



#FreePeriods

Why the period can become a way to poverty and what to do about it

INTERVIEW WITH AMIKA GEORGE BY MARIE-LUISE ABSHAGEN

Half of the world population has it. Nevertheless, it still is hardly ever mentioned in public: the period. Besides accompanying pains, embarrassment and cultural taboos, many girls and women face one further obstacle in this natural process. Menstrual products cost money. Often so much, that for many they are unaffordable. As a consequence, a female form of poverty arises hindering girls and women to properly participate in public life, leading to health implications and limiting economic development of women and societies. This is a clear obstacle to gender equality – addressed in SDG 5. But resistance is on the rise. In the UK the campaign #FreePeriods aims at bringing the issue of period poverty to the public discussion and is organising protest.

Can you explain what your fight against period poverty is about? What is period poverty and who is suffering the most from this?

I started the #FreePeriods campaign after I heard that there were children in the UK who were missing school every month because they didn't have the money to buy menstrual products. It really horrified me that it was happening right under our noses, and that the government wasn't taking action to get these children back in school. I'd never heard of this term, 'period poverty' and it really unsettled me to think that girls were compromising on their education just because they have periods. It was clear that their missing school means sustained gaps in learning which can have a really negative impact on exam results and academic progress. It seemed so unfair to me so I decided to start a petition to lobby the government to provide free menstrual products for all children on free school meals, and decided to work to break the stigma surrounding menstruation through conversation and awareness.

I started #FreePeriods back in April last year [2017] and since then, I've met with several MPs and Peers to tell them why period poverty must be addressed and how we will never get anywhere close to gender parity if something as normal and natural as periods becomes a barrier to achievement.

Why did you get involved in this issue?

As women, we face far too many challenges as it is. There's really deep-rooted poverty in the UK which is crippling families on many levels. For the families from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, there's a growing reliance on food banks and the Trussell Trust [the largest network of food banks in the UK] has said that food donations are on the rise which is alarming. When there's no money for food, there's never money for pads or tampons. That falls right to the bottom of the list of priorities and children then go without. It really upset me that those girls who go through period poverty go through such stress and anxiety every month not knowing if they've leaked onto their uniform and whether they'll be laughed at by their classmates. Others resort to using socks or tissues which doesn't even bear thinking about. I

think that we need to support each other, and if that means fighting to make things better for each other – if we can, and want to – we should. I felt moved to take action and I haven't looked back

What are concrete measures you are proposing to fight period poverty?

I launched a campaign calling for the government to provide free access to pads and tampons for girls from low-income families, called it #FreePeriods and got to work. As the campaign gathered pace, the signatures on the online petition began to rise rapidly. In between studying for my A Levels, I started writing about period poverty, telling everyone who would listen how girls were being held back because they bleed and were poor. I started talking about my own period without shame, without embarrassment, with pride.

In an age where everyday sexism seems firmly rooted in our daily lives, our periods simply cannot be the reason we are held back from realising real, visible gender equality. 137,500 British girls have missed school because they couldn't afford pads or tampons. For me, this is a feminist fight because we do not choose to bleed; menstruation is not something we opt into

Periods are a taboo for many. The topic of period poverty might also be perceived as a women's issue. Men might be even embarrassed to talk about it. But in most fields of gender or social policies we see that it is important to get all genders involved? Can this be achieved with the fight against period poverty?

The taboo is very much there. I still see so many red-faces when I mention the word, 'period' and hasty changes of subject, but it's definitely getting better. People are more open to talking about menstruation, and about issues, which perhaps ten years ago were off limits. I do still hear from men who say they don't want to talk about periods because it's got nothing to do with them. But having said that, there were lots of men who came to the #FreePeriods protest, who have signed the petition, who have written to me to tell me how glad they are that period poverty is being talked about.

The reality is that there are pockets of society where young girls are suffering from period poverty and cannot tell a soul. Period taboo is just the most ridiculous thing – this shame and silence around something so normal – means that those suffering from period poverty are too embarrassed to tell people. Period poverty taboo stems from the wider shame around menstruation. It's all part of the message that has spanned centuries that periods somehow make us unclean or dirty in some way; there are still parts of Italy where women can't make pasta sauce if they're menstruating. Chhaupadi, the tradition of women having to sleep outdoors while on their period, is still rife in parts of Nepal and even in the UK today, manufacturers of sanitary products have been complicated in making periods something that should be all cloak and daggers. I do believe this is changing, but there's still so much work to do. We need to talk really openly about our periods, without shame and embarrassment. Women and girls have to initiate that, and speak to boys and men about them so it becomes just an everyday thing. Conversation will normalise the subject over time, and although it's really hard to do that when we've been conditioned into thinking it's a subject that we have to keep under wraps, small steps really count in a big way.

Education is the key here. School education must be for boys and girls. It used to be the case that boys would be asked to leave the room during period education, but it's vital that they are engaged and involved. Boys need to understand that periods are not a subject to shrink away from, and that there should never be a taboo about them. This can be done in the classroom, in literature, by pad and tampon manufacturers. It can come from homes, from parents, from the media, and slowly that message will seep through.

How did politicians and the government receive it? Do you see a lack of regulation or political awareness of this issue? Did politicians respond to your protest and your demands?

There is most certainly something of a period revolution happening right now. People are talking far more openly about periods and period poverty and this is being recognised by the government. When there was a general election in the UK in 2017, I wrote to all the

political parties to convince them to include a pledge to end period poverty in their manifestos. I'm pleased to say that other than the governing Conservative Party, all the other major Parties included a statutory commitment in their Manifestos, which was incredibly encouraging.

Since I started #FreePeriods, I've been working with some Peers in the House of Lords, and also with some incredible Members of Parliament. The Government has listened to some extent. In March of this year, they promised to give some of the Tampon Tax Fund (the money collected from taxing period products) to charities to tackle period poverty. This is excellent, and a very hopeful start, but we are looking for a long-term statutory pledge from the government.

I'm very disappointed that the government is, however, denying that period poverty is the underlying reason for some school absences. They've used existing school absence data to say that period poverty is not keeping girls out of school. My argument is that given the wider taboo around periods, finding that level of detail about school absences is highly unlikely.

Do you already see any changes in society and politics?

Since the protest, and since the proliferation of campaigners shouting for change in the past year or so, it's been encouraging to see politicians really making waves in Parliament and speaking openly about period poverty. Just recently, one MP spoke very honestly about the cost of pads during a session in Parliament. Period poverty is very much a term that's understood and familiar within our vocabulary now, something that wasn't the case a year ago. I'm contacted every single day by people who want to know how they can help, and #FreePeriods has been started in many countries across the globe. There's most certainly an acknowledgement that periods need to come out from the shadows and be something that we are not scared or embarrassed to talk about.

Looking at a global picture, the lack of access to sanitary products is a huge development and health factor. In many countries of the Global South girls miss up to 20 per cent of school per year because they lack

the funds to buy menstrual products. This also often means that they have to use alternative materials for their periods such as banana peels, old clothing, sand or plastic bags, which may cause health issues. Does your movement address these dynamics? Should or can we have a global movement against period poverty – keeping in mind cultural and religious backgrounds of girls and women worldwide?

I think there does need to be a global movement addressing the issue of period poverty and a movement to change the cultural taboos that exist in many parts of the world. In many parts of the world, the school dropout rate for girls is at its highest when a girl starts her period. Lack of access to menstrual products means that girls think it's not feasible to continue their education and they remain trapped in a cycle of deprivation due to not being able to take advantage of opportunities to improve her life. In addition, schools simply do not provide clean sanitation and girls feel that their needs are not met. The #FreePeriods movement will aim to address these issues in the long term, but much of the solution to find long term, sustainable provision is constrained by financial resources in these countries, many of which are going through economic hardship.

It has been very encouraging to see some countries, Kenya and Kerala, a state in India, make concerted efforts to keep their girls in school by proactively implementing schemes (e.g. She-Pad in Kerala) and investing significant funding to ensure the methods used are robust and sustainable. The Kenyan government has also implemented a scheme to provide every girl in public schools with menstrual products when they need them, after recognising that girls were dropping out of school altogether and using horrific alternatives to stay adequately protected during their period.

Changing the cultural taboos, which are often so deeply engrained into customs and superstitions, is a challenge. The practice of Chaupadhi still exists in rural Nepal, and we hear all too frequently of young women being exposed to the elements because they're forced to sleep in menstruation huts when they have their period. Some have died after being bitten by snakes others are assaulted or worse. The belief that women are unclean when they menstruate is an

example of how society needs to reframe menstruation completely. Periods need a total rebirth in how they are viewed. It stems from education in schools, from a young age, with boys and girls together to understand periods for what they are – a natural and normal biological process. We need organisations to penetrate sections of society in all of these countries where the need for education is the greatest and over time that change will be visible.



Further information is available at
www.freeperiods.org



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