

## **Collaboration between NGOs and Academia to address menstrual hygiene and health in Samoa**

In Samoa, sexual and reproductive health is a topic which is shrouded in secrecy. It is a widespread belief that discussion of such subjects encourages pre-marital sex and promiscuity. These beliefs are ever present in the limited reproductive health education covered in schools. As a result of this, menstruation and menstrual hygiene also becomes an elusive area of research, due its taboo nature. This is not an issue unique to Samoa, with challenges of menstruation and menstrual hygiene affecting school attendance, willingness to seek medical attention, and in extreme circumstances around the world, increasing the likelihood of exposure to violence as women and girls are required to stay away from the family home during this time. This project (as a case study) which sought to explore the effect of menstrual hygiene education and the provision of reusable pads in a rural community in Samoa has the potential to provide a baseline of the experiences and challenges of menstruation in a small sample of women and girls, to improve their knowledge and practice about menstruation and menstrual hygiene and to look at the impact of the use of reusable pads on the challenges and experiences of menstruation.

Although there is one study available conducted by CITE to gather information on the experiences of menstruation in Pacific Island Countries, the study did not include Samoa. This research project was embedded within a community based project led by a local NGO, Brown Girl Woke. The National University of Samoa's School of Nursing Faculty and third year students supported the development of the educational material, survey and with the grant application to Australia's Direct Aid Program. This project emerged organically as Brown Girl Woke, which is excellent at garnering donations both locally and internationally, through their networks, received a shipment of reusable pads for donations. A researcher at the National University of Samoa School of Nursing suggested that by organizing this as a pre and post case study, we would gather evidence that could support future grant applications in this area. Another colleague at Nuanua O le Alofa, Samoa's national advocacy organization for persons with disabilities, also reviewed and provided feedback on the survey design and supported the inclusion of female members of the NGO in the exercise.

This partnership brought together NGOs and academia to generate evidence driven research that could inform future grant applications. With expertise in international development, mentoring, community mobilization, health and monitoring and evaluation, the team used a mixture of strategies to gather information in the pre and post phases, including surveys, group discussions and interviews. The delivery time frame was affected by the measles outbreak in late 2019 and the nationwide lock downs in March until May 2020 due to COVID-19. With such an expedited time frame, the team was unable to plan and deliver completely as envisioned. For the academics with more rigid working systems, negotiating to the flexibility of Brown Girl Woke's delivery of programming was a learning experience. With two workshops required instead of one to meet gathering restrictions, by the second workshop, all members of the working teams were functioning more seamlessly, enjoying the variety the other brought. Nuanua O Le Alofa conducted research alongside Brown Girl Woke's program. Electing to conduct individual interviews to tailor to the individual accessibility needs of each women with disability included in the research. This twin track approach allowed the project to explore the experiences and needs relating to women with disabilities in Samoa, to support an accessible and inclusive approach to future projects.

*It took some time to hold the follow up workshops with the village tied up with many other workshops and state ministry visits. At the follow up workshop which occurred almost two months after the initial*

*workshop, few of the initial group attended.* In the small group discussion, women who attended the first workshop shared that that reusable pads helped a lot, with them feeling ok with washing the reusable pads and putting them out the dry with the rest of the family's washing. Brown Girl Woke followed up with the village to distribute and complete the follow up surveys, which are now in the process of being entered for analysis.