

CAN CIVIC BRANDS ERADICATE PERIOD POVERTY?

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01 : 10 : 2018 Wellbeing : Health : Female Futures



Blume, US

‘ In an era where women’s equality is high on the agenda, it’s astonishing that so many are still struggling to access these basic hygiene products. ’

— Tamara Hoogeweegen, graduate trainee. *The Future Laboratory*

In June 2018, architecture student Ruth Pearn presented a speculative graduation project. She envisioned an old bathhouse transformed into a public space designed to fight period poverty. With its town centre setting, **this bathhouse** would be accessible and open to all in order to foster inclusivity and break down taboos around menstruation. So far, so modern. Yet, this project was not designed for an emerging nation, but the UK city of Hull – a place where period poverty shouldn’t really exist.

Except that it does. And projects such as Pearn’s show how period poverty has become a major social issue in developed nations. A recent report by **Plan International UK** shows that in the UK, one in 10 young women (aged 14-21) can’t afford sanitary products. In London, this number is closer to one in seven. Further still, sanitary products have 5% VAT added to their retail price in the UK because they are considered a luxury item, while items such as biscuits, pitta bread and – bizarrely – crocodile meat are considered ‘essentials’, remaining untaxed.

When girls and women struggle to afford these basic products it affects their hygiene, health and in turn their wellbeing. In an era where women's equality is high on the agenda whether in politics, schools, government or the workplace, it's astonishing that so many are still struggling to access these basic hygiene products.

As a first step in resolving period poverty, we're seeing brands and campaigns fight to remove the so-called 'pink tax', to make sure every female has equal access to sanitary products. Following this, we have seen supermarket Tesco opt to absorb the 5% VAT on women's sanitary products.

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Blume, US

But the cost of female hygiene products isn't the only reason that women are still dealing with period poverty. The stifling stigma that persists around menstruation exacerbates the myriad social and cultural reasons that make it hard for girls to talk about it.

Since LS:N Global presented its micro trend **The Vagina Reconsidered**, more initiatives have emerged to challenge the taboo around periods. Brands such as Blume are **educating young women** about periods, while THINX has created reusable, period-proof underwear. The #FreePeriods campaign by 18-year-old Amika George inspired more than 2,000 people to protest outside Downing Street in London, while sanitary brand **Always** has partnered with the Red Box Project to provide free sanitary products to school-age girls, to ensure they don't miss school because of their period.

It's also been encouraging to see the Scottish government recently **announce a £5.2m scheme** to provide free sanitary products for students at schools, colleges and universities in a bid to counteract period poverty. By providing free sanitary items in bathrooms, these products are brought to the same level as other essentials like toilet paper, hand soap and paper towels that are available for free, and for all to use.

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Taking this further, three Scottish students this year launched the On the Ball campaign to increase the access and visibility of sanitary products at football grounds. Their initiative led to Brighton & Hove Albion becoming the first Premier League football club to provide female fans with free sanitary goods, driving a more inclusive attitude around the sport. Major clubs such as Liverpool and Everton are now considering similar steps.

UK institutions offering free feminine hygiene essentials is a major step forward. However, it drives the question beyond whether tampons and pads should be free from the pink tax, but free *entirely*? With the UK government outlining plans to allocate £1.5 million to address period poverty in the UK, I wonder just how hard mainstream personal care brands will lobby to secure brand-led partnerships with these institutions?

One thing is clear, however. Those raising their voice about period poverty are driving a major shake-up in the female hygiene market. Not only are they breaking taboos around menstruation but heralding a future in which periods are not only sustainable, accessible and inoffensive – but quite possibly free.