

4th ASEF Young Leaders Summit 2021

# Analysis Report on Menstruation

Across ASEM - "End the stigma. Period"

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# Introduction

"The personal is political" is the 60s' feminist discourse that makes greater sense when we look at the whole reality of menstruation and its management across countries, particularly ASEF countries. Women and girls (and everyone who menstruates) privately manage their inconveniences simply because there are limited or no resources at times to manage their menstruation. It seems like it is still an issue that we are reluctant to bring to the discussion table because girls are anyhow 'managing'; no matter how that mismanagement brings serious consequences for the persons' mental health to education and political life.

In 2016, Campaign RED started working with school-going students in remotest villages and disadvantaged urban areas in Bangladesh. Ground reality confirmed to us, yes, it is the "norm" that girls are shy, horrified, and clueless when they first time get menstruation. A beautiful thing happened when I met like-minded people at ASEF Leadership Summit as a navigator last year. It was like discovering different cultural aspects and knowing how many other ways menstruation is still a matter of stigma. This compiled report from ASEF countries is a result of our year-long conversations, thoughts, and call for attention for more actions towards SDG3 (Good health and wellbeing). It also connects SDG5 (Gender equality) because we recognize stigma around menstruation reinforces Gender-based discrimination in our societies.

Each country's narrative aims at giving exposure to the reality of the country and its policy by showing some road map for further actions. Thank you so much ASEF for recognizing once again that menstruation matters and talking about menstruation is more than needed than any time in the past. Thank you so much SDG3 Group of ASEFSL4 for all the hard in producing the report to briefly provide a perspective of ASEF countries.

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**ASEF Youth Leadership Summit 4**

# Country Analysis

# AUSTRIA

## **Sexuality Education**

Austria has introduced a mandatory sexuality education since 1970, which was reformed in 2015 and is now known as the Fundamental Decree on Sexuality Education. Sexuality Education class is mandatory for all students from middle school starting at age 10 until 14 years. The education includes various aspects from biological aspects, pregnancy, contraception, love, marriage, gender roles, HIV, sexual and domestic violence. So far, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the content and the curriculum, but in 2016 with the foundation of the Federal Centre for Sexuality Education (FCSE), they are now responsible for providing sexuality education to Austrian schools. So far, the training of teachers for sexuality education hasn't been implemented extensively, therefore leaving the training in the hands of NGOs. The NGOs also take care of creating teaching materials. In the future the FCSE should be taking care of this matter.

Results from Austria's effort to educate their youth can be seen in the following statistics. Even though teachers aren't the main source for providing sexuality education to teens and pre-teens, they play a major role in being an important source of knowledge and information for the students. An interesting observation from the graph on the right is that boys are more likely to believe the internet and the TV to be an important source of knowledge with 52% (TV) and 54% (Internet) compared to girls with 36% (TV) and 27% (Internet). (Ketting, Ivanova, 2018)

## **Survey about menstruation among 13 – 17 year olds (2017)**

Even though sexuality education is well established in Austria a survey from 2017 shows that an unexpectedly high number of pre-teens and teens (13 - 17 years) don't know much about menstruation and even regard it as an "unimportant and shameful" topic. Out of 1.100 teenagers 17% of the girls and 34% of the boys said they didn't know what menstruation was. Another

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60% of the girls said that they have a negative stance towards menstruation and 70% of the boys regard menstruation as an important and shameful topic. Additionally, 88% of the girls said they suffer from menstrual pain and discomfort, but don't trust their teachers or school doctor enough to talk to them about it. This leads to a lower performance during class and makes them feel isolated, since 20% of the girls don't even talk about suffering from menstrual pain. (erdbeerwoche, 2017)

## **Good Practices**

A new EU law is allowing member countries to lower the tax on sanitary products for menstruation to a minimum of 5%. This is a big step towards de-stigmatization of menstruation by not declaring those menstrual hygiene products as a luxury good with a VAT of 20%. (BBC, 2021) Also in Austria the tax on sanitary products was lowered from 20 to 10% from January 2021. (Global VAT Compliance, 2021) Even though Austria tagged along with lowering the tax on menstrual hygiene products, compared to Scotland where period products are free there is still a lot to do. The tax in Austria is still higher compared to the UK where it is 5% or Ireland where there is no tax at all, so there is definitely room for growth. (BBC, 2021) One good practice that has been introduced in October 2021 is the pilot project "Red Box" in Vienna. This means that until January 2022 girls, women and people who menstruate can get free pads and tampons at 4 places in the 20th district in Vienna. 20% of people living in the 20th district are affected by poverty and therefore have trouble spending money on menstrual hygiene products. The project should help tackle the problem of period poverty by providing free menstrual hygiene products to those who need them. The products are sponsored by BIPA, a German drug store. (Stadt Wien, 2021)

# BANGLADESH

Ensuring menstrual health and hygiene is key to the reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls and women in Bangladesh like many other countries across ASEM. Out of the 160 million population 46.8% is female. Around 39 million are in the 15-49 age group and 8.74 million female students are studying in secondary schools and above in the country. More than 8.26 million women between the age of 15-35 are engaged in different professions. Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in its economic growth over the last few decades. Of the labor market, female work force consists 30% and the participation is increasingly consistently. However, girls' participation in education and workforce are greatly constrained by the lack of enabling condition as well as opportunities. Although girls' education has a long-term positive impact on personal welfare for girls and their health as well as economic and social development, especially in low-income communities, hygienic management of menstruation has not received attention to the extent it deserves. Studies show that barriers to MHM among Bangladeshi girls can hamper progress towards at least three Sustainable Development Goals; one, SDG 3 that is to ensure healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages, two, SDG4 that is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and three, SDG 5 that is to promote gender equality and empower all women and girls.

A Water-Aid study beginning of the pandemic showed how due to the existing lack of progressive policies and accessibility in safe product related to menstruation, women and girls have suffered during the pandemic. It says, one of the primary effects of the lockdown was a fall in income across many categories of workers . Most severely affected were low-income workers from urban communities, especially daily wage earners and readymade garment workers. Another obvious impact the study reveals is that due to the pandemic women and girls felt lack of privacy while managing menstruation due to families being confined to their home during the lockdown. Generally, high price of menstrual product, low quality

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sanitary materials, inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, lack of information and privacy at school or home are common issues related to inadequate menstrual hygiene practices that are affecting girls' education and right to dignified menstrual practices.

The socio-cultural stigma and myths related to menstruation has worsen the situation and hampered progress of gender-equality allowing discriminatory laws and policies to continue in Bangladeshi societies. For example, referring to menstruation as a disqualification, very recently The High Court in Bangladesh has ruled that “women cannot become Nikah (Muslim marriage) registrar due to certain "physical conditions" and social as well as practical situations of the country”. An interview by Plan International Bangladesh shows due to stigma around menstruation, whatever resources available to women that are not being used safely leading to a risky menstrual practice. It says, “On top of that, many rural women are embarrassed to dry the cloth they use during menstruation in the sun because it is such a taboo subject. This means the cloth remains damp, which often leads to infection”. We can see how this whole issue around menstruation is not only about infrastructural and resources. More importantly stigma around menstruation which need wide awareness and change in thoughts worsening has worsen the condition.

Speaking of change, both at the government and non-government initiatives have been taken to recognize and take targeted actions regarding the issue of hygienic management of menstruation. Apart from development organizations both national and international, community-based organizations more and more addressing stigmatized menstruation and lack of resources. Government of Bangladesh is slowly addressing the need of access to proper MHM for socio-economic development in the country. For example, The National Adolescent Health Strategy 2017-2030 has identified

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four priority thematic areas of intervention: adolescent sexual and reproductive health, violence against adolescents, adolescent nutrition and mental health of adolescents linking it with the Sustainable Development Goals. The strategy identifies that the lack of access to accurate and reliable information and the various taboos and myths which are commonplace, necessitates a comprehensive approach to addressing adolescent health and social wellbeing. This opens pathways for practitioners and activists to advocate for advanced policy and practice around menstrual practice which has a direct link to adolescent wellbeing both physically and mentally. Besides, number of initiatives by the non-governmental organizations including young people led activism have contributed to stir up the discussion around the importance of quality, cheap and reusable sanitary napkins.

However, more top-down approach in changing policy specially regarding tax and vat must come to an end. Because any cost added to these menstrual products, women bear the burden. In Bangladesh, several relevant stakeholders have recommended a ZERO TAX/VAT policy on the products available in the market as they are not luxury product. A full report on the taxed reality and its burden on women in Bangladesh is given as footnote



# CAMBODIA

Menstruation is still a challenge for many women and girls in Cambodia and especially its rural areas. It causes friction in daily lives which is due to both the lack of affordable menstrual products in the market and also the lack of awareness at the institutional and private level, where period shaming is still prevalent, and the topic remains taboo in society. In Cambodia, many schools lack adequate water and sanitation facilities for girls to manage their monthly menses with privacy and dignity. Existing facilities may lack a sufficient water supply for washing of hands or clothes, and toilet stalls frequently lack a private place to dispose of used sanitary pads or cloths. Although the Cambodian school curriculum includes reproductive health, adolescent girls report that many teachers are too shy to cover the topics in detail.

In addition, large mixed-gender classes often discourage girls from asking sensitive questions. Menstruation remains a taboo and secretive topic, with numerous girls reporting not having received guidance from mothers or other elder women prior to their first menstrual bleeding. As a result, many girls report being surprised or scared by their first period, with some worrying they had a serious illness and drop out school at the young age.

## **Relevant Stakeholders**

### **Government**

Growth and Changes is a notable publication that the government, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) worked cooperatively with UNICEF Cambodia to publish out in order to contribute to the period education in Cambodia. This book was established to empower and provide guidance on puberty and menstrual management for young students, teachers and the community. The first launching of this book was indicated

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in five provinces and introduced to about 19 provinces in 2014 and 2015. The main goal of this is to include the course in the national syllabus for students to learn more about period education.

## **Non-Government Organization**

Besides the government, we can see the non-governmental organizations are working tirelessly and cooperatively to attribute to the gap of menstruation issue, WASH facilities and girl education in Cambodia. As UNICEF in Cambodia provides training, capacity development and material support on menstrual hygiene management to schools, teachers and the community who work directly with the girls. UNFPA support NGOs and government institutions by handling on Growth and Changes by MoEYS, UNICEF, UNFPA Sex education and reproductive health and contribute to the puberty guidance of Growth and Change with UNICEF for girls.

On the one hand, some of the NGOs spots at the grass-root level like the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC), an NGO educating teachers on reproductive health, sex education and family building. While Clear Cambodia's program advocates precisely girl education by dispelling some myths and advertising girls about the period process.

# CYPRUS

## Background on menstruation in Cyprus

According to a report by Eleni N. Karaoli (2020), in 2020, 22.3% of the population of Cyprus live below the poverty line. The average GDP per capita (\$) is \$26'623.801, which is about €23'564.73 as of December 2021 (Data, 2021). Despite being considered a 'high-income country' in the European Union, Cyprus has a high poverty rate when compared to some of its other 'high-income' European counterparts. Additionally, Cyprus is the only country in Europe that does not have a standard minimum wage law for all workers (Mitsis, 2012). Therefore, it is clear to see why period poverty and period stigma has been an ongoing issue in the country.

Almost 80% of the population of Cyprus identifies as Christian (European Commission, 2021). Like Ireland, Cyprus has historically been a Christian country for many years. Therefore, it is easy to understand how 'Christian' values and norms have integrated themselves into Cypriot culture and allowed for stigma and taboos around menstruation to grow. For example, a study carried out by Androulla Christoforou (2014) which looked at Greek Cypriot women's experiences with menstruation in Cyprus, found that menstruation is still considered a taboo subject today, with many women managing their period's "behind the scenes" and hiding their periods from others. The study also found that a lot of Cypriot are forced to partake in unusual practises while menstruating (Christoforou, 2014). For instance, throughout the 20th century women were not allowed bath for two to three days during their period, a tradition which is still carried out today in some parts of Cyprus (Christoforou, 2014). It is evident that a stigma surrounding menstruation is still prevalent in Cyprus today, yet, what are the government doing to tackle this?

# CYPRUS

## **Tackling issues around menstruation**

**Today, Cyprus has one of the lowest rates of tax on sanitary products in the European Union, at a rate of 5%. Not only did this reduction in tax tackle period poverty by bringing down the price of sanitary products, but it made the topic of menstruation more accessible to the public as news of the ‘tampon tax’ spread around the world. The EU plans to abolish the “tampon tax” by the year 2022, and hopefully this will help reduce period poverty in Cyprus and the rest of the EU.**

# ESTONIA

Estonia is a country in Northern Europe. As it is a developed nation, the level of MHM is quite satisfactory.

Estonia has conducted various meeting and workshops on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools. The workshop also provided a forum to discuss regional priorities for action and guide practical implementation of WASH improvements at the national and local levels, as well as the safe reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The event was expected to raise awareness on the importance of improving and sustaining adequate WASH provision in schools for better health, wellbeing and learning; increase understanding about the range of possible WASH-related interventions; and stimulate action at the national level, including through the Protocol on Water and Health.

The workshop drew attention to menstrual poverty, that is a lack of access to affordable menstrual hygiene products, an emerging issue in Estonia with negative consequences for school attendance. During the workshop, two good practice approaches to tackle this challenge were presented. First, the government outlined their commitment to and experience in providing free access to menstrual hygiene products to pupils in schools. This supported equality, dignity and rights for those who menstruate and ensured that lack of access to products did not impact on an individual's ability to fully participate in education at all levels.

Second, an MHM social and behavior change programme, called "Health Without Shame" was described. This programme is an example of good practice in cross-sectoral work through raising awareness about the issue, engaging celebrities, reaching out to youth through social media and building the capacities of teachers.

# ESTONIA

The workshop concluded that accurate and timely education about healthy and dignified menstrual hygiene and puberty is critical for both boys and girls.

Estonia has also signed a resolution in the United Nation General Assembly on the promotion and protection of human rights. One of the points ensured under this resolution was on MHM. It said – “To ensure access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all women and girls, as well as for menstrual hygiene management, including for hygiene facilities and services in public and private spaces.”

# FRANCE

## **Stigma around Menstruation**

France is no exception when it comes to a societal stigma surround menstruation. As previously reflected in the chapter on Ireland, the stigma around menstruation in France is that it is dirty and impure. As quoted by LREM party lawmaker in her co-authored report on period poverty in France, Laëtitia Romeiro Dias, states that “Periods have long been a taboo subject because they were seen as dirty and impure”. (Trouillard and Dodman, 2020). Sexuality education was banned in France from 1920 to 1967 (European Parilament, 2013), so with an entire generation of people not having access to education on sexuality and their reproductive health, it is not hard to see why this taboo around menstruation being “dirty” and “impure” still exists today.

This ban on sexuality education raised an entire generation of French men and women who were not comfortable talking about their sexuality and reproductive system. Laëtitia Romeiro Dias adds in her discussion on the stigma around menstruation that “A refusal to talk openly about the subject has enabled all sorts of misconceptions to be passed on from one generation to another” (Touillard and Dodman, 2020). And so, a stigma around menstruation still exists in modern France, which unfortunately, is not helped by the rate of period poverty in the country.

## **Period Poverty in France**

Currently, more than one third of young women in France have experienced period poverty in their life (Statista, 2021). A further breakdown of this figure shows that, 10% of French university students use home-made cotton pads due to a lack of finances, and 1 in 20 use toilet paper as a sanitary product (Andolfatto, 2021). Up until the late 2010’s, sanitary products were

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taxed as a luxury item at 20%. While this figure has since been lowered, it is concerning to think that only a short time ago, sanitary products were considered a “luxury” when more than a quarter of the population of the world has a period. Period poverty in France (and the world) is an ever-pressing issue, and with 1.7 million people suffering from period poverty in France (Zhang, 2021), it is essential that the government tackles these issues urgently before this figure begins to grow.

## **What is being done to make a change?**

Thankfully, a lot is being done in France right now to tackle the issue of period poverty. Firstly, in 2016, the French government lowered the tax on sanitary products from 20% to 5.5%, which significantly lowered the monthly cost for people with periods. Many other government policies have been introduced since then. As previously discussed, LREM party lawmaker, Laëtitia Romeiro Dias, along with her colleague, Bénédicte Taurine, recently published a 107-page report on period poverty and stigma around menstruation in France. This report opened the minds of the public to a discussion on period poverty and facilitated further change in government policies. For example, as a result of this report, in 2020 the French government announced that they would be trialling a yearlong initiative and providing free sanitary products for people with periods in schools, hospitals, prisons, and homeless shelters etc. (Zhang, 2021).

Another step in the right direction towards tackling period poverty in France has been the establishment of many feminist organisations and charities who are focused on ending the stigma around menstruation and period poverty in France. For example, Règles élémentaires, founded in 2015, is the first French organisation that was set up with the intention of tackling period poverty. Additionally, the French University of Paris-Saclay



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founded the “Never in the Red Again” project, which aims to educate “non-menstruating people about the physical, sanitary and economic constraints” linked to menstruation. (Andolfatto, 2021). It is interesting to see how this University is focusing on educating “non-menstruating” people about the issue of period poverty. With 50% of the members of government in France being male (Statista, 2021), it is essential that this proportion of the population is adequately educated on issues surrounding menstruation so fair decisions can be made around policies relating to period poverty. Given the evidence shown, it is clear to see that over the last decade France has taken some necessary steps to educate the public on menstruation and tackle period poverty, which will hopefully end the stigma surrounding periods.

# INDIA

With a population of more than 1.35 billion people, India has the second-largest population in the world. It is the world's fifth-largest economy and is also a quickly growing trillion-dollar economy. Despite its tremendous economic growth, India continues to struggle with gender equality. Menstruation has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude women from many aspects of socio-cultural life. In India, the topic has been a taboo until date. Such taboos about menstruation present in many societies impact on girls' and women's emotional state, mentality, and lifestyle and most importantly, health. The challenge, of addressing the socio-cultural taboos and beliefs in menstruation, is further compounded by the low girls' knowledge levels and understandings of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health.

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16, India has over 355 million menstruating women. However, only 36 per cent of women were reported as using sanitary napkins, locally or commercially produced. Societal restrictions during menstruation violate women's right to health, equality, and privacy. A 2016 study on 'menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in India', which was a systematic review and meta-analysis by van Eijk highlighted some alarming statistics:

- 77% of the girls stated restrictions in visiting places of worship, and touching religious items or praying during menstruation
- Only 55% of the girls considered menstruation as normal
- 54% of the girls stated mother as their primary source of information about menstruation

Dasra NGO in its report also highlighted that the lack of MHM facilities in schools affects the employability of the girls as 23 million of them drop out of school annually due to lack of proper MHM facilities. Moreover, many employers see menstruating women as a problem as they associate periods

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with inefficiency in work and reduced participation in the workforce. There are anecdotal examples of corporate workplaces showing insensitivity towards menstruating women fearing loss of productivity.

## **Myths**

The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times as declared in the Veda that guilt, of killing a brahmana-murder, appears every month as menstrual flow as women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt. Further, in the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating. Many girls and women are subject to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating. Not entering the “puja” room is the major restriction among urban girls whereas, not entering the kitchen is the main restriction among the rural girls during menstruation. The underlying basis for this myth is also the cultural beliefs of impurity associated with menstruation. It is further believed that menstruating women are unhygienic and unclean and hence the food they prepare, or handle can get contaminated.

## **Stakeholders**

### **Government Initiatives**

In the last decade, several schemes, including the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (2011) and the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (in 2014), have been launched to promote menstrual hygiene amongst adolescent girls in the age group of 10 to 19. Through the Savidha initiative, the government distributed more than 5 crore brand sanitary pads at Re 1 from 6,000 Jan Aushadhi Kendras. Apart from central government schemes, state governments have also implemented programmes to distribute sanitary

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pads in schools in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. The Bihar government provides Rs. 300 under the Kishori Swasthya Yojana to adolescent girls to buy sanitary pads.

## **Civil Society Initiatives**

Project Red of The Intelligent Indian (TIIx) NGO supported close to 10,000 female migrant workers with sanitary pads at no cost, during the uncertain Covid-19 lockdown in India in 2020. TIIx has been lobbying for mandatory installation of sanitary pad vending machines in all public schools, but due to high cost of machines it became unaffordable of the school authorities to upgrade their infrastructure. However, in Jan 2021, the founder of TIIx has built India's most affordable (non-electric) sanitary pad vending machines to dispense biodegradable pads at no cost. Since then, the organisation has supplemented its efforts to support more than 30,000 girls to continue their education in schools. Several other organisations are supporting the underserved with sanitary kits for women and girls at no cost and using innovative ways like comic books or Sports to break stereotypes around menstruation in classroom and communities.

# IRELAND

## **A Brief History of Menstruation in Ireland**

The history of menstruation in Ireland and how that impacts the way we discuss the topic of menstruation today is a chaotic one. Ireland has, historically, been an extremely Catholic country, and up until the 1990's (and even so today) the collusion between the Church and the State has been a topic of great controversy. Up until 1985, the sale and use of contraception in Ireland was illegal, and divorce was not legalised until 1996 (Ireland allows sale of contraceptives, 2009). This was as a result of a society consumed by religion, which regularly impacted decisions made by the government (Ireland allows sale of contraceptives, 2009). Consequently, the topic of menstruation was considered taboo, and this negatively affected the way it was taught in schools. "Ireland's sex education scheme for schools was only introduced in the mid-1990s" (O' Beirne, 2020), so before then the majority of young women and girls relied on their parents to educate them on menstruation, something which rarely happened because of the embarrassment and stigma associated with it.

However, historically, this stigma surrounding menstruation in Ireland was utilised by Irish women who "used menstrual blood as a means of resisting the state" (O' Keefe, 2006). In Irish society, Catholicism and Protestantism promoted gender norms and saw women as chaste and pure beings whose role on this earth was to build a family and obey her husband. "Sex, bodies and female bodily functions are seen as shameful, embarrassing and therefore to be hidden" (O' Keefe, 2006). The notion that a women could speak about her period was unheard of and so many women tried their best to keep their periods hidden. Therefore, Irish women used their menstrual blood as an act of resistance against the British oppressors during the conflicts in Northern Ireland. The stigma surrounding menstruation made it a powerful tool of resistance that "disrupted existing gender norms and

# IRELAND

relations by helping to spark the rise of a vigorous feminist movement within the nationalist community (O' Keefe, 2006). Today, the stigma surrounding menstruation in Ireland is not nearly as intense as it has been in the past, however, there is still much more work to do to eradicate it entirely.

## **Menstruation in Ireland – Today**

### **Negatives**

A recent study showed that, in 2019, 88.9% of primary schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos (Department of Education and Skills, 2020), a percentage which has been decreasing over the past decade. As a result of this “ethos”, schools are not obliged to provide relationship and sexual education (RSE) to their students. Even so, the majority of schools who do provide some form of RSE, do not provide adequate or correct information, leaving many students confused and misinformed about their bodies. According to a recent survey carried out by Plan International, “1 in 2 women in Ireland did not find school helpful for providing information on their period” (Plan International Ireland, 2021). Additionally, this survey found that 61% of girls in Ireland are too embarrassed to talk about their periods because of the stigma surrounding it (Plan International Ireland, 2021). This stigma was recently demonstrated when, in 2020, the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI) banned an informative Tampax ad from Irish television because they received 84 complaints that the ad was crude and offensive. The advertisement shows two women having a conversation about how to properly insert a tampon and demonstrating it on their hands (Tampax, 2020). This decision to ban the advertisement was criticised by the Irish public, who felt that “Catholic Ireland” should no longer have an influence on society. (O' Connor, 2020).

# IRELAND

## **Positives**

Despite the negatives previously discussed, Ireland has made some great progress surrounding period poverty and period stigma in Ireland. In 2021, the Government of Ireland published a report on “Period Poverty in Ireland” (Government of Ireland, 2021). Not only did this report discuss findings on the issue of period poverty in the country, but it also looked at the ways in which Ireland is trying to tackle these issues. Firstly, Ireland is the only country in the EU who does not charge VAT on sanitary products. Additionally, the Irish Prison Service recently began to provide all female prisoners with a free pack of sanitary pads a month to tackle the stigma around requesting these products (Government of Ireland, 2021). This report goes on to outline the ways in which the Government of Ireland intend to tackle the issues of period poverty in Ireland and showcases their commitment to making changes to better life in Ireland for people with periods.

# POLAND

Although a relatively low gender pay gap (8.5%) is observed in Poland compared to other EU countries (average of 14.1%; European Commission, 2021), the 2020 Gender Equality Index places this country 23rd out of 27 when it comes to gender equality in the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2020). Moreover, in the Global Gender Gap Report developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Poland ranks only 75th out of 156 globally (WEF, 2021). Reasons for Poland's drop in the above rankings in the last years include the decline of the share of women ministers (WEF, 2021), poor economic situation of single and lone women, increase of women's unpaid work, and unequal concentration of women and men in education (EIGE, 2020). The near-total ban on abortion resulting from the October 2020 Constitutional Court ruling, in turn, has exacerbated the situation of ciswomen, transmen, and non-binary persons in the area of sexual and reproductive health (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2021).

A study prepared in 2020 for the Kulczyk Foundation on a representative sample of 606 women found that about 18% of them in Poland cannot always afford quality menstrual products (Difference, 2020). In turn, 6% of women often cannot afford to buy such items at all. Among women with an income of up to PLN 800 (~USD 196/EUR 173) per month, 39% refrain from buying menstrual products in favor of other household expenses. Moreover, the report exposed the scale of tabooization of menstruation. For 41% of respondents, the topic of menstruation was not present in their family home, while more than one in four teens (27%) admitted to being reluctant to talk about menstruation with their mother (Difference, 2020). The study also pointed to a lack of understanding of menstruating people by employers, doctors, and teachers, as well as a lack of sufficient education about menstruation and appropriate accommodation in schools.



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The taboo around menstruation is evident in, and to some extent stems from the media and advertising, which either pass over the menstruation or portray it in an overdrawn or aestheticized manner. The discourse around menstruation in Poland is largely a physiological one as it abstracts from the social implications of menstruation. Moreover, media narrow menstruation down to women, leaving out non-binary and transgender people.

At the policy level, the issue of menstrual poverty and exclusion in Poland has not been directly addressed by any public health strategy or law. Nevertheless, an amendment effective July 2020 reduced the VAT rate on hygiene products – and thus sanitary pads and tampons – from 8% to 5%. However, the law does not apply to menstrual cups, which are still subject to a 23% VAT rate (Anagnostopulu, 2021). In terms of labor rights, some private companies introduce menstrual leave for their employees, albeit such situations remain a rarity (Rozwadowska, 2021).

Given the lack of comprehensive regulation and systemic support, a burden of awareness-raising and outreach on menstruation falls mainly on NGOs. In 2020, the Action Menstruation Foundation was established. It fights menstrual poverty by collecting hygiene products and setting up Period Help Points, which provide free pads and tampons for those in need. In 2021, the Period Coalition was launched, bringing together organizations, activists and experts working on the topic of menstruation. The Coalition has issued a manifesto ([link only in Polish](#)) for addressing menstrual poverty and exclusion in Poland. The organization aims to break menstrual taboos through information campaigns and raise awareness of the environmental aspect of hygiene products. In July 2021, thanks to the Coalition, issues of poverty and menstrual exclusion featured for the first time on the agenda of the standing subcommittee on social policy in the Polish Sejm (lower chamber of the parliament). Mainstreaming menstrual awareness by NGOs brings hope for extending in the future the systemic support to people experiencing poverty and menstrual exclusion in Poland.

# RUSSIA

As the largest country in the world, it is interesting to note the status of MHM in Russia. Even now, Russia still faces the problem of reproductive health of women, children and adolescents.

The results of an anonymous questionnaire survey of socially adapted students among 3327 girls of 13-19 years testify that 59.9% of respondents in this age cohort do not practice daily genitalia toilet. According to population-based studies, 24.0% of women have first pregnancy at the juvenile age followed by labor in 18.4% of young women, abortion in 81.6%. Menstrual disorders represent the most common symptoms and strong indications of reproductive health problems related to progesterone deficiency which can lead to serious consequences such as infertility, miscarriage, breast disease etc. “The choice of medication for the menstrual disorders treatment should consider instruction indications, the lack of limitations and contraindications, need for contraception, concomitant diseases and states, proved efficacy of the medication. Prospects of solving reproductive and demographic problems in the twenty-first century are largely beyond the control of clinicians being aggravated by unresolved environmental and social problems.”

According to a recent on the safety of women’s pads in Russia, only 20% of 31 samples tested met basic safety requirements. In the remaining 80% of the samples, enterobacteria, Staphylococcus aureus and mold fungi were detected. Laboratory data indicated obvious problems within the production process as well as potential health threat of such hygiene products to the health of people who menstruate. This maybe because of the lack of awareness among people for using organic menstrual products.

The most interesting thing related to MHM in Russia was the rejection of a proposal for paid menstrual leave. In 2013, Mikhail Degtyaryov, a Russian lawmaker had asked the parliament to give women two days paid leave a

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month when they menstruate. He said that pain during menstruation heightened fatigue, reduced memory and efficiency at work, and provoked distinct emotional discomfort. However, human rights campaigners had already dismissed the proposal as sexist. Marina Pisklakova-Parker, head of women's group Anna Center, said the proposal was absurd. She said – "If we are seriously debating women's efficiency at work during menstruation, we should also consider how fit for work men are after a drinking bout." Therefore, I feel that even though the MHM of Russia is better compared to other developing countries, it has to improve. This can mainly be done by raising awareness among the people.

# SWEDEN

As one of the most prosperous nations of the world, Sweden has highly developed MHM practices. Several campaigns have been introduced in Sweden. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has provided around 50,000 euros for a campaign aimed at raising awareness of the subject of menstruation at the workplace. The campaign had to include presentations at companies and calls for sanitary pads and tampons to be made available at places of work.

In 2018, the Swedish organization MENSEN – forum for menstruation, received funding from the Swedish Gender Equality Agency for a one-year project dealing with menstruation from a work perspective. Through the project, which is a pilot in collaboration with a Gothenburg-based workplace, MENSEN is developing a workplace ‘menstrual certification’. In practice, this meant educating employers and employees about menstruation from a physiological and sociological perspective, as well as consulting them on how to create a menstrual-aware work environment.

According to this organization, “The menstrual-certification concept is not necessarily a call for European, or even nationwide, menstrual policies to meet the needs of menstruating women and trans-people within the workforce. Every workplace is different and so are the solutions. In Sweden, labour legislation regulates workers’ right to paid sick leave – which could be used for menstrual-related matters – and the Work Environment Act makes employers primarily responsible for the work environment. Employers also have the obligation to work proactively against discrimination. Here, menstruation could be read as one dimension, among many others, for employers to consider, just as with prejudices against pregnancy.”

MENSEN also calls for toilets, sanitary bins and hand-washing facilities to be available in all working environments, including for professionals outside the office space, like construction workers, plumbers and bus drivers.

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Many people also want employers to supply sanitary products at work just as they provide toilet roll. Sweden is known for its gender equality programmes - the government has launched an instruction manual for feminist foreign policies. Menstrual rights feature not only in the media, but also on stage and in public spaces.

There has been "Period - The Musical" for schools, a stage play, comic books, exhibitions and podcasts. Perhaps the most notable form of Menstrual awareness in Sweden is through the artwork on the Stockholm metro by prominent graphic novelist Liv Strömquist.

# SWITZERLAND

Officially called the Swiss Confederation, Switzerland is a Federal Republic in Central Europe. Being one of the most developed countries in the world, it has excellent facilities in place for menstrual hygiene. Few of the reasons for this is the high literacy rate. Most of the citizens of Switzerland are aware of the correct menstrual health practices and have resources for the same.

There are multiple organizations based in Switzerland to help other developing countries to improve their menstrual hygiene. An example of this is “The Cho Ngafor Foundation.” Founded in April 2012 by Doreen Bieri, this organization started identifying issues in deprived communities in Cameroon. Through church networks, both in Switzerland and Cameroon, Doreen was able to gather people passionate about sewing and helping others in need to help her produce washable, reusable, pads from second-hand fabric. After reaching her goal of producing 1,000 pads in Switzerland, and sending them to Cameroon, Doreen realized that what women in poor communities needed most was a thorough understanding of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and the ability to sew these pads for themselves.

Since there is a problem of affordability of menstrual products, Switzerland is launching a pilot project of sanitary towel vending machines in public places. This will include at least 53 vending machines or ganic cotton St towels and it's installed at 30 sites in Geneva. Various community centers, libraries and many citizens are involved in this pilot scheme. Alfonso Gomez, the administrative counselor responsible for equality issues believes that “this protection is a matter of basic need, just like toilet paper, which is free in public places, at work and in restaurants as a matter of course. Easy and free access to mental protection is a way of both combating. Poverty and promoting gender equality.”

A workshop called “menstruation at the margins” was held from 10th to

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13th December 2019 in Switzerland. The workshop brought together menstrual health advocates from across the globe to examine ways through the unmet menstrual health needs could be addressed. This workshop focused on the menstrual health needs of three marginalized populations in particular: persons living with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, and trans and gender non-binary individuals.

Therefore, apart from maintaining excellent menstrual hygiene practices in Switzerland, the country also focuses on uplifting other countries. It strives to help them to increase the level of MHM in other nations.

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The ASEF Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS) is the place for Asian and European young professionals and students to meet political leaders, top-tier business representatives, prominent thinkers and doers. It is the forum for youth to voice ideas and develop an ASEM Youth Declaration addressed to ASEM Leaders on youth issues that matter to Asia and Europe.