

Gender Equality Essentials #5

NIGERIA: Women of different generations with the materials they use for their periods.



Until every girl is free

Menstruation

Periods and the importance of using an inclusive language. In this Gender Equality Essential, we will be referring most of the time to women and girls' experience of menstruation and how they manage their menstrual hygiene. However, we acknowledge that not everyone who menstruates is a woman or a girl – many individuals with diverse gender identities and sex characteristics also menstruate – and not all women or girls menstruate.

Key facts & figures



Worldwide

- **Every day, 800 million people menstruate.** On average, girls and women menstruate 3,000 days during their lifetime, which is more than 8 years in total.¹
- Girls who are menstruating miss 1 to 3 days of school every month.²
- **Period poverty affects 500 million people worldwide,**³ impacting their health, well-being and participation in daily life's activities.
- **1.5 billion people still lack basic sanitation services,** such as private toilets. At least 1 in 10 women and girls in rural areas do not have a private place to wash and change during their last period.⁴



What about boys?

- **Only 1 in 5 boys say they are informed about periods and menstrual health,** while almost a quarter say they are either not that informed or not informed at all.⁵ However, boys want to learn more about menstrual health, with 92% agreeing that periods should be normalised.⁶

- **55% of boys** associate periods as something dirty, **31%** finds them embarrassing and **38%** thinks menstruation is disgusting.
- **1 in 3 boys think menstruation should be kept secret.**⁷
- **7 in 10 boys** said they have seen another boy or man make a negative or nasty comment about periods, including male teachers.⁸



What about Belgium?⁹

- **1 in 2 girls** has resorted to using unsafe or improvised materials (e.g., toilet paper) at least once in her life.
- **1 in 2 girls** felt ashamed of getting their first period.
- **1 in 10 girls** does not have the budget to buy menstrual hygiene products.
- **1 in 20 girls** has missed school or social activity because she didn't have access.
- **1 in 5 girls** didn't know what menstrual product to use during her first period. Over half (54%) said they weren't properly prepared for their first menstruation.
- **Nearly 1 in 3 girls (32%)** feels they haven't received enough information about menstrual health.
- **3 out of 4 girls** found their first period an unsettling experience.

Key terms

- **Menstruation**, or period, is medically defined as the regular discharge of blood and mucosal tissue from the inner lining of the uterus through the vagina. This process is part of the menstrual cycle, which prepares the body for potential pregnancy, and affects most people aged from 13 to 50 who have a uterus.
- The first time a girl menstruates is called **menarche**.¹⁰ This marks the onset of the reproductive years of girls, which typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 16. The **menopause** marks the end of the reproductive years for women and is defined as the permanent cessation of menstruation. It is diagnosed after 12 consecutive months without a menstrual period and usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55.¹¹
- **Menstruation products** include items used to manage menstrual bleeding. These products encompass a range of options such as sanitary pads, tampons, menstrual cups, reusable cloth pads and menstrual underwear. The availability and accessibility to these products are crucial for maintaining menstrual health and hygiene.¹²
- **Menstrual health and hygiene** refer to the comprehensive approach to managing menstruation, which includes the physical, emotional and cultural aspects of menstruation. It encompasses the availability of sanitary products, access to clean water, safe and private facilities and proper disposal methods. Menstrual health and hygiene involves education about menstruation, access to products and the provision of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, which is not available, safe or accessible in a large number of contexts across the world.¹³
- **Menstrual health and right** expand beyond the practical aspects of menstruation to include the rights of individuals to access the necessary resources and information to manage their menstruation. It emphasizes the right to health, education and gender equality. It involves legal and policy frameworks that protect the rights of individuals to access menstrual health resources, education and support. It can also include efforts to address gender inequality and promote social justice.¹⁴

Period poverty

Period poverty goes beyond the inability to afford menstrual hygiene products. It is a combination of barriers that prevent girls and women from managing their periods with safety, dignity and confidence.

1 The cost of menstrual products

For many girls and women, pads, tampons or menstrual cups are simply unaffordable. They may be forced to go without or use unsafe alternatives like cloth scraps or toilet paper.¹⁵

2 Lack of education about menstruation

Too many young people are not taught how the menstrual cycle works. Without basic knowledge of their bodies, girls and women may not recognize when something is wrong or know when to seek medical help.¹⁶ In addition, the lack of reliable and accessible information for all people, whether they menstruate or not, leads to misconceptions, taboos, stigma, as well as poorly designed infrastructure or policies regarding menstruation.

3 Shame, stigma and taboos

Periods are still surrounded by harmful myths and silence. Girls are made to feel embarrassed or 'unclean', often withdrawing from school, sports or social life while they menstruate, and therefore missing out on opportunities they should fully enjoy.¹⁷ Social pressure drives shame and stigma, as 1 in 3 boys think menstruation should be kept secret.¹⁸

- **Menstrual literacy** is a person's knowledge of the menstrual cycle and how to care for their health and well-being when menstruating.¹⁹ Menstrual literacy is essential for menstrual health and for ensuring that menstruation is recognized as part of the full realization of human rights, gender equality, and the Sustainable Development Goals for all genders.²⁰

Why is it important?

Menstruation can impact **ALL ASPECTS** of a girl's life

PARTICIPATION

Harmful cultural taboos can have an impact on the full participation of girls in daily life.

ECONOMICS

Period products are taxed as luxury goods, even though it's a basic need for girls and women who menstruate, which leads to period poverty.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Some public toilets lack clean and private spaces for girls and women.

END OF CHILDHOOD

In some communities, a girl's first period is seen as a sign she's ready for marriage. This can lead to child marriage and school dropout, violating her basic human rights.

GENDER GAP

Half of the population are missing the conversation. This ignorance reinforces misconceptions about menstruation.

Menstruation can impact all aspects of a girl's life

Menstruation is a biological process and a normal part of growing up, yet many girls around the world face significant challenges when they have their period. These challenges affect nearly every aspect of their daily lives, including their education, health, economic opportunities, independence, and ability to participate in public life. In addition, harmful cultural taboos, stigma, and exclusion from everyday activities can cause emotional distress and undermine their dignity.

Harmful cultural taboos still dominate the daily life of girls and women

In many rural communities across the world, deeply rooted cultural taboos continue to shame girls and women for menstruating. In regions and settings of India,²¹ for example, menstruating women are still prohibited from entering the kitchen or preparing food, based on the belief that their presence will contaminate it. In Nepal, despite being officially banned, the practice of *Chhaupadi* (forcing girls and women to isolate during their periods) remains widespread.²² Traditions like these not only cause social exclusion, but also keep girls from participating in daily life, including attending school, due to stigma and shame.

A lack of basic menstrual education leaves girls confused and isolated

For many girls, their first period comes as a frightening and confusing experience. Without prior knowledge or access to information, girls may not understand what is happening in their bodies. In Ethiopia, for example, 70% of girls in Ethiopia had never heard about periods before having theirs.²³ In communities where menstrual health is not openly discussed, many girls experience feelings of fear, shame or embarrassment, especially if their first period happens at school. In the absence of supportive adults or healthcare providers, they are left without guidance on how to manage menstruation safely and hygienically.²⁴

Boys and men are missing the conversation

Menstrual stigma is reinforced not only by silence but also by misinformation. Boys and men often lack even basic understanding of menstruation, which can result in teasing, mockery, or shame directed at menstruating girls. This ignorance contributes to a culture of stigma. At home, men are generally the key decision-makers when it comes to household spending. Without properly understanding the importance of menstrual products, fathers and male caregivers may not see the necessity to purchase them, thereby limiting girls' ability to manage their periods with dignity.

Sanitary products are often out of reach

Period poverty is a global issue, affecting people around the world.²⁵ For families living in poverty, purchasing sanitary pads can be considered a luxury, rather than a necessity. With over 1.5 billion people living on less than

\$1.25 per day, menstrual hygiene is often deprioritized in favour of more immediate needs such as food and water. As a result, girls are often forced to use unsafe alternatives, which increases the risk of infection and perpetuates the stigma surrounding menstruation.²⁶

Even from a public policy perspective, period products are often still classified as luxury goods rather than essential health items hence affecting the way they are taxed. The so-called 'tampon-tax' refers to the value-added tax (VAT) or sales tax applied to menstrual products like pads, tampons and menstrual cups. In many countries, these are taxed at the standard rate, similar to non-essential or luxury items. This exemplifies the wide and generalized lack of understanding of menstrual hygiene management, and reinforces poverty by making it harder for menstruating people to afford the products they need to manage their periods with dignity.²⁷

In Belgium, the VAT on menstrual products was reduced from 21% to 6% in 2018, recognising these items as essential rather than luxury goods.²⁸ While this is a step in the right direction, there is still room for improvement and some inspiring examples can pave the way. For example, Kenya abolished the tampon tax entirely as early as 2004, and in 2021, Scotland became the first country in the world to make menstrual products free through the Period Products (Free Provision) Act, highlighting how policymakers influence the way period products are made accessible and available or not.²⁹



GAZA: Contents of dignity kits for girls and women.



BANGLADESH: Sheemla, 16, and Shunhana, 17, chat together in the new wash block.

The infrastructure is not built with girls in mind

Even when girls have access to pads or other menstrual products, they often lack a clean and private space to use them. Many schools in low-resource settings do not have toilets that ensure privacy, running water, or safe disposal options. This lack of infrastructure makes managing menstruation at school difficult and often humiliating, causing some girls to stay home entirely during their periods.³⁰

Menstruation can mark the end of girlhood

In some communities around the world, a girl's first period is seen as a sign that she is ready for marriage. When menstruation is equated with readiness for adult responsibilities, it can trigger harmful practices such as child marriage, sexual harassment, which can in turn lead to school dropout. These practices violate girls' rights to education, bodily integrity, and protection from child marriage, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Yet, research shows that when girls have access to menstrual education, affordable products, and safe school facilities, they are more likely to stay in school.³¹



TOGO: Comparing the different items used during menstruation over the years.

How does menstruation impede girls' and women's empowerment?

The central question of norms and stereotypes³²

Menstruation, as a biological process, should not be a barrier to opportunities. Yet, for millions of girls and women globally, it remains a monthly source of inequality: shaping access to education, work, public life, and personal agency in ways that fundamentally undermine empowerment.

Education interrupted means opportunities lost

When girls miss school due to menstrual pain, lack of sanitary products, or inadequate facilities, their academic performance suffers. Over time, these disruptions can lead to lower educational attainment or school dropout altogether, which is a critical barrier to their empowerment: inclusive, quality education positively impacts girls' ability to access better jobs, participate in decision-making, and claim their rights.³³

Economic participation is limited

Women's access to safe and dignified menstrual hygiene is crucial, not only in school but also in the workplace. Inadequate sanitation facilities in factories, farms, markets, and offices can cause women to miss work or leave the labour force entirely. Informal and low-wage workers (who make up the majority of women in low and middle-income countries) often lack any provision for menstrual needs, which deepens gender disparities in income and financial dependence.

Stigma restricts social and civic participation

In many contexts, menstruation remains shrouded in shame and secrecy. The stigma silences girls and women, preventing them from speaking open about their needs. As a result, they are often excluded from leadership roles, community forums, or even household decisions. This creates in turn a vicious circle, as empowerment requires voice and visibility, which girls may lose if menstruation continues to be treated as something shameful or polluting.³⁴

Health and safety are compromised

Without access to affordable menstrual products and safe facilities, many women resort to unhygienic methods to manage their periods: rags, newspaper, ash or mud. This can lead to reproductive tract infections and other health complications, which go largely untreated due to limited healthcare access or fear of being judged. As a result, menstruating is associated to denial of basic rights to health and safety.³⁵

In addition, menstrual disorders such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome and menorrhagia (heavy bleeding) are medical conditions that are too often left undiagnosed or untreated, while they can lead to chronic pain, anaemia, mental health challenges, infertility and a reduced quality of life.³⁶ Access to menstrual health services, which includes trained healthcare providers, pain management and reliable information, is essential for early diagnosis and treatment. Without it, women and girls may suffer in silence, facing long-term physical, social and economic consequences. Building menstrual literacy empowers girls and women to understand their bodies, seek timely care, and break the stigma that often keeps them from speaking up.³⁷

Autonomy over one's body is undermined

Menstrual shame often intertwines with wider issues around bodily autonomy. In contexts where menstruation signals readiness for marriage or reproduction, girls may lose control over their life choices. When cultural norms dictate what girls can do or where to go while menstruating, it reinforces the notion that women's bodies are subject to external control and contributes to the normalization of freedom restriction for girls.³⁸

Common misconceptions

Misconception 1:

“Menstruation is dirty or impure.”

Why it is false: Menstruation is a natural biological process that signals a healthy reproductive system. There is no scientific basis to label menstrual blood as dirty: it’s simply a mix of blood, uterine tissue and vaginal secretions.

Why it is harmful: This belief reinforces shame, secrecy and social exclusion. In some communities, girls are banned from kitchens, temples, or even sleeping in their family home during their period. Such practices undermine dignity and perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

Misconception 2:

“Girls should stay home from school during their period.”

Why it is false: There is no medical reason for girls to miss school due to menstruation if they have access to pain relief, hygienic products and clean facilities. With proper support, girls can fully participate in school during their periods.

Why it is harmful: Encouraging girls to stay home normalises absenteeism and puts them at risk of falling behind or dropping out. This widens the gender education gap and undermines their long-term opportunities.

Misconception 3:

“Talking about periods is shameful or inappropriate.”

Why it is false: Menstruation is a normal part of life and health. Open, factual discussions about it help children of all genders understand what’s happening in their bodies or in the bodies of their peers. Avoiding the topic only fuels ignorance.

Why it is harmful: Silence breeds stigma. It makes it harder for girls to seek help, ask questions, or demand their rights. It also keeps boys misinformed, which often leads to teasing, mockery or the perpetuation of myths.

Misconception 4:

“Menstruation means a girl becomes a woman, and is ready to marry or have children.”

Why it is false: Menarche, a girl’s first period, is a biological milestone, not a signal of emotional, psychological, or legal readiness for marriage or motherhood. Puberty does not equal maturity.

Why it is harmful: In communities where this belief persists, girls are pulled from school and forced into early marriage, exposing them to early pregnancy, violence, and poverty. This denies them the right to choose their own future.

Misconception 5:

“Only girls need to learn about menstruation.”

Why it is false: Everyone benefits from accurate knowledge about menstruation, including boys, men, teachers, fathers, male caregivers, policymakers. Understanding fosters empathy, reduces stigma and helps build supportive environments at school, home and work, and inclusive legislations.

Why it is harmful: Excluding boys from menstrual education, reinforces the idea that periods are something shameful or secret. It also means that future decision makers, fathers, teachers, employers, ... remain unaware of the needs of half the population.

Plan International's response



INDIA: Young people create posters to mark Menstrual Hygiene Day.

Tackling menstrual injustice requires multi-layered action: from agency strengthening at individual level, to shifting norms, improving infrastructure to legal reforms and cultural change. Plan International takes a comprehensive and intersectional approach to challenging menstrual stigma, misconceptions and period poverty. Through a holistic and rights-based approach we focus on empowering girls and young women globally, and we target duty-bearers so that they can foster a more enabling environment for girls and young women, so that menstruation is not a barrier to health, education or equality.

Education, sensitization, reliable information and awareness for all

Menstrual health education is an issue for everyone. Plan International's programmes emphasise the importance of menstrual education for both girls and boys. According to our 2022 survey, only 22% of boys feel well-informed about menstruation, even though 92% believe it should be normalized. Nearly three-quarters of respondents agrees that better school-based education is the most effective way to achieve this goal.

For girls, we provide reliable, clear and accessible information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management cross-cuttingly in our programmes. Across

our sports programmes, we engage girls who play football in follow-up sessions, using sports as an entry point for deeper conversations, to discuss menstruation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence and exclusion.³⁹

Examples from Indonesia and Uganda provide promising evidence as we support the establishment of school-based health clubs. These offer safe spaces where young people, regardless of gender, can learn about menstruation, address and challenge misconceptions and access peer support.⁴⁰ In humanitarian settings, we make the most of adolescent girls' safe spaces, where girls gather to participate to group activities, to inform girls about their health and rights.

✓ Access to menstrual products and sanitation facilities

Together with social enterprises and private sector actors⁴¹ we strive to improve the availability and affordability of menstrual products. In addition, we invest in building girl-friendly sanitation facilities in schools and communities, ensuring private spaces for changing and washing.

In one of our projects in West Nile, Uganda,⁴² we have constructed 69 girl-friendly latrine blocks and rehabilitated 34 boreholes to improve access to clean water and sanitation. In addition, we support the economic empowerment of older adolescent girls and young women who have left school, by providing trainings and material to start reusable pads design and fabrication, as a sustainable but also inclusive income-generating activity.

✓ Challenging stigma and harmful social norms

Using campaigns, we are breaking the silence around menstruation. Through education, media and community engagement, Plan International works to normalize menstruation and reduce shame, discrimination and isolation.⁴³

✓ Policy change and systems strengthening

At policy level, Plan International advocates for the full integration of menstrual health into national education, health, and gender equality strategies. This includes lobbying for comprehensive menstrual health policies that go beyond the distribution of products, encompassing access to accurate information, adequate sanitation facilities, and the dismantling of menstrual stigma in institutional settings.

We work to ensure that menstrual health is embedded in budget allocations, teacher training curricula, and health service delivery, particularly within adolescent and youth-friendly services. By strengthening systems (from school policies to public health frameworks) Plan International seeks sustainable, long-term change that enables all menstruating individuals to manage their periods with dignity, safety, and autonomy. Our advocacy promotes accountability among governments and donors, and calls for inclusive approaches that consider the needs of all genders, including people with disabilities and those in humanitarian settings.⁴⁴



MOZAMBIQUE: Pedro, 55, makes reusable sanitary pads after Plan International training.

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PARAGUAY: Alma, 16, receives a menstrual health kit from a Plan International staff member.



About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children's rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls' rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. So that every girl can be free.

About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls' rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls' education and child marriage to girls' leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change. Until every girl is free.

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