



# MENSTRUAL MANAGEMENT IN ANGOLA:

EFFECTIVENESS OF PROVIDING  
QUALITY MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS AND  
EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS IN HUAMBO,  
HUILA, LUANDA, AND LUNDA SUL

LEARNING STUDY  
MAY 2021

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

UNFPA Angola and Be Girl would like to recognize the Government of Angola and all national stakeholders from both key Ministries and civil society organizations who participated in this pilot initiative, and their dedication and commitment to improve the dignity and safety of menstruating adolescent girls in Angola. Thank you for generously offering your time and expertise in support of the development and implementation of this pilot initiative of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) to promote gender equality and equity and the empowerment of young girls in Angola.

We thank the UNFPA Angola Team, especially Ana Paula Andrade for her key support in conducting the Training of Trainers Workshop, the field work and the Data Collection sessions. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Mr. Carlos Cesar who conducted the photographic coverage of workshops with girls and boys in Luanda.

We acknowledge the Be Girl team, in particular Cídia Chissungo, Hortência Franco, and Cristina Brito for their work on the Training of Trainers workshop, and Solange Lubrino and Tatiana Reyes Jové, for their contributions to the data analysis.

Finally, we express our thanks to the girls and boys who participated in this pilot and shared their insights via surveys and discussions for this report.

UNFPA Angola and Be Girl believe that, by providing menstrual health management information and products, we contribute to fulfilling girls' and women's human rights – and specifically reproductive rights – both as a precondition for attaining rights such as health and education, as well as a matter of dignity in its own right.

Authors: Elaine Koerner, Júlia Zandamela, and Audrey Duckett

Formatting design: Natalia Ramos Castro

Photos: Carlos Cesar for UNFPA Angola

© 2021 Be Girl, Inc.  
All Rights Reserved

Any questions regarding this study should be directed to [audrey@begirl.org](mailto:audrey@begirl.org), [carreira@unfpa.org](mailto:carreira@unfpa.org), and [aandreia@unfpa.org](mailto:aandreia@unfpa.org).

Suggested Citation:

Koerner, E., Zandamela, J., and Duckett, A. (2021). Menstrual management in Angola: Effectiveness of providing quality menstrual products and educational workshops in Huambo, Huíla, Luanda, and Lunda Sul.

## ABOUT THE PARTNERS

**Be Girl** is a social enterprise that takes a design-driven approach to menstrual health and hygiene so that all girls can understand, own, and love their bodies. Be Girl works to achieve this vision through sustainable, quality menstrual products, age-appropriate menstruation education programs, and transformative messaging for a stigma-free world. Be Girl is headquartered in Washington, DC, USA, and operates a subsidiary, Be Girl Mozambique, in Maputo.

The **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)** is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. UNFPA has been operating in Angola since 1978, working to: increase access to reproductive health (including family planning and treatment of obstetric fistula) and HIV prevention services; with the mission of delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

**Government of Angola:** This study was made possible through the participation of Ministry of Youth and Sports (MINJUD); Ministry of Education (MED); Ministry of Social Action, Family and Women's Promotion (MASFAMU); Ministry of Energy and Water (MINEA); Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MINJUSDH) and Municipal Administration of Matala, Huila.



## **ABOUT THE PARTNERS - CIVIL SOCIETY**

**African Youth and Adolescents Network (AfriYAN)** was created to increase meaningful youth participation in Africa's development. Participating youth are committed to the fight against HIV/AIDS and the promotion of youth sexual and reproductive health in Africa.



**Aid for the Development of People for People (ADPP)** Angola is a non-governmental organization that works with local communities and authorities to build a more unified, equitable and just nation. It carries out community-based projects in education, health and well-being, environment, and sustainable agriculture.



The **Angola Council of Christian Churches in Angola (CICA)** is an ecumenical membership organization that provides a voice for dialogue with local, national, and international governments. It is focused on promoting peacebuilding throughout Angolan society.



The **Angolan Network of AIDS Services Organizations (ANASO)**, which is part of the Southern African Network of AIDS Service Organizations (SANASO), provides a national network of information exchange, access to resources, and technical assistance. It works to influence policy, build capacity, and fight the spread of HIV.



**League to Support the Integration of Disabled People (LARDEF)** supports the empowerment and social integration of people with visible and non-visible disabilities. Its vision is to create a seamless environment in which people with disabilities are integrated into society and their rights are respected.



**MWANA PWO** is an Angolan-based girls empowerment association whose goal is to transform young women into leaders through creating opportunities and challenging the barriers to attainment of both formal and informal education.



**PRAZEDOR** is an Angolan public health NGO that carries out education on HIV/AIDS awareness. It participates in consortiums providing HIV information, testing, distribution of condoms, and home visits including providing mothers and pregnant women with information about mother-to-child transmission.



The **Youth Support Centre (CAJ)**, created by the Angolan Government through the National Institute of Youth, carries out projects benefitting Angolan youth.



# INTRODUCTION & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescent girls in Angola often face dual barriers when it comes to managing their menstrual health with dignity and comfort: a lack of basic knowledge about the menstrual cycle and its relationship to family planning as well as a lack of adequate materials to use during their periods. Coupled with harmful gender norms such as social stigma and taboos linked to menstruation, these barriers add to girls' diminished sense of self-worth and an increase in missed opportunities.

In Angola, as girls advance through adolescence and into adulthood, the gender equity gap widens. Literacy rates for women stand at just 53% compared to 80% for men.<sup>1</sup> The adolescent fertility rate is among the highest in Africa, with 163 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 years.<sup>2</sup> Child marriage by age 18 stands at about 30%.<sup>3</sup> And on a broader level, poverty at the national level is 32.3%, and it rises to 54.7% in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Inadequate resources for basic needs translates into inability to purchase adequate menstrual products, which often are considered to be non-essential items.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Angola and Be Girl joined in partnership to carry out a pilot intervention learning study in Angola from December 2020 through April 2021.

## PURPOSE & INTERVENTIONS

The primary aim of the study was to assess the benefits of two interventions: 1) teaching a series of menstrual health workshops provided to a group of underserved adolescent girls and boys and 2) providing sustainable menstrual products to the female participants.

The boys-only and girls-only workshops were taught using Be Girl's SmartCycle® menstrual education curriculum.<sup>5</sup> Contents included the basic biology of the menstrual cycle, menstrual health and hygiene, how to track the menstrual cycle, the connection between menstruation and reproduction, and rejection of myths and taboos.

During the workshops, the girls were given two pairs of Be Girl's PeriodPanties™, reusable menstrual underwear that includes a mesh pocket to hold a removable washable towel that absorbs menstrual flow. Both girls and boys also received a SmartCycle® handheld learning tool, designed as a small "clock" with a movable "hand" to enable users to track their menstrual cycles.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Data as of September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Inquérito de Indicadores Múltiplos e de Saúde (IIMS), 2015-16. Angola.

<sup>3</sup> UNFPA World Population Dashboard - Angola, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank. 2020. Angola Poverty Assessment.

<sup>5</sup> Be Girl SmartCycle® Curriculum. 2019. Available at <https://www.begirl.org/smartcycle/#curriculum>.



*Be Girl's PeriodPanty™ (top left and center) is a sustainable menstrual product that combines underwear with built-in menstrual protection.*

*A towel (included with the panty) or any absorbent material is inserted into a mesh pocket in the panty with a leakproof bottom for menstrual flow.*

*Be Girl's SmartCycle® (top right) is a menstrual cycle learning tool designed as a necklace. Using this technology, Be Girl developed 1-hour SmartCycle® menstrual education workshops for both girls and boys.*

## TIMELINE & METHODS

Trainers from Be Girl's subsidiary office in Maputo, Mozambique conducted a one-week virtual training of trainers (TOT) for 27 partners based in the provinces of Luanda, Huíla, Lunda Sul and Huambo. Virtual training methods employing video streaming and webinar technology were used to ensure safety during COVID-19 lockdown. During the virtual workshops, trainees learned how to teach adolescents about menstrual health and hygiene using Be Girl's SmartCycle® menstrual education workshop curriculum. Trainees received manuals and educational banners to use while they taught the workshop as well as an electronic folder of resources needed for successful project execution and data collection.

After completing their training, the trainers then conducted 45 SmartCycle® workshops from December 2020 through early February 2021. A total of 1,000 adolescent girls and 1,000 adolescent boys from disadvantaged families participated. Of this number, 790 girls and 457 boys filled out surveys both before and after their workshop so that changes in knowledge and attitudes about menstruation and reproduction could be assessed. The average age of participants was 15 years, and 17% of girls reported that they had not had their first period yet. Workshops took place in schools and community shelters located in four provinces: Huambo; Huíla; Luanda (25 of the 45); and Lunda Sul. Each workshop reached approximately 15 to 30 participants. Extra time was allotted for limited reading and writing skills.

In regard to the boys' workshops, the SmartCycle® methodology was adapted to reach boys through an approach called "Building Cycles of Empathy." In addition, the pre- and post-workshop survey questions differed in some cases so as to better understand gender-specific viewpoints and negative practices such as bullying.



AVERAGE AGE: 15

SAMPLE SIZE - QUANTITATIVE:

**790 GIRLS 457 BOYS**



SAMPLE SIZE - QUALITATIVE:

**76 GIRLS**



Girls and boys received a Be Girl SmartCycle® learning tool, and girls received two pairs of Be Girl's signature PeriodPanties™. To measure the effectiveness of the workshop and girls' use of menstrual panties over time, project facilitators held 7 focus group sessions involving 76 girls from three provinces (Luanda, Lunda Sul, and Huíla) three to ten weeks after the intervention, which enabled the girls to use the panties and tracking tool in the interim.

Quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group discussion data were compiled and submitted to Be Girl's Maputo office to analyze and develop recommendations.

# RESULTS

## PRIMARY FINDINGS

Data analysis based on comparing pre- and post-intervention quantitative survey answers from boys and girls, as well as themes emerging from qualitative focus group discussions with girls, yielded the following high-level findings:

### **Experiences with menstruation prior to the intervention**

#### **GIRLS**

Lack of access to menstrual products and information, coupled with cultural taboos, affected girls' self-esteem and limited their participation in daily activities such as attending school and playing with friends.

Girls demonstrated a lack of knowledge about their menstrual cycle, reproduction, and family planning.

#### **BOYS**

Boys possessed incomplete or inaccurate information about menstruation and reproduction and, in some cases, negative attitudes.

### **Effectiveness of the menstrual product and education interventions**

#### **GIRLS**

The menstrual cycle workshop improved girls' knowledge of their menstrual cycle and reproduction, and the number of girls who reported that they were comfortable discussing family planning increased.

Access to menstrual panties improved girls' confidence and ability to participate in daily activities during menstruation, including school attendance and participation.

#### **BOYS**

The menstrual cycle workshop improved boys' knowledge of menstruation and reproduction, and, similar to the results for girls, the number of boys who reported that they were comfortable discussing family planning increased.

Following the workshop, boys were more likely to reject menstrual stigma and report positive attitudes towards menstruation.



*A facilitator shows how to fold the absorbent towel to insert in the menstrual panties.*

## SPECIFIC RESULTS - GIRLS

### Menstrual Experience Prior to Intervention - Quantitative Findings

In the entry survey girls filled out prior to the workshop, only 15% reported that they understood menstruation when they got their first period (menarche). Disposable pads were the most common product used, and only 15% reported they were satisfied with how they were managing their periods. The top complaint was that the existing products sometimes leaked or stained their clothes (39%).

Girls reported limitations on daily activities during menstruation. A total of 54% of respondents said they had limited mobility when they had their periods and they usually stayed home, and 41% said it was considered unacceptable at that time to be around family members. The top restriction that girls mentioned was participation in social activities such as playing sports or playing with friends: 61% of girls reported these activities to be difficult during menstruation. Note that non-response was high for this series of questions on limitations during menstruation, around 20%.

Regarding managing menstruation at school, 45% of girls reported to have a private space to change menstrual products and take care of their periods in the school, while 30% of girls reported that it is very easy to access water at school. 21% reported they had missed school during menstruation, and 42% of that group missed one or more days every cycle.

#### "When I have my period..."\*



\*Respondents could choose more than one answer.

**45%** **30%**

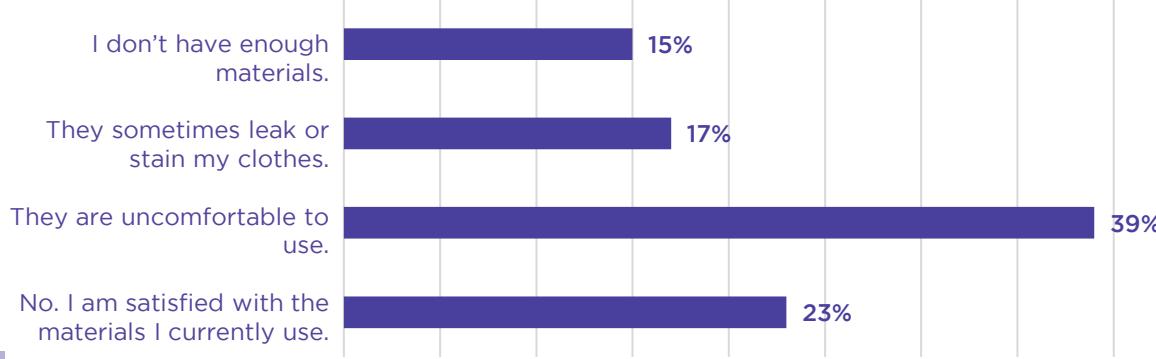
of girls report to have a private space to change menstrual products and take care of their periods in the school

of girls report that it is very easy to access water at school. 34% report some difficulty, and 19% report a high degree of difficulty accessing water.



1 in 5 girls reported to have missed school because of menstruation during the last year. Of this group, 42% missed one or more days every cycle.

#### Do you have any concerns or complaints about the menstrual products you currently use?

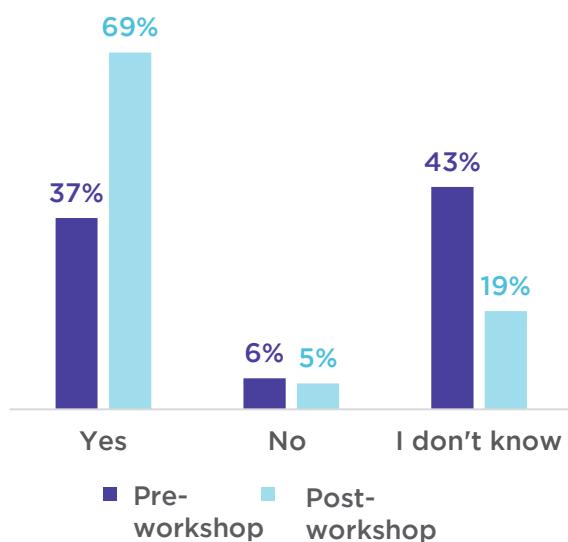


# SPECIFIC RESULTS - GIRLS

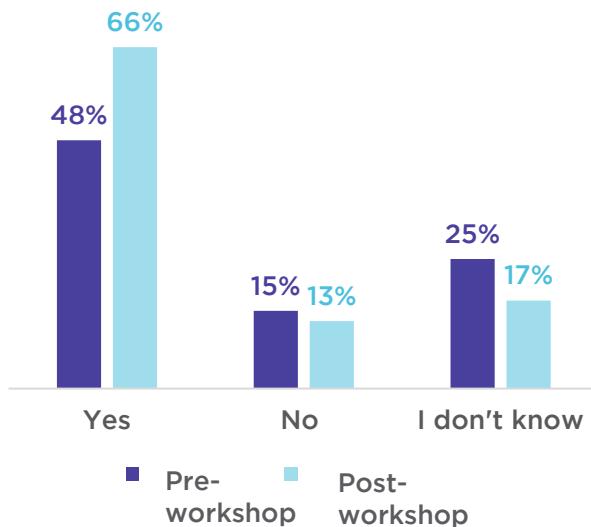
## Effects of Menstrual Education Workshop - Quantitative Findings

Girls' knowledge base regarding their menstrual cycle and reproduction increased after participating in the workshop. For example, before the intervention, 44% correctly identified that menstruation is a healthy occurrence when the uterine lining sheds; post-workshop, the number rose to 68%, a 56% increase. The percentage who correctly answered that ovulation is the release of the egg from the ovary and is the most fertile time more than doubled post-workshop, increasing from 28% to 59%. And the percentage who correctly identified day 14 as the most likely day for peak ovulation in an average 28-day cycle more than tripled, increasing from 19% to 63%. The percentage of girls who responded that there was a connection between the menstrual cycle and reproduction ("where babies come from") increased from 37% pre-workshop to 69% post-workshop (86% increase).

## Is there a connection between the menstrual cycle and where babies come from?



When you grow up, would you feel comfortable discussing with your partner whether or not to have a baby?



Attitudes toward menstruation took the form of increased confidence. For instance, after the workshop, 69% of girls reported to understand how their menstrual cycle worked compared to just 39% beforehand (a 75% increase). After the workshop, 90% reported that menstruation is something positive, up from 75% pre-workshop. The number who reported they felt confident around boys during menstruation rose modestly from 11% to 18%, a 65% increase. And the percentage who reported they felt uncomfortable talking about menstruation dropped by more than 50%.

**75%** increase in girls who reported to understand how their menstrual cycle worked

Attitudes toward reproductive health and family planning also changed. The percentage who stated that husbands and wives together should decide whether to have a baby increased from 72% pre-workshop to 81% post-workshop, a 14% increase. Moreover, post-workshop, 66% said that they would feel comfortable talking with their future partner about the topic, up from 48%, a 36% increase.

## SPECIFIC RESULTS - GIRLS

### Effects of Menstrual Education Workshop - Qualitative Findings

Girls' focus group discussions during February and March 2021 (held three to ten weeks after the intervention) provided a more informal setting to gain additional information about the effectiveness of the two interventions.

Many girls shared that they used the SmartCycle® menstrual cycle learning tool to help them track their period better, including when they ovulate. One girl said,

**“I now know when my menstruation is about to come and prepare myself.”**

Another told her focus group, “I shared (it) with my sister.”

Girls shared in the focus group that they had learned valuable information about menstrual and reproductive health during the workshop, reinforcing quantitative findings. For example, their verbal answers to questions about the phases of the menstrual cycle and when a woman is most fertile confirmed survey results that indicated many had better knowledge of both menstruation and reproduction, even several weeks after the workshop:

**“In the ovulation phase, we find the day when a woman is most fertile.”**

**“I don't think about having babies yet, but when the time comes, I now already have the information.”**



A girl studies the menstrual cycle tracking methodology.



*Wearing a SmartCycle® tool around her neck, a workshop participant discusses how to track the menstrual cycle.*

During the discussions, girls talked openly about common myths and taboos about menstruation that they learned were untrue during the workshop, such as: if a girl is close to a boy while menstruating she can get pregnant; a girl's menstrual flow increases when she is close to a boy; a woman should not bake a cake during menstruation; and a girl cannot go to school or be out in public when she is menstruating. In many discussions, girls suggested that similar educational sessions be made available to their mothers and more widely to their community, because their mothers often uphold taboos (e.g., preventing them from cooking when menstruating). Multiple girls expressed reflections on myths and taboos about menstruation and reported that they intended to use the information they had learned in the workshop to challenge these myths and taboos in the future:

**“In my opinion, there will always be taboos and myths, but we can use the information we have to help other girls better understand menstruation and their own bodies.”**

**“Since I attended the lecture, I can now talk openly about the menstrual cycle. I can now tell girls and boys that I am on my period.”**

# SPECIFIC RESULTS - GIRLS

## Effects of Menstrual Product Access - Qualitative Findings

The focus group discussions provided evidence regarding girls' experiences with the menstrual underwear products that they had received several weeks earlier. Most girls shared positive feedback about the panties, citing reasons such as they protected their clothes from stains, they looked good, and they felt comfortable. One girl said, "I wish my sisters could have them, too." Others remarked:

**" I used [the menstrual panty] four times. I found it comfortable, and I would like it if we received them more times. I felt good, and I was not worried about it staining because it protects, the blood does not seep through the panty."**

**" I feel like I'm wearing a normal panty. I almost forget I'm on my period."**

Some girls said that they were nervous at first to use the panty but eventually felt comfortable after finding that the panty protected them:

**" The first time I used it I was constantly checking if it was stained or if it was seeping through, but after that I felt safe."**

Several girls shared that they felt more comfortable during menstruation both inside the house as well as participating in school:

**" I felt relieved while wearing it."**

**" I felt good outside the house and at school as well."**

In some cases, girls said the panty size was a problem and in other cases the girls reported that they had worn a disposable pad along with the panties. As a result of these comments, Be Girl and UNFPA are examining these issues to make any adjustments needed in future interventions.

Most said that the panties were easy to wash and dry, particularly compared to the underwear they were used to. Several noted the sports fabric as the reason: "It was easy to dry because the fabric is lightweight compared to what I used before."

When asked, most girls expressed a preference for the menstrual panties compared to disposable pads, listing reasons such as: the panty is more comfortable, it lasts longer than pads, it saves money, and it protects them better from stains. One girl said, "I would choose the period panty, because I am allergic to [the commonly used brand of disposable pads]."

At the end of the focus group, girls were asked to imagine that they were responsible for choosing a "dignity kit" to give to other girls in the community to manage their periods and to share what they would choose to include in these kits. Most girls said they would choose the menstrual panty, and many said they would provide both menstrual panties and disposable pads so girls could choose what they prefer. Girls also mentioned that kits should include soap, detergent, towels, the SmartCycle® menstrual tracking tool, and information about family planning.

**Imagine that you are responsible for choosing a kit to give to other girls in the community right now to help them manage their periods. What would you put in the kit?**

- ✓ Menstrual panties
- ✓ Disposable pads
- ✓ Absorbent towels
- ✓ Soap, bleach, detergent
- ✓ Menstrual cycle tracking tool
- ✓ Information about menstrual health and family planning with practical examples

The items listed above were mentioned by multiple focus groups. Other items mentioned by only one group included razor blades, water containers, and pantyhose.



## SPECIFIC RESULTS - BOYS

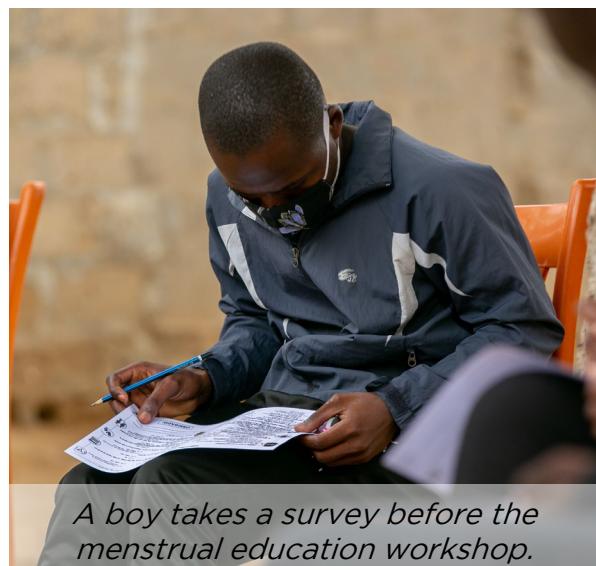
### Effects of Menstrual Education Workshop - Quantitative Findings

As was the case for girls, boys' quantitative survey results showed an increased understanding of menstrual cycles and reproduction. For example, the percentage who reported they understood how the menstrual cycle worked nearly tripled, from 20% to 57%. Pre-workshop, the percentage who correctly identified what ovulation was stood at 39%. After the workshop, it rose to 68%, a 74% increase.

Additional findings revealed substantial increases in knowledge. For instance, pre-workshop, 23% correctly identified that Day 14 is the most likely day for peak ovulation in an average 28-day cycle. The number afterwards rose to 70%, more than tripling. In addition, the percentage who correctly identified the general time during the menstrual cycle that a woman is most fertile increased from 16% pre-workshop to 51% post-workshop, also more than tripling.

Family planning knowledge also increased. The percentage who said there was a connection between the menstrual cycle and where babies come from increased from 50% pre-workshop to 76% post-workshop, a 53% increase. The percentage who reported they understood that it was possible for adults to decide when to have a baby increased from 68% pre-workshop to 84% post-workshop, a 23% increase. A total of 72% stated that husbands and wives together should decide whether to have a baby before the workshop; the number rose to 81% post-workshop, a 13% increase. And while 51% pre-workshop said that they would feel comfortable discussing with their future partner about whether to have a baby; the number rose to 67% post-workshop.

Finally, boys' attitudes toward menstruation also changed. Before the workshop, 63% reported it was normal for boys to interact with menstruating girls in comparison with 84% post-workshop, a 33% increase. Also, 47% reported pre-workshop that they would feel comfortable interacting with a menstruating girl and afterwards, 57% said they would, a 21% increase. And the percentage who said boys and men should learn about menstruation increased from 73% pre-workshop to 84% post-workshop.



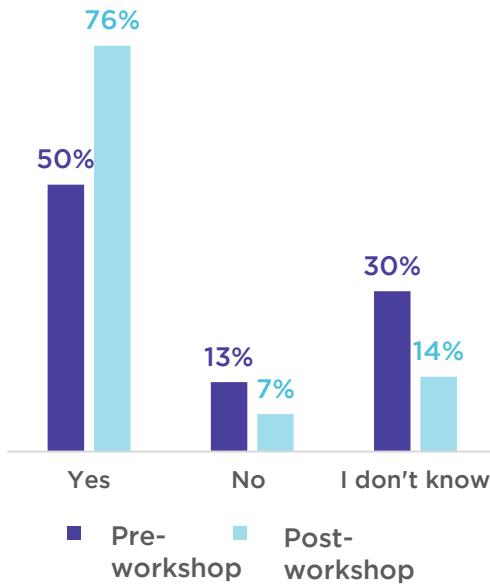
*A boy takes a survey before the menstrual education workshop.*

Percentage of boys who responded that it is normal to interact with a girl who is menstruating:

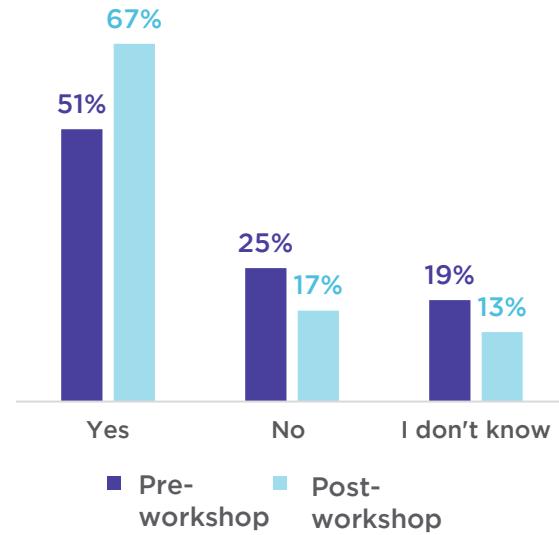


## SPECIFIC RESULTS - BOYS

Is there a connection between the menstrual cycle and where babies come from?



When you grow up, would you feel comfortable discussing with your partner whether or not to have a baby?



## RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, findings from the pilot learning study demonstrated that both interventions contributed to removing menstruation-related barriers and stigmas faced by Angolan adolescent girls, which prevent them from opportunities that enable them to reach their full potential such as attending school comfortably, participating in social activities, and making informed decisions about their personal health. The findings confirm that targeted menstrual management interventions can play an important role in opening up opportunities for equitable participation in society. Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations for actions to be taken:

### **1. Deliver biology-based menstrual education to girls and boys starting at an early age (ideally pre-menarche).**

Educational content should be designed to reduce fear, increase knowledge about both menstruation and reproduction, grow confidence, create trust to engage in dialogue, and build a foundation for girls to have greater control over their reproductive health and, thereby, their futures. Provision of kinesthetic learning tools to track the menstrual cycle offers the opportunity for greater learning about menstruation and reproduction.

### **2. Involve parents, teachers, community leaders, and adolescents themselves in menstrual educational efforts.**

Involving adults who are important influences in the lives of young people enables them to educate young people and help dismantle stigma and taboos that ultimately are damaging to everyone. Furthermore, adolescents themselves can make important contributions as peer educators and consultants on program decision-making to enhance the effectiveness and uptake of interventions.

### **3. Provide girls with sustainable access to reliable menstrual products.**

When possible, provide girls with menstrual products that are proven to provide safe, sustainable, and reliable protection. When possible, offer girls choices in managing menstruation to enable them to confidently and competently participate in daily life, including their ongoing education.

### **4. At a national level, advocate for the scaling up of collaborative efforts in menstrual health evidence generation and programs.**

Menstrual health contributes towards realizing multiple United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 3, Good Health and Well-being; 4, Quality Education; 5, Gender Equality; 6, Clean Water and Sanitation; and 10, Reduced Inequalities. Supporting existing policies and creating new initiatives that enable collaborative efforts in research and programming around menstrual health furthers progress towards these goals.

## CONCLUSION

Given that nearly half of Angola's population of 31.1 million people (as of 2020) is 14 years old or younger,<sup>6</sup> the potential to facilitate positive change nationwide through the provision of critical information around sexual and reproductive health, and respective menstrual health information and support materials, is exponential. Moreover, the opportunity to increase adolescent boys' knowledge about, and support of, menstruation and family planning – including their contribution towards ending stigma and taboos – is just as promising. In combination, the fundamental positive changes that can unfold set the stage for greater gender equality in Angola. And greater gender equality, in turn, can usher in beneficial ripple effects that are felt across all sectors of Angolan society.

<sup>6</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2016. Projecção da População 2014-2050.

For questions about this report, contact: [audrey@begirl.org](mailto:audrey@begirl.org) | [carreira@unfpa.org](mailto:carreira@unfpa.org) | [aandrade@unfpa.org](mailto:aandrade@unfpa.org)

