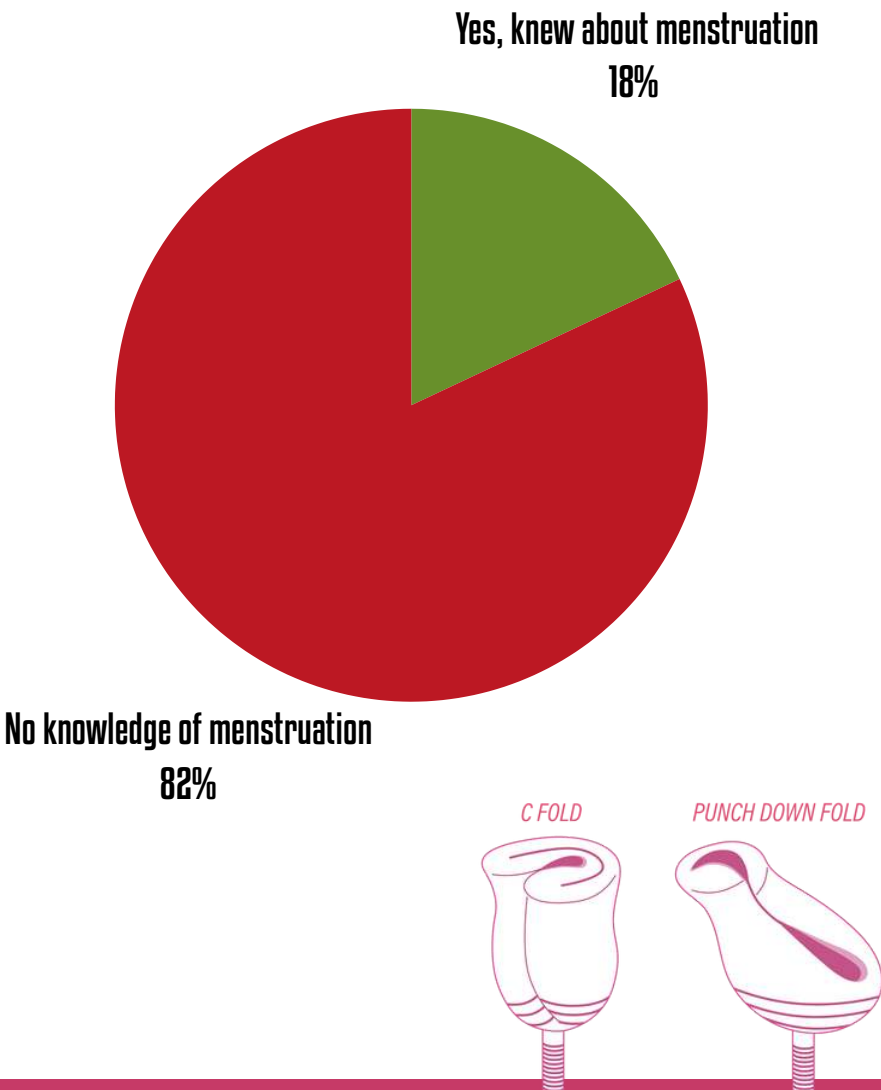
The feedback consistently emphasized the transformative impact of the MH Club, particularly in providing knowledge and skills that were previously unavailable. While the analysis highlights opportunities to enhance guidance, the overall findings affirm the program's strong foundation and significant value to participants.

Menstrual and reproductive health knowledge:

However, when specifically questioned on menstrual and reproductive health knowledge, the evaluation revealed significant gaps among the participants. A striking 82% of the girls had no prior knowledge about menstruation before their first period as indicated in the pie chart below. In addition, only 8% of the girls' interviewed correctly identified the most fertile days in their menstrual cycle.

These findings underscore the critical need for comprehensive education on menstrual health and adolescent development at an earlier age, to ensure girls' understand about menstruation before it occurs to avoid confusion or fear. Such education will be further integrated into program materials and training sessions to empower girls with the knowledge necessary for informed health decisions.

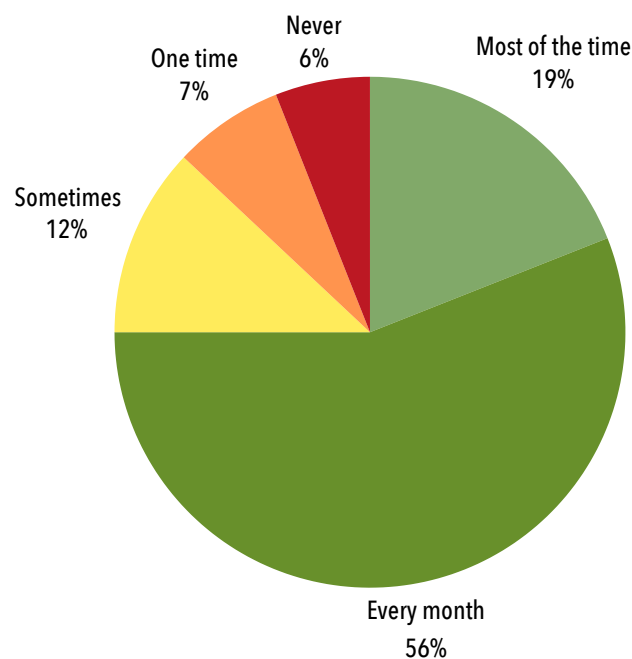
Table 1: Pie chart: Menstrual health knowledge prior to menarche



Experience using the menstrual cup:

The introduction of the menstrual cup has had a substantial impact on participants' experiences and school attendance. In the closed question responses, 75% of the girls who opted to receive the cup said that they had used it most of the time / every period over the preceding 3 months.

Table 2: Pie Chart: Menstrual Cup Usage

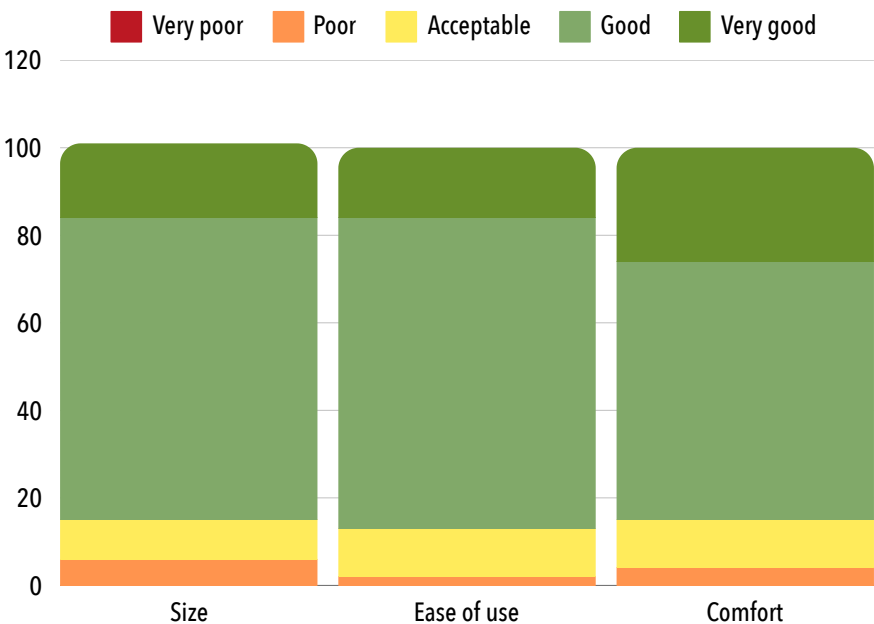


Encouragingly, 80% of the girls interviewed rated it positively in terms of size, ease of use, and comfort as shown in table 3 below. These findings highlight the cup's potential as a sustainable solution for menstrual health management. Positive feedback highlighted the cup's comfort, hygiene benefits, and suitability for physical activities.

However, there is an initial learning curve involved in using the menstrual cup that presented challenges, as some participants experienced discomfort or difficulty with insertion and removal especially when first using it. This feedback points to the necessity of the Join for Joy training sessions that provide practical demonstrations and address common concerns and frequently asked questions.

Overall, the findings are encouraging, though approached with cautious optimism by Join for Joy. The menstrual cup has been well-received, with participants affirming its appropriate size, ease of use, and comfort.

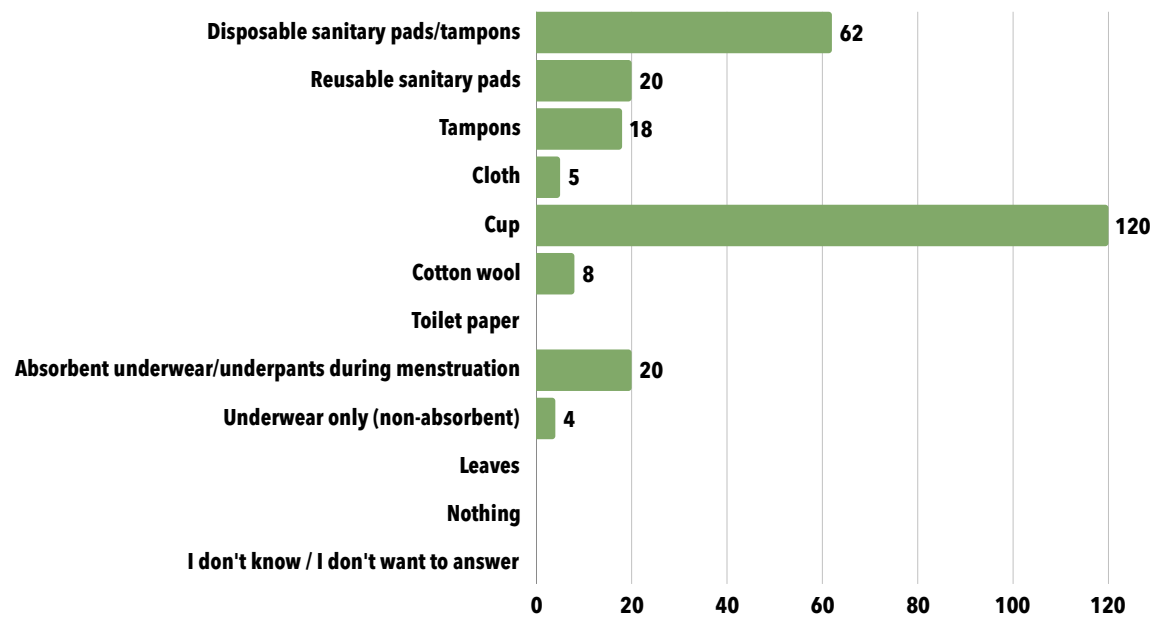
Table 3: Bar Chart: Menstrual Cup Satisfaction



Usage rates are notably high and have improved significantly compared to previous years, attributed to enhanced sensitisation sessions conducted prior to distribution. The strategic focus on providing cups exclusively to informed and interested participants has proven to be both cost-effective and impactful, maximising the program's benefits.

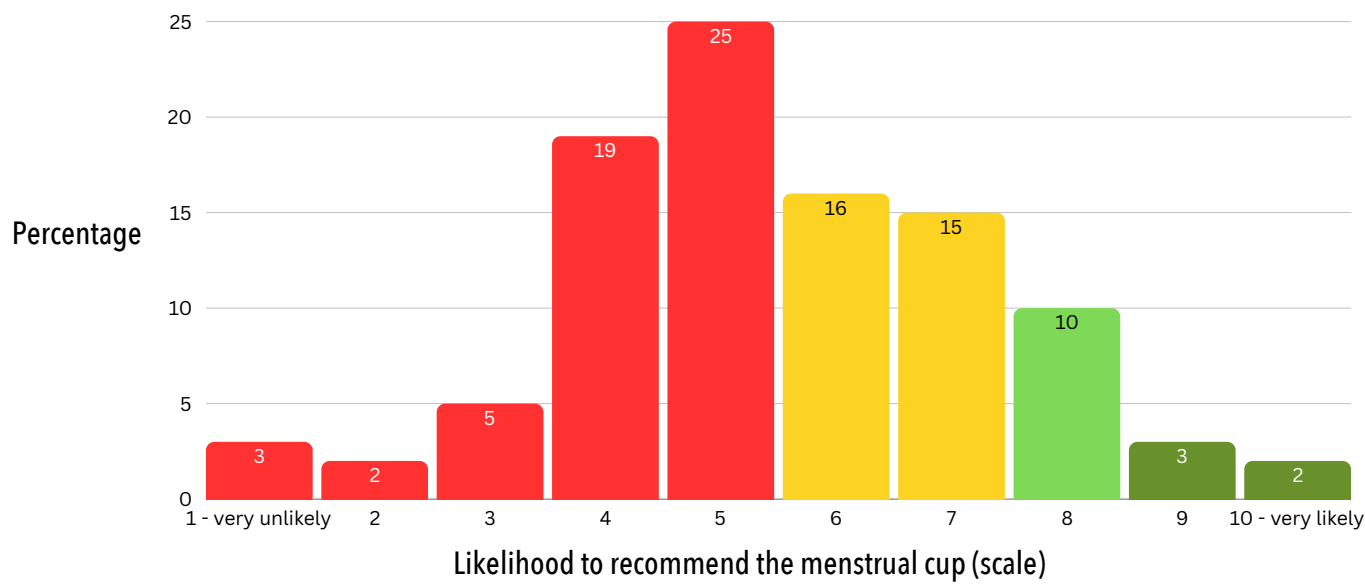
Interestingly, despite the challenges noted, the majority of girls interviewed expressed a preference for the menstrual cup over other menstrual hygiene products if given the choice, as shown in table4 below. This underscores the cup’s potential as a sustainable and favoured solution.

Table 4: Bar Chart: Menstrual product preference



However, these findings are somewhat at odds with the low percentage of participants willing to recommend the menstrual cup to others. Only 15% reported that they would actively recommend the cup to friends or family, with cultural factors likely influencing this hesitancy. Despite these positive outcomes, this indicates that the program still faces challenges in achieving broader acceptance of the menstrual cup. This apparent contradiction may reflect cultural taboos or discomfort in discussing menstruation rather than dissatisfaction with the product itself.

Table 5: Bar Chart: Net promoter score to indicate the likelihood of participants recommending the menstrual cup to friends / family



In communities where menstruation remains a sensitive or taboo topic, young girls may feel uncomfortable discussing such issues, let alone advocating for a specific product. Additionally, the phrasing of this question may have offered a more realistic glimpse into their actual experiences, as it is less prone to reporting bias. This disparity suggests the need for further exploration and community engagement to address underlying cultural barriers and promote open conversations about menstrual health. Addressing these cultural barriers through community engagement and sensitisation campaigns could foster greater acceptance and dialogue around menstrual health.

Impact on school attendance:

School attendance data further emphasize the program's impact. Before receiving the menstrual cup, participants missed an average of 0.9 school days per month due to menstruation. This figure dropped to 0.01 days per month after receiving the cup, illustrating the program's role in reducing absenteeism. Such improvements are particularly crucial in rural areas, where menstrual-related absenteeism exacerbates existing educational inequalities.

“ My parents have been able to save money thanks to the menstrual cup. I can recommend other girls to use the cup, because it does not hurt. Some girls miss school because they don't have sanitary pads. With the cup they no longer have to miss school days.

Docas, student Mulola Primary School, Zambia

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Reporting Biases and Limitations

The evaluation acknowledges inherent reporting biases, which may have influenced participants' responses. Interviews conducted by program staff might have encouraged socially desirable answers, potentially overestimating the program's impact.

To mitigate these biases, the evaluation employed indirect questioning techniques and emphasized privacy during data collection. While these measures improved data reliability, the absence of an external evaluation remains a limitation. Independent assessments could provide a more objective perspective but are currently constrained by resource considerations.

Programmatic Implications and Recommendations

While we are cautiously positive with the findings of this evaluation, we also note areas for improvement. Expanding educational components to address gaps in menstrual and reproductive health knowledge is a key priority. Training materials and sessions will be revised to provide enhanced practical guidance, particularly for first-time users of the menstrual cup. However, it is also important to recognise that time and continued practice play a significant role in fostering long-term acceptance and successful use of the menstrual cup.

Join for Joy coaches will continue to provide tailored advice and support to teachers facilitating MH clubs, ensuring they have the necessary resources to effectively address participants' challenges. Additionally, the program manual will be updated to include a broader range of interactive games focused on adolescent health, puberty, and menstruation. This enhancement will enable teachers to approach these more sensitive topics through playful education, fostering engagement and understanding.

By integrating play and joy into the learning process, this approach aims to not only increase knowledge but also support long-term knowledge retention and acquisition, reinforcing the Join for Joy's core ambition; playful learning!

While the menstrual cup offers numerous benefits, incorporating alternative products such as pads or tampons could potentially increase acceptance by providing girls with more options to suit their preferences. However, distributing a well-known product like pads may discourage some girls from trying the menstrual cup, as they might default to a familiar choice rather than exploring a new, lesser known alternative. However, all menstrual hygiene products are displayed and discussed as part of the education sessions. This is done to ensure the girls' gain a comprehensive understanding of menstrual health management options, are aware of different products available and the advantages and disadvantages of each. This way they can make informed decisions about which product they would prefer to use. Striking the right balance between discussing diverse options and promoting the advantages of the menstrual cup will be key to ensuring both widespread acceptance and long-term program impact.

The program staff and teachers will need to continue to prioritise efforts to normalise discussions around menstruation. In 2025, Join for Joy will focus more on reaching and engaging more community leaders in open dialogue and educational sessions to help dismantle taboos and create a supportive environment for girls. Due to the nature of rural areas, parents are more likely to shun what community leaders shun and support what they support. Therefore community leaders are key gate-keepers and additional activities will be essential for fostering long-term cultural change and ensuring the sustainability of the program's impact.

Looking forward

The MH Program has made notable strides in improving menstrual health education, reducing absenteeism, and providing a sustainable, cost-effective menstrual management solution. However, challenges remain in addressing cultural barriers and initial usability issues.

By incorporating the evaluation findings into program updates and expanding community engagement efforts, Join for Joy aims to further enhance the program's effectiveness and reach to continue to empower girls in Zambia and enable them to thrive academically and personally.



TESTIMONIALS

From the interviews with girls who have received a cup.

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"I found it difficult to have to ask permission to leave the classroom to change my sanitary towel. That's why I preferred to stay home when I had my period and only go back to school when it was over."

“

"The menstrual hygiene club taught me how to take good care of myself during my period. In the past, we (girls) would sometimes stay home, and then we would lag behind the boys in the class."

“

There are four girls in our home, and my mother can't buy pads for all of us. When I asked her for money for pads, she told me to wait until the end of the month. Before I got the menstrual cup, I often used cloth. But if it didn't fit properly, it could fall out. I was often afraid to go to school when I used cloth because I was embarrassed.

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"I could hardly ever use sanitary towels because we didn't have the money. When I got a menstrual cup, my mother was very happy. She can now spend the money she would have used for sanitary towels on food. She also motivates me to go to all the menstrual hygiene club meetings at school."

“

"If you use a cloth, you sometimes leak. Because classes are from 11am to 5pm, a cloth doesn't last long enough and that can also happen when you're in class. That's why I used to stay home when I got my period."

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"The cup is comfortable and you can't see it. When I wore sanitary towels, I never felt comfortable. I kept asking my friends to check if I had leaked."

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"I like the cup much better than other products because I can now exercise without worrying."

This report was created thanks to Mwangala Ikacana, Hannah Kooren, Mirriam Nanyinza, Namasiku Munyanya, Charlotte Petty, and Mart Beeftink.

References:

Chinyama, J., Chipungu, J., Rudd, C. et al. Menstrual hygiene management in rural schools of Zambia: a descriptive study of knowledge, experiences and challenges faced by schoolgirls. BMC Public Health 19, 16 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6360-2>



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