

ADDIS STANDARD

December 2019

Special edition

Beyond education: Helping girls believe in themselves



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Abebech Yetebarek, one the female teachers

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Bishoftu, December 06/2019 - Nestanet Alemayehu, Rediate Tibebu, both 15, are student trainees; and Abebech Yetebarek, one the female teachers, is a trainer. There is one common thing that brought the three together: making lternative sanitary pads. All three of them share their own distinct experiences of being a part of a project that is bringing an ultimate change in their womanhood; for Netsanet and Rediate, it also defines their experiences of being female students.

Nestanet Alemayehu is an 8th grade student at Kerahora Primary School in Bishoftu, 45 km South of Addis Abeba, in Oromia regional state. She explains about making homemade sanitary pads with a trace of pride in her voice: “after I got the training on how to make homemade sanitary pads easily, I have been showing my friends, colleagues and even my little sister. The training and awareness creation at the school has taught us sanitary pads are important for our economy, health and environment”. She adds that the alternative sanitary pads are very useful especially for poor and large families. “We know sanitary pads bought from shops have their own side effects. We used to buy from shops most of the time where it isn’t stored properly and if we don’t change it in time, it causes another problem. This is why we choose the alternative sanitary pads. We can clean it easily, store it at home properly and it is free from any chemicals.”

Rediate Tibebu, 15, is the other student *Addis Standard* met in the alternative sanitary pad training. "I am a member of the girls club and this training has helped me a lot already. I have started to make such kinds of pads at home and am using them myself."

Abebech Yetebarek is connected with the stories of Netsanet and Rediate because she is one of the trainers on the preparation of alternative sanitary pad and sanitation to the two young girls.

"Our mothers were using different materials as sanitary pads, Abebech told *Addis Standard* during an interview in Bishoftu, "The modern sanitary pads used today have chemicals on them [which if not handled well during transportation and storage, can cause health problems]. So we are teaching our girls how to prepare their own sanitary pads which have multiple purposes."

On the one hand it helps the girls with their hygiene while on the other it helps protect the environment, Abebech believes. The girls will also be free from having to pay for sanitary pads monthly."

According to her the students are very happy about the education given on menstruation and reproductive health including HIV/AIDS. "We have girls' clubs in different schools now, so when a girl bleeds she contacts the clubs and can get pads for free. Here in Karahora we have a waiting room for girls for any illnesses during menstruation."



Rediate Tibebu

The story above wouldn't have been possible without the support provided by Korea International Volunteer Organization (KVO) Quality Education Projects in collaboration with Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). Mikias Girma, resident representative of KVO, says they are working on quality education, which is the 4th UN Sustainable Development Goal, from different perspectives, and this project is one component of meeting their targets.

KVO started operating in Ethiopian in 2007, whereas it has been active worldwide starting from 1989. It is working on quality education in collaboration with KOICA in five public schools in Bishoftu city alone. "We have two major components here known as School Support and Child Support, under the quality education project. In the child support component, we support around 5000 students in the five public schools of Kenenisa, Kerahora, Bekelcha, Foka and Derara, all found in Bishoftu," Mikias told *Addis Standard*.



Kerahora Primary School 8th grade student practicing in the school's lab



The teacher's empowerment program which trained more than 150 teachers was an achievement of

KVO



Mikias Girma

According to him the child support component includes schools supplies which are always given at the beginning and middle of the academic year, the alternative sanitary pad training, which includes the reproductive health and sanitation, and parents' training about alternative sanitary pads. "In the schools above, we learned that there were a lot of students who stayed at home due to lack of food. After many surveys and analyses, we started a school meal project known as '500 Loving Meals for 500 Students' once every day for five days a week."

Another KVO project, the school support component, supports schools in two different ways, says Mikiyas. The first is through empowerment of teachers, and the second is by renovating school facilities such as toilets and installing safe water tankers. "The teacher's empowerment support which trained more than 150 teachers as an achievement of KVO" says Mikiyas, adding the training includes different components that help raise the quality of education practically. "Pedagogical science, curriculum development, classroom management, student management and preparation of teaching materials were the focus of the training."

Mohammed Kelil, a Biology teacher at Kerahora primary school talks about the benefits of the KVO support. "We were teaching only theory until KVO supplied us with different laboratory materials. Now we have several laboratory materials including a skeleton model and a microscope which are both very important materials for Biology education, and also other chemical and laboratory equipment have been supplied ," Mohammed told *Addis Standard*.

This support has lifted the confusion of theory-only classes among students. "Now everything has changed. As soon as they finish the theory lessons, they come to the laboratory to practice it. After the laboratory materials were supplied and start functioning, the change the students have shown towards science education is incredible."

KVO's other school support for schools focuses on internet technology and computer laboratory classes. "Before this computer laboratory was opened, the students didn't even learn theoretical aspects of computer properly" says Berisso Midegso, an IT teacher. "We are teaching them introduction to computer technology, which wasn't even in the school schedule before. Right now, we have around 40 grade seven and eight students. The students are very happy to be studying computers, which weren't here before."

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Berisso Midegso



Kerahora students practicing computer training

After those components of quality education are provided, KVO works to have a way to make sure all the students are available and attending their classes. "So with the help of KOICA we prepared attendance books and gave them to schools for free," says Mikiyas Girma.

Whenever possible, South Korean citizens with pedagogical experience come to volunteer at either of KVO Bishoftu Projects. Ms. Kwon In is one such volunteer. She told *Addis Standard* she first came to stay for one year, but decided to add another after her one year was up. She used to be an intern volunteer in Seoul. Seeing the commitment and determination in all the people at the KVO projects who are eager to bring about change is what keeps inspiring her to extend her stay in Ethiopia, she says.

Back in Karahora elementary school, Abebech, the trainer, says that what keeps her going is the fact that beyond taking part in producing alternative sanitary pads is the fact that many girls come to her and talk to her about menstruation and other reproductive health issues like they would to a mother, without shame and fear. She says she is glad that as a result of the training the girls come to talk to her about everything. Perhaps more than the actual benefits of the alternative sanitary pads, this is a story that shatters the long-held societal taboo that besieges millions of menstruating girls throughout Ethiopia; most have no one to talk to about this delicate stage of their teenage lives.



Girls' waiting room

There is a girls' waiting room too, which is exclusively prepared for menstruating girls to change their sanitary pads and to rest if they feel any illness. This waiting room has become a source of confidence for many of the girls; it is where they feel connected to one another at such times when intimacy and support to one another is crucial; it is where they exercise the humility of rising above fear and believing in self. **AS**

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