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Period Poverty: What Is It & How Can We Help?

Period poverty is a global problem, with millions of women and girls being held back and even endangered by not being able to afford basic menstrual care.

All around the world women are being held back in life and even put in danger, simply because of their period. Period poverty is a global issue, but even in the UK alone, 1 in 10 girls can't afford to buy menstrual products, with many missing school as a result.

But period poverty isn't just about affordability. Many women and girls don't have access to hygienic facilities, or feel unable to manage their periods with dignity - often due to stigma or superstitious or religious dogma around menstruation.

This guide will outline the key problems, what's being done, and how it can be eradicated for good.

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- The history of myths and taboos about periods
- Period poverty in developing countries

"Meeting the hygiene needs of all adolescent girls is a fundamental issue of human rights, dignity, and public health," - Sanjay Wijesekera, former UNICEF Chief of Water

Period poverty in the Western world

Despite period products being available widely in the UK, 10% of girls have been unable to afford sanitary wear at some point. But that's not all. Did you know that according to Plan International:

- **One in seven** girls have struggled to afford sanitary wear
- **One in five** girls have had to switch to less suitable sanitary wear due to cost
- **More than one in ten girls** has had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues

The charity Bloody Good Period estimates the average lifetime cost of having a period amounts to £4,800. For low-income families who find it hard to afford even basic necessities, being able to afford menstrual products each month can be

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this problem. Lack of education and conversation around periods can give rise to shame about this perfectly natural, healthy bodily function. In turn, this pushes the conversation away from periods and prevents girls and women feeling comfortable about asking for what they need.

In 2017 when Plan International carried out their studies, they found that around half of girls aged 14-21 girls were still embarrassed by their periods:

- Almost 71% of girls said they felt embarrassed about buying period products
- 1 in 10 girls had been asked not to talk about periods in front of their mother or father
- Only 1 in 5 girls felt comfortable discussing their period with their teacher

As well as providing affordable solutions to manage periods comfortably and hygienically - empowering girls and women to feel comfortable talking about their periods can also help bring about awareness and action to eradicate period poverty.

"Period poverty is a very real challenge facing many girls in the UK, and it's devastating to hear of the impact it is having on girls' lives, their ability to be themselves, and their self-esteem. For

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can't be right.

"We need a society-wide approach to bust the taboo, and an education programme which addresses the shocking reality that too many girls lack the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their period, and are too afraid to ask for advice.

Lucy Russell, UK Campaign Manager at Plan International UK

How period poverty impacts education, health, and emotional wellbeing

Period poverty reaches far and wide, having a negative impact not just on girls and women, but society as a whole.

Education and work

Many girls miss out on education because of their period. Almost half of girls have missed an entire day of school. This leads to around 137,000 girls missing school each year, which could have a lasting impact on a girls education, especially if days are missed each month.

A study conducted in the Netherlands of 32,7498 women indicated that 13.8% of women have to miss work due to their

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This causes an economic impact through the loss of productivity. As schools and workplaces don't take into account female menstrual health, despite it affecting a large chunk of the population - greater flexibility and more open, honest conversations about menstrual health could help to address these issues.

Health

Physical education is also affected, with 64% of girls having missed PE or sports lessons due to their period. This can mean girls aren't getting the same benefits of physical education and regular physical activity that boys are.

Women can also feel prohibited from taking part in certain sports and activities as a result of not having the right menstrual products, self-consciousness or myths. For example, plan-uk.org found that there was a common assumption that you can't go swimming whilst menstruating. Even those who understood that this wasn't true said they'd feel uncomfortable getting in the water in case they leaked.

Whilst it's important for anyone menstruating to be able to take part in sport if they wish and to not feel embarrassed about being on their period - pressure to 'carry on as normal' as though

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and not to feel guilty about doing that.

Limited access to menstrual health products can also leave women creating makeshift solutions that are uncomfortable and unsafe. It can also lead to repeated use of products like menstruation pads which can increase the risk of thrush or bacterial infections. Or, leaving in tampons for longer than advised which can increase the risk of TSS.

Emotional wellbeing

In addition to period poverty, we know periods can be uncomfortable. This also contributes to missing school and sports. But girls and women shouldn't have to feel ashamed or embarrassed about saying why.

Of the girls missing out on school and PE lessons, in both cases over 50% have made up a lie or alternate excuse because they didn't want to say they were having a period (Plan International). Of those who missed work, some also didn't feel comfortable citing a period as the reason.

For anyone, feeling shame or embarrassment about their body can contribute to low self-esteem, stress, anxiety and depression. This can be coupled with the stress from the added difficulty of being unable to buy the menstrual health products

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talking about their periods. Asking for what they need, be that advice, menstruation products, medication to manage pain or other support is important and should be encouraged.

Why it's also a problem for boys and men

To end embarrassment and shame around periods and to fight period poverty, men and boys must also recognise they play a part.

42% of US Women say they've been period shamed by men. 60% of women said they still felt embarrassed when they menstruate, due in large part to pervasive taboos and the attitudes of men.

Important and open discussions about periods need to be held in the public sphere in order to raise awareness. It takes both women and men to make that happen.

The history of myths and taboos about periods

Myths and taboos about periods have existed for thousands of years thanks to periods being extremely poorly understood

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Many myths concerning periods have similar themes - the idea that women are somehow unclean, or emit a toxic substance when menstruating. This can be linked to similar superstitions around the world such as women not being able to make jam/make bread/preserve meat/prepare food when pregnant as it won't work/will be poisoned.

This might sound ridiculous but in many countries, religions and cultures these types of superstitions are still practised.

In the texts of many religions such as the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam - as well as other religions such as Hinduism and Buddism, there are also statements (that can be interpreted in various ways, often negatively) that during menstruation woman should be compelled to act differently in some way, or that people around them should behave differently. And so, setting apart girls and women who are menstruating from wider society.

In some customs, women are expected to literally separate themselves from their society when menstruating.

These superstitions and religious dogmas can contribute to the lack of education and understanding that allows period poverty

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lack of hygienic facilities and no or limited access to menstruation products. Strong superstitions also exist about periods, which cause stigma and sanctions that can sometimes be life-threatening.

This can create a considerably negative impact on the lives of women and girls, and communities. In developing countries, the consequences of period poverty can include:

Education
Girls often miss school on days when they have their period due to stigma, lack of hygiene facilities or private space like toilets where they can change and painful cramps or other associated symptoms.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, some girls can miss up to 20% of their school year, with some dropping out of school altogether because of their period. As well as impacting their education, this can put children at risk of child marriage and early pregnancy.

Health
Many women are unable to access suitable products to help them manage their period safely and with dignity. Forced to use substitutes like dirty rags, leaves, sand, grass and other

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Not having a bathroom with running water, or a clean environment to wash and change can also increase the risk of infection. In fact, around **72 million people have to manage their period without a decent toilet (Water Aid)**.

Even if there is water available - girls may not feel comfortable bathing when on their period... **For example, 70% of girls in Afganistan don't bathe when menstruating, for fear of becoming infertile (UNICEF 2015).**

In India, there are one hundred and thirteen million girls between the ages of 12-14 at risk of dropping out of school due to the stigma around menstrual health. Girls feel embarrassed to go to school on their period. They also often use rags instead of pads, and many schools don't have bathrooms. As the subject of periods is often taboo here, there's a lack of education and dialogue about menstruation or menstrual health hygiene at school or home. Consequently, many girls don't know what's happening to them, believe their bodies are purging evil spirits or that they're injured once a month.

Some Hindu communities believe menstruating women bring bad luck and natural disasters, so they're banished to animal sheds during their period. This practice is called

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whilst staying in the huts.

Emotional wellbeing

The impact of period poverty on mental health and emotional wellbeing is thought to be significant. Women and girls are being outcast from society, unable to manage natural bodily functions with dignity and told they're unclean or toxic - during what is often a vulnerable time. This can lead to girls feel scared, isolated, confused and lonely.

What can be done to address period poverty?

Addressing period poverty can be complicated as it's both an economic issue and one perpetuated by long-held cultural beliefs and customs. Ending period poverty requires better education on menstruation but also the support of government, health and public bodies. A great deal of work is being done in also being done in this area by charities and individuals supporting them.

Let's take a closer look at how these three areas are supporting education and prevention of period poverty.

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Normalising both the concept and reality of periods for both boys and girls can help shape the attitudes of future generations.

At the moment, there's a great deal of variation in education on menstrual health. Usually, there is only one session taught at primary school by either a school nurse, PE teacher or someone sent from a company that makes menstruation products. This may often be a girls' only lesson that boys don't have to sit in on.

Even if the lesson is exceptionally lead, for some children, the lesson may come too late if they've already started their periods. Likewise, by the time other children start their period they may have forgotten much of what was taught. Menstruation may also be covered in biology at high school level, but some teachers may skip this - assuming that many of the children have already been taught about it in primary school.

Lack of lessons in menstruation can act to reinforce the belief that periods are embarrassing, and shouldn't be talked about.

Bodies like the Girl Guides are campaigning for better period education. As a result, from 2021, all pupils in England will learn about periods as part of Relationship and Sex Education. They are also working with parliaments in Scotland, Wales and

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periods, it is usually passed through female family members - or friends (if they're not ashamed to talk about it). Unfortunately, this information may be laced with superstition and patchy in science.

Lack of hygienic facilities in schools to change, wash or dispose of products also remains a huge challenge for many developing countries.

Independent and larger charities and local initiatives provide a lifeline for advocating and carrying out education in menstrual health, providing resources for many communities.

Charities that help

In the UK: There are several groups and charities in the UK working to help end period poverty. They usually focus on education and empowerment, providing period products and campaigning against period poverty.

One example is Period Power in Staffordshire, who work to raise awareness locally through holding talks and workshops in local schools. This encourages children to talk about periods openly and helps break down taboos.

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charitable organisations throughout the UK.

Some charities like Freedom4Girls in Leeds also hold sewing workshops for women to create their own reusable cloth pads - anyone can get involved!

Abroad: Much of the pioneering work in menstrual health and education abroad is undertaken by charities. Various NGO's campaign for policy reform to address the issue on a wider scale, yet overall, the topic is sadly still neglected.

International charity Water Aid is performing vital work to provide clean water and female-friendly toilets for communities in the developing world. As well as producing educational support, materials and products.

ActionAid also helps local women learn to make safe, reusable pads and gives them free to girls in school.

NGOs like Dignity Dreams in South Africa, Gramalaya in India and Pad-Up Creations in Nigeria are also creating reusable pads for women - providing sustainable and hygienic solutions for poorer rural, low-income girls and women.

Governments and public bodies

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surrounding periods.

Since January 2020 the government has also rolled out free products in English primary schools. From summer 2019 the NHS also pledged to provide free sanitary products for all patients who need them - something which it didn't do before.

In Scotland, the government funds free period products through schools, colleges and universities. Tampons and towels are also delivered to low-income households and councils have funding to provide free products at sports clubs and other public places.

Along with its taskforce, UK also launched a global "period poverty" fund to help all women and girls worldwide access sanitary products by 2050, and to tackle stigma and taboos around menstruation. The government pledged 2 million pounds to organisations working to end period poverty globally.

Governments abroad: Thanks to pressure from charities and health organisations, governments in developing countries are making some positive steps.

The Indian government initiated a campaign called "Save the Girl Child" in 2014 to reinforce the value of girls lives and education. Although this is an important step towards

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by the supreme court in 2005 and criminalised by the government in 2018, some rural communities continued with the practice. Forcing a menstruating woman into a “period hut” is now punishable with 3 months in prison and a fine of 3,000 rupees (£33). Local authorities are also informing families that if they observe the custom, they don't qualify for state food support.

Menstrual care as a basic human right

Half the population of the world have experienced or currently have regular periods. It’s a natural biological process that anyone should be able to manage hygienically, comfortably and with dignity. Unfortunately, as we’ve seen - this isn’t the case yet.

Menstrual care is a question that can be placed with the issues of reproductive rights, bodily autonomy and forms of conservatism towards female bodies and sexuality. In fact, it’s part of the larger overall issue of women’s rights.

Menstrual activism and the media

Menstrual activism began in the US in the 1970s but wasn’t really covered by popular media until around 2015. In fact, 2015

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periods. These campaigns were spread via social media with hashtags like #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult, #HappyToBleed, #periodpositive, and #FreeTheTampons.

In the UK, a campaign to cut the 5% VAT tax from period products was launched by Laura Coryton. Kiran Gandi ran the 2015 London Marathon during her period 'free bleeding' - not wearing any menstrual products. This caused a debate in the media and brought the issue of women's rights and menstrual health into the spotlight.

Collectively, this activism and the work of charities have helped promote dialogue around menstrual health and period poverty - abroad and in the UK.

How you can help

There are lots of ways that you can get involved and make a difference to help end period poverty. Here are some:

- Choose menstruation products from brands that support ending period poverty
- Donate to charity, either global or locally
- Attend marches and events
- Sign petitions

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Together, we believe that we can make a difference to end period poverty.



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