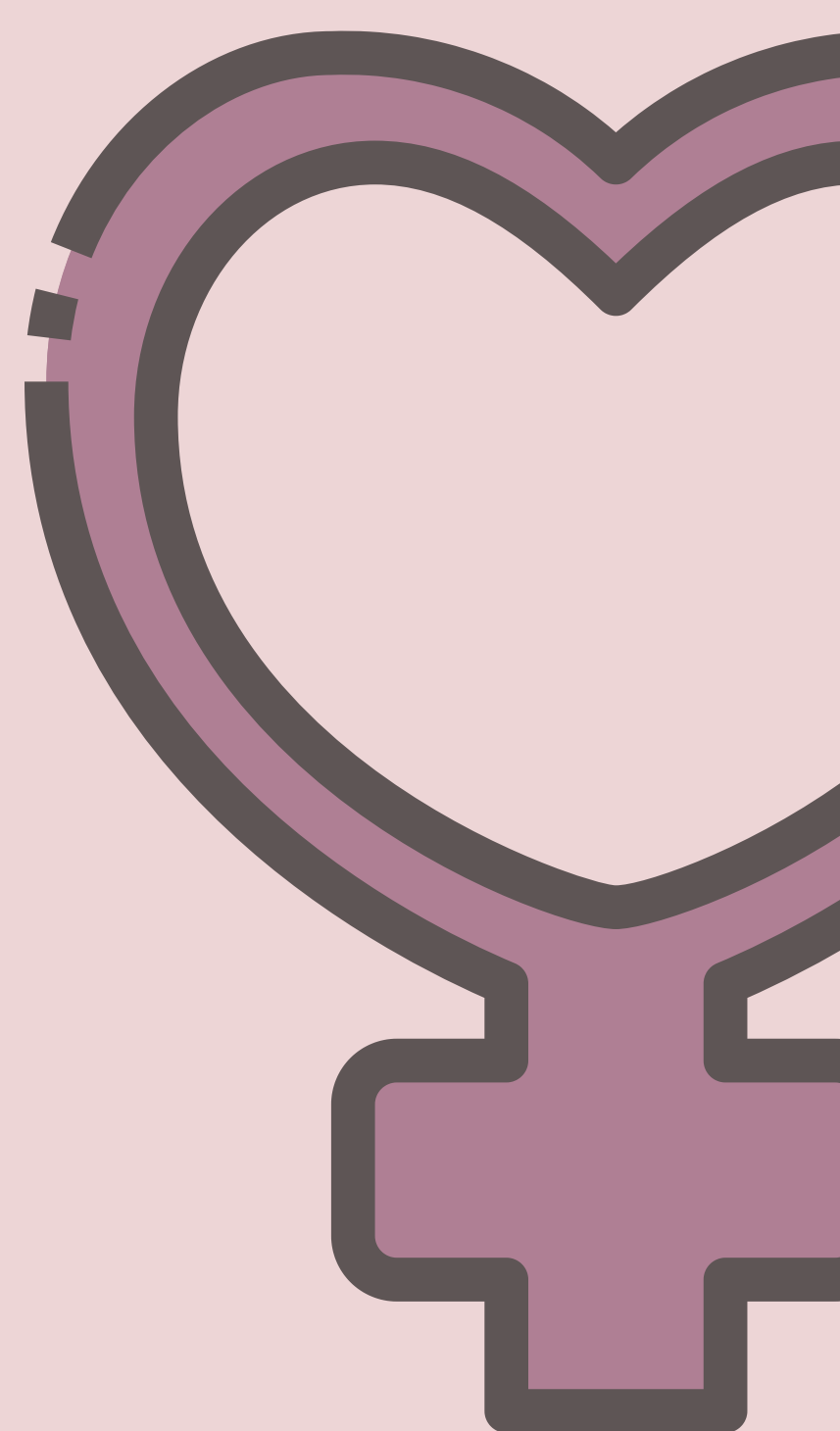


ALL GIRLS DESERVE
FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS.



Period Poverty

The prevalence and impact of period poverty
faced by girls in Birmingham



Education

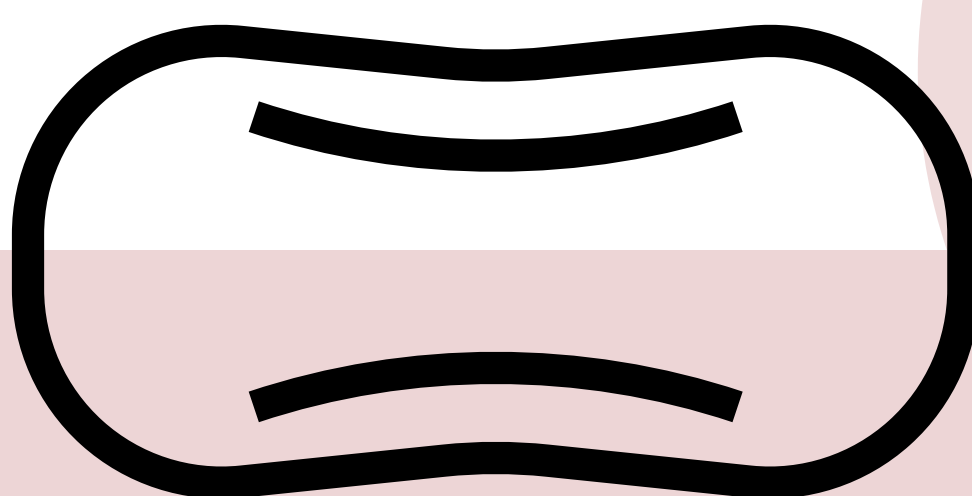
What is Period Poverty?

... A Toxic Trio

Stigma

Affordability

“



‘Period Poverty’ occurs when a female cannot afford sanitary products as a result of financial constraints. This also includes not having access to hygiene facilities, pain relief and methods of disposing sanitary products.

According to Plan International UK, a global children’s charity who strive for girl’s rights and equality, one in ten girls in the UK have been unable to afford sanitary products during their period. These girls reported having to ask a friend to borrow sanitary products or have improvised with items including newspaper, tissues or socks.

Period poverty extends beyond issues of affordability. It can also be understood in terms of the limited education and lack of knowledge that girls have on menstruation. Some girls receive inadequate education that covers basic information about periods and how their bodies work. More than a quarter of UK girls admitted that they did not know what to do when they started their period, and one in five felt uncomfortable to discuss this with a teacher (Plan International UK, 2017/18). This shows that schools may not be delivering detailed menstrual health education to prepare a girl with the knowledge to manage her period.

In addition to affordability and education, there is also stigma, shame and taboo associated with periods. Nearly half of girls in the UK (aged 14-21) are embarrassed by their periods, with 71% admitting they feel embarrassed purchasing products in store.

The issues surrounding periods reflect poverty and inequality. This effects girls on a global and a local scale and can have cause serious health, educational and social impacts.

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Period Poverty & Birmingham Girls

Period Poverty is a major challenge faced by many girls across Birmingham. Findings from Plan International UK report that one in ten girls aged 14-21 have experienced Period Poverty. According to a Birmingham Public Health report, this is equivalent to an estimated 32,490 girls and women in Birmingham who may have experienced period poverty at some point in their lifetime.

Period Poverty is one of the ways females suffer as a result of not having enough money to meet basic needs. Currently, 42% of children in Birmingham are living in poverty and over 42,000 children live in a household where neither parent or guardian is working. Over 70,000 children are from households classified as 'low income' (Birmingham Public Health, 2019).

In comparison to other basic needs such as food, when household income is low, purchasing menstrual products becomes less important. Birmingham's food banks contributed over 40,000 packs of supplies in the space of a year, and over 14,000 of these were given to children (Bowman, 2019; Trussell Trust, 2019).

These figures demonstrate the severity of poverty within Birmingham. The inability to financially meet basic needs and buy food will link to the prevalence of period poverty in the city. When finances are tight, compared to other necessities such as food, menstrual products become less of an 'essential item'.

Moreover, research has found that girls from low income families understand about their parents' financial struggles, and so limit what they ask for from the household budget. These girls engage in self-denial of their needs (Ridge, 2005). With poverty being a real issue faced by families and children in Birmingham, this has a significant effect on the lives of girls and their experiences with menstruation.

Birmingham is also one of the most diverse cities in the UK. Office for National Statistics report that in Birmingham, one in every three people are either Black, Asian or from another minority ethnic group. Sixty percent of under 18's in the city are from a non-white background (Birmingham City Council, 2018/19). Period poverty is found to be a greater issue for people in varying ethnic communities due to the cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation.

As such as diverse city, with high rates of poverty faced by families and children, period poverty is a major issue faced by Birmingham.



How Does Period Poverty Effect Girls?

Menstrual Health & Wellbeing

Not having a safe and hygienic method to manage periods can cause serious health risks. It has been highlighted that 19% of girls have used an unsuitable sanitary product due to cost (Plan International UK, 2017/18). These products include rags, paper towels, socks, newspaper or cardboard. This is also inclusive of using tampons or sanitary pads for longer than recommended. By using unsanitary alternatives, girls are facing health risks and are more susceptible to infections such as bacterial vaginosis.

Many girls also report managing menstrual pain to be an issue, and yet because of the stigma surrounding menstruation they receive little attention or sympathy (Day, 2018). When physical wellbeing is compromised this will negatively affect the mental health and emotional wellbeing of a girl too.

According to a study conducted by menstrual hygiene company 'Always', those who experience period poverty are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, low confidence and poorer social skills. Even without the influence of poverty, for many girls, going through puberty is a difficult time in itself as their body changes and they become more self-conscious and insecure. If a girl is not prepared for her period, or does not understand it, this can be extremely distressing (Plan International UK, 2018).



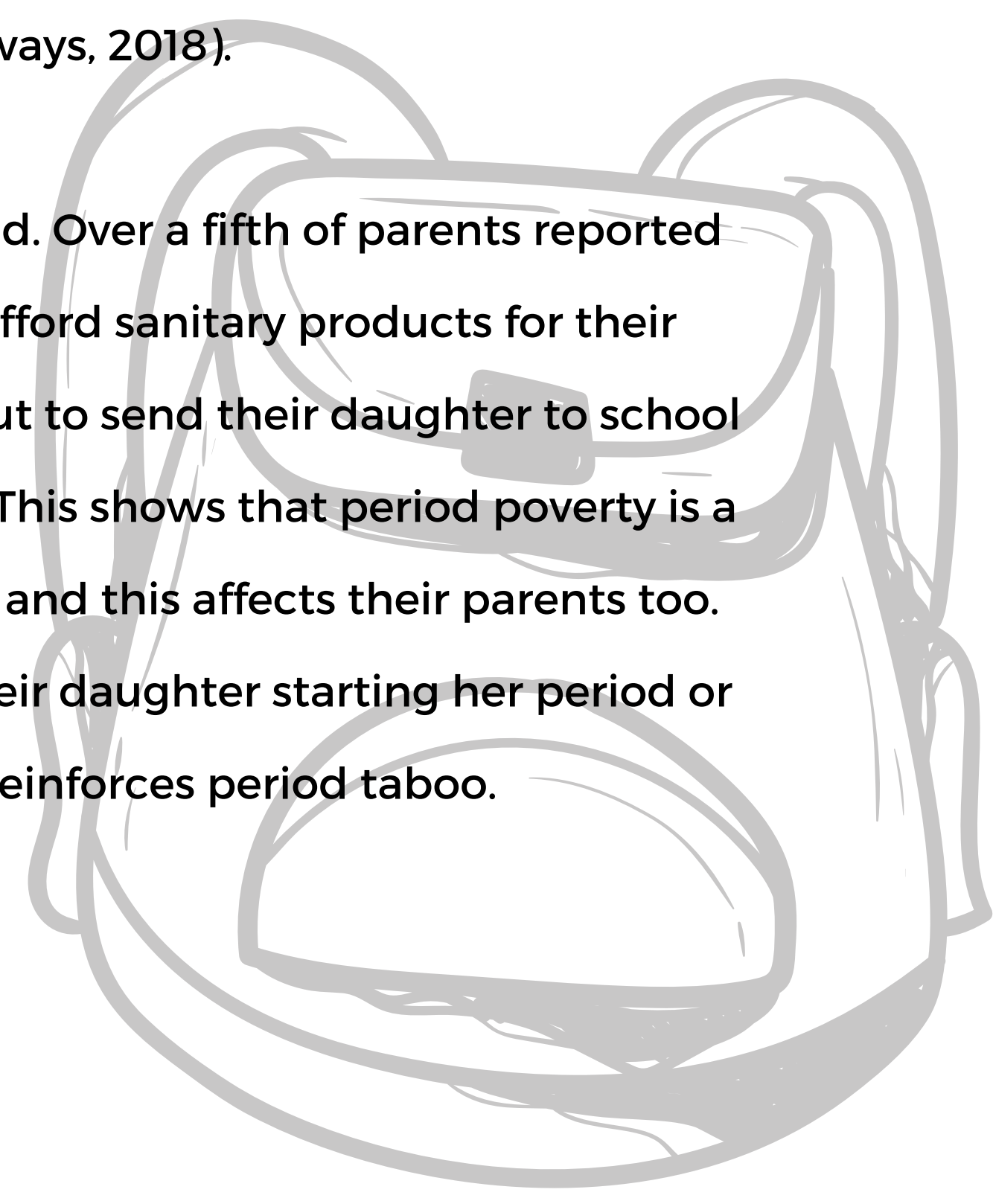


Girls miss out on the activities they love

Period Poverty is also associated with a range of negative influences on a girl's school life. Data published by Plan International UK states that 49% of girls have missed a day of school due to their period. Of this sample, 59% had made up an excuse as an alternative reason for missing school. Furthermore, 64% of girls admitted to missing a PE lesson due to their period. This shows that periods significantly interfere with a girl's education and other school activities. Actions should be taken to ensure every girl feels capable, confident and supported to manage their period.

Young girls are also missing school due to period poverty in Birmingham (Thandi, 2019). On average 137,700 UK girls missed school in the past year because they could not afford sanitary products (Elsworthy, 2018). Data collected by 'Always' found that of a sample of girls aged 10 to 18, seven percent said they had no choice but to skip school because of not being able to afford products and this made them feel "embarrassed and ashamed". Girls who experienced period poverty were also less likely to complete their GCSE's and A-levels (Always, 2018).

Period poverty also affects families in the household. Over a fifth of parents reported having to go without something themselves to afford sanitary products for their daughter, and one in ten said they had no choice but to send their daughter to school without sanitary products (Always One Poll, 2018). This shows that period poverty is a common challenge faced by school girls in the UK and this affects their parents too. Parents themselves can also feel unprepared for their daughter starting her period or feel uncomfortable discussing it which reinforces period taboo.

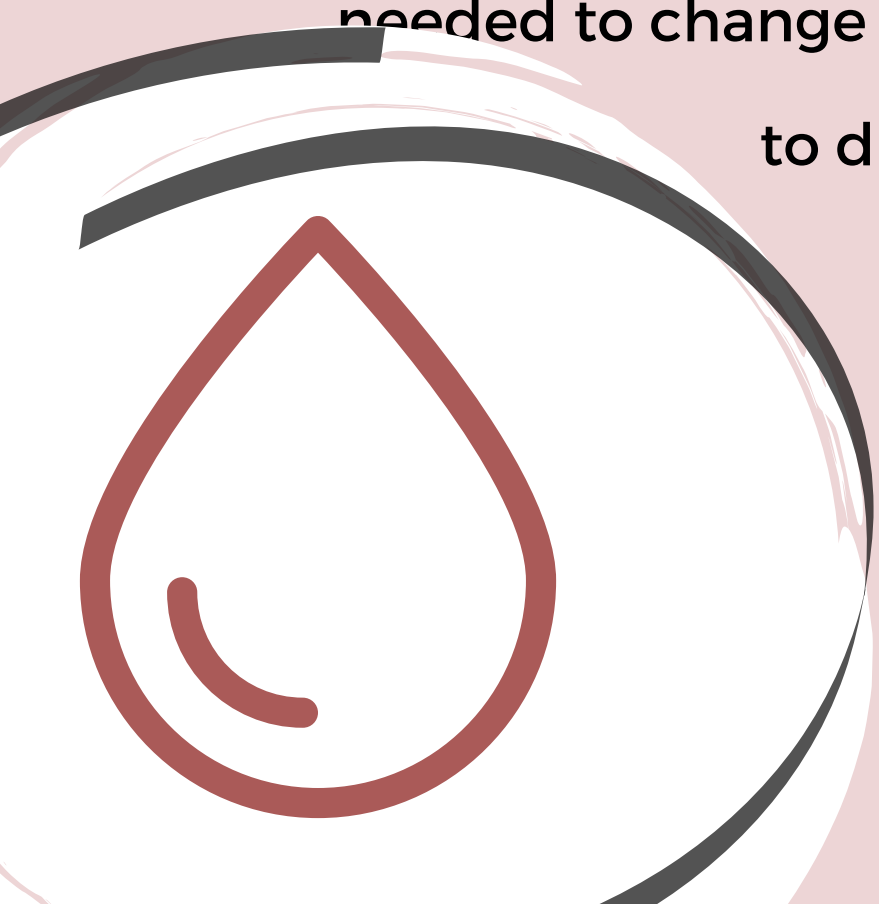


Girls Are Embarrassed By Their Period

Due to the stigma surrounding periods, girls can feel embarrassed, dirty, shamed or even encouraged not to discuss their periods. One in ten girls had been asked not to talk about their periods around their mother or father, and as many as three quarters of girls feel embarrassed while purchasing sanitary products. As a society, the concept of “periods” has been silenced, euphemised and dismissed, and period stigma can have a negative influence on mental health and a girls self-esteem (Plan International UK, 2017).

The taboo surrounding periods has been passed down through generations, through religious contexts, cultures and beliefs. Periods have been treated as if they are unnatural and unclean. This contributes to the issue of period poverty and can also put a girl at risk by limiting communication and knowledge about their bodies. For example, heavy abnormal bleeding or extremely painful cramps could be a sign of health issue such as endometriosis. Eighty percent of adolescent girls have said to experienced heavy or irregular bleeding but had not gone to the doctors because they felt ‘embarrassed’ to mention their period (Day, 2018). If periods are not talked about, or girls feel uncomfortable discussing them, these health issues can be overlooked (Plan International UK, 2018).

As menstruation is a normal, natural and critical biological function, actions are needed to change perceptions, to relieve stigma, and encourage girls to feel confident to discuss and manage their periods in a modern society.



Ethnic Groups



Menstruation is also viewed differently across cultures, each with myths and taboos surrounding periods (Plan International UK, 2018). In some cultures, religions and faiths, girls are taught that “periods are dirty, blood spoils food, and while menstruating women should be kept away from the kitchen”.

In certain cultures, menstruation is considered to be a sign of impurity, shame and uncleanliness. Therefore, for girls and women, the beliefs and cultural myths surrounding their periods can make it even harder for them to speak out about menstrual hygiene, wellbeing, and poverty.

Research has shown that girls and women from BAME communities (Black, Asian & Minority Communities) can be more likely to experience period poverty and menstrual stigmatisation. “Cysters”, a woman’s support group who aim to reduce cultural barriers, found in a focus group sample that many women from Black and Minority Ethnic groups stated that their daughters frequently used tissues and alternative products during their period (Cysters, 2018).

In this context, sanitary products were considered “less important compared to other expenses, such as purchasing high quality meat and food for the father”. It appears that the menstrual needs of girls are of lesser importance in comparison to male needs, and this comes from cultural attitudes concerning menstruation.

However, Birmingham City Council report that the extent of period poverty across different cultures in the city may be misrepresented because of the issues surrounding the discussions of menstruation. This shows that period poverty extends beyond the issue of poverty itself and involves cultural stigma and taboo. As a diverse city, actions should be taken increase the understanding and representation of period poverty faced by various community groups.

What is being done to address period poverty?

As period poverty is formed by issues of affordability, education and taboo, actions are needed to overcome each of these factors across the UK and locally in Birmingham.

Government Scheme for England

In 2020, a Government scheme was launched to provide funding for free sanitary products in primary and secondary schools in England (Department of Education, 2019). This means that sanitary products will be available, cost free to all girls while attending school.

Therefore, actions have been taken across the UK to provide schools with fully-funded sanitary products, for the use of girls, to ensure that no girl misses school because of her period.

However, by September 2020, less than 40% of schools in England had signed up to the scheme (The Red Box Project, 2020). This shows that the issue of period poverty extends beyond financial constraints, and other methods of education and tackling stigma need to be addressed. This will ensure that schools understand the severity of period poverty, and so sign up to these initiatives, to equip their girls with the resources to effectively manage their periods.

Tampon Tax to be abolished 2021

Another factor relating to the financial input of period poverty, is tampon tax. From 2021 the Government have stated that there will be no VAT applied to women's sanitary products. There is currently a reduced rate of 5% VAT applied to sanitary products in the UK. This was once as high as 17.5%. The profits from the tax applied to tampons and sanitary pads meant that these items were once classified them as "non-essential luxury items".

This has reflected gender inequality over the years and has received attention from women's rights activists. The upcoming abolishment of tampon tax is a huge achievement towards ending period poverty in the UK.

Addressing Poverty in Birmingham



The most important action to overcome period poverty within the city is to address overall poverty.

Birmingham City Council are looking to address the employment gap and the gender pay gap experienced by women. There are also 15 Youth Centres situated in Birmingham that provide free sanitary products. Most of these youth centres are located in the most deprived areas of the city, and so can be accessed by girls who need it most.

Menstrual wellbeing to be taught in schools

Menstrual health was set to be part of the new Relationship & Sex Education school curriculum, being introduced from September 2020 and compulsory in both primary and secondary schools (Department of Education, 2020).

Starting from primary school, all pupils will be taught about menstrual health and the menstrual cycle. This curriculum will be inclusive of girls and boys. In previous years, menstruation was covered only briefly in schools, sometimes limited to just the one session, with only the female members of the class. There was variation in terms how well the sessions were delivered, they were very basic and often many of the girls would have already started their period before this session took place (Plan International UK, 2018). Moreover, 7% of children in the UK have a disability, and yet 44% were said to have not received any menstrual education in schools (Leonard Cheshire Disability survey, 2010).

Today, girls are starting their periods younger, some as young as 8 years old. Therefore, education on menstruation needs to start younger. It is important for all girls to receive detailed information regarding their periods. Having menstruation covered in school will encourage conversation surround the topic and will allow all girls to feel more comfortable and confident talking about periods and managing them effectively. Likewise, having thorough menstrual education will allow girls to identify unhealthy periods, and recognise the onset of conditions such as endometriosis.

By including the males in these sessions will also be effective as it will strengthen their understanding and normalise periods to relieve taboo. In previous years the exclusion of boys from the session reinforces the assumption that periods are disgusting, and girls need to keep them secret. Schools therefore have great potential to end period stigma and provide necessary education to both girls and boys on menstruation. Combined this contributes to ending period poverty.

Other Considerations

The Environment



Another important factor to consider when addressing any issue in society is the impact we have on the environment. The disposal of sanitary products can be particularly harmful to the environment, with a sanitary pad taking on average 500 years to biodegrade (Environment Committee, 2018).

‘Cysters’ also work to educate girls in schools on the options of environmentally friendly menstrual products. They provide reusable sanitary pads and menstrual cups, which means that girls can wash products and then re-use them rather than purchasing new non-reusable products every month (Cysters, 2018).

This is important as reusable period products will ease some of the issues created by poverty as girls won’t need to purchase new products every month. This will also reduce plastic waste which negatively impacts the environment.

Coronavirus Pandemic

Most of the major movements to end period poverty were taking place during the year 2020. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, these actions will have been affected due to factors such as school closures.

Many young people have missed out on education this year, including the new Relationship and Sex Education to cover menstrual cycles. Schools are also a key source for provisions of sanitary products. However, during lockdowns, pupils would have been unable to access them.

The figures of period poverty experienced this year have also risen sharply. Reports showed that as many as 3 in 10 girls could not afford period products. More urgent action is needed than ever before (Plan International UK, 2020). This is due to the financial constraints people have faced this year, with job losses, business closures and lowered income. As a result, purchasing sanitary products as a necessity for family members became increasingly difficult.

Therefore, it is important that support is available to help girls manage their periods in difficult times and ensure that positive actions remain in place to end period poverty.

What Support is Available in Birmingham?

There are some current local initiatives that are taking place across Birmingham to support girls who experience period poverty in the city.

Cherished

Cherished; a support organisation for girls across Birmingham in primary and secondary education, offer mentoring to young girls. They put together period packs containing information on menstruation, a handmade pouch for sanitary products, self-care items and chocolates. These are especially useful for schools to give to their female pupils, girls who want a pick me up, for fathers who may feel uncomfortable discussing periods with their young daughters, and youth leaders, teachers, nurses etc to have supplies for stock. All of the money raised from these period packs goes towards supporting period poverty in the UK and India.

Cherished also offer one-on-one mentoring for girls in primary and secondary for a range of childhood experiences. This would be extremely useful for girls who require a little extra support with understanding their periods, or don't have someone at home who they feel they can turn to.

The Red Box Project

The Red Box Project, who campaigns and provides access to free sanitary products, offer free period products to young people in schools and colleges across Birmingham (Birmingham: Birmingham central, South West, Great Barr and Sutton Coldfield).

Cysters

"Cysters" are a women's support group, who aim to reduce cultural barriers, ensure equality, and support those living in poverty. They run support run a project called "Our Cysters" across Birmingham to tackle period poverty. They provide menstrual products to those who need them and work in schools and other organisations to deliver workshops on menstrual health (Cysters, 2018).

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