

Keeping Girls in School

When Brenda Birrell discovered what was harming young teens' futures, she sewed up a solution



Brenda Birrell with period kits and, inset, at the Karatina Special School in Kenya



I FOUND MY LIFE'S purpose in a dentist's waiting room.

As I flipped through a magazine that day in 2017, a random fact caught my eye: More than 20 million girls in the developing world drop out of school every year because they cannot manage their periods. It might be as many as 50 million!

I was flabbergasted. It had never occurred to me that a girl's future could be so shaped by a natural process that happens to half of humanity.

I'd been volunteering for an international nonprofit called the Global Uplift Project. Experts there told me the issue was real. Disposable products are too costly for many girls' families. So the girls try "homespun" solutions like sitting on dried leaves or dried cow dung. They might work, but they don't help them go to school.

There is no goodness that comes from a 12- or 13-year-old girl dropping out of school. She might be sold as a child bride or into the sex trade. She might end up in a menial job. In no case will she be able to realize her potential. The converse is also true. A better-educated girl is one of the best assets a society can cultivate. She delays marriage longer, educates her children better, has better vocational options and contributes more to her community. The goodness literally ripples into eternity.

As fate would have it, I'm an experienced seamstress. So I designed a set of washable, reusable sanitary pads and asked young girls in several countries where the nonprofit worked to test them. We discovered we could make a durable, reusable kit for less than \$6.

After hiring and training seamstresses in developing countries, we have given more than 85,000 free kits to girls in 11 countries. And we've had amazing results. At schools where the kits have been distributed, girls' attendance improves, grade point averages rise, graduation rates increase and test scores skyrocket.

When I started this adventure, I was recently widowed after 41 years of marriage. I was trying to figure out who I was on my own. Now I know. I will always be proud to have shared a life with my husband, but today I'm making my own mark. It might be a small one, but it is mine, and I hope it will help these girls, and many others, make their marks as well.

Brenda Birrell, 71, is a retired physics teacher in Los Altos, California. She is the founder of the Save a Girl program at the Global Uplift Project.