

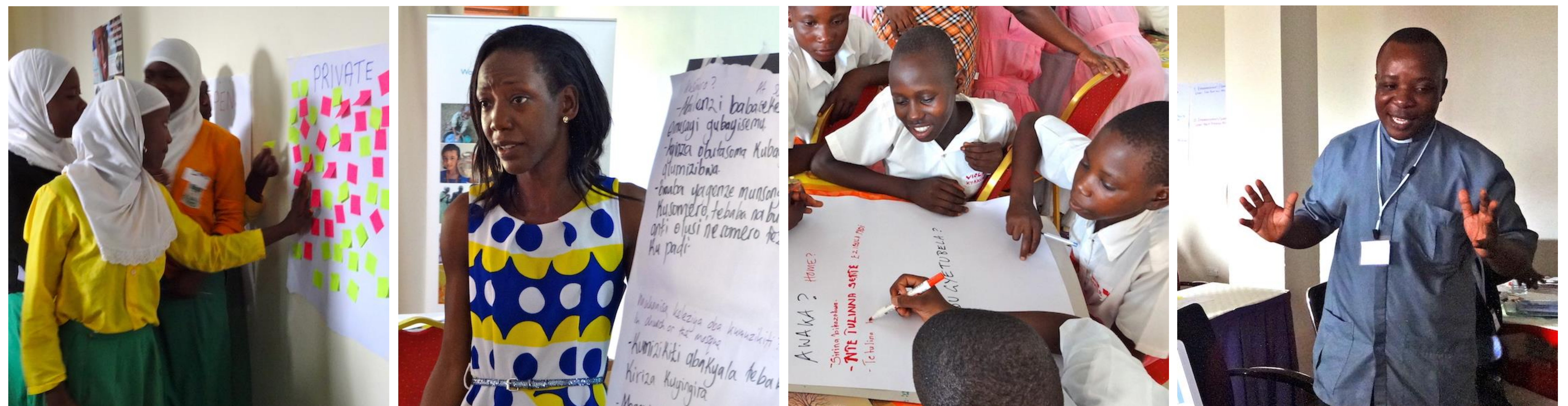
Engaging faith groups on menstrual health

Capturing the voices of Christian and Muslim girls, faith leaders, teachers and women's groups in Uganda



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Background & objectives

Faith groups are rarely engaged in discussions on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) even though they are major providers of education and religious taboos are often cited as contributing to girls' difficulties. In Uganda, faith groups are involved in more than 50% of schools yet have not been engaged in national MHM campaigns or initiatives.

In April 2016, UK-based Faith in Water held the first consultations of Christian and Muslim groups on MHM. The intention was to:

- **Gather information** about girls' experience of menstruation, including any religious restrictions;
- **Raise awareness** of MHM among faith leaders
- **Consult** on the development of a faith-based MHM toolkit for Christian and Muslim schools.

Methods

Nine half-day workshops were held involving:

- **162 girls** from two Christian and two Muslim primary schools (urban and rural);
- **115 women** linked to those schools
- **83 faith leaders**, heads of faith schools, teachers and faith women's group representatives.

The workshops were delivered in English and Luganda and took a participatory approach with a mix of discussions, group work and games.

Representation

Over 20 religious institutions and faith-based organisations were represented including:

- Catholic Church
- Church of Uganda
- Full Gospel Church
- Uganda Muslim Supreme Council
- Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly
- Baha'i community
- Mothers' Union
- Uganda Muslim Women Association
- Catholic Women's League
- Baptist Union
- Office of the Supreme Mufti

Key findings

Girls' experience

Girls rated their top three concerns out of 14 commonly cited MHM challenges. The girls were aged 11-12 years; more than 90% had started their period.

Myths and misunderstanding

- 13% of girls thought menstruation was a disease
- 38% thought it contained harmful substances
- 39% thought 'used menstrual cloths attract evil spirits'

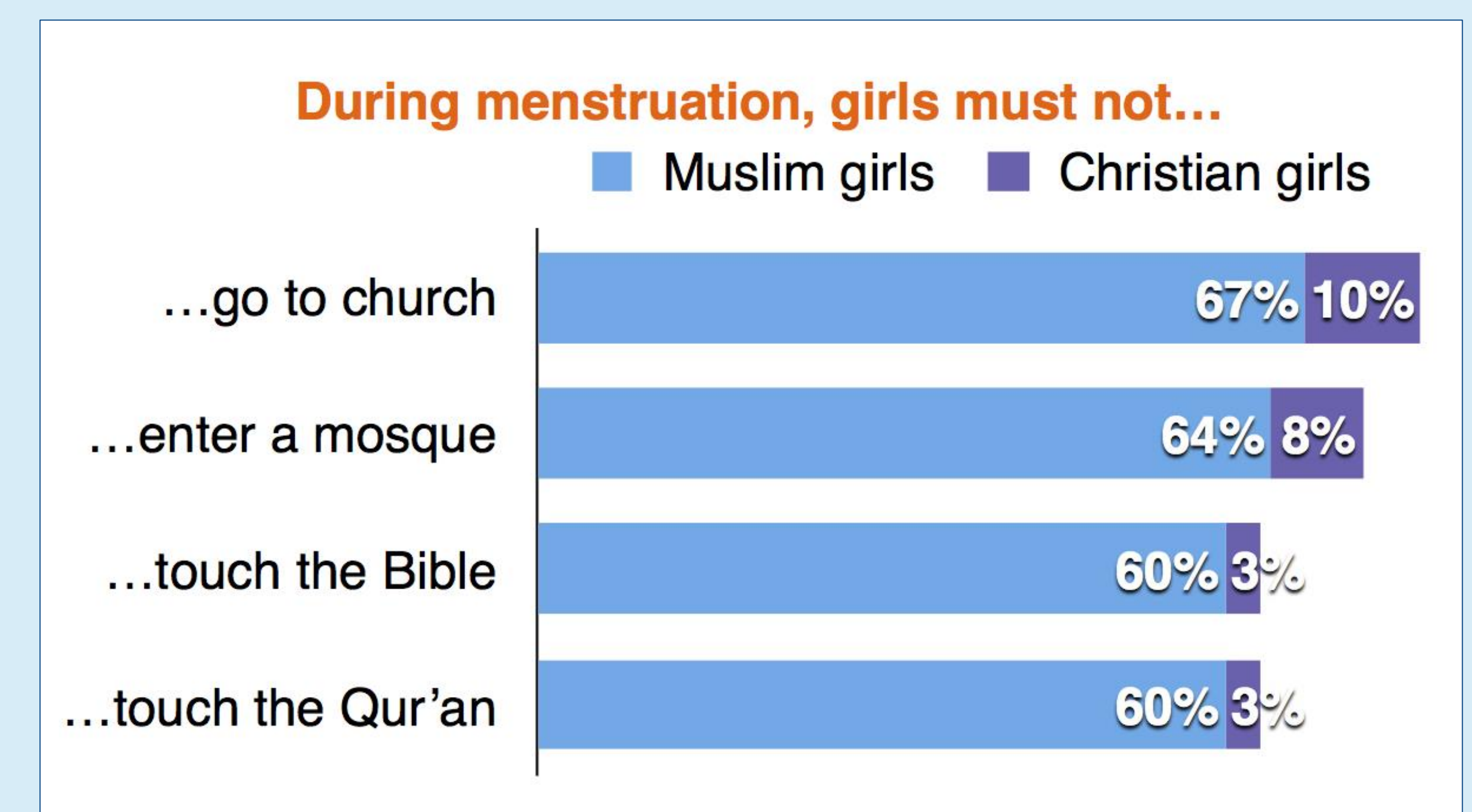
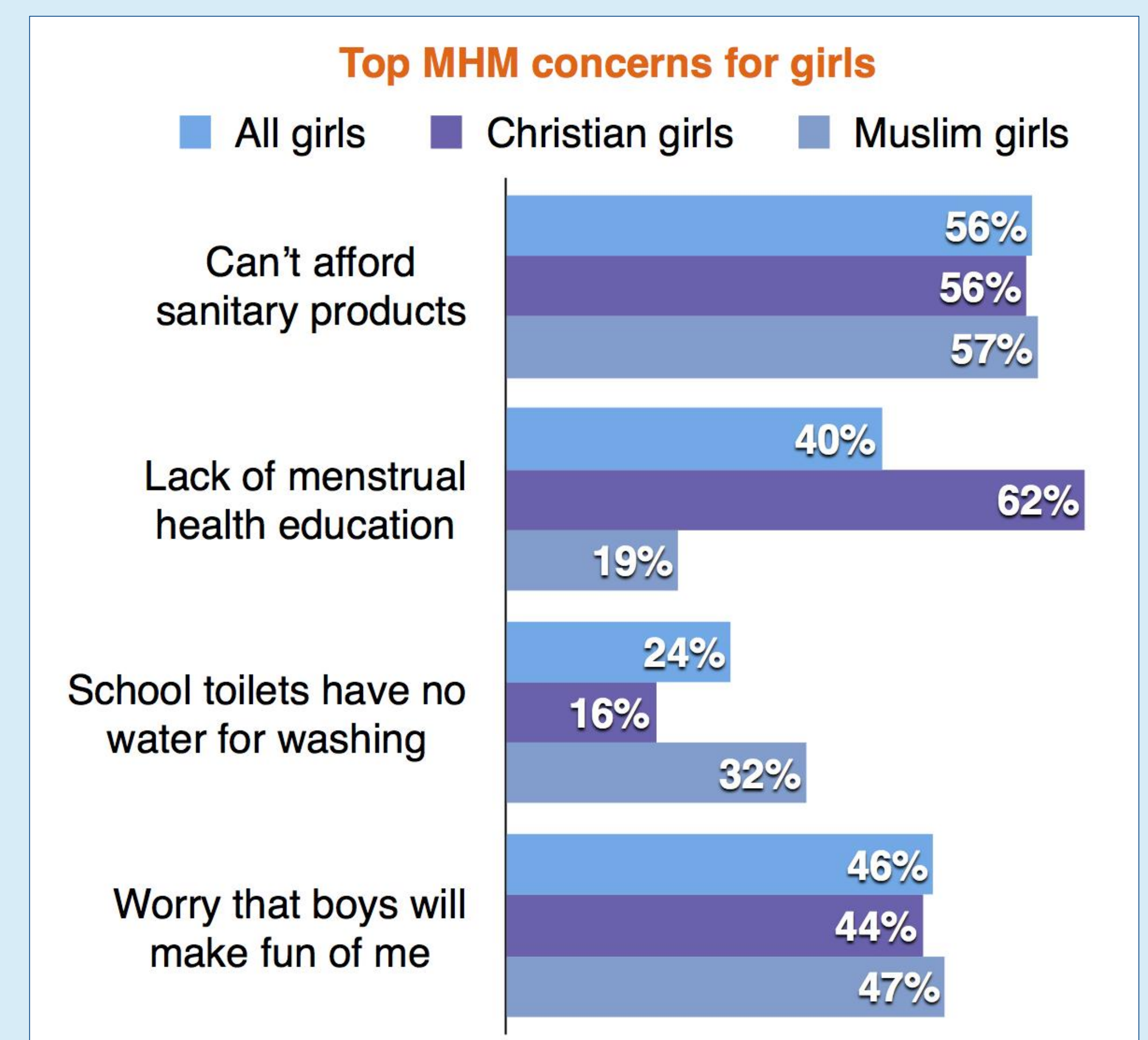
Religious restrictions

- There was little evidence of widespread restrictions among Christian groups.
- Restrictions were much stronger in the Muslim community.

Faith leaders, teachers and women's groups

The response of faith leaders, teachers and faith women's groups was very positive.

- They recognised the importance of MHM.
- They endorsed the idea of an MHM toolkit for Christian and Muslim schools.
- They called on faith schools to become examples of best practice.
- All adults – including mothers – greatly underestimated the extent of the girls' sense of shame and embarrassment.



Conclusions

- When engaged on MHM, faith groups recognise its importance and are keen to be involved in national initiatives.
- Faiths are significant providers of education in Uganda; failing to engage them is a missed opportunity.
- Future MHM initiatives and campaigns should actively involve the faiths and faith schools.
- Muslim beliefs around the ritual purity of blood are a significant factor in religious practice.