



**WASH United**

# **FOCUS TOPIC: MENSTRUATION**

**EXPERIENCE OF GIRLS AND WOMEN  
IN GERMANY AND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD**



## IMPRINT

This survey has been published by Plan International Germany and WASH United. It has been developed by Alexandra Tschacher and Claudia Ulferts of Plan International Germany as well as the company transpekte Marktforschung, with technical support of Ina Jurga and Thorsten Kiefer of WASH United. We also would like to thank Danielle Keiser of the Menstrual Health Hub in Berlin who supported us with her expertise. The authors of this survey are Claudia Ulferts, Katharina Hofmann, Alissa Ferry and Antje Schröder. Barbara Wessel is responsible for the design. Our thanks also go to our "Young Voices", Mika Jartwig and Anna Mühlenbruch, of Plan International's Youth Advisory Board for their support.

**Photos and cover: Eva Häberle and Plan International**

**Published by:**  
**Plan International Deutschland e.V.**  
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the topic of menstruation is still surrounded by taboos and stigmas. And yet, menstruation is the biological prerequisite for people's existence and reproduction. Half of the world's population have to do with it every month for a period of several decades – approx. 450 times on average during a lifetime. An estimated more than 300 million girls and women worldwide menstruate every day.<sup>1</sup>

In view of this high number, it is a sad reality that millions of girls and women throughout the world are not able to provide themselves with hygiene products in a healthy and dignified manner when they have the period, and adequate sanitary facilities often do not exist. Furthermore, there is a lack of acceptance, knowledge and understanding of the body processes which also influence the mind.

**It is difficult to get them: access to hygiene articles is not always a matter of course.** In many countries girls and women do not have sufficient access to adequate and/or affordable hygiene products. Therefore, they must make do with cloths, leaves, grass or other makeshift solutions, which further increases shame and stigmas and might lead to considerable health problems. At many places, the lack of hygiene products has become worse during the corona pandemic: supply chains have been interrupted and the prices of sanitary pads and tampons have increased considerably. In some regions, a single sanitary pad was as expensive as a loaf of bread.<sup>2</sup>

In order to make sure that girls and women can fully exercise their right to health, education and protection, they should have access to period-friendly infrastructure. There should be separate toilet facilities<sup>3</sup> for girls and women at schools and universities, at the place of work and in public facilities.

These toilets rooms should be well-lit and equipped with lockable doors as well as water, soap and waste bins to make sure that women can manage their period safely and discretely. However, one in three women worldwide does not have access to safe toilets.<sup>4</sup> Apart from physical complaints and social restrictions, a lack of access to adequate sanitary facilities and affordable menstrual hygiene products can mean that girls and women miss up to five days of school or work every month.<sup>5</sup>

**Investing into menstrual health and hygiene for a better future:** If girls and women have improved access to menstrual hygiene products and if taboos and/or social restrictions regarding this topic are being reduced, the income opportunities of girls and women may also be enhanced in the long term. In such a case, less girls and women drop out of school, they do not lose any school days or work days, and they have the chance to lead a self-determined life – also in terms of their economic situation.<sup>6</sup> However, more than 500 million women and girls worldwide do not have the knowledge, hygiene products and or/other resources they need to manage their menstruation safely and without shame.<sup>7</sup>

**Menstruation is a topic that concerns all people:** It will only be possible to reduce taboos and stigmas and to change social norms if all people participate. Understanding and support from men and boys are essential to overcome prejudices and myths. Therefore, all people should be sensitised and be involved in the awareness raising activities regarding this topic.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.de/informieren/aktuelles/blog/menstruation-maedchen-und-frauen-drei-mythen-und-fakten/193120> | <sup>2</sup> <https://plan-international.org/publications/periods-in-a-pandemic> | <sup>3</sup> In countries of the global North, there have been demands for gender-neutral sanitary facilities to prevent discrimination against non-binary people. <https://www.jetzt.de/querfragen/non-binaere-menschen-was-bedeutet-euch-die-unisex-toilette> | <sup>4</sup> <https://www.wateraid.org/us/media/1-in-3-women-lack-safe-toilets> | <sup>5</sup> <https://bit.ly/3G3uE5r> | <sup>6</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/water/menstrual-health-and-hygiene-empowers-women-and-girls-how-ensure-we-get-it-right> | <sup>7</sup> [www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/05/24/menstrual-hygiene-day-2019](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/05/24/menstrual-hygiene-day-2019)

## 1.1. MENSTRUATION AS A TOPIC OF PUBLIC INTEREST: THERE IS A CHANGE

Since 2014 the Menstrual Hygiene Day has been observed on May 28th. It was initiated by the Berlin non-profit organisation WASH United to make people aware of the topic and to demand politicians to act.<sup>8</sup> The impact of the action day increases every year which suggests that menstruation has become a topic more frequently discussed.<sup>9</sup>

The topic is currently experiencing a gradual change leading to more openness and positive self-empowerment. Especially in the social media such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, it has become a popular topic. If you search for information about menstruation there, you might think due to the algorithm that taboos surrounding the period are a thing of the past. Books such as “Periode Ist Politisch” (2020) written by Franka Frei or films and series such as the Oscar-winning documentation “Period. End of Sentence” (2019) also aim to break the taboo and show solutions.

There are also some changes regarding menstrual hygiene products: after a successful campaign and petition, a reduced tax rate was introduced in Germany in January 2020<sup>10</sup>. As the first country worldwide, Scotland has been providing cost-free menstrual hygiene products at schools, universities and public facilities since 2021<sup>11</sup>. We can observe the same development in Germany: some towns, universities and schools start to provide menstrual hygiene articles free of cost, or they demand this.<sup>12</sup> There are small associations distributing sanitary pads and tampons to the poor on a donation basis. Drug stores offer a wide range of menstrual hygiene articles, and products such as menstruation cups and menstruation underwear aim to enhance sustainability.

All these initiatives show that the public is becoming more open-minded about menstruation. However, it is not possible to say whether and how this tendency will have an impact on the direct experience of girls and women in Germany with the topic.

## 1.2. PERIOD POVERTY AND A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE DO NOT ONLY CONCERN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In January 2018, Plan International UK published the study “Break the Barriers: Girls’ Experiences of Menstruation in the UK”<sup>13</sup>. It was the first comprehensive study on this topic in a European country. The results in the field of “period poverty” were particularly remarkable. Some groups of menstruating people do not have enough money for sanitary pads, tampons and other products they need. In Great Britain every tenth interviewee said that she was not able to afford menstrual hygiene products and therefore had to get by with toilet paper and cloths. Nearly half of the girls were ashamed of their period. One interviewee in seven did not know exactly what was happening when she had her first menstruation, and one out of four did not know what to do in this situation.

After publication of “Break the Barriers”, similar studies and surveys were conducted in France, the Netherlands and Australia<sup>14</sup>. The results were similar to those of the British study. This raised the question how the situation in Germany was. In order to gain knowledge, Plan International Germany collected the following data at the end of 2021. They clearly show that not only women and girls in countries of the global South, but also here in Germany, can be faced with enormous challenges due to menstruation. We derived concrete recommendations for politicians, companies and the society from the results of this survey.

In order to improve readability of the text, we alternately refer to girls, women and menstruating people, taking into account that also non-binary and transgender people are affected by the mentioned taboos and restrictions. “Women and girls” are often mentioned in the text to describe people who menstruate. We are aware of the fact that not all people who menstruate are women and that not all women menstruate.

<sup>8</sup> <https://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/about-mhday/>The Menstrual Hygiene Day is a multi-stakeholder platform which brings together non-governmental organisations, researchers, individuals, the private sector and the media and which is supported by more than 830 partner organisations. Since 2020, members of the German parliament of all parties have been committed around the Menstrual Hygiene Day, aiming to overcome taboos and to “normalise” menstruation - in Germany, but also worldwide through development cooperation and humanitarian aid. In 2021, 47 members of the German parliament took part in the campaign. | <sup>9</sup> <https://menstrualhygieneday.org/about/impact/> | <sup>10</sup> By the end of 2021, 42 countries have introduced a reduced tax rate or zero rate on menstrual hygiene products: [www.periodtax.org](http://www.periodtax.org) | <sup>11</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/period-products-free-provision-scotland-bill> | <sup>12</sup> <https://www.tampagne.de/> oder <https://www.fzs.de/2021/06/17/kostenlose-menstruationsprodukte-in-allen-bildungseinrichtungen/> | <sup>13</sup> <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v> | <sup>14</sup> <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0255001>



## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to find out which attitudes and experiences regarding menstruation exist in Germany, we conducted a nationwide representative survey from September 22nd - October 10th, 2021. As this is a topic relevant for the whole society, we did not only interview girls and women, but also boys and men to learn about their perspectives. The survey also aimed to find out to which extent girls and women in Germany have financial and social problems related to menstruation.

By means of a standardised written online survey, 1,000 women and 1,000 men were interviewed about various topics regarding menstruation: knowledge level, experience, restrictions, response of people around them and what they expect from the society<sup>15</sup>. The samples were population-representative and segregated by age groups (16 - 24 years, 25 - 34 years and 35 - 45 years) to be able to obtain differentiated results, and these results were correlated with the level of education.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The online survey was conducted by the Online Access Panel of Respondi; the concept and the analysis were prepared by the market research institute transpekte. | <sup>16</sup> In order to state the gender in the online questionnaire, female, male and neutral/diverse could be selected. A non-binary person took part in the survey, used the questionnaire for women and complained not to be sufficiently represented in this questionnaire. According to their current status, the survey does not meet the requirements and specific interests of non-binary menstruating people. However, Plan International Germany does not want to neglect or ignore the experience and needs of this group and other groups. The same applies to people with disabilities and women who are victims of female genital mutilation. These groups face differentiated challenges as regards menstruation. In order to meet the requirements of these groups, it would be necessary to conduct an individual survey.

# 3. SUMMARY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The results of the survey show that in terms of menstruation Germany still has a long way to go until a prejudice-free, well-informed and period-friendly society has been created.

## “PERIOD POVERTY”:

In a rich country like Germany, 23 percent of the interviewed girls and women say that the monthly expenses for menstruation are a financial burden for them. 15 percent try to use as few tampons, sanitary pads and/or panty liners as possible. One out of ten puts off the change of tampons, sanitary pads and/or panty liners to get along for a longer period of time and thus (knowingly) takes the risk of infection. Young women are most affected by “period poverty”: almost 75 percent of the 16- to 25-year-olds would buy more menstrual hygiene products if the prices were lower.

## FIRST MENSTRUATION:

Many interviewees lacked the knowledge to manage their first menstruation in a well-prepared manner and without shame. One out of five did not know what was happening to her at the “first time”. One out of four did not have a menstrual hygiene product at hand at that moment, and one out of ten was not well informed about menstrual hygiene products.

## TABOOS:

Blood spots caused by the period on clothes, bed linen or in the toilet are a “worst case” scenario for the majority of the interviewed girls and women. “Bleeding through” is fraught with shame for almost all the interviewees. Every third interviewee feels “unclean” during the period. But at the same time, one out of three no longer wants to be ashamed of her period.

## PAIN:

72 percent of all interviewees have womb pains and cramps during the period. In addition, women and girls suffer from accompanying effects such as back pain, mood changes and tiredness. More than every third interviewee takes pain killers due to the accompanying effects. Many women think that medical support in this field is insufficient. Only half of the women who consulted a doctor due to their period pain were satisfied with the support they received. Every third woman said that she was “sent away” with a pain killer. Less than one out of five felt taken seriously with her pain.

## RESTRICTIONS:

Discomfort (75 %) and pain (62 %) are the most frequent reasons why women and girls cancel sports and other social activities during the period. Another reason for 29 % of the interviewees is that they fear to find an ill-equipped or dirty toilet outside the home. Not even half of the menstruating people are satisfied with the current hygiene situation in public buildings. More than one out of four sometimes prefer to stay at home because they fear that they might not be able to change sanitary pads and tampons early enough.

## LACK OF ACCEPTANCE:

Hardly any woman is happy to cancel activities during the period. Every second interviewee feels embarrassed or very embarrassed to cancel such activities. 14 percent of the participants who take part in activities despite pain and other trouble do so because they fear to face a lack of understanding or negative consequences in their environment. The biggest worries exist when they must call in sick at work, school, vocational training or university. In such a case, almost one out of four fears to face a lack of understanding and/or negative consequences.

## PERCEPTION OF MEN:

In partnerships, 75 percent of men say that they support their partner during the period. However, every fifth man thinks it is not acceptable when a woman cancels an activity due to her period. 79 percent of the interviewees have made a “stupid” comment on the period or have heard a friend dropping such a comment. However, 60 percent of men say that they are interested in learning more about the period and would appreciate an improved education about this topic at school.

## DESIRED CHANGES IN THE SOCIETY:

79 percent of the female interviewees and 60 percent of the male interviewees say that schools should better inform about menstruation. Two thirds of the female participants and 48 percent of the male participants think that, in general, the period should be freed from taboos and the topic should be discussed more frequently – also with men. A large majority of girls and women (80 percent each) demand that tampons and sanitary pads are provided free of cost in public buildings. Furthermore, politicians should deal with the topic of “menstruation poverty”.

**THE FIRST PERIOD**  
IS ASSOCIATED WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF  
UNCERTAINTY FOR MANY GIRLS.

## 4. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY IN DETAIL

### 4.1. GIRLS FEEL UNCERTAIN WHEN THEY GET THE FIRST PERIOD

In Germany and in most other European countries, menstruating people have their first period between the 12th and 13th year of life on average<sup>17</sup>. However, they might also have the first period at the age of 9 or 10 or at the age of 16.

Experiencing the first period is associated with a high level of uncertainty for many girls. Only one in five interviewees knew exactly what was happening during the first menstruation, more than half of the women were roughly informed and one out of five did not know at all what was happening to her. This is also reflected in the emotional response to the first menstruation: only every third interviewee was “calm” and “prepared for it”, whereas almost half of them were “worried” and “surprised”, and more than one in five was “unable to cope with it” and “helpless”. Every fourth interviewee did not have any menstrual hygiene product at hand when having the first menstruation, and one out of ten was not well-informed about such products. (*Diagram 01*)

“I unexpectedly got the period at school and was ashamed because my clothes were dirty. As I didn’t want someone to see it, my parents had to pick me up. This is an experience I will never forget.”

Participant, 35 - 45 years old

<sup>17</sup> <https://edoc.rki.de/handle/176904/423>

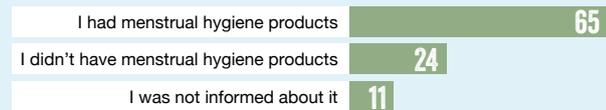
## WOMEN LOOKING BACKWARD – HOW THEY EXPERIENCED THEIR FIRST MENSTRUATION: (%)

### THE FIRST MENSTRUATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH GREAT UNCERTAINTY FOR MANY WOMEN.

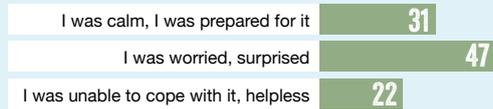
#### Level of information



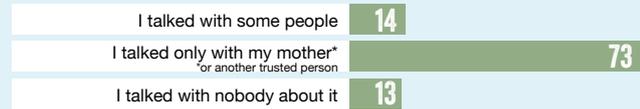
#### Availability of menstrual hygiene products



#### Emotional response



#### Communication with others



**Many girls are on their own:** The first period is associated with a high level of uncertainty for many women. One out of seven kept the first menstruation secret. This figure shows the importance of informing young menstruating people early and comprehensively about all aspects of menstruation. A culture of open discussion, especially in the immediate environment, ideally prevents that the first menstruation becomes an experience of fear and shame.

The most important persons who passed on knowledge about the period were almost always the mothers. 68 % of the girls and women said that they were a source of information. However, school also plays a key role in knowledge transfer. Every third menstruating person and every second man received (first) information about menstruation there<sup>18</sup>.

## 4.2. BETWEEN REJECTION AND ACCEPTANCE: HOW WOMEN EXPERIENCE THE PERIOD

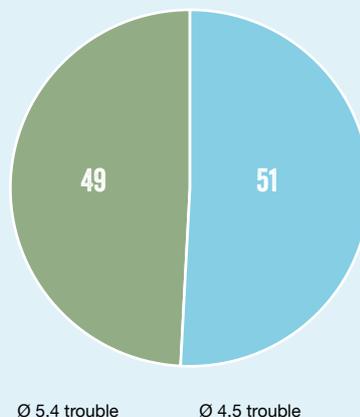
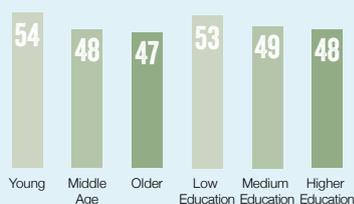
The survey also aimed to find out whether girls and women rather accept their period or rather consider it as a burden and detriment in their life. The results are almost balanced: 51 % of the interviewees consider the period as part of their body, widely accept the changes and restrictions and try to live in harmony with their menstrual cycle. On the other hand, 49 % rail against the period and think there is nothing positive about it. (Diagram 02)

**ONE OUT OF SEVEN KEPT THE FIRST MENSTRUATION SECRET.**

## WOMEN: GENERAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS MENSTRUATION

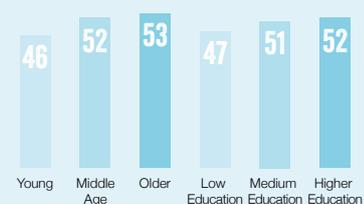
(Tendency to) rail against menstruation:

“The period is an inconvenient episode that affects me month after month. It disturbs and interrupts my life, it is annoying, it is not welcome. There is nothing good about – and it is simply difficult for me to accept it.”



(Tendency to) accept menstruation:

“The period belongs to me and my body. It shows me that I am a woman. I accept the changes in my body and pay attention to them. I try to live in harmony with my cycle, if possible.”



<sup>18</sup> A survey of WASH United and einhorn conducted in 2019 revealed that only 17 % of girls in Germany felt (very) well-informed about menstruation through the lessons at school: <https://einhorn.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Pressemitteilung-Aufkl%C3%A4rung-WASH-United-und-einhorn.pdf>

In this, the following becomes apparent: the lower the level of education and the younger the interviewees, the more frequently the period is considered as a burden and detriment. On the other hand, a higher age and more experience, more practice and more knowledge about menstruation and the female cycle – also through a higher level of education – increase acceptance of the period. Thus, being informed has a positive influence on how women experience the period.



### 4.3. THE PERIOD IS STILL FRAUGHT WITH SHAME

The majority of girls and women consider various situations related to the period as embarrassing and unpleasant. According to the survey, the worst situation is a visible blood spot on the clothes. **97 % consider such a blood spot as “unpleasant” or “very unpleasant”**. 87 % of the interviewees also feel ashamed when leaving blood spots in the toilet. And 77 % feel ashamed when there are blood spots on the bed linen. Thus, visible bleeding is still a taboo. (Diagram 03)

**In general, many girls and women prefer not to show the period in public.** 59 % think it is embarrassing when a tampon or sanitary pad falls out of the bag and might be visible for other people. Every second interviewee considers “stupid comments” on menstruation as unpleasant. Furthermore, every third woman feels “unclean” during the period (see diagram on page 16). This shows that the period is still considered as something “dirty”.

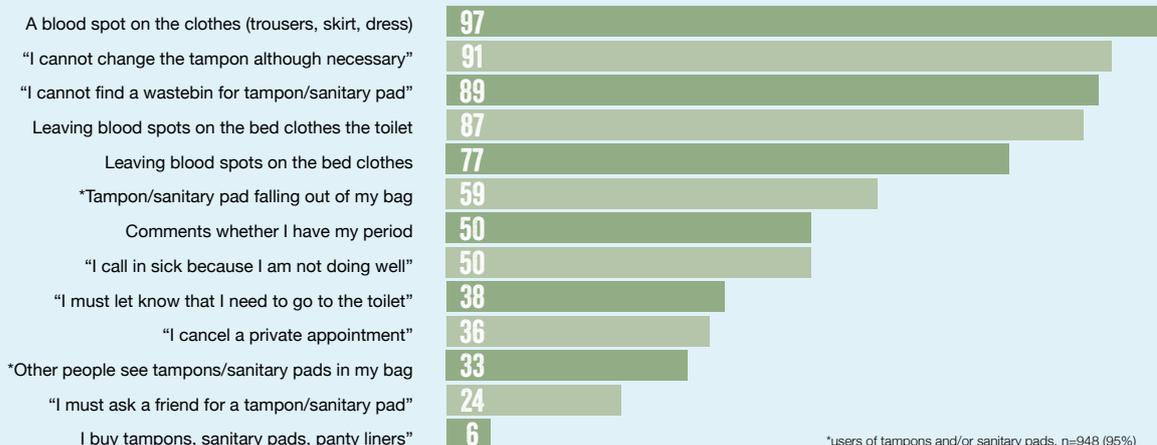
More than 75 % of menstruating people can talk about the period with close friends or their mother without any problems. However, every tenth interviewee feels embarrassed to talk about the period. Likewise, men – except for the partner who is the most important male confidant for 68 % of the women – are less frequently considered as a suitable person to talk about this topic, even if they are close family members. Only one in five interviewees talks about the period with her father.

“Every woman should know her cycle. Awareness raising should be enhanced and the period should no longer be a taboo in the society. The period is a wonder of nature and directly related to the fertility of a woman.”

Participant, 25 - 34 years old

#### WOMEN: GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF SITUATIONS AS “UNPLEASANT” OR “VERY UNPLEASANT” (%)

03

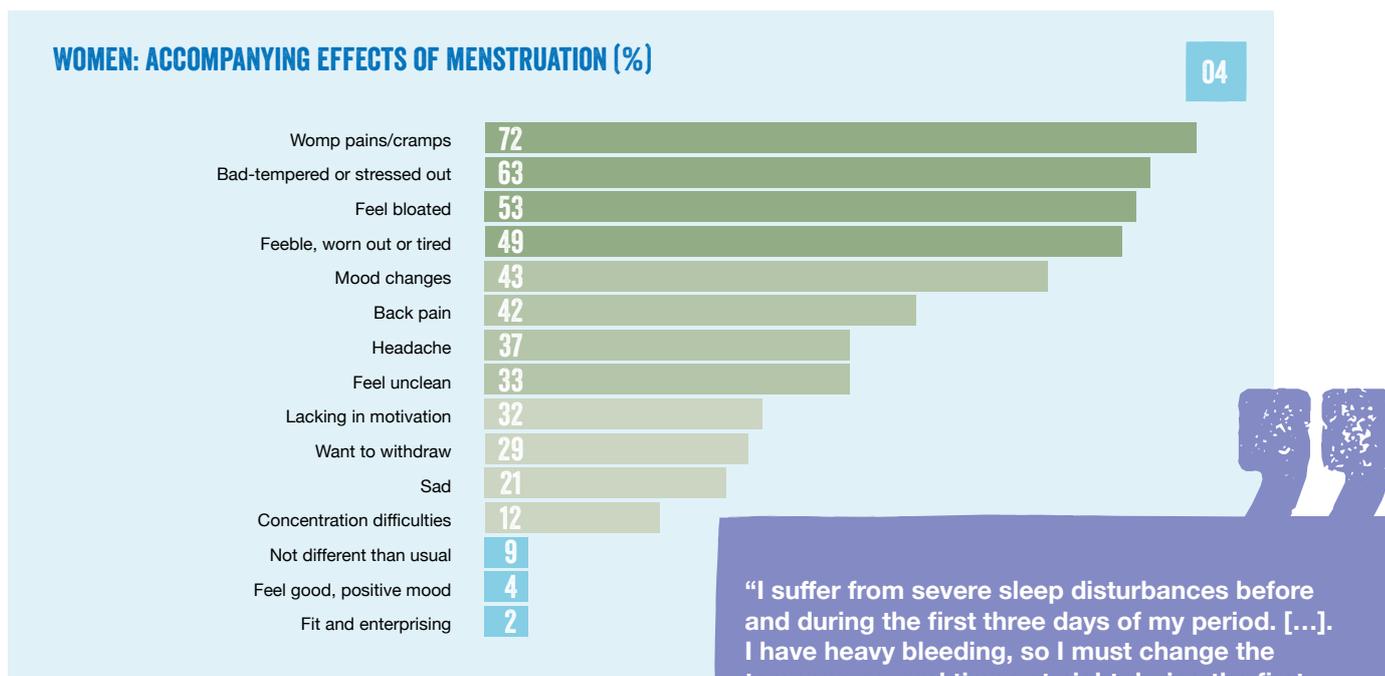


\*users of tampons and/or sanitary pads, n=948 (95%)

## 4.4. ACCOMPANYING EFFECTS AND PAIN ARE PART OF IT

**Three in four women have womb pains and cramps during the period.** Furthermore, they suffer from other unpleasant accompanying effects – to such an extent that 39 % of them take pain killers. 28 % say they rely on naturopathic medicine, such as homeopathic products or home remedies such as hot-water bottles, teas or a relaxing bath to relieve the trouble. (Diagram 04 and Diagram 05)

This shows that it can be very hard to fulfil one's daily commitments such as job, school or other activities despite the physical and/or mental trouble related to the period. When women get older and have a higher level of education, the troubles reduce a bit, probably because the women are more experienced in managing their menstruation and the cycle is more regular. Menstruating people who have a higher level of education and who are older suffer from 4.5 accompanying effects on average, compared to 5.4 accompanying effects among young women and women with a lower level of education.



According to the survey, menstruating people suffer from four to five unpleasant accompanying effects on average in the time before, during and/or after their period. The following troubles have been stated most frequently: womb pains and cramps, mental disgruntlement such as feeling bad tempered, feeling bloated, weariness and tiredness as well as headache and back pain. Only 9 % of the interviewees do not feel different than usual during the period. One of the reasons might be that part of the menstruating people take an oral contraceptive<sup>19</sup> which alleviates the bleeding and relieves or stops the accompanying effects. Only 4 % are in a positive mood and only 2 % feel fit and enterprising although advertising for tampons, sanitary pads and other menstrual hygiene products aims to make the buyers believe this.

**THREE IN FOUR WOMEN  
HAVE WOMB PAINS AND CRAMPS DURING THE PERIOD.**



<sup>19</sup> According to the health insurance Techniker Krankenkasse (TK), approx. 6 - 7 million women in Germany take an oral contraceptive. There is a downward tendency among young women. <https://www.tk.de/resource/blob/2043476/f68a7108f6cdeae1a58e438d312e3ac6/studienband-pillenreport-2015-data.pdf>

## 4.5. MEDICAL SUPPORT? NO SUCH LUCK!

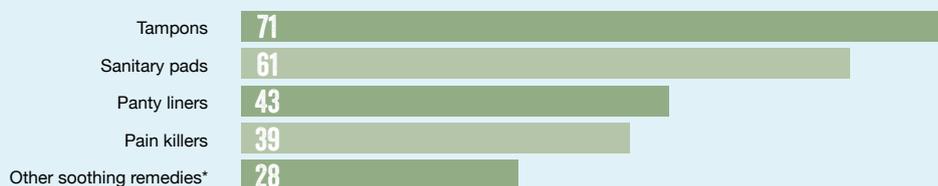
A large majority of girls and women suffer from physical and mental accompanying effects during the period. These troubles are hardly compatible with a high-performance society which demands a lot from the affected women every day. It is alarming that 39 % of the interviewed menstruating people take pain killers during the period to cope with their daily life, accepting harmful side effects such as inflammations of the gastro-intestinal tract or hepatonephric troubles (Diagram 05). Some women also take oral contraceptive pills to reduce period pains.

“I am one of the women who have heavy bleeding and cramps. Going to school or work was sheer torment. [...] I am not happy to take hormones, but otherwise I feel that I lose a whole week of my life every month.”

Participant, 25 - 34 years old

### WOMEN: AIDS USED DURING THE PERIOD (%)

05



\*Homeopathic drugs, home remedies (tea, hot water bottle, relaxing bath or the like)

**Trust in doctors is limited:** Almost half of the affected women consult a doctor or gynaecologist due to period pain. Only half of the women who consulted a doctor were satisfied with the result. **Every third menstruating person said that the doctor only prescribed pain killers**, but hardly talked about the troubles. One out of five felt that she was not taken seriously with her concern. (Diagram 06)

“I am in a great deal of pain due to my period. I have to take strong pain killers each time.”

Participant, 35 - 45 years old

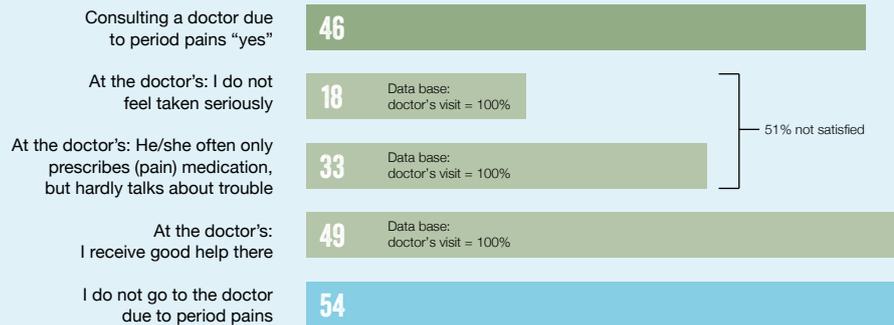
## PROJECT OF CHARITÉ BERLIN

Menstrual problems have hardly been a subject of medical research until now although there are millions of menstruating people who are affected and there are considerable needs. Prof. Dr. med. Sylvia Mechsner, Director of the Endometriosis Centre of the Berlin Charité, works with Prof. Dr. med. Claudia Witt in the Integrative Medicine working group. Their aim is to advance an app which informs young women about their cycle. The project will start in September 2022. The app is needed because there is not enough awareness raising about this topic and at the same time it is suggested that period pains are part of being a woman. Furthermore, more than 10 % of menstruating people suffer from endometriosis, a painful chronic womb disease<sup>20</sup>. According to Sylvia Mechsner, the reason for the fact that many of the women interviewed by Plan International Germany said that they did not receive adequate advice from doctors is that the doctors would have to take much more time for this. However, they have only approx. ten minutes per patient because they must work economically and the health insurances still do not list “Advice, introduction and therapy support for severe menstrual molimina”.

<sup>20</sup> When women suffer from endometriosis, tissue which resembles the uterine lining develops outside the uterus and causes chronic and very painful inflammations. As the symptoms are unspecific, it takes up to ten years on average until the diagnosis is made.

## WOMEN: STATEMENTS REGARDING SUPPORT RECEIVED WHEN SUFFERING FROM ACCOMPANYING EFFECTS OF MENSTRUATION (%)

06



### 4.6. "PERIOD POVERTY" – WHEN THERE IS NOT ENOUGH MONEY

The term "period poverty" has nothing to do with amenorrhea. Period poverty means that menstruating people do not have adequate access to hygiene products due to financial straits.

The expenses for menstrual health amount to 5 - 35 euros per month, depending on which costs are considered. At first glance, this seems to be a low amount. It is true that the costs for menstrual hygiene products have decreased in Germany after the reduction of the VAT (from 19 to 7 %) <sup>21</sup>, but the expenses are still high for financially weak groups of the population <sup>22</sup>.



### WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF THE PERIOD?

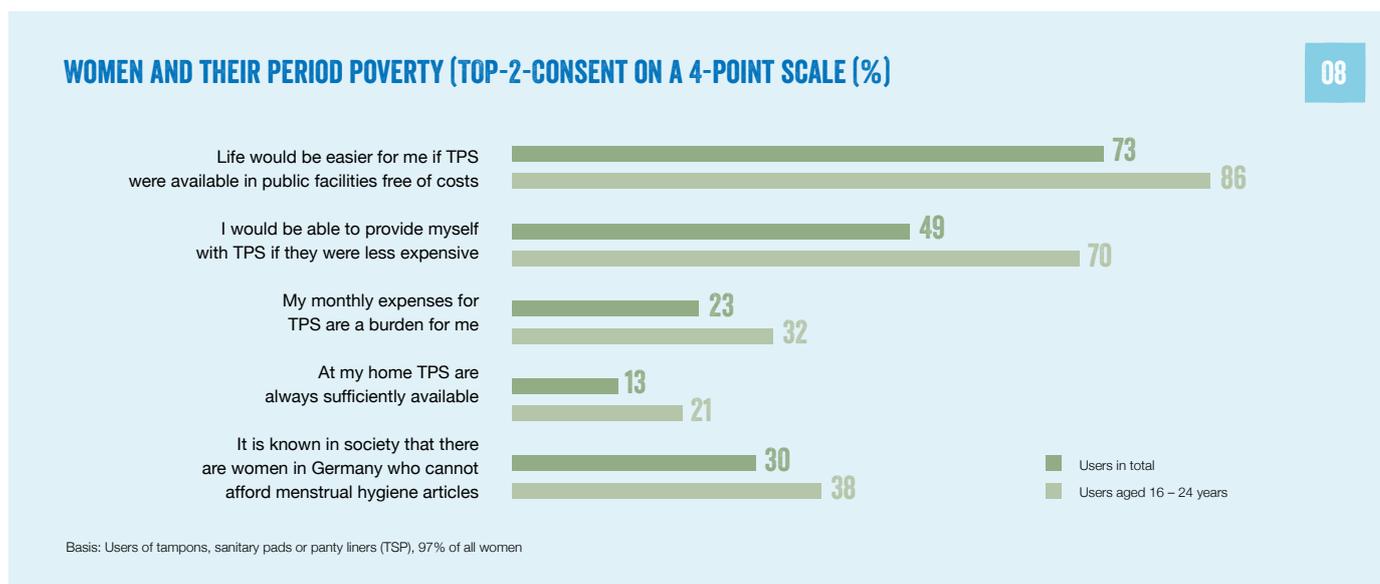
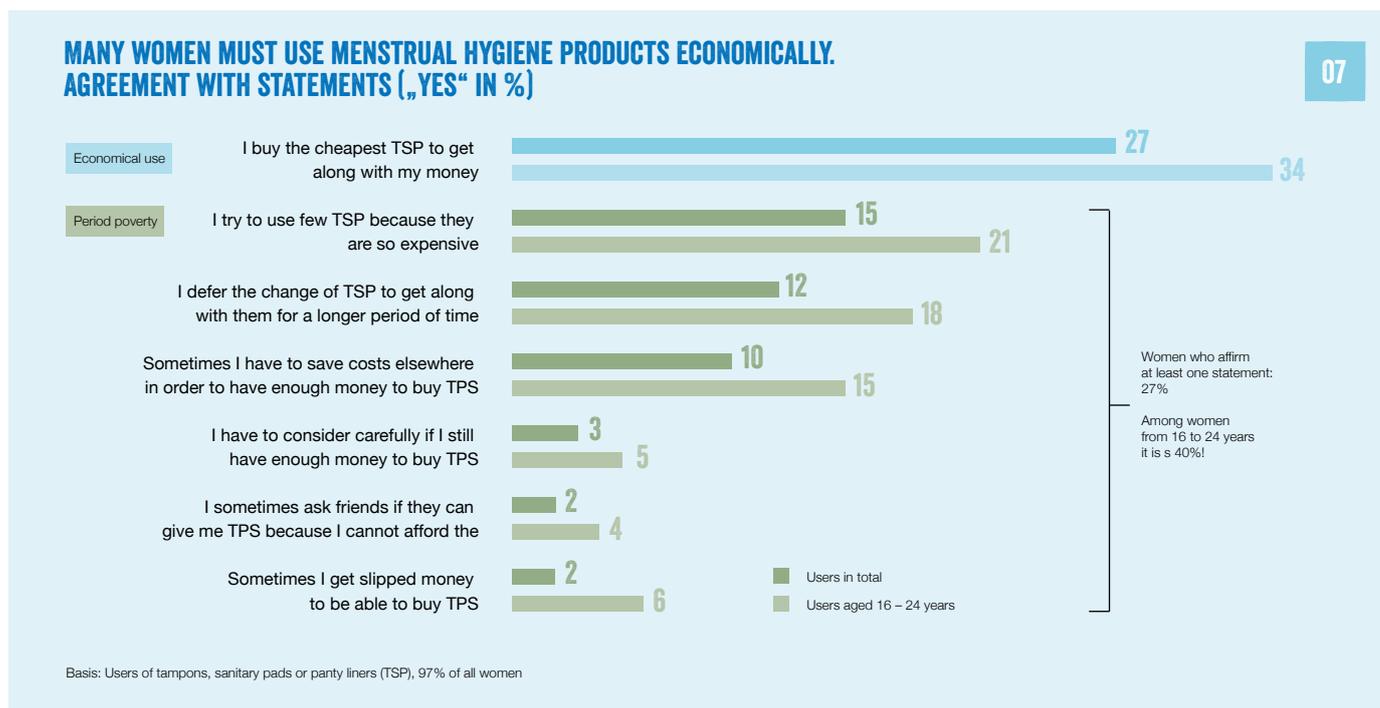
Calculations of the US online newspaper "HuffPost" are based on 38 years of menstrual cycle, which means an average of 456 cycles or 2,280 days <sup>23</sup>. In 2018, the German magazine "Der Spiegel" considered only the most important necessities - hygiene products and pain killers - and estimated the monthly costs at approx. 5 euros <sup>24</sup>. According to the Austrian menstruation portal "Erdbeerwoche", menstruating people spend 7,000 euros <sup>25</sup> on average for sanitary pads, tampons as well as pain killers and contraceptives during the whole duration of the cycle. This means approx. 15 euros per month. In 2017, "HuffPost" established a detailed list of all period costs <sup>26</sup>, including contraceptives. According to this list, a woman in the USA spends 18,171 US dollars (approx. 16,000 euros) on the period during her life. These are approx. 35 euros per month. The financial impact of menstruation is all the more important as women in Germany earn an average of 19 % less than their male colleagues (compared to a pay gap of 15 % in the EU on average). <sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> WASH United, [www.periodtax.org](http://www.periodtax.org) | <sup>22</sup> It is also difficult to verify whether the producers have always passed on the reduction of 12 % to the customers. | <sup>23</sup> "That means the average woman endures some 456 periods over 38 years, or roughly 2,280 days with her period – 6.25 years of her life." [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/period-cost-lifetime\\_n\\_7258780](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/period-cost-lifetime_n_7258780) | <sup>24</sup> [www.spiegel.de/gesundheit/diagnose/tampons-binden-schmerzmittel-was-kostet-die-menstruation-a-1220188.html](http://www.spiegel.de/gesundheit/diagnose/tampons-binden-schmerzmittel-was-kostet-die-menstruation-a-1220188.html) | <sup>25</sup> <https://erdbbeerwoche.com/meine-umwelt/tamponsteuer/> "Erdbeerwoche" does not consider any costs for other products such as teas, relaxing baths, homeopathic products, hot water bottles or costs for the replacement of underwear which cannot be used again. | <sup>26</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/period-cost-lifetime\\_n\\_7258780](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/period-cost-lifetime_n_7258780) | <sup>27</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-gender-pay-gap-shrinks-but-still-higher-than-eu-average/a-55860947>

With the help of our survey, we wanted to find out whether “period poverty” also exists in Germany, and if so, which impact this has. **32 % of the youngest surveyed age group (16- to 24-year-olds) said that the expenses for menstrual hygiene products were a financial burden for them. In all age groups, this is true for 23 % of the interviewees.** Thus, almost one in four women in Germany has problems to settle the expenses for the period. Especially young women with a low income have difficulties in raising these costs. (Diagram 07)

The interviewees explained if and how they could manage their period despite low financial resources. 15 % of the interviewees try to use as few tampons, sanitary pads and/or panty liners as possible during the period. If girls and

women intentionally delay the change of menstrual hygiene products to get along with them for a longer period of time, severe health problems might be caused, such as the toxic shock syndrome or an infection. For cost reasons, every tenth interviewee does not change the menstrual hygiene products as frequently as she should. In the youngest age group this is even true for 18 %. Furthermore, every tenth interviewee says that she sometimes has to save expenses elsewhere to be able to procure enough menstrual hygiene products. In the youngest age group, this is even true for every seventh woman. **Half of the women say they would better provide themselves with menstrual hygiene products if they were cheaper. In the youngest group this is even true for 70 %.** Thus, the costs are the main reason for the above-mentioned limitations. (Diagram 08)



## WHO IS AFFECTED BY “PERIOD POVERTY”?

Statistics for Germany show why so many menstruating people apparently experience “period poverty”. In 2021, there were approx. 2.82 million female Hartz IV recipients (unemployment benefit)<sup>28</sup>. According to the Hartz IV standard rate of 2021, they receive only 17.14 euros per month<sup>29</sup> for the entire domain of “hygiene and sanitation”.

This amount shall cover all expenses which belong to the domain of personal hygiene and health care in a wider sense: prescription drugs, body care and oral care products, repair of glasses as well as hygiene products and other products for menstruating people. The association Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband (Federation of Welfare Organisations) has ascertained that this amount is definitely insufficient and recommends to almost double it to 30.22 euros<sup>30</sup>. In addition, the corona crisis has slightly increased poverty in Germany: today 16.1 percent of the population or 13.4 million citizens are considered as poor<sup>31</sup>. This is the highest level according to the latest poverty report (2021).

Also menstruating people who do an apprenticeship and get a low wage as well as students who receive Bafög (support in education) often must get by with little money. In 2020/21, the highest rate for Bafög recipients amounted to 861 euros<sup>32</sup>. Some of them are probably also affected by period poverty.

“Social Period”, an initiative founded by two Berlin students, points to another very precarious group who are particularly affected by period poverty: homeless women of reproductive age. In Germany approx. 100,000 women live in the streets and many of them are affected by period poverty<sup>33</sup>.

## 4.7. HOW THE PERIOD MAKES DAILY LIFE DIFFICULT

The period influences daily life of almost all menstruating people. In order to find out how strong the impact on daily life of girls and women is, the participants were also asked whether they cancel or reduce (certain) activities during the period.

According to the survey, they especially cancel or reduce sport activities – most frequently swimming. Three in four women who regularly go swimming do not go to the swimming pool during their menstruation. This is not always due to physical accompanying effects, but another reason might be the hygiene product they use. 42 % of the interviewees do not take part in team sport activities during their menstruation or reduce them, and every third does not exercise alone. 12 % do not (always) go to school, university or vocational training during the period. 8 % cancel or reduce meetings with the family or professional obligations. (Diagram 09)

### WOMEN: REASONS FOR LIMITATION/ CANCELLATION DURING PERIOD (%)

09



“As women we always have trouble explaining. [...] People say strange things such as: you are bad-tempered. Do you have your period?”

Participant, 25 – 34 years old

<sup>28</sup> <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/383588/umfrage/hartz-iv-empfaenger-in-deutschland-nach-geschlecht/> | <sup>29</sup> <https://www.lpb-bw.de/regelsatz-hartziv#c54427> |

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.der-paritaetische.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publikationen/doc/expertise-regelsatz\\_2020\\_web.pdf](https://www.der-paritaetische.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Publikationen/doc/expertise-regelsatz_2020_web.pdf) (Seite 15) |

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.der-paritaetische.de/themen/sozialpolitik-arbeit-und-europa/armut-und-grundsicherung/armutsbericht> | <sup>32</sup> [www.bafogeg-rechner.de/FAQ/bafogeg-hoehstsatz.php](https://www.bafogeg-rechner.de/FAQ/bafogeg-hoehstsatz.php) | <sup>33</sup> <https://www.socialperiod.org/#darum-gehts>

Discomfort (75 %) is the most frequent reason why women reduce or cancel an activity during their period, followed by pain (62 %). A worrying fact is that almost every third interviewee said that lacking or inadequate toilets and sanitary facilities were the reason to cancel or reduce activities. One in four menstruating people cancels activities because she fears that she might not be able to change sanitary pads and/or tampons early enough.

Irrespective of which activities she cancels due to the period and its accompanying effects: no woman does it with a light heart. **At least every second affected woman feels uncomfortable or very uncomfortable to cancel an activity.** 14 % of the women who maintain daily activities during their period do so because they fear to face a lack of understanding or negative consequences. For this reason, one in six interviewees also continues to do the household chores. **They are most worried when they must call in sick at work, school, vocational training or university.** One in four women continues these activities despite menstruation troubles. This corresponds to our performance-orientated society in which for decades advertising and the industry have conveyed the idea that the period did not lead to any restrictions in daily life.

**The fear to face a lack of understanding is not unfounded: more than a third of the women said that they experienced a lack of acceptance when reducing or cancelling activities.** 59 % of the women hear negative comments from their family during their period. Every second woman faces such comments when being together with the partner and/or at school, vocational training or university. Furthermore, 39 % said that they also heard negative comments when meeting friends. **In our survey 79 % of the men said that they had already heard or given “stupid” comments regarding women during the period.**



## 4.8. MEN AND MENSTRUATION – THEIR UNDERSTANDING SHOULD BE IMPROVED

Especially men in partnerships say that they are very interested in supporting their partner during the period: **73 % said that they supported their partner in this time. This corresponds exactly to the percentage of women who confirmed that they received such support.** 67 % of the men also said that it was okay for them to buy menstrual hygiene articles for their partner in the drugstore or supermarket.

But if the period leads to restrictions for the men themselves – for example if women cancel joint activities – they will accept the decision of their partner to a lesser extent. **Across all activities included in the survey, every fifth man thinks it is exaggerated or not acceptable when women reduce or cancel activities during the period.** However, there are considerable differences as regards the age and educational background: the younger and less educated they are, the less do the men accept a “no”.

## EVERY FIFTH MAN

THINKS IT IS EXAGGERATED OR NOT ACCEPTABLE WHEN WOMEN REDUCE OR CANCEL ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD.

“These stupid comments annoy me. Petulance and temper are reduced to the period irrespective of whether women have the period or not.”

Participant, 35 – 45 years old



# 40 % OF THE MEN

THINK IT IS EXAGGERATED WHEN WOMEN  
DO NOT WANT TO BE TOGETHER  
WITH THE FAMILY DUE TO PERIOD PAINS.

40 % of the men think it is exaggerated when women do not want to be together with the family due to period pains. Every third man does not understand it when women are not, or only to a limited extent, able to do the household chores. Furthermore, 29 % resp. 28 % of the male interviewees do not understand that women call in sick at work or at school, vocational training or university due to the period.

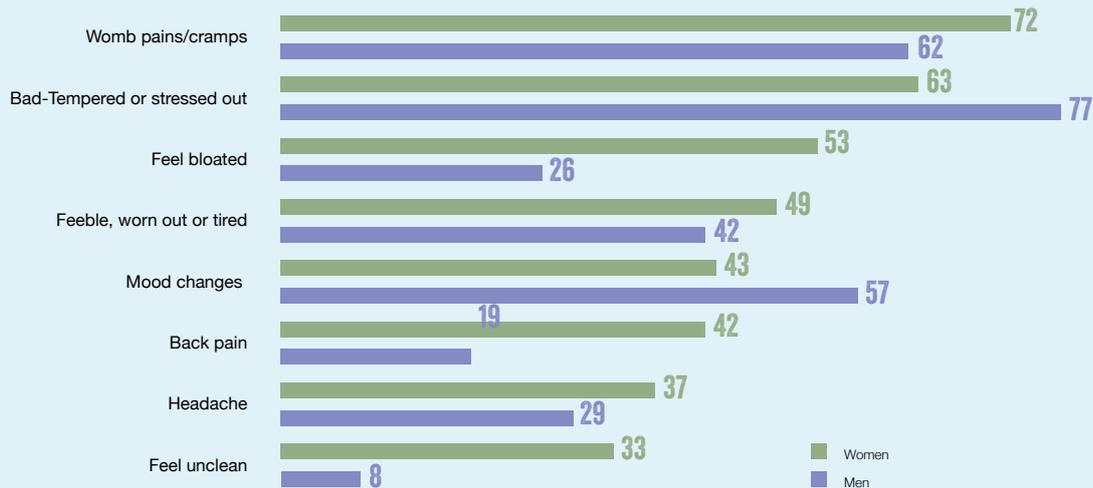
(Diagram 10)



Men notice that women suffer from accompanying effects of the period – however they more frequently notice mental responses, such as petulance and mood changes, than cramps or back pain. They even observe them more frequently than women themselves say to be affected by them: 77 % of the men have already supposed that women were bad-tempered or stressed out during their period. 57 % thought that women suffered from considerable mood changes in this time. At the same time, "only" 63 % of the women said to be bad-tempered or stressed out, and "only" 43 % said they had mood changes. This suggests that men sometimes (might) stereotypically tie mood changes among women to menstruation troubles or women do not (want to) talk about their concrete troubles with men. (Diagram 11)

## ACCOMPANYING SYMPTOMS OF THE PERIOD AND HOW MEN PERCEIVE OR SUSPECT THEM (%)

11



When men talk about menstruation, they mainly talk with trusted women: **slightly more than half of the interviewed men said that their partner involved them into this topic.** Approx. every third man talks with close female friends about menstruation. However, one in five men said that he did not talk about the topic with any women – this especially applies to young men.

The period is not an easy topic among men. Only slightly more than every third man talks about it with other men. **25% of the interviewed men prefer to get informed about it on the internet instead of talking about it with someone.** One in seven men does not want to know what is happening during the period, and more than every tenth man thinks that the period is a matter that concerns only girls and women. However, the topic is not necessarily indifferent to them, but the feeling that it is a taboo to talk about it is especially strong among men. 9% of the interviewed men say that they feel reluctant to talk about the topic. They sometimes would like to ask something about the period, but they do not dare to do so. This might have a (negative) impact on the knowledge level of men about menstruation: less than 25% said they were well informed about the period. 64% think that they are roughly informed.

**MEN NOTICE THAT WOMEN SUFFER FROM ACCOMPANYING EFFECTS OF THE PERIOD – HOWEVER THEY MORE FREQUENTLY NOTICE MENTAL RESPONSES, THAN CRAMPS OR BACK PAIN.**



## ONE IN SEVEN MEN

DOES NOT WANT TO KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING  
DURING THE PERIOD.



## 5. WHAT GIRLS AND WOMEN WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE – AND WHAT MEN THINK ABOUT IT

Awareness raising is an important concern to menstruating people. **79% think that schools should inform better and more openly about the period. 68% think that boys and men should be more involved and made aware of the topic.** Almost two thirds of the interviewees think that people should talk more about the period. This shows that they wish to break the taboo around menstruation and would welcome a (positive) change of attitude. A large majority of menstruating people want to end discrimination. They no longer want to be laughed at or made look like a fool and they demand that the period shall no longer be considered as a weakness.

**They also criticise that the equipment of toilets in public facilities is often inadequate.** 82% of the interviewees say that there should be sanitary bags, waste bins, soap and enough space. **Not even half of the menstruating people are satisfied with the current hygiene situation in public buildings.** They think that the equipment is better at the place of work and in schools and universities. 75% of the interviewees are satisfied with them.

The interviewees also consider “period poverty” as an important topic. 80% want politicians to support women who cannot afford menstrual hygiene products. **And 80% think that cost-free tampons and sanitary pads should be provided in public facilities and more sustainable menstrual hygiene products should be offered.**

(Diagram 12)

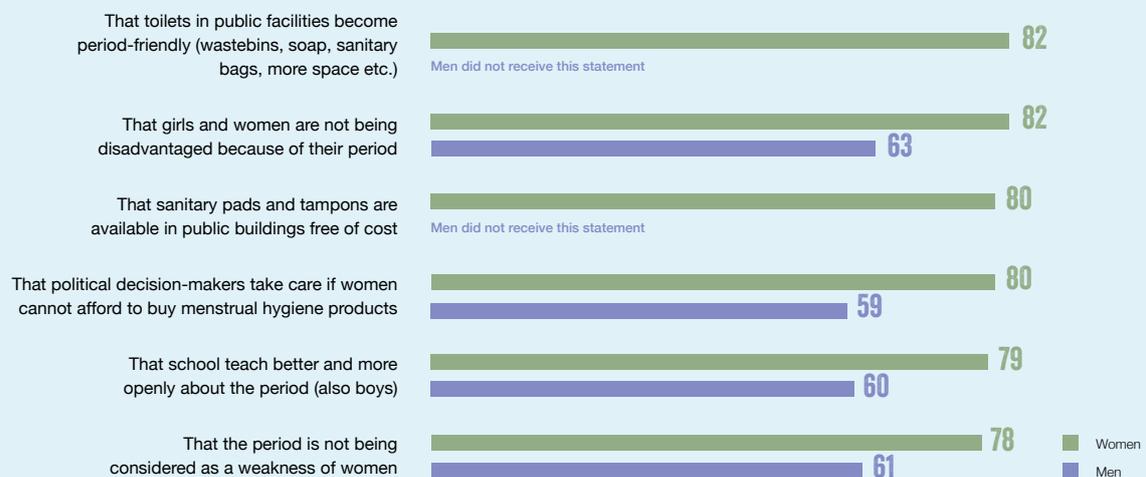
In general, men agree less to these wishes expressed by many women. But it is interesting that 50% say they would like to be more involved in the topic and be better informed about it. **Almost every second man would like to have trusted persons to talk about it. Every second man would appreciate it if women talked more openly about their period with men.** (Diagram 13)

80 %

THINK THAT COST-FREE TAMPONS AND SANITARY PADS SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN PUBLIC FACILITIES AND MORE SUSTAINABLE MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS SHOULD BE OFFERED.

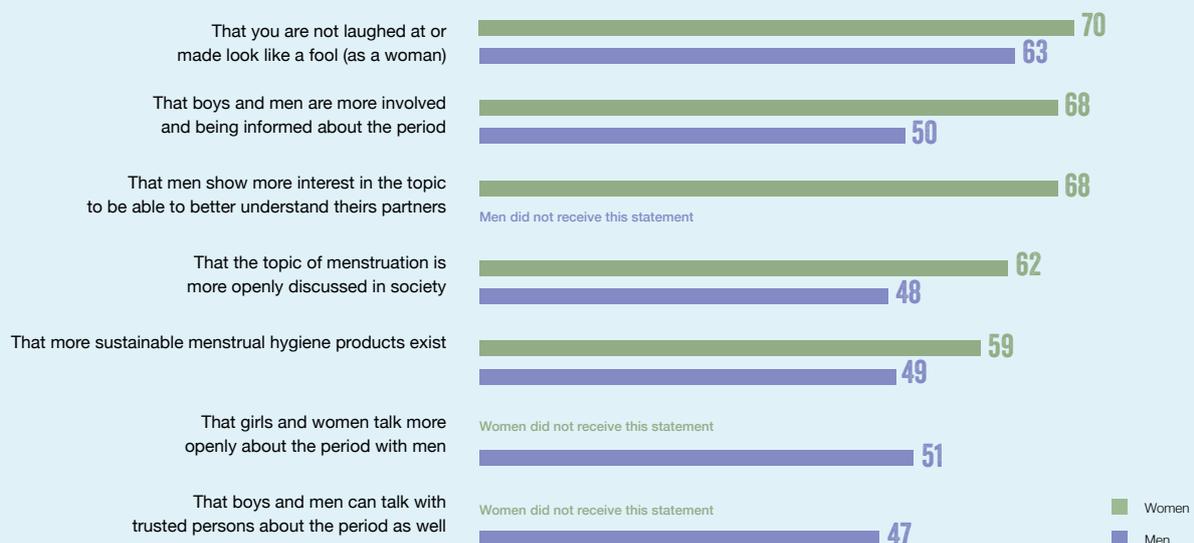
### WOMEN AND MEN (1): CHANGES IN SOCIETY REGARDING THE PERIOD: “THIS IS WHAT I WISH TO HAPPEN” (%)

12



### WOMEN AND MEN (2): CHANGES IN SOCIETY REGARDING THE PERIOD: “THIS IS WHAT I WISH TO HAPPEN” (%)

13



**MENSTRUATION IS  
NORMAL FOR GIRLS**



# 6. TIME TO ACT: SOMETHING NEEDS TO HAPPEN!

Menstruation must become what it is: the most normal thing in the world. No girl, no woman and no menstruating person should be prevented from exercising her rights and developing her full potential due to the period. But before achieving this goal, many things must change both in Germany and worldwide.

## 6.1. DEMANDS OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL AND WASH UNITED FOR GERMANY

- **Cost-free menstrual hygiene products in all schools and public facilities:** Reducing the VAT in 2020 was the first important step to improve access to menstrual hygiene products. Scotland and other governments<sup>34</sup> have already made the next step and provide cost-free menstrual hygiene products in all public facilities. We demand that cost-free menstrual hygiene products are provided in all schools, universities and public facilities in Germany.
- **Improving the sanitary facilities in schools and public buildings:** Many toilets are not equipped in a period-friendly manner. Waste bins with a lid to dispose of sanitary pads and tampons often do not exist. Sometimes, there is a lack of soap and toilet paper. We demand to provide adequate sanitary facilities in all German schools, universities and public buildings, which meet the needs of menstruating girls and women<sup>35</sup>.
- **Improving education about menstruation in schools:** All young people should receive modern and not embarrassing education about menstruation at school. It shall not only inform about biological facts, but also reduce taboos and increase the self-esteem of girls. We demand to provide more funds for the development and distribution of modern and product-neutral educational contents which are provided to all teachers and pupils free of cost and which can be used throughout the country. Furthermore, it should be ensured that education about menstruation is part of the curriculum of class 5 and 6 in all federal states.
- **Ending the period taboo:** We demand the German government to conduct a public awareness raising campaign to change social norms and attitudes around the topic of menstruation in all parts of the German society. The Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28th is a good occasion to launch such a campaign.

## 6.2. DEMANDS OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL AND WASH UNITED IN THE FIELD OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND HUMANITARIAN AID

- **Clear and measurable targets for the topic of menstrual health and hygiene:** In its Water Strategy of 2017, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) defined clear and measurable targets for the domain of water and sanitation. Specific targets for menstrual health and hygiene do not yet exist, neither in the field of development cooperation nor in humanitarian aid. Together with the civil society, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) should define clear and measurable targets regarding menstruation in the domains of development cooperation and humanitarian aid.
- **Providing more funds for menstrual health and hygiene:** More funds are urgently required to sustain and expand the successful activities of German organisations regarding the topic of menstruation in development cooperation and humanitarian aid.
- **Menstrual health and hygiene should be better integrated into existing projects and programmes of BMZ and GFFO, especially in the domains of sexual and reproductive health and rights, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)<sup>36</sup> as well as education:** We must ensure good communication between the responsible ministries and the civil society to be able to better use the existing expertise, identify approved solution approaches and support their implementation through BMZ and GFFO.

Picture left: Sign to raise awareness about menstruation in Uganda.

<sup>34</sup> [www.periodtax.org](http://www.periodtax.org) | <sup>35</sup> The initiative "Toiletten machen Schule" (2018/19) of the German Toilet Organization reveals that school toilets in Germany are often in a desolate condition and are not sufficiently adapted to the needs of menstruating girls. | <sup>36</sup> WASH is the acronym for Wash, Sanitation and Hygiene.



Young women in Bangladesh making sanitary pads.

## 7. GLOBAL COMMITMENT OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL IN THE FIELD OF MENSTRUATION

The start of menstruation is an important moment in a girl's life. It can be connected with positive and negative feelings and experiences. As an organisation which promotes children's rights and equality for girls, Plan International strives to overcome barriers and inequality related to menstruation.

Girls, women and other menstruating people should be able to live a life free from stigmatisation and constraints.

**Integration of menstrual health and hygiene into our projects is essential in order to ensure children's rights and equality for girls.**

### IMPORTANCE OF MENSTRUATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Being a child rights organisation focussing on the rights of girls and young women, menstrual health and hygiene is an important topic when planning the programmes. It is not an individual topic, but it is closely tied to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals of the UN<sup>37</sup>, such as SDG3: good health and well-being, SDG4: quality education, SDG5: gender equality; SDG6: clean water and sanitation; SDG8: decent work and economic growth.

<sup>37</sup> For more information about the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, see: <https://unric.org/de/17ziele/>

**Plan International's work on menstrual health and hygiene focuses on the following three core areas:**

- Informing menstruating people, their families and communities, e.g. through health education and awareness raising campaigns.
- Supporting access to affordable and adequate menstrual hygiene products, e.g. by working with girls and women on the production and - in some cases - sale of reusable menstrual hygiene products.
- Improving access to (clean) toilets and sanitary facilities, especially in schools, to help girls and women manage their menstruation with dignity so that their education or work is not impaired. This includes, among other things, the construction and rehabilitation of sanitary facilities in schools or in accommodations for internally displaced people or refugees.

**In some cultures, the start of menstruation indicates that young girls have become women and can be married.** Thus, the first menstruation blood can mean the end of childhood. The abrupt transition to adulthood may have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of girls – especially when they give birth, which is often the case in marriages with (considerably) older men. Child marriage usually means that girls have to drop out from school and have less economic opportunities in their life.

Furthermore, it means nothing less than child abuse. The children of very young mothers often have poor health prospects and less educational opportunities – it is a vicious circle. For this reason, Plan International especially focuses on the domain of sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as menstrual health and hygiene.

**The climate change may also have a negative impact on women's opportunities to manage their menstrual hygiene.** In many countries, women and girls bear the main responsibility for the household chores, including fetching water. Due to increasing drought periods, they must cover longer distances in some regions to collect water. In these cases, water becomes a precious commodity and washing clothes or menstrual hygiene materials is sometimes neglected. This reduces girls' and women's mobility outside their home.

**Crises and disasters** are increasing throughout the world, and this means that there are more and more refugee girls and women who must seek shelter in crowded emergency accommodations with inadequate and overstretched sanitary facilities which provide hardly any privacy. In such a situation, it is very difficult for menstruating people to manage their period with dignity. Plan therefore provides hygiene kits for girls and women in the context of flight and migration and conducts workshops on sexual and reproductive health and rights.



Homemade cloth bandages from Uganda in different colours.



Separate toilets and washrooms make it easier for girls in Uganda to attend school.

## 8. CASE STUDIES FROM THE PROJECT COUNTRIES OF PLAN

### 8.1. UGANDA: “A BLOODY SERIOUS MATTER”

In Uganda one in four adolescent girls does not attend school during her period due to a lack of hygiene products and for fear of humiliation<sup>38</sup>. In the project “A Bloody Serious Matter” conducted from 2014 - 2020, Plan International improved the knowledge, attitudes and menstrual hygiene practices of more than 200,000 people in the districts of Tororo, Lira and Kamuli.

In 197 health clubs established by Plan International at schools, girls and boys learned about menstruation and how to manage the period. By means of 1,000 theatre plays and 113 radio talk shows, they passed on their knowledge to other community members and held public discussions about the topic with staff of local health authorities as well as religious leaders.

In addition, 284 entrepreneurs from youth groups and women’s groups, teachers and health workers were trained on how to produce hygienic and reusable sanitary pads and how to procure the needed materials from suppliers. They learned which kind of cotton is suitable to produce the padding and protective cover and which synthetic material should be used to prevent leaking. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, a training manual on menstruation was developed and introduced in many educational facilities throughout the country.

<sup>38</sup> <http://library.health.go.ug/publications/adolescent-health/adolescent-health-risk-behaviors-uganda-national-cross-sectional>, p 65 ff.

THE NUMBER OF GIRLS  
WHO GRADUATED FROM SCHOOL

**INCREASED  
FROM 56 TO 95 %.**

By constructing 69 girl-friendly toilets and 34 water points, the number of gender-separated sanitary facilities at schools was increased. The school authorities provide 10 – 20 % of their annual budget for the maintenance of the sanitary facilities and the procurement of materials to produce sanitary pads during the lessons. Thanks to the advocacy work of Plan International and other organisations, menstrual health and hygiene have become part of the national curriculum at all schools in Uganda since 2020. In 2020, the government also abolished the taxes on sanitary pads and on materials needed to produce sanitary pads. As a result, the price for a sanitary pad reduced by 50 %.

During the project period, the number of girls who graduated from school increased from 56 to 95 % in Tororo, Lira and Kamuli – a result achieved through the water and hygiene activities in combination with other measures. The knowledge about menstruation has also been improved: in 2020, 95 % of the girls and 90 % of the boys were correctly informed about the topic. The way how girls and boys treat each other and the power relations changed in the six project years: girls are no longer teased because of their period, but encouraged by the boys and their fathers to stay in school after the start of their menstruation. In addition, the teachers talk about the topic in their lessons.

“We included boys into the clubs. [...]. They play an active role. One of the boys pulled off his pullover and gave it to a girl whose dress was dirty. Thus, she could cover the spots. The boys also help clean the bathrooms of the girls, and they know that they should not be there after cleaning them. The boys even carry water to the girls’ toilets.”

(Teacher from Tororo)



Young boy from Uganda sewing.



Successful project work: bandages sewn by students from Uganda.

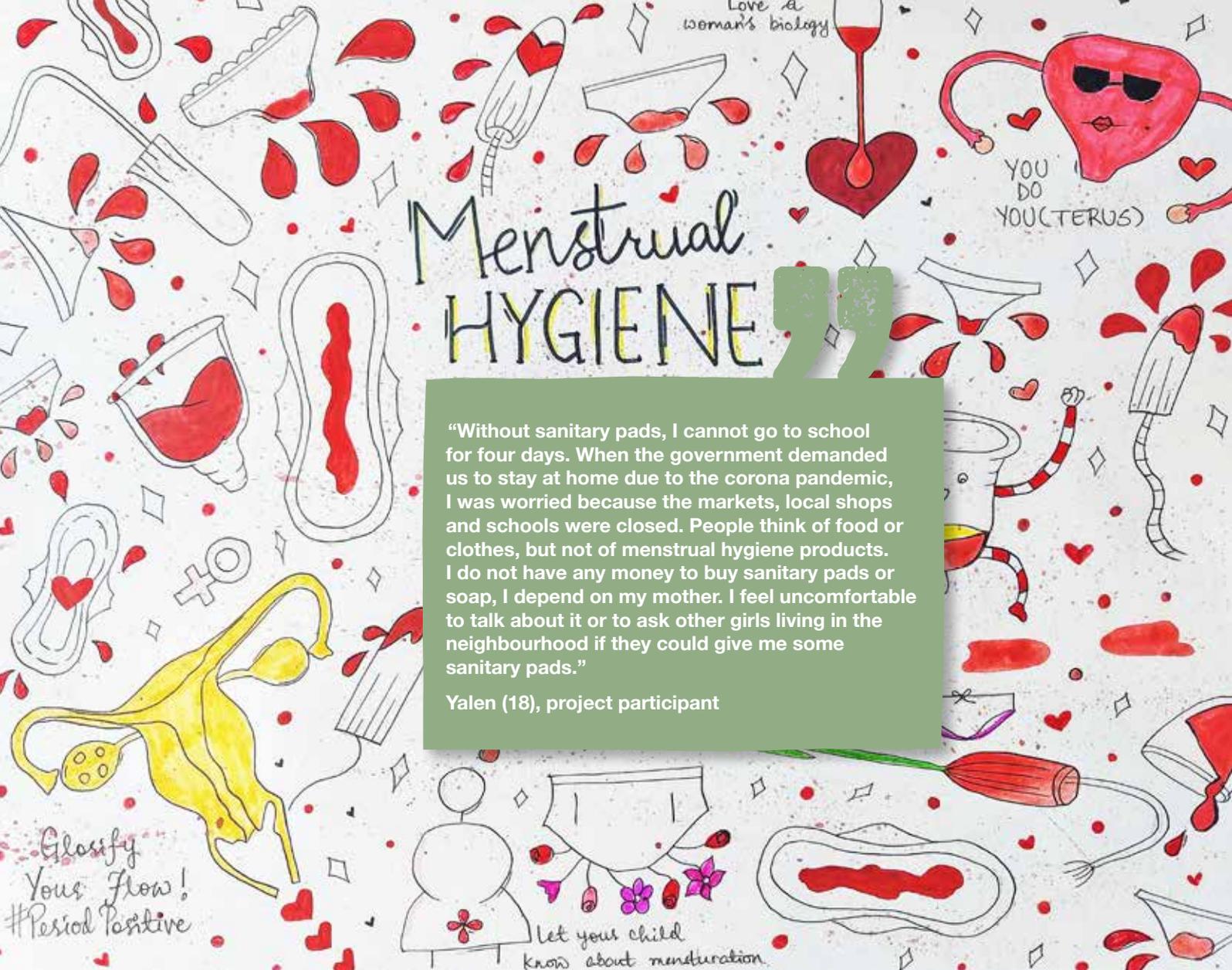


Illustration on menstruation by a schoolgirl from Nepal.

## 8.2. INDONESIA: NEW WAYS WITH MENSTRUATION UNDERWEAR

During the corona pandemic, especially remote and hardly accessible regions in Indonesia faced huge challenges. It was difficult to ensure the provision with vital goods and hygiene products. To respond to the school closures during the corona crisis, Plan International developed online awareness raising courses on menstrual health and hygiene. In small groups, trained youths informed other girls and boys in a snowball system. Although the period is considered as a taboo in the traditional Indonesian communities, these virtual peer education sessions were very successful. “We noticed that the students asked more questions than in face-to-face learning sessions, especially the boys”, says Silvia Landa, WASH project manager of Plan International in Indonesia.

With period underwear of the Australian brand “Modibodi”, Plan International started a three-month pilot project for reusable period slips in October 2020. 333 girls and women received three reusable slips each as well as informative materials. After the end of the project, 99% of all girls and women said that they wanted to continue to use the period underwear. 74% of the interviewees said that they felt safer in managing their menstruation. By using the reusable “Modibodi” slips, the quantity of disposable hygiene products was also reduced. “The pilot project shows that reusable period underwear is a good solution and can contribute to the struggle against menstruation poverty in Indonesia”, says Silvia Landa.

### 8.3. COLOMBIA: PILOT PROJECT “COPA” FOR REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS

Due to the crisis in Venezuela, Colombia has been affected by a complex humanitarian emergency situation since 2015. 1.7 million refugees from Venezuela are currently living in the Latin American country - many of them do not have any financial resources<sup>39</sup>.

Menstruation is an important topic in humanitarian aid. Plan's aim is that all girls and women throughout the world have access to menstrual hygiene products, including refugees as well as girls and women in accommodating communities. Menstruation cups may change the understanding of the period as the flexible silicon cups can be easily used after training and have a life span of up to ten years. When changing them, they are always properly cleaned and after the menstruation they are disinfected with boiling water. Menstruation cups make it easier for girls and women in emergencies to manage their menstruation as the cups are always at hand and no additional expenses are required.

In 2021, these considerations led to the start of the pilot project COPA (= cup)<sup>40</sup> in Colombia. Refugees from Venezuela and Colombian women from the project communities received menstruation cups, reusable period slips and a small pot to boil out and sterilize the menstruation cup.

Facilitators supported the participants during the six-month project period. They trained the young women during a period of five cycles and showed them how to use the products correctly and hygienically. In monthly group meetings, the girls and women improved their knowledge of their cycle and the physical and emotional changes. At the same time, fears and discriminatory ideas about menstruation were reduced.

The pilot project COPA is one of the first emergency aid projects worldwide in which menstruation cups were used. It has an exemplary function. Based on this project, a global humanitarian aid approach will be developed. For this reason, the participants were asked to answer some questions before, during and after each of the five cycles. Based on all facts and records, the success of the activities was assessed. Through COPA, the refugee girls and women received sustainable menstrual hygiene products which they did not know before due to poor access to gynaecological health care and which they could not afford in their emergency situation.



Enlightenment in Colombia: Girls with menstrual hygiene underwear.

<sup>39</sup> “Girls in Crisis” report on the situation of refugee girls from Venezuela: <https://www.plan.de/presse/pressematerial-maedchen-in-krise-regionen.html> | <sup>40</sup> The project is part of the projects supported by Beiersdorf as part of the “Care beyond Skin” programme.



Rwanda: Girl Guides educate younger girls with the Education Guide (Photo: WASH United).

## 9. EXAMPLES FROM THE GLOBAL WORK OF WASH UNITED

### 9.1. PROMOTING EDUCATION ABOUT MENSTRUATION THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

Through the **“Menstrual Hygiene Education Guide”**, WASH United provides an innovative solution to educate girls aged 10 - 14 about the period. The guide can be easily used and is inexpensive. It does not only inform about puberty, the period and good hygiene, but also increases the girls’ self-confidence and promotes communication among them.

The “Education Guide” is provided to partner organisations in the global South free of cost via a digital platform. These organisations implement this guide in their projects. So far, more than 1.6 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa/Middle East have been reached with education about the period.<sup>41</sup>

At the end of May 2022, “Emmas Welt” (“Emma’s World”) will be launched, a new education solution for German-speaking countries to inform about menstruation in a modern and non-embarrassing manner.<sup>42</sup>

### 9.2. MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY: REMOVING THE TABOOS FROM THE PERIOD

WASH United organises the “Menstrual Hygiene Day” on May 28th, the largest campaign worldwide to remove the taboo from the period. Together with more than 830 partner organisations from all over the world, the Menstrual Hygiene Day raises awareness and helps reduce taboos and stigmas. It encourages governments and other organisations to do more in this field.

In 2021, more than 560 million people throughout the world were reached with positive, taboo-breaking messages about menstruation: [www.menstrualhygieneday.org](http://www.menstrualhygieneday.org)

<sup>41</sup> Link to the guide: <https://www.wash-united.org/mhm-guide/mhm-guide.html> | <sup>42</sup> [www.periodenaufklärung.de](http://www.periodenaufklärung.de) (starting in autumn 2022)



## 10. CLOSING WORDS

The results of the representative survey conducted by Plan International in 2021 clearly show that Germany is still far away from being a period-aware and period-friendly society. If the claims stated in chapter 6 were implemented, we would have done a big step forward. To reach this goal, all interest groups and institutions should work together: politicians, the society, schools, menstruating people and men – for more awareness raising, openness, tolerance, deference and cost-free provision of menstrual hygiene products. In the field of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the topic of menstrual health is also becoming more and more important. In the programmes, funds should be provided to enable girls and women in the global South to manage their period safely and with dignity.



Safe to school: protection also on critical days for schoolgirls in Uganda.



**Plan International ([www.plan.de](http://www.plan.de))** is an independent organisation for development cooperation and humanitarian aid. We believe that girls and boys worldwide must have equal rights and opportunities and be able to actively shape their future. In order to achieve this, we carry out sustainable community development projects efficiently and transparently in our partner countries and respond rapidly to emergencies and disasters that threaten the lives of children. We work together with children, youths, supporters and partners of all genders to achieve our global aims in more than 75 countries. The sustainable development goals of the United Nations reinforce our commitment.



**WASH United ([www.wash-United.org](http://www.wash-United.org))** is a charitable organisation founded in 2011 and seated in Berlin. The aim of the organisation is that all people worldwide have access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). WASH United focuses on the taboo topic of menstruation. In 2014, WASH United initiated the Menstrual Hygiene Day ([www.menstrualhygieneday.org](http://www.menstrualhygieneday.org), MH Day), the largest global campaign to remove the taboo from the period. Furthermore, WASH United develops modern and scalable contents to inform about menstruation at schools and has already reached more than 1.6 million girls.