

Period Poverty. Challenge the shame!

ADRA calls out to challenge the shame of menstruation and period poverty!

About half of our planet consists of women, which is quite a lot. Most, if not all, of these women experience their first period at some point in their life and will continue to do so for the next 40 years, on average and that is quite a long time. So, why is menstrual care such a taboo?

Shame

Shame, stigma, and misinformation surrounding menstruation contribute to serious concerns for the health and safety of women and girls. Periods are a biological process that enables us to give life, therefore should it not be seen as a human right rather than just an issue of women's rights.

Exclusion

A report issued by [the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency \(UNFPA\)](#) finds that menstruation taboos can reinforce gender-based discrimination, perpetuating the idea that menstruating women and girls are unclean.

When menstrual shame is infused with a life of poverty, it becomes almost lethal. Global studies show a link between menstruation, missing school days, and a loss of wages. Women around the world experience limited access to sanitation facilities at school and in the workplace.

Due to the absence of (safe, separate) toilets and sanitary products at school, many girls are missing their education. About one in 10 girls in Africa will miss school during their periods, which can lead to dropouts putting the girls at a greater risk of child marriage.

In many communities, menarche – the first menstruation – is associated with readiness for marriage. Child marriage increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy and other outcomes that undermine girls' human rights.

Double the shame

The Netherlands ranks 14 on the list of the richest countries in the world. The Dutch are known for their tolerance and broad-mindedness. That is why Paula Kragten, a journalist and founder of the online magazine [Period!](#), was surprised to hear about menstrual shame in her own country. Her research on the subject covers more than two decades. She argues that menstrual bleeding is, first, a moral issue and secondly, is a burden on our household spending. Asking for (financial) help becomes even more difficult when the subject matter is clouded by taboo. *'In fact', she says, 'menstruating women and girls without enough resources to buy sanitary products may feel twice the shame due to their period and poverty.'*

Maria van Essen, the [co-founder of a local initiative 'Together we can do a lot'](#), concurs. Together with her husband, she set up a foundation to distribute food, clothing, and other life necessities to families and individuals in need. Besides distributing food, they have a small warehouse where they invite people to choose what they need. *'It doesn't happen very often, she says, 'but sometimes we get a few boxes of ladies' stuff. Instead of just picking what they need, the women come to me and whisper if they can take a pack of sanitary towels with them. While they are talking, I can see them blush. I encourage them to take two. They gladly do so and very quickly the products disappear in a big shopping bag.'*

COVID-19

One [survey](#) found that one in four women between the ages of 13 and 35 reported having a more difficult time managing their periods because of financial strain during the pandemic.

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Many public places, school campuses, recreation centres, libraries, that supply free tampons and pads in bathrooms are closed. As with toilet paper and medicine, those who could afford to hoard maxi-pads and tampons did just that, leaving women with lower incomes without basic essentials.

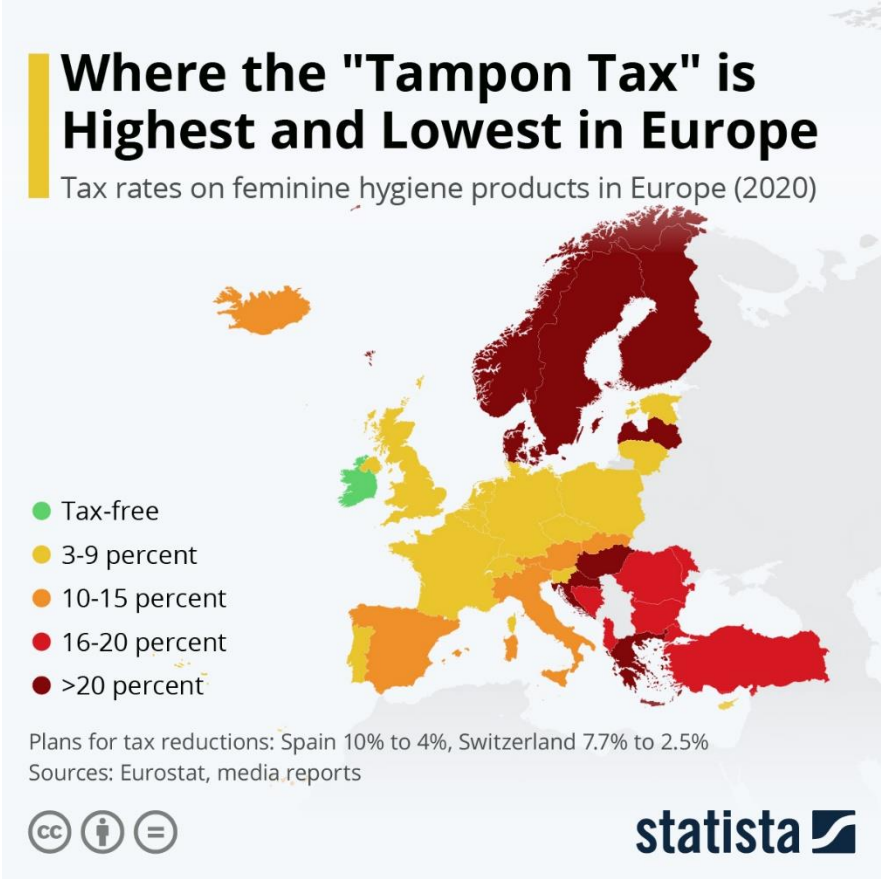
Menstrual Revolution

Last year Scotland was the first country in the world to make period products free. New Zealand and (a part of) Australia followed. And just this month the French government mandated that pads and tampons will be available for free at all universities from next year onwards. Many countries have put the subject on their political agenda, including Netherlands.

'The good news', Paula Kragten claims, 'is that in the last ten years we dare to seek more publicity. The subject is blooming. Companies selling tampons and sanitary towels have jumped on the bandwagon and use their products to enhance public awareness. For them, claiming to break the taboo is a strong marketing tool. Not ideal, but it keeps the ball rolling. Women's lib has also contributed to the menstrual revolution. However, we are not quite there yet. There are still a lot of women whose health may be at serious risk, not only of improper use of products but also because pains and aches are accepted as 'normal period discomforts', whereas they may well be an indication that something is wrong. We need to educate ourselves, as early as possible.'

Tampon Tax

Many countries are taking action to abolish the tax on tampons, menstrual cups, sanitary pads, and panty liners. The argument against the tampon tax is that tampons and sanitary pads are not luxuries but essential products. In the eyes of opponents, the tax on menstrual products increases inequality between men and women.



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What does ADRA do?

ADRA, Adventist Development Relief Agency, promotes justice and human rights for every individual. Our on-the-ground approach allows immediate assistance in times of crisis and partnership with the communities we serve. We combine advocacy with groundwork to get the strongest impact.

In Nepal, ADRA supports a school of 700 students. Since 2005, the ancient tradition Chhaupadi was banned by the Nepalese government. But the tradition is still practiced in parts of Nepal. Menstruating women and girls are banished to mud huts or sheds for the duration of their period, or even longer. It is believed they will otherwise bring their family bad luck, or ill health. There have been reports of deaths in Chhaupadi huts due to suffocation, fire, pneumonia, and animal attacks.

Arjun Thapa, the principle of Everest Academy in Nepal explains, *'We know girls during their period do not attend school, are forbidden to touch food in the kitchen and are forced to live separately for 4-7 days every month. We, as School Management Board, felt compelled to help the young ladies in our school. We reached out to ADRA. Our goal was to facilitate free sanitation pads at school. We started this in April 2020. Whenever the girls need sanitary pads, they know where to get them. We also conducted an awareness programme. A medical person talked about the dangers and risks due to ritual beliefs people follow. Our ultimate goal is to see the change of mentality in our students and put an end to superstitious beliefs that kill our women.'*

Period Pride

'There are so many women that have never heard of terms like period poverty or menstrual equity, yet once they do, it's as though a veil is lifted and they become allies, spokespeople, advocates in the fight to end it,' she said. "When we discuss it, we open the door to eradicating the shame and stigma associated with periods and period poverty, which will lead to a more menstrual equitable society.'

Eiko La Boria, The Flow Initiative founder.

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