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Ending period poverty: Scotland's plan for free menstrual products shatters taboos and leads a global movement

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In the UK, the average woman will spend about £4,800 on period products in her lifetime. For households on low incomes, this kind of expense is a heavy burden.

In August 2018, Scotland made history as the country leading a global movement to end period poverty. The government pledged to invest £5.2m to provide free menstrual products in schools, colleges and universities across the country. Period supplies will be available in toilets, just as paper and soap are already provided. The scheme's objective is to ensure that all students have access to the pads, tampons and products they need, regardless of financial means.

This initiative follows a bill to provide free menstrual products, proposed in 2017 in the Scottish parliament by Scottish Labour MSP **Monica Lennon**, an advocate for women's health and gender equality. Following a public consultation, the bill garnered support from all parties at Holyrood. At the same time, a government-funded pilot in Aberdeen provided 1,000 women with period supplies, leading to the introduction of a £500,000 trial across several Scottish cities. These trials were aimed at women in low-income households to help alleviate the consequences of period poverty.

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Poorly provided

When someone is unable to afford the necessary materials to manage menstruation, they often have to turn to makeshift solutions like toilet paper or even socks. A lack of access to effective menstrual products may limit the ability of women and girls on their period to go about their daily lives.

Recent research suggested that up to 25% of young women in Scotland and 15% in England may struggle to get the pads and tampons they need. Girls across the UK report skipping physical education and dropping out of sport due to their periods. When women and girls are barred from participating in school or work for this reason, there are social and economic implications.

Beyond the practical challenges of period poverty, the stigma of menstruation can leave young women embarrassed, isolated and anxious. Using inappropriate products, or using products for too long, carries significant health risks, as well as have an impact on someone's dignity and self-esteem. In a 2018 Plan International report, an 11-year-old girl said:

I wrapped a sock around my underwear just to stop the bleeding, because I didn't want to get shouted at.

Stories like this are all too common. But menstruation-related inequalities don't stop after full-time education, with women of all ages – particularly those on low-incomes – potentially missing work and other opportunities.

Ever since early 20th-century entrepreneurs in the US and UK started making money out of disposable pads and tampons, periods have been profitable. Menstruating women buy an estimated 250 disposable products each year. With demands on food banks increasing for other everyday essentials, it shouldn't surprise us to see increasing demand for free sanitary products.

Social enterprise companies like Hey Girls, a UK brand that provides one free box of pads to charities for every box purchased, and the Red Box Project, have helped fill the void. Yet these companies can't, and shouldn't be expected to, solve period poverty.

Still a stigma

But it's not just the issue of the availability of products, but issues of stigma and embarrassment, pain, and emotional or psychological problems relating to periods that have an impact. The stigma associated with menstrual blood has been long evident in **advertising**, which erases notions of pain or the physical discomfort women experience during their monthly bleed. By concealing the realities of menstruation (such as blue liquid masquerading as blood), advertisers are complicit in maintaining this harmful taboo.

Recent widespread recognition of both period poverty and menstruation-related stigma has made periods an agenda item for policymakers and campaigners. There have been an array of initiatives around the world to address menstrual stigma and period poverty. From international **Menstrual Hygiene Day** to comedian Chella Quint's **Adventures in Menstruating**, activists are raising awareness globally. Among these are two Glasgow-based campaigns: the **Bloody Big Brunch** movement, which seeks to raise awareness about period poverty, and the **@OnTheBall** campaign in UK football.

Football's #OnTheBall campaign

In May 2018, three female Celtic supporters launched a petition and convinced the club to **run a trial** this season, stocking stadium toilets with free menstrual products. Their campaign has expanded across the UK, with **29 football clubs** already agreeing to participate.

Raising awareness about menstrual health in sport is vital to encourage more girls and women to participate. A recent **study by Sport England** found that 42% of 12 to 14-year-old girls avoided exercise during their periods, mostly due to feeling embarrassed, fear of leaking and pain. Sport participation has a wealth of physical and emotional benefits for life, and healthy habits form early, so it is critical to create inclusive environments in sport. British hockey's Olympic champion Sam Quek took up this cause in 2017 as part of an **#activeperiod** campaign.

As Scotland advances the global #periodpoverty movement further, there are still many questions. What will be the impact of this new policy? How can governments implement these strategies in inclusive ways? How can researchers better understand period poverty and menstrual stigma? How can schools improve education about periods? How can companies who make period products get involved with the campaign, and how can it effectively engage the general public – including men – in this still-taboo subject?

We're still finding out the answers, but we are encouraged by these latest initiatives and feel confident that periods are finally having more than a mere moment. As they should, given that half the world has them. Scotland welcomes you to the bloody revolution.

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