

ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms

Gender norms and the 'period revolution'

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Report



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About the author

Yasmin Watling is an intern with the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team at ODI. She holds a BA in History from the University of Cambridge, where she concentrated on gender, race, and 20th-century world history. She has previously volunteered for Free Periods, a not-for-profit campaign group that advocated successfully for the provision of free period supplies in all UK schools. Yasmin is due to start on the Civil Service Fast Stream in Autumn 2021 and hopes to continue to focus on gender, international development, and human rights throughout her career.

Introduction

2015 was 'the year of the period', according to media outlets such as NPR, Cosmopolitan, BuzzFeed and The Huffington Post. While that year is perhaps best seen as a 'tipping point' (Crawford et al., 2020) (as it is part of a longer picture of activism dating back to the 1970s) 2015 certainly saw the emergence of periods into public debate and the mainstream media. The increase in the visibility and discussion of menstruation¹ and menstrual-related activism has continued to gather pace ever since, leading to significant global change.

Indeed, as of 2021, 36 national governments have applied a reduced tax rate or tax exemption to menstrual products, and campaigning has led to the provision of free menstrual products in public institutions from Kenya to Scotland. By 2018, the story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, the founder of a menstrual pad making business in India, had achieved both Bollywood and Hollywood success (Jalan, 2018). And through the past six years, a vast number of campaigns have proliferated on social media, aiming to break down menstruation stigmas, such as [#PeriodsAreNotAnInsult](#), [#HappyToBleed](#), [#PeriodPositive](#), and [#FreeTheTampons](#) (see also Bobel et al., 2020; Plan, 2018; Crawford et al., 2020).

This report focuses on this recent period of activism, often labelled the 'Period Revolution', and explores the extent to which campaigns since 2015 have focused on, and been able to shift, gender norms surrounding menstruation. It finds that the primary focus of most campaigns is not norm change, but rather the provision of free or lower-cost period products. Nonetheless, there have been significant shifts in menstruation norms and taboos since 2015, with debates surrounding periods markedly different today. However, there is still a long way to go before we live in a world where discussions and experiences of menstruation are not shrouded in stigma and shame.

First, this report outlines its scope and methodology, before zooming in on 'product focused' period campaigns in high and low-income countries. It will then examine the way these campaigns can initiate significant advances in norm change, before focusing on a variety of campaigns that have focused explicitly on norms, before finally summarising evidence on the impact of the 'period revolution'.

Methodology and scope

Research for this report involved a review of a wide range of academic and grey literature; interviews with six leading academics and activists in the UK; and the collection of primary data from social media and news archives. The report draws on period poverty and norm change campaigns worldwide, with a particular focus on the UK. The 'period positive movement' is made up of highly diverse and dynamic campaigns that span a wide range of regions, contexts and generations. This report aims to synthesise the key threads of this multi-faceted movement, provide an accessible overview of change, and indicate space for future progress.

¹ Menstruation is the scientific word used to describe the process by which many woman, trans, or non-binary people discharge blood and other material from the lining of the uterus about every month until the menopause. It is interchangeable with the word 'period', which is used more commonly in this report as it is the most widely used and readily understood term for this process in English (Hampton, J., Osborne, A., Sweetland, C. (2021).

Menstruation and norms: why do we care?

The working definition of norms set out by ODI's Align Platform is 'the implicit and informal rules that most people accept and follow'.² While norms and taboos related to menstruation can mean very different things in distinct contexts, they are commonly associated with silence, shame, ignorance, disgust, fear, restrictions and an impression of impurity or uncleanness.

Plan's 2018 *Break the Barriers* report, for example, found that 48% of girls in Iran, 10% in India and 7% in Afghanistan believed menstruation was a disease. An extreme example of restrictive period taboos cited in the report is the practice of *chaupadi* (outlawed in 2017) in Nepal, with women and girls forced to retreat to separate huts during their period. Harmful norms are not specific to lower-income countries, however: these experiences of secrecy, concealment and shame are common worldwide. Drawing on research by V'cenza Cirefice in schools in Northern Ireland, the Plan report highlighted that menstrual secrecy and concealment was common among participants. Those surveyed also used highly negative and emotive language when discussing periods and the fear of leaking, such as 'uncomfortable', 'terrifying', 'insecure', 'embarrassed', 'ashamed', 'freak-out', 'afraid' and 'scared' (Plan, 2018).

A study at the University of Colorado in 2002 observed reactions towards a woman who dropped either a tampon or a hair clip during the experiment. The results demonstrated that the woman was viewed as 'less competent, less likeable, and [someone] to be both psychologically and physically avoided' when she dropped the tampon as opposed to the hair clip: in other words, when the study participants believed that she was menstruating.

It is therefore not surprising that concealment is perhaps the most common menstruation norm, given the power and prevalence of menstruation stigmas. This wide-scale concealment can create a 'reinforcing cycle, where the sanitised, deodorised and idealised images of women's bodies become the only ones we encounter and accept' (Crawford and Waldman, 2020). This rigid management of menstrual cycles is comparable to a wide range of practices women conduct to 'manage' their natural bodies; such as grooming their body hair, hiding breastfeeding, and masking any weight gain (Bobel and Fahs, 2020). A huge range of negative taboos surrounds menstruation, and adherence to informal rules of concealment causes these damaging norms to further replicate themselves in a vicious cycle. In this sense, silence implicitly perpetuates stigma.

A consideration of menstruation norms also provides key insights into a wider host of gender norms that surround sexuality and health and illuminates how power structures interact with female, trans and non-binary bodies.³ Bobel and Fahs have eloquently described how the 'period revolution' has allowed us to engage with the 'complex and enduring project of loosening the social control of women's bodies' (Bobel and Fahs, 2020). Indeed, the recent years have seen an explosion in political campaigning and menstrual art that clearly assert the 'personal' as a matter worthy of public comprehension and political debate.

² <https://www.alignplatform.org/about-norms>

³ It is not only women that menstruate, but also trans and non-binary people. Academics have therefore coined the word 'menstruators' to best describe all of those who menstruate.

Menstruation norms and access to period products are also closely intertwined with wider human rights issues, such as access to sanitation and education. The UN Human Rights Council stated with some authority in 2019 that the stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation '*have severe impacts on all aspects of women's and girls' human rights, including their human rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education, freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to take part in cultural life and public life without discrimination*' (UN Human Rights Council, 2019). Indeed, the 2018 Plan report highlighted that 70% of girls in Malawi miss 1-3 days of school a month because of menstruation (more than they do if they have malaria), and that 49% of girls in the UK have missed an entire day of school because of their period (Plan, 2018).

It is clear, therefore, that damaging attitudes surrounding menstruation have a significant impact on wider gender norms, a negative impact on the lives of menstruators, and can even undermine school attendance.

Campaigns focused on period products

Campaigns in high-income countries

Campaigns and advocacy related to periods are rarely focused on norms explicitly, but rather on expanding the accessibility of period products, with free period products distributed mostly to marginalised groups and school-age girls. This finding is supported by academic literature, which often argues (and sometimes bemoans the fact) that the product focus 'dominates' the activist landscape (Bobel and Fahs, 2020). An overview of this landscape is provided here, before closer scrutiny of the (less common) campaigns focused on norms.

In the UK, campaigns led by organisations such as *Plan UK*, *Free Periods*, and *Bloody Good Period* have focused on getting rid of the 'tampon tax' and distributing free period products to marginalised people such as refugees and the homeless. Government lobbying had great support and success when *Free Periods* and *Red Box* led a campaign for free period products to be provided in schools. This galvanised popular support and enthusiasm following the public activism of 17-year-old schoolgirl Amika George (later the founder of *Free Periods*). In January 2019 *Free Periods* began to work with human rights lawyers to build up a robust legal case, and in April 2019, the UK Government agreed: since January 2020, every state-maintained school and college in England has been able to order free period products for their students.⁴

Earlier, in 2016, the UK Government was placed under significant pressure after a change.org petition to abolish the tampon tax gained 300,000 signatures. This was tied up in Brexit politics, with the tax finally repealed only when the UK left the European Union in 2021. Similar campaigns achieved more rapid successes in other countries. For example, after the #NoTaxOnTampons campaign in Canada gathered over 75,000 online signatures and sparked a range of protests, editorials and campaign videos, the abolition of the tax was debated and passed in the House of Commons with a unanimous vote.⁵

⁴ <https://www.freeperiods.org/free-periods-in-schools>

⁵ <http://www.canadianmenstruators.ca/>

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a unique era where increased poverty in many countries⁶ and the reduction of in-person schooling made the provision of free products more urgent, as schools are key distribution centres for free period products. It has also been a time of consolidation and increased awareness of a variety of period-focused campaigns. Indeed, *Bloody Good Period* cited a level of demand for free period products six times higher during the pandemic.⁷ In America, the Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of March 2020 included a provision that improved the affordability of menstrual products, a watershed moment in the congressional acknowledgement of their necessity (Crawford and Waldman, 2020).



Girls learning about sexual and reproductive health via the Miss Koch Girl's Education Project in Korogocho slum, one of Nairobi's most populated informal settlements. © Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment, Kenya 2014.

Campaigns in low-income countries

This focus on period products is not exclusive to campaigns in high-income countries, and a useful cross-country analysis is provided by considering examples of initiatives across the globe.

'Menstrual Hygiene Management' (MHM) is a global development sub-sector that has rapidly proliferated in the last decade. Bobel's in-depth study of 45 organisations that have worked in MHM

⁶ In the UK alone, almost 700,000 people were driven into poverty by the COVID-19 crisis in the UK in 2020 alone, and the World Bank estimated that the pandemic pulled an additional 120 million people into poverty worldwide
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/30/almost-700000-driven-poverty-covid-crisis-uk-study>;
<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021>

⁷ <https://www.bloodygoodperiod.com/covid19>

in the Global South shows that their approach has been framed almost exclusively around the lack of access to period products, with a particular focus on girls in school (Bobel, n.d.). As shown above, this focus on products is consistent with findings from high-income countries.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also embodies a product-oriented focus, with its 'Review of Gender Equality in Operations' highlighting its commitment to 'empowering displaced women and girls to ensure that they have equal access to and control over management and provision of core relief items [...] including sanitary materials and supplies for menstrual hygiene management' (UNHCR, 2016). Another example is AFRIPads, which since its founding in 2010 has distributed more than 3.5 million kits containing reusable pads to girls and women, predominantly in East Africa, but also to Afghanistan and Nepal.⁸

And the expansion of access to products is not just the result of large international development efforts. Indeed, there are many local NGOs and governments working in this space. In July 2015, for example, the State Government of Rajasthan launched a free sanitary napkin distribution scheme called UDAAN, aiming to cover over 2 million girls (Rajagopal and Mathur, 2017). In early 2021 the Sri Lankan government committed to providing free, locally made pads to about 800,000 schoolgirls (Rathnayake, 2021).

Since 2011, the Kenyan government has also allocated about \$3 million every year to provide free products to schools in low-income areas, although demand continues to outstrip supply (Fallon, 2019). This is not the only area in which Kenya has been ahead of the game. In 2004, it became the first country in the world to repeal a tax on sanitary products. In India, the campaigning action of *SheSays* in 2017, who utilized social media as a key tool (with the hashtag #LahuKaLagaan - 'tax on blood - going vital on Twitter'), resulted in the government eliminating the controversial 14% tax on sanitary products. In 2018, Colombia also abolished this tax and mandated free menstrual products for homeless people in the capital.

Grassroots initiatives have also been significant, such as that led by (as previously noted) Arunachalam Murugananthan, who spent over five years inventing a machine to create affordable pads. He then passed on his user-friendly, low-cost technology to the poorest states in Northern India, enabling people to mass-produce their own pads. Despite offers from several corporations, he continues to provide these machines to self-help groups run by women. A further example is Mountains of Hope, an NGO based in Uganda that has been training girls and boys to make reusable sanitary pads since 2014 (Fallon, 2019).

The influence of 'period product' campaigns on norm shifts

While the campaigns that dominate the menstrual activism space are explicitly product-focused, they should not be seen as isolated from progressive shifts in menstruation norms. Indeed, product-focused campaigns often play a useful role in raising awareness and opening up wider educational conversations around norms. First, governmental changes (such as the CARES act, the provision of free products in schools, and the abolition of tampon tax) directly acknowledge the fundamental biological nature of periods and their impact on daily life. The publicity generated by these

⁸ <https://twitter.com/afripads/status/1379326132269555714>

campaigns also helps to increase awareness and interest in menstrual health, as well as directly combatting the major stigmas that perpetuate the silence that surrounds menstruation.

Sally King, for example, has highlighted that the provision of free products in schools makes periods more visible; increasing awareness of the menstruating body and helping to combat practices of concealment.⁹ The tackling of stigmas is also addressed by ‘period product’ campaigns in more explicit ways. For example, when the Government of the UK agreed to provide free period products to all schools in 2019, the scheme’s guidelines included a section titled ‘How to reduce stigma’, which stated that ‘Educating all learners about periods is crucial to tackling the stigma which surrounds it...From September 2020, teaching both boys and girls about periods and menstrual wellbeing will be compulsory in all state-funded schools’ (Department for Education, 2020). Here we can see that the expansion of access to products often goes hand-in-hand with the reduction of stigma, in both deliberate and indirect ways.

As emphasised by many UK activists, period products can help to spark a host of valuable discussions around wider gender norms related to sex, reproduction and women’s health. For example, the work of Janie Hampton (the founder of the World Menstrual Network) in leading menstrual cup training in Malawi necessitated an explicit conversation about the anatomy of women’s bodies and reproductive organs, resulting in a dramatic expansion in sex education.¹⁰ Hampton herself has also highlighted that a focus on period products can often be a very useful strategy for the expansion of wider sex education, noting that when asking head teachers to add such issues to school curricula, it’s much easier to lead with a demonstration of menstrual cups than discussions of reproductive health.¹¹ Overall, it is evident that the expansion of access to period products can influence norm change, and they cannot be fully separated from one another.

Campaigns focused explicitly on ‘norm change’

As we have seen, the bulk of activism efforts are not aimed explicitly at ‘norm change’. There are, however, some notable campaigns that do aim to transform the norms around menstruation.

Non-profit organisations

While the majority of development organisations in the period activism space do not focus explicitly on norm change, some focus their energies on combatting harmful taboos, particularly through education in communities and schools. One key example is the work of organisations that aim to eliminate the ancient Hindu practice of *chaupadi*, which has branded women as impure when menstruating and banned them from the home. *Chaupadi* was outlawed in 2005, but the practice continued. Organisations such as *Restless Development Nepal* have launched programmes over the past decade to help eliminate this practice once and for all. This organisation alone reached over 35,000 people with comprehensive sexual education and generated a 15% reduction in the practice from 20% to 5% (UN Women, 2017).

⁹ Interview with Sally King, Founder and Director of *Menstrual Matters*, who also believes that there should be a greater emphasis on ‘norm change’ in menstrual activism.

¹⁰ Interview with Lucy Russell, gender equality consultant and previous head of Girl’s Rights and Youth at Plan UK, re. the work of Janie Hampton. See <http://www.menstrualcupcoalition.org/> for more.

¹¹ Interview with Janie Hampton, British author of 15 books and an international development and women’s health activist.

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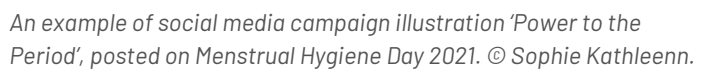
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¹⁴ A global advocacy platform coordinated by WASH United each year.



An example of social media campaign illustration 'Power to the Period', posted on Menstrual Hygiene Day 2021. © Sophie Kathleenn.

art on Instagram, for example, that of [@doodleodrama](#) and [@kaviya.ilango](#), helps to break concealment taboos about menstruation through visceral and explicit illustrations, highlighting how 'digital spaces can be successfully used to politicise the personal' (Doshi, 2020).

As well as improving menstrual education and raising awareness, social media platforms have been a vital tool in highlighting the breadth of the menstrual experiences, spanning, for example, the experiences of menstruators with health conditions such as endometriosis, or the experiences of trans- and non-binary people. The artist, educator and activist [Cass Clemmer](#), for example, posted a photo in July 2017 depicting obvious menstrual blood on their trousers – an image that went viral and inspired a series of news pieces (Bobel and Fahs, 2020).

Overall, while the 'Period Revolution' has focused largely on expanding access to period products, a significant number of organisations and campaigns address menstruation norms directly through education and awareness raising.

Evidence of norm shifts

There has most definitely been progress over the past six years, led by activists and development organisations. As described by Weiss-Wolf, there was rapid acceleration even between 2014 and 2017 from 'zero to sixty, periods as a whisper or insult to the initiation of a full-blown, ready-for-prime-time menstrual movement' (Weiss-Wolf, 2017).

It is a challenge to chart shifts in menstrual norms over time with any accuracy, as there is no data compiled to map this and very little academic literature which holds this as its direct focus. Even where there is a discussion of norms, such as in the reports by Plan (2018) and Always (2020), no evidence is provided to draw a clear map of change over time. Despite the absence of quantitative data on this subject, this section demonstrates various examples of indisputable norm change.

It is important to note that it is often difficult or impossible to untangle cause and effect into neat strands. Indeed, many of the matters discussed here, such as social media trends and representation in advertisements, can be used to demonstrate change but are also themselves agents of change. Furthermore, many of the various examples of progress already outlined, such as the removal of taxation on menstrual products, were dependent on campaigns that gained public traction. The success of campaigns like #AxeTheTax demonstrates that they were able to win over a significant portion of the public.

This indicates widespread acknowledgement of menstruation as a fundamental human process, as well as increased awareness of the issues menstruators face each day. It must also be noted at this stage that while there has certainly been norm shift in low-income countries as well as the Global North, it is much harder to track because of a lack of evidence.

Organisations

One key shift to underline is the sheer quantity of organisations that are now addressing menstruation. Ten years ago, menstruation was largely relegated to a minor branch of the WASH

(water, sanitation and hygiene) community. More recently, however, it has been mainstreamed into a wide variety of development areas, while new movements and collectives are constantly being created. This is part of a wider global trend that centres development efforts on girls (Bobel and Fahs, 2020).

Indeed, in 2018, the UN's Commission on the Status of Women stated in its recommendations to governments worldwide that steps should be taken to 'promote educational and health practices to foster a culture in which menstruation is recognised as healthy and natural and in which girls are not stigmatised on this basis' (quoted in Bobel and Fahs, 2020). Menstrual Hygiene Day, established in 2014, has acquired a huge global platform. Indeed, MHD in 2020 inspired over 4,000 media articles about menstrual health (84% more than 2019), generated 151,000 contributions on social media, and reached over 411 million people (30% more than the previous year).¹⁵ This growing representation demonstrates that menstrual health is increasingly seen as a key development issue and a vital component in the achievement of gender equality.

This shift has also been reflected in funding increases within the sector. In the UK, Gabby Edlin, the founder and CEO of *Bloody Good Period*, highlighted that the past five years have seen a huge increase in the quality and quantity of brands keen to partner with the organization and join its conversations.¹⁶

Media

There has been an explosion in coverage of menstruation norms by the media. As well as raising the profile of campaigns and educating people about more subtle period stigmas, the inclusion of periods as a viable discussion in the media has helped to validate it as a topic worthy of discussion and helped to break traditions of silence. Traditional media sources are increasingly putting stories about periods and menstrual campaigns on the front page, while columns, radio segments and live news stories have appeared in growing numbers (Crawford et al., 2020).

Weiss-Wolf has shown that by 2015, there were more than 167 mentions of menstruation in the five top American news outlets that year, more than triple the number of mentions across the four previous years combined (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). My own search of the *New York Times* database shows that this trend has only continued, with 69 mentions in 2018, 78 in 2019, 70 in 2020 and 35 by the end of May 2021.¹⁷

The fact that the two major film industries of Hollywood and Bollywood have made films about menstruation; *Phullu* and *Period. End of Sentence* is not to be discounted, with the latter winning an Oscar for best documentary in 2019. The increase in the academic focus on the subject is also significant, as shown by the publication of *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* in 2020. This is the first open-access handbook of its kind, providing a sweeping view of the field of critical menstruation studies from more than 130 contributors spanning the worlds of academia and activism. This valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, practitioners and activists had been downloaded almost 900,000 times as of 2 June 2021 (Bobel et al., 2020).

¹⁵ <https://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/impact/>

¹⁶ Interview with Gabby Edlin, founder and CEO of *Bloody Good Period*.

¹⁷ Search of NY Times archives on 2 June, 2021;

www.nytimes.com/search?dropmab=true&endDate=20180101&query=menstruation&sort=best&startDate=20170101.

As noted, social media platforms can be major agents of change and allow for the saturation of timelines with key campaign materials. They are also useful tools for the examination of change over time and the provision of evidence for norm shift. While Instagram makes it very difficult to extract useful data from posts, Heijden's 2020 master's thesis showed that the 50 most-liked posts linked to #periodpoverty were posted between September 2018 and March 2020, with most posted in 2020. This suggests that attention for the problem of period poverty has snowballed and that the problem is gaining increased visibility on social media year-on-year (Heijden, 2020).

The private sector

Another key and highly visible example of norm shift can be seen in the changing rhetoric used by companies that produce period products in their branding and marketing, as well as the wider attention given to periods by corporations. That said, it is important to recognise that many activists have argued that companies such as Always (significantly named 'Whisper' in India) have profited from 'selling shame' and at times coopted the period positive movement. Furthermore, changes in advertising are not always progressive, and there is huge diversity among different brands. Corporations can often actually reinforce menstrual taboos in their advertisements by framing periods as a hygiene crisis that must be kept secret (Plan, 2018).

There have, however, been many notable and progressive shifts in advertisements in recent years. Perhaps the most well-known is the increasing use of red, rather than blue liquid to visually demonstrate the effectiveness of products. This was spearheaded by BodyForm in 2018 with their 'Blood Normal' [advert](#), which earned numerous awards. Johnson & Johnson also included similar visuals in their Latin American adverts with *Siempre Libre*, *Siempre Juntas* in 2018, joined by Kotex in early 2020 (Tarzibachi, 2020). Bodyform is an industry leader in progressive marketing, with their 'Womb Stories' [advert](#) in 2020 demonstrating the varied experiences of 'pleasure, pain, love, hate' caused by wombs, and depicting a diverse range of experiences, such as miscarriage, endometriosis and menopause. As of 1 June 2021, the original video had amassed over 1.3 million Instagram views and 780,000 Youtube views.

Outside the 'period world', the proliferation of conversations in the sporting industry recognising the influence of menstrual cycles on athletic performance is a clear indication of progress in the reduction of stigma, as well as an expansion in education and research. Nike, for example, partnered with R/GA London and a leading female physiologist, Stacy Sims, in early 2021 to build the first ever menstrual cycle training collection on the Nike Training app.¹⁸ This allows athletes to adapt their training in line with the hormonal changes across their menstrual cycle. It is highly significant that such a huge corporation, not historically part of the period world, has put funding into this research.¹⁹

Shifts within menstrual activism

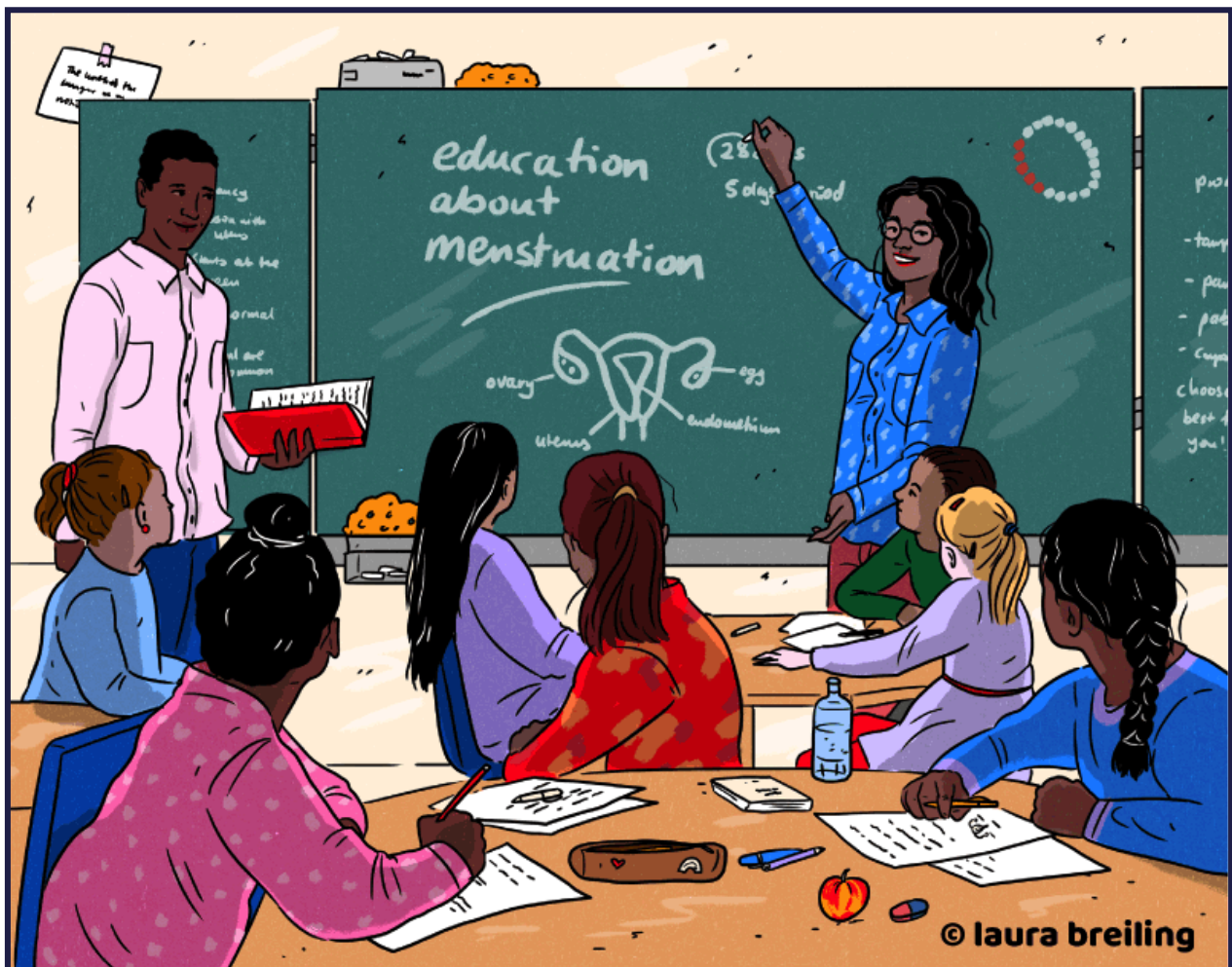
The 'period positive' movement itself has not been static, and there have been notable advances in the past decade. Sustainability has become an increasing concern for consumers, reflected in the ever-expanding diversity of products and choices, particularly in higher-income countries. Products

¹⁸ <https://www.nike.com/gb/a/cycle-syncing-explained>

¹⁹ highlighted by Hannah Whelan, campaign manager at *Free Periods*, in interview.

such as menstrual cups and period underwear are experiencing significant growth, and the Google Trends Index demonstrates that there has been, on average, a 70% increase in the search for the phrase 'menstrual cup' since 2014.²⁰

This report has already referred to a growing recognition of the breadth of the menstrual experience, which has allowed for people such as Clemmer to add their voices to the movement. The experiences of menstruators with health conditions, disorders and pain are also gaining more prominence. Furthermore, while people of colour are still vastly underrepresented in the movement, their voices are increasingly heard, aided by the Black Lives Matter movement and protests following the murder of George Floyd. Indeed, black activists like Augustina Adeola and Kasey Robinson are prominent members of the movement in the UK, and Kasey was the keynote speaker at the first ever UK (virtual) nationwide meet-up of period activists in March 2021. These shifts have helped to break down stigmas and contributed to a more productive intersectional discussion. However, much more progress is needed in order to make the movement fully inclusive and representative.



An example of a Menstrual Hygiene Day Campaign Resources, 2021. © Laura Breiling.

²⁰ <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2011-03-05%202021-06-03&q=menstrual%20cup>

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that there has been a huge shift in norms surrounding menstruation over the past decade. The most significant and noticeable of these shifts is an easing of secrecy and concealment; periods are now visible in newspapers, across social media and in the open display of products. While the data on shifts in attitudes are extremely limited, the expansion of these important discussions will hopefully serve to empower and educate and, in effect, reduce taboos. The early 21st century has also seen significant practical changes, with the reduction of period poverty through development and campaigning initiatives, the free provision of period products and the abolition of the tampon tax.

Despite such changes, however, the experience of menstruation is still commonly defined by shame, fear and concealment. The 2020 Always report found that 1 in 3 young people don't feel prepared for their first period; 2 in 5 young people have been shamed or teased because of their period; and 85% of young people have tried to hide the fact that they're menstruating (Always, 2020). The top words used to describe periods are 'scared' and 'self-conscious', and young people have also stated that talking more openly about periods would make them feel supported, comfortable and confident (Plan, 2018).

Looking to the future, there are many fantastic opportunities for faster and greater progress against prevailing norms. While there is, and certainly will be, resistance to this, the success of 'period poverty' focused campaigns around the world indicates a healthy foundation for more nuanced discussions surrounding menstruation. Indeed, this report has argued that the two are inextricably linked, and a product focus can be used as an effective strategy to open the door to positive norm shift.²¹

As highlighted by many activists and organisations, more comprehensive and inclusive sex and menstrual health education in schools is a critical first step to reducing persistent stigmas and increasing understanding. For this to happen, there has to be more research and more funding. A more exhaustive understanding of current stigmas and knowledge gaps is an imperative for lasting norm change. It is uplifting, however, to note that the world of period activism has demonstrated time and time again, through champions such as Amika George and Arunachalam Muruganantham, that individual voices and actions do matter, and that people can unite powerfully, virtually and in person, to drive real change.

²¹ Gabby Edlin of *Bloody Good Period* has highlighted that if those who face the most severe period poverty are to be included in these conversations, their basic needs must be met.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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