

Spotlight:



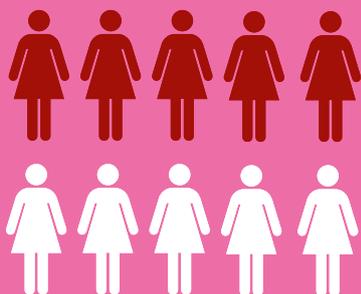
Period poverty: what is it, why is it happening and what are we doing about it?

The idea of a woman being forced to use rags or newspaper because she can't access sanitary products may seem like a distant, dismal nightmare affecting only those in economically underdeveloped countries. It's easy to see how issues like widespread poverty, and menstruation remaining a taboo topic, can lead to conditions like these in places such as India and Pakistan, but this is happening right here in the UK today, and it's called period poverty.

Period poverty refers to the inability of women and girls from deprived backgrounds to afford sanitary products. Due to the cost, pads and tampons are increasingly inaccessible to many women across the UK. Some women get by using makeshift products out of leftover material, and some use a single sanitary product for an extended period of time. Many women are not getting by at all. This can damage educational and career progress, as it may lead to repeated truancy and absence, as well as a hugely negative effect on one's self-esteem as well as mental and physical health.

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Research from the Girlguiding youth panel showed that 50% of a sample of panellists had faced difficulties in accessing period products. One panellist, aged 17, said "it's hard to scrape together the money to buy them".



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When asked how this has impacted their lives girls recalled missing revision time during exams and being unable to leave the house throughout their period. The dread of anticipating one's period and the anxiety that occurs when it comes can also result in going as far as to shoplift just to be able to maintain basic hygiene. This cycle of behaviour is clearly unsustainable, yet thousands of women are forced into doing it every month. 21% of the population lives below the poverty line - but this is an additional burden, only faced by women and girls.

Many believe that as the UK is a wealthy and technologically advanced country, that societal issues faced by Britons would have very little overlap with those in developing nations. This can be true, but is not always the case. Although poverty is relative, it can manifest itself in similar ways across the world, one of which is period poverty. Freedom4Girls sanitary product provision scheme makes this clear. The Freedom4Girls charity began as an initiative to provide girls in Kenya with free sanitary products, but the organisers were contacted by local schools in their home city of Leeds, highlighting a need for free sanitary products to reduce truancy. The fact that schools in the 5th richest county in the world are reaching out to ask for provisions initially intended for girls in a country where a third of people live on less than 1.9 dollars a day highlights just how dire the situation is.

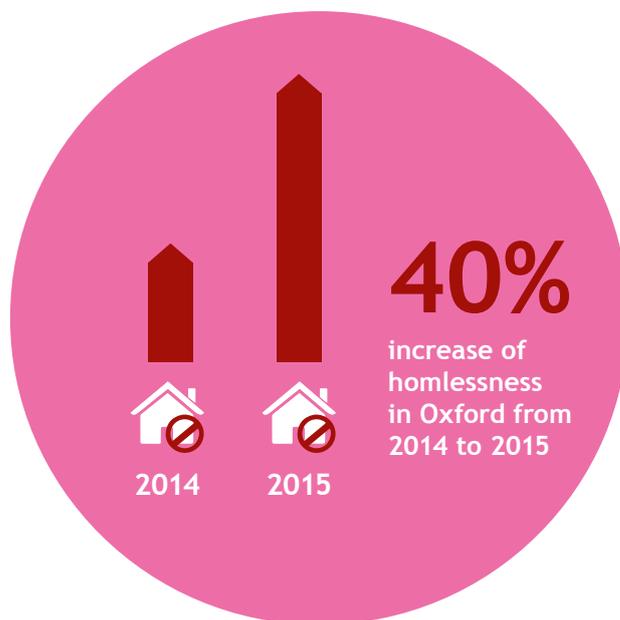
The parallels between developing countries and the UK regarding period poverty is what inspired Chloe Tingle to start the 'No More Taboo' enterprise. Tingle was taking part in a volunteer program in Bolivia for a menstrual hygiene project and became aware of period poverty in developing countries. Upon arriving home, she intended to raise money in the UK for overseas projects when she learned that this is a problem that exists much closer to home. No More Taboo found that women spend over £3500 in a lifetime on sanitary products, so the project provides reusable sanitary products. A £7 menstrual cup can be used for up to 20 years, cutting costs hugely. They also have a 'Monthly Hug' subscription box with extras like chocolate and candles to make periods as comfortable as possible, with profits going to charitable organisations. Tingle feels that this is important particularly due to the experiences she heard when working with homeless women in shelters, who largely found sanitary products inaccessible. One woman described her period as 'the worst time to be homeless'. For people who are already likely to have many and complex challenges in their lives, this experience, which she describes as an 'extra blow', only increases difficulties.

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Homeless women are, unsurprisingly, a key demographic of those who suffer from period poverty. The number of homeless people in the UK has risen 500% since 2010 with the total number of families, largely women with children, in temporary accommodation at over 77,000.



And while rough sleeping is also on the rise, so is the proportion of rough sleepers who are female. In 2016 30% of the people that used St. Mungo's homelessness services were women. People often become homeless as a result of relationship breakdown, poverty, debt and addiction issues. But there is also the factor of domestic violence which disproportionately affects women. With the price of sanitary products, it is no surprise that those who can't afford clothing, food and shelter cannot afford to have a period. The correlation between period poverty and homelessness is readily observed in places like Oxford. The most recent report from the Oxford Homeless Pathways charity reported a 40% increase from homelessness in 2014 to 2015, meaning more and more women are becoming homeless in the city or coming to the city whilst homeless.



The Oxford Dignity Drive aims to tackle this problem by providing free sanitary products to homeless women in Oxford. The organisation has fundraised £1,300 in conjunction with the University of Oxford to buy sanitary products. The women behind the project say that they started it after seeing the 'massive number of homeless women with no access to sanitary products'. They believe that although publicity around the issue has increased, prevalence of the issue itself has got worse as austerity pushes more people further into poverty.

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Regardless of all of the money and donations generated by charity, this can only be stopped through government action. Public policy has to be reformed to make sanitary product provision mandatory to girls on free school meals - so says 17-year-old campaigner Amika George. George started the [#FreePeriods](#) campaign to provide free sanitary products in school for those from the poorest backgrounds. George found that responses to the campaign exposed a rich-poor divide she found particularly striking. They largely fit into two categories of 'complete shock' or people coming forward and saying 'this has happened to me'. One of the hardest parts of tackling the issue, says George, is that there are few recordings of generalisable statistics regarding period poverty and the demographics that experience it because of reluctance to come forward. The 'taboo and shame around menstruation' means that although reason tells us that period poverty affects the poorest girls in the UK we cannot find out how many. This also leaves us with a difficulty to understand how race and location intersect with poverty when discussing influential factors of period poverty.

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Despite these barriers Amika has made impressive strides. Her campaign has gained support from Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and Cherie Blair. She has had support from 13 MPs and the Green Party has credited her with inspiring their vow to make sanitary products free for those in need. A month after her campaign was launched, the House of Lords had their first debate over sanitary product provision. This is the change we need, and this is the result of the lobbying of grassroots campaigners like Amika and vocal MPs like Lorely Burt. Lorely Burt was the Solihill MP representing the Liberal Democrat party in 2015 and is currently the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for equalities. Burt believes that through building up a head of pressure on the government a change can be made to help those in need. She believes that the political attitude toward period poverty is still problematic but she has had a positive reception, particularly from those in the Labour party, when discussing period poverty. The money needed to provide sanitary products would be 'less than a drop in the ocean' in terms of government expenditure, so the lack of action being taken isn't because of a lack of resources but because the issue isn't being taken seriously enough.

Fourth Wave is going further, says Rachel who is a member of the group; they want all school girls to have free-access to pads and tampons. They've secured over 80,000 signatures on their [petition](#) calling for change, and have secured support from peers to help influence government. With funding from Rosa, Fourth Wave want to build a website capturing and sharing stories of girls and women's struggle with period poverty, and they're working to connect and collaborate with other campaigners on this issue, so they can learn from each other and join forces to have a bigger impact. When a reporter on a recent BBC interview pointed out that tampons only cost a pound, Rachel responded "So does a pack of spaghetti, a tin of tomatoes and an onion - and I often had to choose to feed my family over buying a pack of them."

"...I often had to choose to feed my family over buying [sanitary products]."

The issue of period poverty is deeply disturbing, and the dismissal of it even more so. The problem is so insidious because the stigmas of menstruation and poverty are so shameful individually that when they are combined, the humiliation undoubtedly prevents people from coming forward. Even if resources are available, those in need will have to come forward first before being able to access them. There is one thing that we can do to help this problem. We can start talking. We can start to de-stigmatise periods by talking openly and honestly about this fact of life. By creating a society in which women feel they can publicly acknowledge their periods, the use of sanitary products will be de-stigmatised. When this happens, those who are deprived will no longer have to suffer in silence.



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