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We Are Champions: The Women Behind A Social Revolution in Rural Uganda

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WE ARE CHAMPIONS

The Women Behind a Social Revolution in Rural Uganda

By Brooke Latham and Gordon Jones



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Village of Bukibiira, Mpigi District, Uganda

Welcome to Bukibiira, a typical rural village located in the Mpigi district of Uganda. Electricity and fresh water are scarce. Nearly everyone is a farmer. Kids play soccer until the sun won't let them.

Yet it is in Bukibiira that one finds Bana, a social enterprise that is shattering social norms and tapping into the potential of female entrepreneurs.

Bana Headquarters



Mpigi, Uganda

Established in 2010, Bana uses patented technology to manufacture comfortable, low-cost and biodegradable sanitary pads from the fiber of banana pseudo-stems. Local women are then recruited and trained by Bana sell the pads to local villages. These women are acclaimed as “Champions,” and distribute their inventory using a variety of methods and markets.

It is not the sale of pads alone that is changing social structures and positively impacting lives. It is also the knowledge that Champions spread in the wake of their business transactions. This knowledge normalizes menstruation, dispels taboos, and ensures that every woman and girl can easily manage their menstruation period in a safe and affordable manner.



A group of Mpigi Champions gather before going out to make sales

Who Are Champions?

They are extraordinary women with victorious ambition. Champions are winning the fight against ignorance, replacing silence with truth. They are highly motivated, entrepreneurial and selfless individuals. Nearly all of the Champions hold additional jobs (mainly farming) but understand that their work with Bana is unique. Their work elevates the quality of life for others.



Champion Maria with schoolchildren in Mpigi

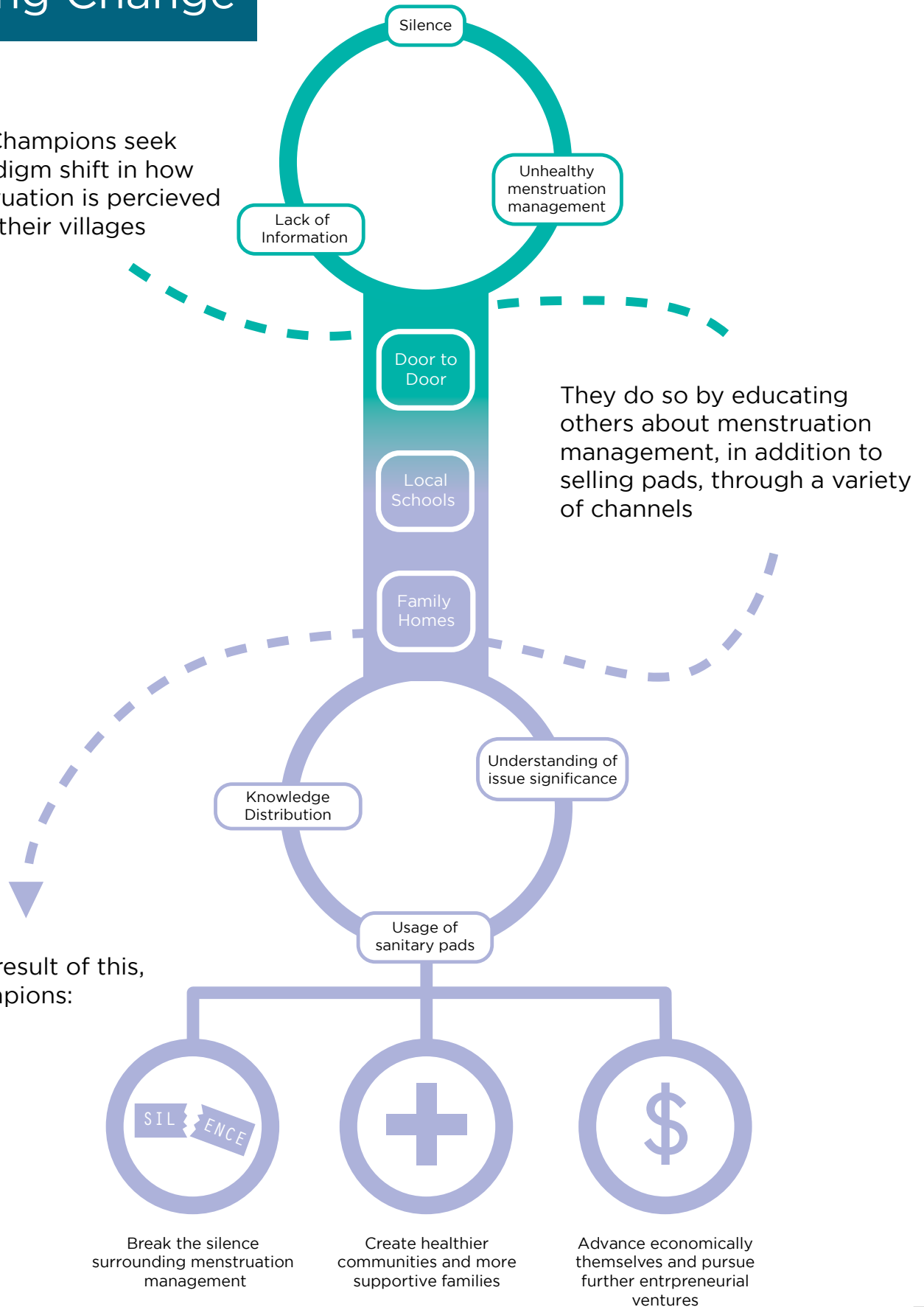
This is the first report to document how Champions catalyze social impact in their respective communities. Our research team interviewed over 45 Champions spanning four regions of Uganda. Interviews were conducted with a semi-structured guide and the help of a translator. Throughout our seven weeks in the villages, we became participant researchers: interacting and socializing with the people as well as recording our own personal observations.

The report is divided into two main parts. The first describes the process of becoming a Champion through Bana's recruitment and training program. In this phase, Bana conducts workshops that equip Champions with the skills they need to succeed in their communities. They are educated about what menstruation is, why it occurs, and why it needs to be managed properly. These workshops help Champions develop, business skills and communication skills. Champions are then prepared to educate others about menstruation, as well as sell Bana's pads with confidence, creativity and determination.

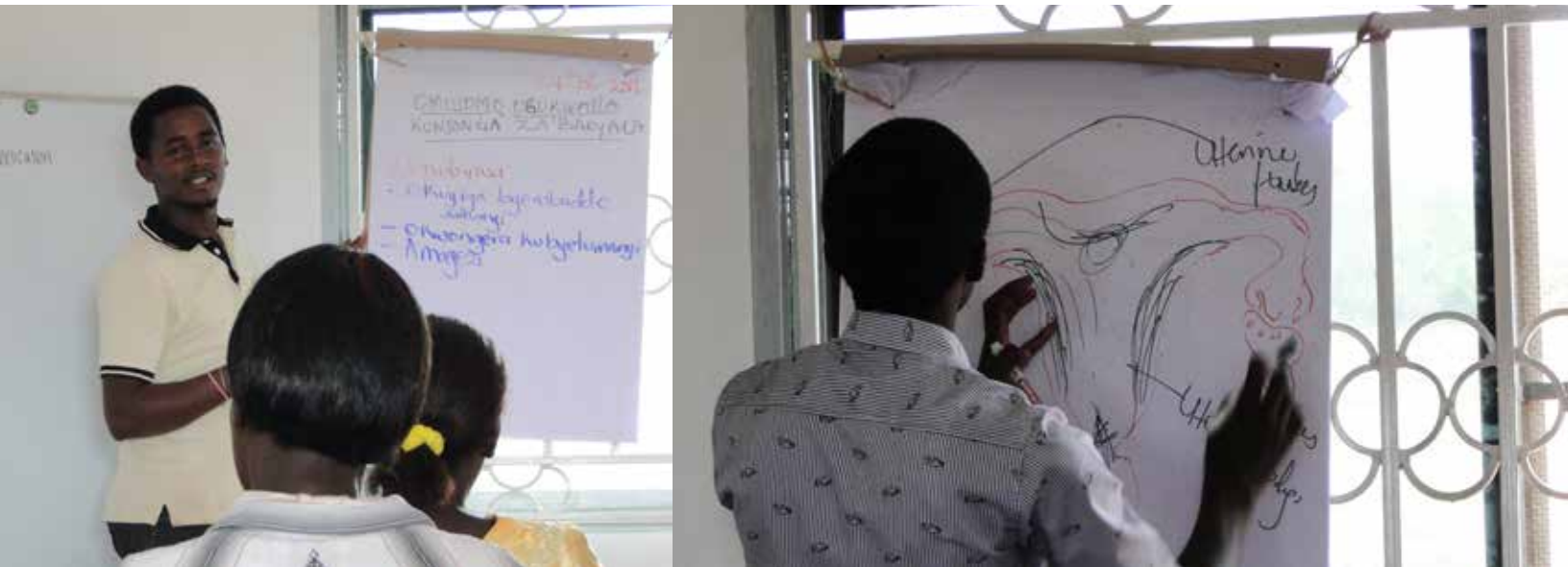
The second part evaluates the social impact created by Champions as they take action. We discovered this impact manifest in multiple, interdependent ways, and not just on customers. We also discovered that the livelihoods of Champions have also been positively affected as a result of their work. The sum of these outcomes is a growing, culture-changing movement that fosters economic opportunity, autonomy and pride amongst women. Champions are blazing new paths for the worldwide desire to support females as agents of social change. Yet even the greatest of change begins with individuals, and in this case, the Champions. The stories of these women – their power, creativity and agency – demonstrate how they are changing the world for the better.

Shaping Change

Bana Champions seek a paradigm shift in how menstruation is perceived within their villages



Part 1: Becoming a Champion



Jeremiah (left) and Mubarak (right) leading a Champion training workshop

Bana recruits Champions in a variety of ways. Originally, in Mpigi, where the enterprise is based, potential Champions were identified via word of mouth. In other villages, Bana seeks to tap into existing women's groups. Once Bana connects with one of these local groups, it conducts free menstruation management workshops. These workshops equip potential Champions with the skills to both educate others about menstruation, as well as how to successfully sell pads.

Bana's director of operations, Jeremiah Kimbugwe conducts these workshops, with other Bana staff members. The workshops begin with introductions from the women, their interests in the company and a brief overview of Bana. Following introductions, Jeremiah begins a comprehensive lesson on the medical facts behind menstruation and the importance of maintaining hygiene throughout it. Then a brief video is played on his laptop, which explains these concepts in more detail, with animations to bolster the information. The video is in English, so it is frequently paused and translated. After the video is played, future Champions have the opportunity for questions.

Following is a series of discussions, in which the women are encouraged to participate. These dialogues cover a wide range of topics including the challenges women face while menstruating, along with common myths and taboos in the community surrounding menstruation. These topics are important because Champions must be adequately prepared to answer any questions and concerns expressed by customers regarding menstruation.

To complete the educational component of the workshops, Jeremiah and Bana representatives teach Champions how to properly use, and dispose of pads. All of this critical knowledge will inevitably be transferred to customers during interactions and sales. Menstruation education is the foundation of Champion training.

Champion Profile: Agatha



Champions thrive when they combine past experience with their newly acquired knowledge about menstruation. Agatha, a Champion from the district of Rakai, had been a schoolteacher for several years before joining Bana.

She connected the enterprise to her local women's group, Krudo, and they soon received training from Bana. Following this, they were able to go out within their community and begin selling.

According to Agatha, many women were unaware of the importance of using pads before she educated them about it. However, once they received the necessary knowledge from Agatha and could try the product for themselves, many within her community became regular customers.

Agatha was eventually able to accumulate enough savings from her success as a Champion to begin constructing her very own primary school. Now complete, Kisa Kya Maria Nursery and Primary School provides education to young local children, as well as menstruation education and counseling to girls beginning around age 12.

Agatha has combined her passion for both education and women's health to create a safe, positive and hopeful learning environment. This is a critical foundation for the children, many of whom were orphaned due to an HIV epidemic that has occurred in recent years. We observed Kisa Kya Maria to be more than just a school, but a family as well.



“They see me wearing my shirt, and they know I am from Bana. The young girls in particular look up to us.”

-Champion Florence

Champions also learn business skills in Bana workshops

Bana also uses a manual created by the 2014 Global Social Benefit Fellows to guide business skill development in their workshops. The manual outlines procedures for conducting sales, managing inventory and profit as well. In addition, the manual discusses important business skills such as time management and how to deal with resistant or skeptical customers. Skills gained from proper business training lead to success within Bana, but can be transferred to other economic ventures in the Champions’ lives as well.

Once Champions complete training, they receive a distinctly bright green shirt with “Bana Champion” printed on the front. As they begin their sales within the community, village members can easily recognize the Champions. One Champion, Florence, said “They see me wearing my shirt, and they know I am from Bana. The young girls in particular look up to us.” Equipped with skills and recognition as a Champion, the women are prepared to take action.

Sent forth in to their own communities, Champions can begin to reach customers through various channels.

Part 2: Impact Through Action



Door-to-Door

Champions both educate and sell when going door-to-door throughout their communities

Impact Through Action *door-to-door*

The door-to-door sales strategy is based on community ties and personal relationships. In the village setting, neighbors are closely connected and therefore a strong initial market for Champions. When interacting with a new customer, Champions utilize their training to lay an educational foundation before trying to sell the product. This includes a brief explanation of what exactly menstruation is, why using a pad is important, and further tips for maintaining sanitation while menstruating. Then Champions introduce Bana pads, and explain why they are more affordable and of higher quality than other brands.

Door-to-door sales develop personal trust between a Champion and her customers, essential when selling a product they are not used to buying. Since the subject of menstruation is still in the process of being sensitized to the majority, Champions need to be pillars of knowledge, empathy and compassion. Customers not only need to trust the product, but the person selling it to them as well. Champions need to let them know that they are women too, and understand the struggles that arise from not managing menstruation properly.

Champion Profile: Florence



Florence is a primary school teacher from the district of Rakai. She has been a Champion since 2012, and a firm believer in the power of knowledge. In fact, when it comes to menstruation, Florence believes that girls should be educated well before they experience it for the first time.

She explained that “Even if the girl hasn’t [menstruated] yet, at least they will say ‘one day one time this will happen’, and they can be prepared to address it.” Florence also facilitates family dialogues outside of the classroom, with several parents having approached her to help. “These people, they come to me. They know—that I know—more than they do [about menstruation], so they come to me for help with their daughter. “It makes me feel proud,” she said.

Florence has a daughter, Maria, who often assists her with sales. If Florence has to leave town, she will leave a stock of pads at home and text customers that they can go there to buy them from her daughter. When asked if she would like to see Maria become a Champion herself, Florence smiled and replied “Of course! Like mother like daughter, right?”

Florence combines her roles as a teacher, mother and Champion to shatter the silence surrounding menstruation and creates a new culture of support, awareness and open dialogue.



Schools

Champion-led menstruation education sessions are one way to inform young girls within the community

Impact Through Action *within schools*

Local schools provide another significant channel for Champions to distribute education and conduct business. Champions usually coordinate with the headmaster or headmistress of a school to speak with girl students. Once this has been arranged, Champions will either go alone, or in groups, to the school. We had the opportunity to attend several of these Champion-led school sessions.

Girls aged between 10 and 16 years old (depending if the school was a primary or secondary) are gathered within a single room. Similar to Bana's own workshops, sessions begin with the Champions introducing themselves. They proceed to go through basic menstruation education, emphasizing that the process is natural, and needs to be adequately addressed on a monthly basis.



Girls at a secondary school in Mpigi learning how to properly use and dispose of BanaPads

Then the session becomes interactive as Champions ask girls to come up and try putting pads onto example undergarments for themselves. Girls are often shy and reluctant at first, but a few courageously volunteer. As they undo the packaging of the box, then the pads, we would hear other girls giggling and the volunteers would seem embarrassed. Yet the laughs stop as the girls proceeded, and the atmosphere of the room turns rife with curiosity and support. For many of the girls in the room, this is the first time they have been enlightened about a bodily process that can be a source of mystery and shame. Additionally, they have been introduced to a product that can manage the process safely, rather than having to rely on unhealthy alternatives such as cloth, rags, or toilet paper.

The sessions conclude with a question and answer component to address any lingering curiosity or concerns. Girls not only ask questions about menstruation, but other topics including pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Without the Champions creating a safe, open and constructive environment, these important topics may have gone unaddressed, leaving girls without critical health knowledge.

The outreach that Champions provide to schools is particularly significant because these girls represent a new generation with the potential to grow up with truth, not taboos, to explain menstruation. They will also have access to pads that are comfortable and affordable.



Many Champions told us that menstruation is still linked to myths and taboos

This is an important shift from previous generations that shrouded menstruation in silence and fostered the persistence of myths and taboos. Several Champions explained that growing up, they were instructed by their parents to avoid road intersections, fetching water and talking to boys while on their period, as doing so would cause bad luck. Champion Maria Nanotube told us some people still believe that a girl must pick a fruit from each tree when she menstruates for the first time, so that the trees will not die the next time she picks from them. Such myths are not only false, but detrimental to the change in culture that Bana and its Champions seek.

By going to local schools, Champions have direct access to young girls within the community and can dispel any false information they may have heard regarding menstruation.

However, this is just part of the solution. In rural Uganda, most girls usually begin attending primary school (around age 6), but eventually drop out before reaching secondary school (around age 12). Jackie, a Champion from Rukungiri and secondary school teacher explained that “The main reason is money. Parents would rather have their child cooking or doing chores at home than paying fees for education.” The problem is compounded by the fact that school fees are raised with each year of education. This is significant because there are inevitably a large number of girls in any given village who do not have the opportunity to hear Champions speak at a school session. Furthermore, even if a girl is present at one of these sessions, it does not mean she will have the confidence to talk to her family members about what she has learned, and the support she needs.

Champion Profile: Parity



Like many young girls in Uganda, Parity was only able to attend the first few years of primary school. She had to dropout around age 10. Her parents thought that working at home was more beneficial than paying for her to attend school. She recalled, “Most of my friends dropped out too, for many reasons — lack of school fees, parents who didn’t care, or no scholastic materials.”

This is not an uncommon scenario in rural Uganda. Parity believes the problem of children dropping out, both boys and girls, can be attributed to parents not believing that education actually leads to a better future. “They look at a teacher and say, here is an educated person that is poorer than we are, why should we have our child do the same?”

It is important that parents understand the value of an education and the consequences of rejecting it. “I wanted to become a nurse,” Parity told us, “but could not once I had dropped out of school.” It was at this point in the interview that Parity was overcome with emotion, having to leave for a few minutes to gather herself.

When she returned and told us that she wanted to continue, we asked her if she thinks that young girls in her community look up to her. “I know they do because I am still young and can relate to them. Even though I didn’t become a nurse, I am still proud of my work with Bana and helping other girls.”

Now at age 20, Parity owns her own stall in the local market place from which she sells both sweaters and BanaPads, providing her with the income she needs to live comfortably, while simultaneously benefitting other young girls in the community. She is exemplary of the Champion spirit, overcoming obstacles in her life and community.



Households

Champions facilitate family dialogues so that daughters can receive support from their parents

Impact Through Action *within households*

To make sure girls are receiving adequate support at home (including funds for pads), the majority of Champions have taken on the role of family dialogue facilitator. This is yet another example of how Champions go beyond simply selling pads to achieve their mission of shattering the silence. Champions facilitate family dialogues after being approached by either a parent or daughter. Many Champions described young girls reporting that their parents do not see the importance of buying pads, and ask the Champion to talk to their parents about this problem. The main issue is usually cost. Alice, a Champion from Rukungiri, described such an instance. A girl approached Alice and asked her to speak to her mother, who thought that pads were too expensive. Alice said she was able to meet with the girl's mother and explain that Bana pads are cheaper than other brands. Alice described, "She was not aware that our pads were less expensive than others and when I explained the prices, she bought some for her daughter."



“Every time I would try to talk to my parents about a solution, they couldn’t give me a solution. I would use anything I could find: paper, cloth, whatever was near. I was so shy to talk to them about it.”

-Champion Josephine

These three champions have facilitated family dialogues about the importance of menstruation management

A Champion in Mpigi, Sarah, recalled a story about a young girl who started menstruating for the first time. She was, didn’t know what was happening, and locked herself in her room. The girl was living with her grandmother, and feared telling her what was happening. Sarah went to the house and the grandmother explained that the little girl was sick. When Sarah went to see the young girl and realized what was really going on, she comforted her and explained it was simply the beginning of her menstruation. Sarah was able to offer the girl this guidance and support. Without it, she may have continued to suffer silent and isolated.

Alternate scenarios, in which a parent asks a Champion to speak to their daughter, frequently occur as well. Parents explain to Champions that they do not have adequate information regarding menstruation, or feel uncomfortable talking to their daughter about it themselves.

Annet, another Champion from Mpigi, described such an instance, “The parents, they feared talking to their daughter about [menstruation]. I brought them together and explained why it is important to manage.” It is clear that these conversations are not only important for addressing health issues, but also for bridging the disconnect between girls and their parents.

Many Champions desire to go out of their way to conduct such dialogues because many experienced similar situations growing up themselves. “Every time I would try to talk to my parents about a solution, they couldn’t give me a solution, or they just didn’t even care,” said Josephine, a Champion from Rakai. “I would [use] anything I could find, paper, cloth, whatever was near. I was so shy to talk to them about it.”

Breaking the Taboo

Champions report the majority of these family dialogues are usually conducted with just a mother and daughter. Since menstruation only affects women, and they struggle under culture traditions of taboos and myths, men are generally alienated from this issue. They do not see it as relevant, and therefore not worth learning about. “Men are very stubborn, they can be hard to handle,” Agnes told us. We learned that this stubbornness is particularly applicable when it comes to learning about menstruation. “My husband doesn’t give a damn about [menstruation],” she voiced.

This is a significant problem for several reasons. The first is that men in rural Uganda usually provide the household income, and thus have the final say on how it is spent. Even though Bana pads are more affordable than other brands available they are still an expense. If men do not see pads as an absolutely necessary purchase, they simply will not buy them.

Champion Christine, from Rukungiri, described that men “find it wasteful to spend money on pads.” When she goes to a household to talk to parents, some men are interested in her talk and will stay, while many choose to leave. One man that decided to hear her family menstruation dialogue told her after, “I loved your talk, and I will support my daughters.” Christine considered that a major success, and strives for more. She argues that it is important for men to be educated about menstruation, because it will inevitably effect how future generations, both male and female, perceive menstruation.

Champions are addressing the disconnect between men and the subject of menstruation starting within their own homes. Champions Constance and Alice both recalled that they have had open conversations with their husbands about menstruation and sexual health. They informed them about the knowledge they received from Bana, and how one should avoid having sex while menstruating for health reasons. The two women described that once they informed their husbands about this, the men accepted and agreed. Constance stated, “some men are stubborn and rigid, but when they get that education, they can change.”

Though Champions have the time and space to educate their husbands at home, not all are open to discussion, as we learned from Agnes. It is an even more difficult challenge to educate men outside of their household, but a challenge that must be undertaken nonetheless.



Concrete, widespread change will only occur when all men, not just women, understand and support menstruation management. This will take time, effort and persistence on the end of Champions– and they are ready for the challenge.

Champion Sylvia (left) believes it is critical for men to understand menstruation so that they can better support their wives and daughters



Self

Being a Bana Champion leads to economic advancement and opportunity for female entrepreneurs

Impact Through Action *within the self*

The positive effects of their fight to break the silence surrounding menstruation do not just benefit others, but Champions themselves. As noted before, the majority of Champions hold additional jobs. Many are farmers, teachers, or small business owners (hair salons, bakeries, convenience stores etc.). However, several women reported that they receive a higher income as a Champion than from their other economic ventures.

In particular, Champions stated that they cannot rely on farming on to generate a steady income. Yet, their profits from pad sales are something they can regularly expect from returning customers, which is more dependable than relying on a crop to succeed. As Champion Sarah noted, “Crops are seasonal. Menstruation happens all the time.”

Champions bolster previous entrepreneurial ventures with the profits they gain from sales. For instance, Champion Florence started a confectionery from the profits she earned from selling pads. She described how she saved money from Bana, as well as her salary as a teacher, to gather the capital necessary to serve as the middleman between distant bakers and local consumers. She receives the baked goods from places that are beyond walking distance from the village, and then sells them from her house. Florence is one of the many accomplished Champions who credit the start of other economic ventures to profits accrued from working for Bana.

This economic empowerment manifests itself in additional subtle, yet significant ways. For instance, Champion Scovia, from Rukungiri, described to us, “I am happy when I sell pads and gain a profit because I know I can eat whatever I want to eat, and can even eat meat whenever I want.” We observed that having ample food to eat, especially meat, is an indication of economic well-being. As Scovia described, her happiness of being a Champion is due to gaining food. Additionally, Agnes, a Champion in Mpigi, enjoys being a Champion because she can contribute funds to her grandchildren’s school fees.

Champion Profile: Grace



Grace was one of Bana's first Champions. In 2011 she began selling pads by going door-to-door within her community. Noting that people were enjoying the product and her sales were increasing, Grace began selling to girls at the local secondary school.

As her customer base expanded and profits increased, Grace began to envision owning her own shop where she could sell pads along with other products. Just a year later, in 2012, this dream became a reality when Grace constructed a convenience shop next to her home. The exterior of the shop has a boldly painted sign that reads "CHAMPION". Not only does Grace sell pads from her store, but other goods including salt, sugar, bottled water, cooking oil, bread, and various snacks.

Her business continues to thrive to this day. When asked if she would credit being able to open the store to Bana, she enthusiastically replied, "(I am) so proud of Bana, so happy for the project, the company, and every bit of (my) success is linked up to the start of the company. So thumbs up for Bana, thumbs up for the company."

Still a Champion, Grace continues the fight against silence and menstruation by selling pads from her store and actively educating young girls who come by her stall about the importance of menstrual hygiene.

Champion Aspirations

In every interview, we asked Champions what their personal and familial aspirations were. We received a wide range of responses, based on personal interests or circumstances.



Hadijah

Wants to begin a husbandry business in which she is constantly raising and selling animals



Justine

Aspires to expand her business (a convenience stall) so she can afford to send her kids to boarding school



Klessy

Dreams of creating a large shop and paying all of her children's school fees



Teddy

Hopes to buy her own car soon



Alice

(Right) Plans to buy more goats and cows, and to start a banana plantation



Edith

Aspires to build a larger house for her family



Bana is creating widespread change across Uganda with Champions leading the way

Virtually all Champions with children explained that they want their kids to finish secondary education, attend university (something very few do) and obtain professions such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, and teachers.

Bana is helping these women begin the path towards achieving these aspirations and more. It has already helped Grace to launch her store, and Agatha with her school. These women have learned to leverage the potential already within them, and utilize entrepreneurial thinking to maximize opportunity.

Champions are breaking the silence of menstruation throughout Uganda by educating young girls, men, and entire communities as well as providing affordable solutions for menstruation management. As Champions impact their family and communities they are able to economically advance. Bana is creating widespread change across Uganda with Champions leading the way.