Meet Amina, a 14 year old girl living in sub-Saharan Africa? Her parents make about $1 a day doing odd jobs. She has 3 sisters and 1 brother and her family dwelling is a mere 10x10 corrugated metal shack with a dirt floor. Sanitary napkins cost about $1, the same price as a kilogram of sugar or maize. Her family does not have a bathroom (or running water) and buying sanitary pads for her and her sisters is out of the question. Amina no longer goes to school during her period because she is embarrassed.When Amina first got her period at twelve she thought she was dying. No one told her about the monthly “flow” and she came running home from school one day, embarrassed after she bled through her tattered uniform and scared she had little time left on this earth. Her sister escorted her behind the shanty and explained the “curse’ and that she would have it EVERY month. How can that be, Amina thought, I will surely run out of blood. Now she understands why her sister no longer goes to school. So even though Amina still goes to school she misses 3-4 days of school a month and she is getting behind in her school work. She doesn’t think she will go back next semester.

    Four thousand miles North of Amina lives Aruna. She is 12 and spends 5-7 days every month in a hut called a goth – a small mud hut about twice the size of a doghouse or she may stay in a cave, barn or another building far from her house. Imagine, you are 12 and you need to stay all by yourself, it may be unsafe, unsanitary and in the cold months it’s hard to stay warm. Other girls in Aruna’s village have been attacked by wild animals and her cousin was raped last year. It doesn’t get any better. After giving birth to Aruna’s little brother, her Mother had to remain isolated for up 10 days – until she was considered what their society calls “clean.” Aruna had to take off of school to help with the housework. While practicing “chaupadi”, many girls don’t attend school and end up missing up to a week of school every month. The Nepal Supreme Court banned chaupadi in 2005, though it is still practiced in some regions. Aruna lives in a village where many villagers still practice chaupadi, but she hopes with all her heart that her daughter will not have to go through the pain, indignity and horror of what she experienced in the past . But, with the possibility of her income also being meager, what are her options? Even if she could afford disposable pads, how would she or her daughter dispose of them?

    More than half of Ugandan girls drop out of school before they start secondary school. Research has shown that some of the challenges associated with keeping these girls in school is related to their monthly cycle. Sanitary pads are about $1.50-$2.00 a month (for a normal flow). If you have several girls in the family and are barely making it day to day, that may be more than a day’s wage and with other mouths to feed, the chances of you getting sanitary pads is nil. Besides that, you probably don’t own a pair of under garments anyway.

    Fatuma lives in war torn Somalia. She is 13 years old and does not attend school any more. Her parents just told her last week she is to marry her cousin Ahmed (her least favorite boy cousin) at the end of harvest. She can’t go to school for three reasons, First, she can’t afford the uniform or book fees, second her mother just gave birth to her eight sibling so Fatuma needs to stay home to fetch water and help her Mom around the house. Thirdly, she can’t afford sanitary pads and to make it worse, she has been circumcised, which causes excruciating pain during her period. Circumcision is a Somali tradition that is losing popularity but still practiced across Somalia (and other countries). It has several different degrees of severity, but the most severe involves removing the clitoris and inner labia and then taking what is left and sewing it over the urethra. Usually a small stick is inserted during the healing process to allow a trickle of urine from the bladder. The wedding night is not joyful as the groom has to either force his way into the small vaginal opening or cut it open with a knife. So Fatuma is now going to complete the cycle of not being able to further her education due to traditions and poverty.

     So, what do these girls use during their periods? Depends on what country we are talking about. In Kenya they may use paper, cloth, old mattress stuffing, old cloths, banana leaves,corn husks, ash, dirt, sand, newspaper, even pages from their school workbooks. In some countries girls use leaves and even cow dung.

    Can you imagine such desperation? What would you use? I was born in the 60’s and I remember using the belts and pads and thinking now how archaic that was. I lived in Somalia for 2 years and I never remember thinking about what women used for their periods. I had brought a supply with me and became pregnant shortly after, so I didn’t really need to use them. I have been to India, Mexico, Nicaragua and several countries in East Africa and yet I have never asked the women what they do every month. I think we take it for granted.

    So, we are not going to just sit back and ponder this problem, we are going to do something. Hope Without Borders is going to distribute re-usuable sanitary pad kits to needy girls in Nepal, Tanzania and Kenya on our March 2014 trip. We will include an educational class on what menstruation is, how to use the pads and how to clean and dry them to avoid infections.