

Understanding the pathways to menstrual health knowledge and empowerment in Huanchaco, Peru:

Findings from a non-experimental qualitative study

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July 2024





Table of Contents

Key Findings	3
Summary	4
Introduction	5
Methods	6
Findings	7
Conclusion	11
Reference List	12
Acknowledgements	13



A research brief on pathways to learning for menstrual health and empowerment in Huanchaco, Peru.

Key Findings

- While there have been advancements in gender equality in Huanchaco, Peru, both mothers and daughters experience harmful gender norms present in their community, which impact how they view themselves and what they can accomplish.
- Girls do not learn about their bodies from one source and often supplement more formal education through conversations with friends and trusted adults.
- Girls identified six main pathways as sources of menstrual health information: media, friends, family, medical professionals, school, and GLOW Clubs.
- Global G.L.O.W. curriculum is the most impactful source of menstrual health learning because it includes the emotional and physical aspects of puberty.
- Global G.L.O.W. offers a safe place to ask questions to peers and trusted adults while promoting friendship, agency, and self-empowerment.



Summary

Menstrual health is a complex issue that spans social norms, personal experiences, and policy. The early years of menstruation are a complicated time for girls as their bodies change. For girls in Huanchaco, Peru, there are several pathways to gain menstrual knowledge and learn about their own empowerment. Through a non-experimental qualitative research approach, one researcher found that girls in this community learn about their periods from family members (mainly mothers), friends, school, medical contexts, mass media, and out-of-school programming.

While each pathway delivers information in different ways and focuses on different content, the most comprehensive and impactful pathway was the programming provided in the out-of-school GLOW Club curriculum, provided by Global G.L.O.W. and implemented by Otra Cosa Network. This source bridged the emotional aspects of menstruation and puberty to the biological and practical realities of developing bodies. While the state of gender inequality in Peru has seen improvements in recent years, there are still harmful gender ideas and practices. Comprehensive menstrual and sexual health education is often blocked by policies, and men and women alike are frequently misinformed on what women can accomplish due to their gender and bodies (1). GLOW Clubs are helping girls and communities fight these inequalities.



Introduction

In Huanchaco, Peru, girls face unique challenges that impact how they view periods and how they view themselves. While Peru has recently made progress in increasing access to schooling and health services for girls, Peruvian girls continue to encounter menstrual stigma that affects school attendance and their overall health (2). Adolescent pregnancy has also seen recent rises in Huanchaco's region (3), and cultural and political norms limit the availability of comprehensive sexual education, including topics of puberty and menstruation in schools (4, 5).

However, Huanchaco also has great resources for the girls in several of its neighborhoods: Global G.L.O.W. and Otra Cosa Network. Global G.L.O.W. is a 501(c)(3) organization that mentors girls around the world to become powerful advocates and confident leaders by implementing mentor-facilitated GLOW Clubs that focus on increasing girls' confidence, strengthening their voice, and building their power. GLOW Clubs are after-school or out-of-school clubs that meet at least bi-weekly and follow Global G.L.O.W.'s proprietary social-emotional learning curriculum. Included in that larger curriculum is a focus on building healthy relationships, menstrual health and sexual & reproductive health. Otra Cosa Network (OCN), a UK Charity and Peruvian non-governmental organization, has partnered with Global G.L.O.W. to receive the program curriculum and facilitate GLOW Clubs for girls throughout Huanchaco's neighborhoods (6). OCN is committed to improving education and learning for youth in Huanchaco through an expansive volunteering network. Their partnership with Global G.L.O.W. has been an impactful way to extend their work to adolescent girls and address the gender equality present in the community.

In an attempt to better understand the importance of and interactions between familial and community knowledge transfer, educational interventions, cultural ideas, and the existing state of menstrual experiences in Northern Peru, this research used a non-experimental qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of participants and generational dynamics surrounding gender issues. Understanding these pathways may help improve menstrual education, address cultural stigma, and empower girls and women.



Methods

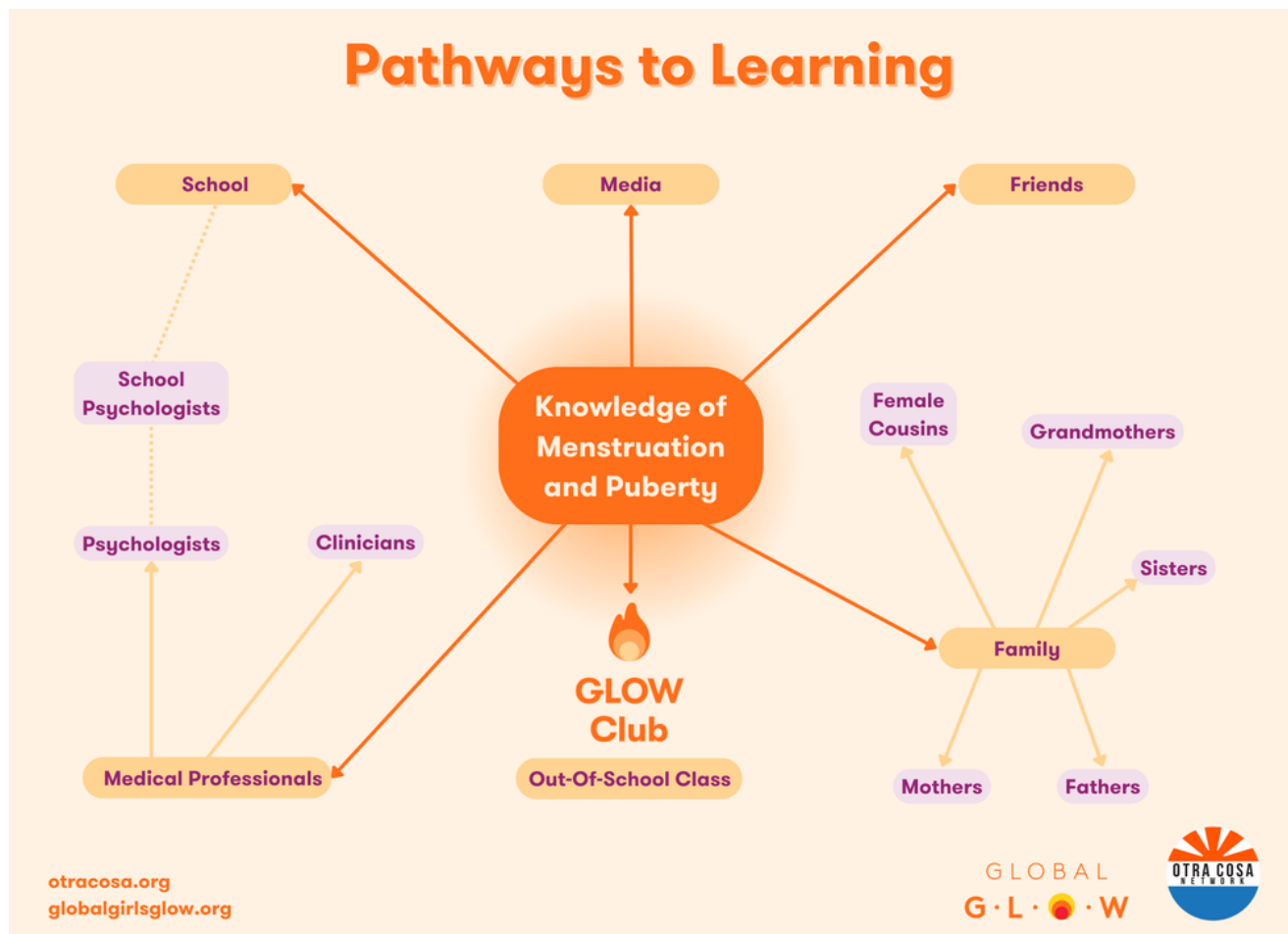
Twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted by an independent researcher in-person in Huanchaco, Peru in June and July of 2023. Nine daughters aged 10 to 18 and seven mothers were interviewed about the interactions, beliefs, and experiences regarding menstrual health knowledge and empowerment. Seven key informants, or individuals with expertise on the research topic and community, such as medical professionals, politicians, and Global G.L.O.W. mentors, were also interviewed. Ethical approval for this study was granted in May 2023 by the University of Sheffield ethical review committee with reference number 052415. Informed consent was obtained through providing an information sheet for participants to read and sign before interviews began. For daughters, a parent was also required to sign giving permission for their child to participate. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six phase method of reflexive thematic analysis to develop key themes and findings (7, 8). Purposive sampling (9) was used to select interviews, as the Program Director of OCN used her contacts to invite willing individuals that met the inclusion criteria of either being a daughter aged 10-18 or a mother of a daughter aged 10-18. The interviews were all 30 minutes to one hour in length.



Findings

There are six pathways to learning about menstrual health for these girls: media, friends, family, medical professionals, school, and Global G.L.O.W. curriculum. The image below outlines these important pathways of knowledge transfer.

The most impactful source of knowledge was GLOW Club. Both daughters and mothers were overwhelmingly positive about this program and the influence it had on their knowledge of their bodies and themselves. One girl stated, “I love the way they treat me and what we do [in] the classes and what the classes are about.” Another shared that she had “really grown to trust the mentors.” Many girls explained that these classes were where they first learned, or learned the most, about the biological and emotional side of periods including concepts such as the fertile window, pain management, types of hygiene products, and how to work through emotions. Girls also stated that the classes made them feel strong, heard, empowered, and that they “like to be with their friends” and “like what they teach us.”





Mothers also echoed these sentiments saying, “I like the way the mentors empower them and make them capable. They give them a lot of information. I love that. My daughter always wants to go.” These classes connected girls to other girls their age and trusted adults, creating a safe place for learning where the mothers felt like their daughters could “freely express themselves” and learn to stand up to boys who might tease them at school. Several mothers even wished that they had had GLOW Clubs when they were adolescents, or suggested other areas in Peru that could benefit from this programming.

GLOW Club modules also addressed aspects of learning that the other pathways lacked. GLOW Clubs were the only source that connected concepts of gender issues and ideas of empowerment to their bodies and were the only route that described in detail both the emotional and physical aspects of menstruation. One girl stated that in GLOW Club, “They tell them about women’s rights, about gender, and they change the story,” allowing the girls to envision what type of future they wanted for themselves, rather than what others might tell them. A mother described the importance of her daughter learning about periods and empowerment from GLOW Club, saying that when girls “learn about their bodies and accept their bodies, they love themselves and understand that it is just a period... That is empowerment: not being ashamed and living without fear and without shame.” One key informant involved in GLOW Club summed up the sentiments girls shared, saying that “when [they] specifically talk about girls’ bodies, their changes, and of course menstruation, [it can] solve all the problems they may have.” GLOW Clubs foster moments of learning beyond physical terminology and create trusting friendships.

Another pathway to learning was school, but the knowledge gained there was found to be significantly less comprehensive than in GLOW Clubs. While Peru has an enacted set of guidelines to provide sexuality education in schools (10), mothers and daughters clearly expressed large gaps in implementation and comprehensiveness. Mothers described having learned “hardly anything at school” during their own upbringing, and agreed that their daughters are experiencing similar realities in their schooling as only clinical and broad information is shared.



Some daughters said they could not recollect ever learning about periods or puberty at school, while the majority noted that while they did learn about certain topics, the instruction was very brief and insufficient. Lessons at school did not discuss emotional changes and did not leave girls feeling educated.

Medical professionals and medical contexts were by far the most limited pathway to menstrual learning, but were mentioned a few times. Apart from one impactful school psychologist, girls and women typically only interact with those in medicine if something is wrong. Girls may see an obstetrician or a clinician if they are experiencing unusual pain or abnormal menstruation, but treatment can be very limited. In the case of the school psychologist, several girls who were interviewed mentioned her as an established safe person who taught lessons at school and was safe to turn to with questions. One girl described how, “She's really nice and she doesn't tell. Sometimes I tell her stuff that I don't want to tell my mom.” The girls described the need for adults outside of their homes that they could turn to for help.

Learning through friends and families was another pathway to health knowledge, often sought out by the girls. Most girls described how much they enjoyed or relied upon sharing questions and ideas with their friends, especially when their friends also attended GLOW Club. In families, mother-daughter communication was described as most common, but other girls described talking with their grandmothers and witnessing changes in their sisters and cousins. While some girls noted that they could talk with their mothers on this subject, many reported that they either did not at all, or had very limited discussions focused on normalizing periods as opposed to in-depth discussions of puberty and what it would mean for the girls. This differed slightly from the mothers' perspective, who reported that they talked with their daughters at length and in much more substantial ways than they received in their own adolescence. The mothers recollected negative experiences of not knowing what was happening when they got their period and not wanting that for their daughter. This pathway was not available to each participant in the same way, and its impact differed across experience. Many of the girls verbalized their wish for more knowledge than what their friends and mothers could give them.



And finally, books, movies, and television were all referenced by participants as ways they heard about menstruation or puberty. The most novel media tool for learning was social media, as mothers described both how popular it is for their girls now and how it was nonexistent for themselves. One mother noted the change in how girls want to learn, saying, “My mom raised me without talking, without explaining things to me ... [My daughter’s] generation wants to learn through technology.” This pathway was agreed by all to not be a sufficient source for learning. Key informants noted how social media can lead to inaccurate or inappropriate material, and daughters explained that the information they gained from media was often infrequent and incomplete.

GLOW Clubs were the only source that connected concepts of gender issues and ideas of empowerment to their bodies and were the only route that described in detail both the emotional and physical aspects of menstruation.

Beyond the discussions of pathways to menstrual knowledge and how girls learn about their bodies, the findings also paint a picture of the culture of Huanchaco. Informants described advancements in gender equality, but also very real gender expectations and sexism they still see day to day. Several mothers noted that harmful ideas of men thinking that “because they are male, they can do whatever they want,” and that “the man is the provider of the family” have lessened since their childhood, but agreed that both themselves and their daughters are affected by gender ideas. Daughters identified progress in this realm through choices, such as being able to participate in sports, and “[doing] something in a guy’s world.” However, girls also reported moments where boys their age had told them that “[periods] are dirty” and teased them about being girls. All in all, the interviews showed how complicated it is to be a girl in Huanchaco, how learning about their bodies in positive and comprehensive ways help them break out of gender expectations, and how there have been positive shifts generationally.





Conclusion

The findings show the complexity in how girls in Huanchaco learn about their bodies and periods. The formative experience of growing up is impacted by cultural gender norms, and while there seem to be positive shifts happening, these limiting ideas still persist. Girls do not learn about their bodies from one source and often supplement the more formal education with conversations with friends and trusted adults. GLOW Clubs offer a forum to have these discussions, all while promoting friendship, agency, and self-empowerment. Global G.L.O.W. is helping girls advance their own empowerment and the state of gender equality in their community.



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Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by: Amelia Van Komen, MPH, Independent Researcher and Principal Investigator, The University of Sheffield, Otra Cosa Network and Michele Coleman, DrPH (c), MPH, MPA, Global G.L.O.W., Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.