



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Period Poverty

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Problem statement.

Periods are a healthy part of life, with more than 800 million people menstruating daily (The World Bank, 2020). Yet, as normal as it is, menstruation is stigmatised globally leading to serious consequences such as menstruation poverty (United Nations Children's Fund, 2018). Menstruation poverty, or period poverty, is a consequence of lack of access to sanitary products or sanitary facilities and lack of menstrual hygiene education and information. Globally 2.3 billion people lack access to basic sanitation services - toilets, hand-washing facilities and/or waste management (Global Citizen, 2019). The inability to use these facilities makes it harder for those who menstruate to manage their periods safely and with dignity, and obstacles have been increasing since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic. According to a poll conducted by UNICEF and World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts 47% of the menstruating population found it more difficult to access all the supplies and facilities they needed in 2020 (U-Report. Voice Matters, 2020). Lack of information regarding menstruation leads to misconceptions, discrimination, stigma, taboos, and myths, which then may lead to shame and prevent adolescents from the opportunity to learn about menstruation and develop healthy habits (United Nations Children's Fund, 2018).

The impact of menstruation poverty cannot be understated. Firstly, it impacts physical health. When people cannot access basic menstrual products on a monthly basis, they are forced to choose unhygienic solutions that put them at higher risk of suffering from health issues, such as skin irritations, urinary tract infections, bacterial vaginosis and toxic shock syndrome.

Menstruation poverty additionally impacts mental health. Having to make choices between purchasing sanitary products or affording other essentials, contributes to stress and anxiety, possibly leading to general distress and depression, amplified by the stigma surrounding both menstruation and poverty. Menstruation poverty furthermore affects overall well-being, engagement and productivity, thus limiting the mobility and social life of the people affected (Neighborhood Feminists, 2021). A 2017 report published established that 137.700 children annually in the United Kingdom miss school because of menstruation poverty. It is known that those who do not receive an education due to missing classes for reasons connected to menstruation poverty are more likely to enter child marriages and experience early pregnancy, malnourishment, domestic violence and pregnancy complications as a result (Global Citizen, 2019).

Menstruation poverty is more frequent among people who lack permanent housing like refugees, homeless, prisoners and people living in conflict-affected or natural disaster areas due to impediments in accessing hygiene products for their period management. Therefore, menstruation poverty has more detrimental effects on those groups and people with disabilities and special needs than the general population (Global Citizen, 2019 & United Nations Children's Fund, 2018).

While multinational companies profit enormously from monthly menstruation, the pricing models used directly contribute to period poverty. State-imposed costs such as the 'tampon tax' exacerbate these effects, with sanitary products being taxed in many countries as 'non-essential goods' (Neighborhood Feminists, 2021). In 2020, Hungary was the European country that charged the highest tampon tax at 27%, several Scandinavian countries taxed at around 25% and Greece had recently raised the rate to 23% when compared to previous years. However, there have in recent years been reductions by many European countries regarding these taxes (Statista, 2020).

The expensive cost of menstrual hygiene products compared to the cost of other essential products often means that many people will struggle to afford essential products such as food just to afford the products they need. Many people do not possess the means to afford basic menstrual products. Up to 10% of menstruating people in the Netherlands are experiencing period poverty. 19% of people who menstruate in the United Kingdom resort to rags, newspapers and toilet paper during menstruation due to the high cost of period management products (The New York Times, 2020).

It is also necessary to ponder the impact of the European economic situation on the ability to properly manage menstruation. The economical crisis of 2008 caused a peak in poverty and inequality and despite the positive improvement of previous years, the COVID-19 pandemic has considerably diminished the world's capacity of eradicating poverty. Despite the quality of health services in Europe, SARS-CoV-2 has had a great impact on the economy and health care since household income and employment has been negatively impacted.

After conducting research on the topic of providing period products at school, Scotland has, in an effort to fight period poverty, ensured access to period products to students. This policy was extended in february 2020 to include all ages, making Scotland the first country to eradicate period poverty in Europe (The New York Times, 2020). England followed and is, since January 2020, delivering free menstrual products to learners at all state-maintained schools (GOV.UK, 2020). Making learners aware of these schemes is vital to making sure they can access period products when they are needed and to reduce the stigma surrounding periods.

Our view. Aim.

The inability to ensure one's menstrual hygiene is a serious problem that should not be belittled considering its dimension and implications. Period poverty is a multifactorial issue and menstrual hygiene is often at stake due to the high cost of period management products or due to lack of access to proper sanitary facilities.

The consequences of the above stated conditions are severe and have a significant impact on the psychological, social and health conditions of individuals who menstruate. Period poverty impacts one's dignity and has a strong effect on self confidence and self worth. It also leads to social exclusion and increases gender inequity since it impairs school and work attendance. At last, the inability to ensure hygienic menstrual management potentiates infection and disease.

This is a topic that should not be left uncovered considering EMSA's aim to empower medical students to defend and actively promote human rights within society, whilst raising awareness of ethical matters in health and advocating for a just and equal access to healthcare for everyone.

It is necessary to accept menstruation as a natural and biological occurring event and to defeat the taboos and stigma associated with it and to recognise that access to period management products should not be a privilege but a given. It is urgent to fight school and labour absenteeism as a consequence of period poverty.

Recommendations.

EMSA calls upon the European Member States to:

- Strategise budget plans which favour the reduction of the cost of sanitary products.
- Reconsider and remove the luxury tax applied on menstruation management products.
- Any collected taxes on menstrual products should be used to alleviate period poverty
- Implement new initiatives such as a state funding to provide standardised and effective menstrual products making it easy to access menstrual products for vulnerable populations.
- Call for a menstruation inclusive education in schools in order to ensure all students are equally educated.

EMSA calls upon the authorities overlooking public health sectors to:

- Organise campaigns for distribution of free sanitary products among the underprivileged community.
- Organise routine health check ups located in the rural areas for people who menstruate.
- Increase availability & feasibility of medicines in such areas.
- Promote public health campaigns regarding menstruation and its management.
- Implement intra and inter collaborations with other organisations providing proper menstrual education.
- Ensure availability of hygiene articles in public buildings (schools, hospitals, administrative..)

EMSA calls upon the European Institutions to:

- Increase availability of facilities for people belonging to the Low Income Group.
- Collaborate with NGOs, healthcare professionals, civil society organisations and other key stakeholders defending the rights of women and girls.

EMSA calls upon the FMOs and students to:

- Organise campaigns and workshops to increase awareness about the subject among the people and remove the taboo related to menstrual health.
- Dismantle the myths embedded in the conceptions of local people related to menstruation by the use of effective means of education.
- Increase awareness on the fatal effects of using supplements like cardboards, rags, etc. in place of sanitary products during menstruation.
- Participate in activities organised by EMSA regarding this topic, (e.g seminars, webinars, campaigns and donation initiatives etc.)

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