

**A SPEECH BY THARAKA NITHI COUNTY FIRST LADY, MRS. LUCY MBAE DURING THE PRESENTATION OF
SANITARY TOWELS TO SCHOOLS AT KATHWANA HEADQUARTERS ON 27TH MARCH 2014.**

The County Executive Committee members,

The County Directors for Education,

The head teachers and the whole education fraternity,

Pupils,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen present,

Good Morning,

It is my utmost pleasure to be with you this day as we come together in aid of our young girls of Tharaka Nithi County and the whole womenfolk at large.

It is a great step to see the entire community come together in aid of these girls and assist in curbing this very disturbing issue that has continued to affect our girls in Kenya both physically and socially.

It is great to see the county and the education fraternity unite to drum their support in addressing the issue of lack of sanitary towels for our girls because the education sector has also been adversely affected.

The issue of lacking sanitary towels in Kenya is not new but thankfully Kenyans have continued to be equally informed and aware of this issue which creates a great alleyway to curbing the issue.

Last year, Kenyans were left in utter disbelief when a local TV station aired a story “Period of Shame” on how young girls in Marigat, Baringo County used goat skins, chicken feathers, leaves and even soil during their periods for lack of sanitary towels in attempt to remain dry and clean. Some girls dig a hole and sit on it throughout the period while others cut pieces of blankets and clothing.

This means that they skip schools and remain at home sitted on the hole to avoid soiling their clothes at school and embarrassing themselves.

A study done by UNESCO estimates that one in 10 African adolescent girls in remote areas misses school during their menses while some eventually drops out because of menstruation related issues. In Kenya a girl misses 3-5 days of school every month during their monthly periods which means in a month she loses 13 learning days equivalent to two weeks of learning in every school term.

In an academic year (nine months) a girl loses 39 learning days equivalent to six weeks of learning time. A girl in primary school between class 6 and 8 loses 18 learning weeks out of 108 weeks while within the four years of high school a girl can lose 156 learning days equivalent to almost 24 weeks out of 144 weeks of learning in high school.

This we must all agree will adversely affect the education of the girl child because she cannot even interact with their fellow pupils and teachers due to lack of confidence caused by soiled uniforms.

We can attest, this is the same case for women who do not have access to the sanitary towels and you can be sure they will not be confident in social circles hence we cannot blame the girl for skipping school.

As Kenyans we need to accept that this is a disaster on its own because in the end we are left with frustrated young girls due to continuous ridicules. They eventually fail in their exams; others drop out of school and get absorbed into the same community that has been unfair to them. In the end what we have are frustrated women, which are a turn in the wrong direction for our county and the entire country at large.

This also negates the achievement of Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3: (*Achieving universal primary education and promoting gender equality and empowering women*) and the realization of Kenya Vision 2030.

We have to do something to prevent this from happening and I appreciate that the government was concerned and through the ministry of education allocated funds for provision of the sanitary towels in schools.

However the allocated money was slashed by 99 million shillings in the financial year 2013/2014, this is the 300 million shillings allocated previously to the ministry of education for the provision of sanitary towels to 568,925 needy girls between class 6 and 8. This is a fraction of the 2.5 million in need of the towels meaning only a 1/3 of the targeted girls will benefit.

On average, a girl will have 13 menstruation circles a year. This means that with the effect of a 16 percent Value Added Tax and other related taxes, parents will need as much as KES 120 (about US \$1.50) for a packet containing eight sanitary pads each month. For most parents this is too costly, especially in a country where majority of the people live on less than a dollar a day.

Therefore it means something more needs to be done and we cannot always be sympathizing and getting shocked after such stories on TV and just talk about it doing nothing.

The advantage now is we have county governments in place and the leaders are closer to the girls more than ever and this means rapid identification of the areas where our girls are suffering and immediately going into their aid.

It is in this line that we saw the need to have this event today and start a programme that will see our girls in Tharaka Nithi County gain access to the sanitary towels and help them grow to be confident women ready to take on the world.

Today, we are issuing sanitary towels to 300 pupils from Chuka Igamba Ng'ombe, Tharaka North and Tharaka south sub counties. This is just the beginning and we are going to work with the education sector, business community, and various organizations to source more towels for our girls.

I urge all the women to join us in preaching this gospel and assist in saving our girls from going through these challenges yet there is something we can do. Let us not wait for the media to air to the world sad stories of our girls while we continue enjoying life and boasting of personal growth.

Let us encourage more of such events through supporting our schools in development and advocacy associations, youth and women groups etc. Get that girl in your local school and change her life by buying a packet of a sanitary towel which costs from Sh 40 a month and you will have instilled confidence and self esteem for the girl therefore playing a part in building of a great community.

As we continue with these projects and campaigns, let us not forget there is also need to provide information to girls about their bodies, menstruation itself and their general reproductive system.

I have researched and found out that there is none or limited knowledge about the biological process of menstruation among girls and women living in some remote areas. Many women and adolescent girls in Kenya have limited knowledge about their bodies, especially in relation to menstruation and sexual and reproductive health.

In some parts of Kenya menstruation is treated with silence and as a taboo topic, this limits women's and girls' access to relevant and important information. In the case of Baringo we can recall that the clansmen almost banished the girls for speaking out and accused them of embarrassing the community.

According to Forum for African Women Educationalists-Kenya chapter(Fawek), a majority of adolescent girls in Kenya suffer through premature pregnancy, HIV/Aids and sexually transmitted infections, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, rape and sexual harassment due to lack of information and services for healthy sexuality and reproduction.

Let us talk to our girls and help them understand this is how God created us and it is very normal and okay to talk about it.

As I conclude let us remember more girls are being born every day, more girls are graduating to adolescence every day and as this happens more girls are likely to get into the sorry and devastating state of goats skin, feathers and soil if you and I do not do something.

As one Faye Wattleton said "Reproductive freedom is critical to a whole range of issues. If we can't take charge of this most personal aspect of our lives, we can't take care of anything. It should not be seen as a privilege or as a benefit, but a fundamental human right."

Thank you and God bless you.

Mrs. Lucy Mbae.