PUBLISHED Updated **1 month ago** by Lydia Morrish (talk | contributions) started by Lydia Morrish (talk | contributions)

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'Period poverty' leads to girls missing school and health problems

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A phenomenon known as "period poverty" affects at least one in ten girls from low-income families across the UK. As a result of struggles to afford sanitary protection, girls face stigma, health risks and missing out on school.

Period poverty is the inability to pay regularly for the sanitary products needed during a person's monthly menstrual cycle. It was first identified publicly in 2017 after campaigns to rid a tax on sanitary products, known as the "tampon tax," emerged. The problem is also recognized in the United States, (*ViaNews*) where author Jennifer Weiss-Wolf published a book on the problem and its part in the issue of "menstrual equity".

Two years ago, public health worker Tina Leslie launched a charity to help girls in poverty in Kenya menstruate with dignity. She provides reusable sanitary pads, menstrual cups and disposable sanitary products to Kenyan schools which then get handed out to those who need them.

In early 2017 Leslie received a phone call from a high school in her hometown, the northern English city of Leeds, describing a situation similar to Kenya. There too, some girls couldn't afford sanitary wear; Leslie agreed to provide supplies.

More than a year on and the issue of period poverty is increasingly documented, with charities, pharmacies, and sanitary product brands trying to help the ten percent of people who menstrate who can't afford to buy sanitary products.

Already in the past year, three major political parties in the UK – The Labour Party, The Liberal Democrats and The Green Party – have pledged to end period poverty.

In Scotland in July 2017, the government started giving out free menstrual products to 1,000 girls from low-income families in Aberdeen.

The British Medical Association is also pushing for sanitary products to be provided for free to patients in hospitals (*iNews*).

The problem is widespread — yet underground — across the United Kingdom and Ireland. Along with the embarrassment associated with periods, scores of girls from low-income families are missing out on vital education whilst they're menstruating and face infections and health problems, *WikiTribune* has been told.

"We've learnt a lot in the past year that actually it's happening all over the country in every high school ... it's not just Leeds. It's nationwide," said Leslie.

6 Talk Comments

4 Contributors

Activity

(diff) .. 2018-09-05 10:19:06. . Lydia Morrish (talk | contributions) (Action → correcting plural) ****** Latest version ******

(diff) .. 2018-09-04 18:20:10. . Jet Davis (talk | contributions | block) (Action → Edited for more inclusive language)

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Freedom4Girls collects sanitary product donations for women and children in poverty in Britain in supermarkets and workplaces. Photo by: Freedom4Girls

A pattern of poverty

Period poverty is a growing concern, another manifestation of the UK situation, where 50 percent of children are in poverty in some areas and 1.3 million people are using food banks.

A recent fact-check by Channel 4 News said the average cost of period in the UK is £128 ($168) a year, or around £10 a month. It challenged other estimates that women were spending £500 a month on menstrual necessities. But for the very poorest, even an extra few pounds a month is unaffordable.

"If you can't afford food, you can't afford sanitary towels," says Tina Leslie.

But some girls are going completely without, resorting to unconventional and possibly risky methods of sanitary protection.

"Girls are having to use socks, tissues, rags, anything they can to be able to still go to school. But these aren't appropriate," Becky Lopez, a volunteer for Red Box South East London, a charity that supplies schools with sanitary products, told *WikiTribune*.

More than one in 10 girls have been forced to come up with makeshift sanitary products as a result of period poverty, according to research by children's charity Plan International UK.

Kenyan schoolgirls with donations of sanitary products from Freedom4Girls, which also donates to girls in poverty in northern English city, Leeds. Photo by: Freedom4Girls

However, improvising sanitary protection can lead to both physical and mental health problems, said Peymana Assad, Plan International UK's campaigns officer.

"If you're not able to manage your period properly and you're having to use products for longer period than you're supposed to, that affects your mental health and hygiene."

Rising awareness and help

The number of charities and initiatives to combat period poverty has grown alongside rising awareness. Events have also become increasingly creative, with activists hosting brunches and comedy shows to raise money for sanitary product donations.

Organizations like the Red Box project supply girls with sanitary starter packs in schools and youth clubs or to women in food banks. Any girl in need simply needs to ask a teacher or trusted adult in their school for a "red box" and they can help themselves from a crate full of sanitary products.

There are 78 Red Box groups across the UK, which supply a total of 540 boxes full of sanitary towels, tampons, clean underwear. The boxes also contain brown paper bags for girls to carry away their items discreetly.

Becky Lopez, a volunteer for Red Box South East London told *WikiTribune* that access to sanitary products is vital for girls to stay in education.

"We would like to see a world where schools are able to provide girls with sanitary products, [that are] provided by the government," she said.

She continued: "It's a gender equality issue… If girls have this situation where because they're girls they're having to miss school because they haven't got the sanitary protection they need, you're basically saying that we don't value girls' education, that girls' education doesn't matter as much as boys."

Got your period?
If you are in need of Sanitary Towels or Tampons, just ask

The Red Box project operates in 78 locations across the UK, providing sanitary products to girls in need. Photo by: Red Box Project

Freedom4Girls' Tina Leslie said teaching girls about their bodies is just as important as supplying sanitary wear and education surrounding periods needs to improve. "Some girls don't even know they're getting their period."

Grassroots girl groups

Eltham Hill is an all-girls school in Greenwich, south east London, that distributes Red Box packs to its students. In comparison to other London boroughs, Greenwich has a lower rate of child poverty.

But the issue of period poverty has become so apparent there that a group of 16- and 17-year-old students are launching a support group for school pupils.

Christina Holomah, a member of Eltham Hill's student council, said the main thing that drove her and fellow students to start a support network was to connect over their shared female experience.

"It is important that girls in our school get the right support when it comes to their periods and this is because it helps build their trust with us," Holomah said. "[It] also boosts their self esteem and their confidence especially since they are reassured that periods are one of the main processes every girl goes through when developing."

Stigma hindering progress

Social attitudes towards menstruation vary across the globe, but go from outright revulsion to embarrassment.

The ancient tradition of "Chhaupadi" banishes women and girls from their homes in Nepal while they menstruate because of the belief that periods are unclean. In Britain, girls are too ashamed about their periods to talk about them, said Plan International UK's Peymana Assad.

"Across the country, girls have been telling us that there's this sort of stigma or taboo surrounding periods where they're expected to be discrete," said Assad. "Also this idea that it's not clean or it needs to be hidden away so people don't need to know about it, and they don't have those conversations with male members of their family or male friends."

- *WikiTribune* is awaiting a response to a request to the U.K. Department of Health for comment.

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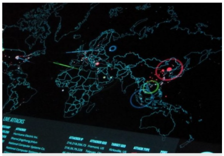

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