

“We See You, We Care”

NMC Students and Staff Walk to End Period Poverty in Kenya

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Photo credit Keiara Pettengill

Sixty-five percent of women across Kenya have no access to period pads, according to Amref Health Africa. And so, on Oct. 11, sporting matching red backpacks, more than 70 collective NMC staff, students, and faculty walked four miles around Boardman Lake, raising approximately \$7,000 in funds to provide women and girls in Kenya with menstrual pads through PadMad. Access to safe pads is critical in keeping Kenyan girls in school, which will lead them to greater opportunities without risking their vaginal health or prostituting themselves. The walk shows them that there are people across the world in their corner fighting for them, to encourage them to keep fighting for themselves.

“When I heard about this, I was intrigued and thought, ‘maybe we could do something here at NMC.’ Having just walked around Boardman Lake himself, Jim Bensley, NMC Director of International Services and Learning, proposed a walk in solidarity and support of ending period poverty in Kenya in conjunction with PadMad.

According to their website, PadMad aims to eliminate period poverty and promote dignity for marginalized women in Kenya. The non-profit not only provides these women with a 10-pack of reusable pads designed to last up to five years, but also employs them to manufacture the pads, which helps end the cycle of poverty. The biodegradable cotton pads are environmentally friendly, with 77 million single-use pads in landfills avoided and 1.17kg of carbon emissions prevented.

Madhvi Dalal, professional pharmacist, yoga instructor, and PadMad’s CEO and founder, moved from the UK to Kenya to teach students yoga and dance. While visiting the slums, she noticed a huge disproportion of severe vaginal and uterine infections due to the lack of access to safe period products.

“They wouldn’t use a ‘product,’ so to speak,” Dalal said. Girls and women of menstrual age in Kenya are often forced to use unsanitary and unsafe substitutes for pads. This includes mattress pieces, cow or elephant dung, leaves, and even other women’s discarded, blood-covered pads.

Even if they are fortunate enough to have access to an education, without access to sanitary pads, girls have no choice but to stay home during their periods, causing them to miss up to five days of school per month. To avoid being absent from school, many girls resort to transactional sex with their teachers to get one pad. Sometimes two, depending on the quality of the sex. This causes many girls to contract HIV, a very prevalent STI in Kenya, which has no cure according to the National Institutes of Health.

“These girls will do anything, anything to stay in school because it’s their only way to break poverty—to get an education,” said Tanja

Wittrock. Wittrock is a retired large animal veterinarian, NMC biology and anatomy/physiology instructor, and co-founder of Uplift Travel, the organization hosting Dalal’s visit and facilitating the NMC student trip to Kenya in May.

“It feels so hard to do anything,” Jayden Eskew, an NMC world cultures student at the walk, expressed. “But even if you do the smallest thing like this, where you come with your friends and show up for the community, you’re making a difference.”

Many other students expressed a similar sentiment, like Dakota Mummy, who added, “If we don’t help each other, then how would we get anywhere?”

Although the walk fundraised more than \$7,000 for PadMad, the biggest impact of the event is to show these girls that people across the world are seeing their struggles and fighting for them, as stated by Wittrock and Dalal. The red backpacks were not only a fashion bonus with extra snacks and water inside for walkers, but they also showcased solidarity. They express to these marginalized women that they are seen and heard, which empowers and gives them hope for the future.

Wittrock recalled a conversation she had with a Kenyan girl one night, who said, “Many tourists come, and maybe in their buses, they take some pictures of us. But they don’t see us. You see us. You see me.”

To drive this point home, a volunteer was asked to collect video messages from people participating in the walk to send to the women and girls in Kenya. The messages range from anticipation of saying hello in person on the upcoming student trip to Kenya in May, school advice, and most importantly, sentiments of encouragement and empowerment, which were displayed by a pair of girls who cheered, “Woman to woman, we see you, and we care.”

As a morale booster for walkers, the multicultural club also implemented a series of activities halfway through the walk, boosted by 2010s dance-pop. These competitive but fun games included a three-legged race and an egg-and-spoon walk challenge.

Besides the walk, during her visit, Dalal



also worked with students at NMC in classes, including Introduction to Social Work, World Cultures, and Gender and Society, to “offer a unique opportunity for students to engage with real-world issues,” said Bensley. Not only does this give students a break from typical bookwork, but it also allows them to speak directly to a passionate expert who is actively working to overcome global issues.

Dalal also spent time interacting with the Traverse City community as a whole, including visiting local high school students, Rotary communities, and hosting an event at a local winery.

“It’s just been an incredible week,” Dalal stated, “and most importantly, to see how the community has come together and really doing... They’re so engaged. I’ve loved it.”

She expressed that the walk would, hopefully, return next year for those who are interested in participating again and to give those who missed it a chance to support a good cause.

For just \$8, the price of a standard Starbucks coffee,

a period pad kit can be sponsored through PadMad’s website (padmadkenya.com), which can change the course of a girl’s life by protecting their health and education. More information on the cause can be found by contacting Jim Bensley’s office or scanning the QR code on posters about the walk, which can be found on bulletin boards around campus.



DO YOU HAVE A PERIOD?

Undergraduate student and faculty from NMC* are running a large-scale survey on individuals' access to period products in Northern Michigan. Please consider briefly sharing your experiences and contributing to women's health research in the region.



The survey link can also be accessed at the following web address:
<https://www.smartsurvey.com/s/periodmichigan/>

QUESTIONS? CONTACT RESEARCHER FROM *NORTHWESTERN MICHIGAN COLLEGE
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Judge's comments: "Eily, your writing is impactful. This piece was filled with useful information, interesting facts, and was well written. What spoke volumes, though, was the perspective of not only those who are helping but those who are being helped. Those voices are rarely shared yet are so important. That bit elevated this story and really brought the point home how important it is to help. This story is something to be proud of. Keep writing and keep sharing these voices and stories because they need to be known."