

Motion

Combating menstrual poverty across Europe - an unseen hindrance to equal opportunities

signed by: World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), European Young Women's Christian Association (YWCAs)

co-signed by: European Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA Europe), European Trade Union Confederation - Youth (ETUC-Youth), European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS), Forum des Jeunes (FJ), Polish Council of Youth Organizations (PROM)

Background

Menstruation is a physiological process that lasts for, on average, 5 days.¹ Studies show that the median number of lifetime menstrual cycles is 451.3, which can add up to more than 6 years of bleeding days total.² Aside from simply shedding the endometrium lining, a period can be accompanied by a range of symptoms, such as pain, heavy flow, bloating, breast tenderness, mood swings, feeling irritable, or headaches; some of those are grouped into premenstrual syndrome (PMS).³ Being such a substantial part of life for around 26 percent of the population,⁴ it should not be a reason to stigmatise, exclude, or limit opportunities to those affected, especially not due to a lack of financial resources. Furthermore, the right to menstrual health is not only internationally recognised, but also fundamental to advancing gender equality and the right to health (including sexual and reproductive health) more broadly.⁵ Since menstrual poverty can result in health complications such as chronic genital tract infections, which can lead to infertility, ectopic pregnancy, and chronic pelvic pain,⁶ it is very much a topic ingrained in those fundamental rights.

One of the biggest reasons for menstrual-related exclusion is period poverty, defined by UN Women as “the inability to afford and access menstrual products, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and education and awareness to manage menstrual health.”⁷ Plan International UK identifies a more easily understood ‘Toxic Trio’ at the root of period poverty: the cost of sanitary products, a lack of education about periods, along with shame, stigma, and taboo.⁸

Context and Current Policy

Despite not being commonly regarded as an issue in Europe, studies show the contrary. An estimated 10% of half the EU’s population who menstruate are affected by period poverty, with a higher prevalence among people with a low income, refugees, young people, and people with disabilities. Studies from Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain highlight the economic burden menstruation imposes, particularly on vulnerable persons.⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue by disrupting supply chains and intensifying financial strains.¹⁰ A French study determined that an estimate of 20% of young women in France are notably

- 1 Menstrual cycle (normal menstruation): Overview & Phases. Cleveland Clinic. September 11, 2025. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/10132-menstrual-cycle>.
- 2 Chavez-MacGregor M, van Gils CH, van der Schouw YT, Monnikhof E, van Noord PA, Peeters PH. Lifetime cumulative number of menstrual cycles and serum sex hormone levels in postmenopausal women. *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*. 2007;108(1):101-112. doi:10.1007/s10549-007-9574-z
- 3 Periods. NHS choices. January 5, 2023. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/>.
- 4 Fast facts: Nine things you didn't know about menstruation. UNICEF. May 25, 2018. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>.
- 5 Menstrual hygiene management, human rights and gender equality: Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 12, 2021 (A/HRC/RES/47/4). United Nations Human Rights Council (47th session: 2021, Geneva). July 12, 2021. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/199/47/pdf/g2119947.pdf>; Menstrual hygiene management, human rights and gender equality: Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 11, 2024 (A/HRC/RES/56/11). United Nations Human Rights Council (56th session: 2024, Geneva). July 11, 2024. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4059828?v=pdf>.
- 6 Menstrual hygiene management, human rights and gender equality: Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 11, 2024 (A/HRC/RES/56/11). United Nations Human Rights Council (56th session: 2024, Geneva). July 11, 2024. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4059828?v=pdf>.
- 7 Moragianni D, Dryllis G, Andromidas P, et al. Genital tract infection and associated factors affect the reproductive outcome in fertile females and females undergoing in vitro fertilization. *Biomedical reports*. April 2019. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6439431/>.
- 8 Period poverty – why millions of girls and women cannot afford their periods. UN Women – Headquarters. July 28, 2025. Accessed September 30, 2025. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/period-poverty-why-millions-of-girls-and-women-cannot-afford-their-periods>.
- 9 Break the barriers: Our menstrual manifesto. Plan International UK. January 2018. <https://plan-uk.org/about-us/advocacy-policy-and-research/publications/break-the-barriers>.
- 10 Lecerf M. Addressing menstrual poverty in the EU: Think tank: European parliament. Think Tank | European Parliament. May 13, 2025. Accessed September 30, 2025. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)772855](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)772855).

affected by period poverty.¹¹ Additionally, transgender and gender-diverse people who are assigned female at birth are also particularly vulnerable, with a US study showing that nearly 34% of trans men and 24% non-binary individuals live in poverty, in comparison to 16% of cisgender individuals.¹²

The consequences of menstrual poverty are vast, ranging from negative impacts on education or work (as a lack of period products forces people to stay home) to serious health hazards or risks.¹³ A study conducted by Plan International showed that 49% of girls in the UK had missed an entire day of school due to their period, and up to 27% of responders also had at one point overused a sanitary product because they could not afford fresh ones.⁹ Prolonged use of menstrual hygiene products increases the risk of serious health complications, such as urinary tract infections, bacterial vaginosis,¹⁴ and even toxic shock syndrome - a rare, but possibly lethal complication.¹⁵

The EU passed a reform that allows Member States to apply reduced or even zero VAT rates on menstrual hygiene products, however, practices remain divergent across the EU, with some States adopting a zero rate (e.g. Ireland, Cyprus, and Malta) while others have maintained the standard rates (e.g. Hungary, Sweden, and Denmark).¹⁰ This is simply not enough. Combating menstrual poverty needs to be multifaceted and institutional.

Non-governmental organisations have been raising awareness about the issue and implementing their

own measures of combating period poverty, which include providing single-use menstrual products in schools, at universities, and other public spaces.¹⁶ For example, Paris-Saclay University has provided reusable products for students in precarious financial situations,¹⁷ which both decreases the monthly cost for menstruating individuals and reduces the environmental impact. However, these grassroots and singular actions are just drops in the ocean of needs.

Good Practices and Recommendations

Initiatives in Scotland have ensured that free access to period products is protected by law. All local authorities and education providers are legally required to make period products available free of charge, as and when they are required.¹⁸ This has allowed menstruating people in all situations to go about their day with less financial stress and reduced worry of being caught without having any menstrual hygiene products should a period arrive unexpectedly. At least 1 in 5 respondents reported that they had accessed the free products due to challenges with the cost of living.¹⁹

As an organisation representing young people across Europe, we believe that ensuring no one is affected by period poverty is a crucial step towards achieving gender equality, and young people's enjoy-

- 11 Legrand F. Baromètre Hygiène et précarité. Ifop Group. March 21, 2023. Accessed September 30, 2025. [https://www.ifop.com/article/barometre-hygiene-et-precarite/#:%7E:text=Une%20alarmante%20progression%20de%20la%20pr%C3%A9carit%C3%A9%20menstruelle&text=A%20la%20fin%20de%20l,\(9%25%20et%208%25\).](https://www.ifop.com/article/barometre-hygiene-et-precarite/#:%7E:text=Une%20alarmante%20progression%20de%20la%20pr%C3%A9carit%C3%A9%20menstruelle&text=A%20la%20fin%20de%20l,(9%25%20et%208%25).)
- 12 Siers-Poisson J, ed. The complexity of LGBT poverty in the United States. Institute for Research on Poverty. June 28, 2021. Accessed September 30, 2025. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/the-complexity-of-lgbt-poverty-in-the-united-states/>.
- 13 A Bloody Problem: Period poverty, why we need to end it and how to do it. Kulczyk Foundation. October 2020. <https://kulczykfoundation.org.pl/uploads/media/default/0001/05/465728000cda27b8f50a3acc18d77c7b4df8b482.pdf>.
- 14 Jaafar H, Ismail SY, Azzeri A. Period poverty: A neglected public health issue. Korean Journal of Family Medicine. 2023;44(4):183-188. doi:10.4082/kjfm.22.0206
- 15 Billon A, Gustin M-P, Tristan A, et al. Association of characteristics of tampon use with menstrual toxic shock syndrome in France. EClinicalMedicine. 2020;21:100308. doi:10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100308
- 16 Menstrual protection products for students in a precarious financial situation. Green Forum European Commission. Accessed September 30, 2025. https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/green-business/green-public-procurement/good-practice-library/menstrual-protection-products-students-precarious-financial-situation_en.
- 17 Fundacja Różowa Skrzyneczka - Raport roczny 2024. Różowa Skrzyneczka. 2024. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://rozowaskrzyneczka.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Raport-2024-Rozowa-Skrzyneczka-1.pdf>.
- 18 Access to free period products: Baseline survey results. Scottish Government. November 23, 2022. Accessed September 30, 2025. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/access-free-period-products-baseline-survey-results/>.
- 19 Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021: Equality Impact Assessment of the Period Products. Scottish Government. August 15, 2022. Accessed September 30, 2025. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/period-products-free-provision-scotland-act-2021-equality-impact-assessment/>.

ment of their social and economic rights, including the right to menstrual health.

Call to Action

The European Youth Forum calls on all European countries to:

- eliminate the “Pink Tax” by applying a zero VAT rate on period products;
- provide safe access to publicly-funded menstrual products in easily accessible public spaces (such as schools, universities, city halls, courthouses, shelters, etc.);
- include menstrual cycle, hygiene, and poverty, along with comprehensive sexual education, in the curriculum, to decrease stigma and raise awareness;
- provide school and university students with reusable menstrual products at health and wellness classes;
- implement measures in national healthcare policies to mitigate the health consequences in cases of patients at risk or already suffering from complications related to menstrual poverty, with a special focus on pediatric and young adult patients;
- provide the possibility of sick leave for patients experiencing severe symptoms of menstruation.

The European Youth Forum calls on the European Union to:

- include the fight against menstrual poverty in the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The European Youth Forum calls on all European institutions to:

- ensure that grants awarded to civil society organisations include funding for menstrual hygiene products at in-person events.



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