

Plan for Periods: Ending menstrual poverty across the European Union

An EU Menstrual Health Strategy from MEP Maria Walsh to eradicate period poverty across Europe

Introduction

Menstrual health has been overlooked for far too long, having often been treated as a marginal concern. With menstrual poverty **affecting an estimated 10% of the menstruating population in the EU**, it is time to move beyond the narrative that this is solely a 'women's issue' - it is a matter of public health and fundamental human rights. Strong political commitment and coordination action is needed to eradicate menstrual poverty across all 27 Member States.

Below is a proposal for an **EU Menstrual Health Strategy**. This proposal aims to eradicate menstrual poverty, taking into account policy and governance, access and affordability, education and awareness, research, and consultation with stakeholders. It is based on an intersectional and inclusive approach, and sets out how the **EU can lead in global action for menstrual health**.

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Definition: Menstrual poverty is defined as insufficient access to menstrual products and facilities.

Overview of the EU situation:

- In Ireland, **24% of women** (and 35% of 15-24 year-olds) have experienced an indicator of period poverty.¹
- In France, menstrual poverty affects an estimated **1.7 million women**.²
- In Slovakia, period poverty affects an estimated 16% of women, but public awareness remains low with **76% of people having never heard the term**.³

Proposals to reduce & eradicate period poverty in the European Union

1. Policy & Governance

- **EU Action Plan on Menstrual Health:** Create a formal strategy integrating menstrual health into EU frameworks on gender equality, education, health, and poverty reduction.
- **Member State Benchmarks:** Set EU-wide minimum standards for access to menstrual products, education, workplace support, and data collection.
- **Mandated Reporting:** Require national statistical offices to collect disaggregated data on period poverty and menstrual health.

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-report-2022.pdf>

² <https://www.ifop.com/publication/hygiene-et-precarite-en-france/>

³ <https://enrsi.stvr.sk/articles/society/398745/on-period-poverty-with-natalia-blahova-from-the-initiative-d-ostojna-mestruacia>

- **Funding Mechanism:** Establish a dedicated EU fund to support local initiatives, NGOs, schools, and healthcare systems addressing menstrual inequity.

2. Access & Affordability

- **Zero VAT on Menstrual Products:** Encourage all Member States to fully remove VAT under the 2022 VAT Directive revision. Disparities persist across Member States, and the lack of an harmonised EU approach exacerbates menstrual poverty.
 - For instance, Ireland has applied a zero VAT rate to menstrual products even before the Directive revision in 2022. However Hungary maintains one of the highest VAT rates in the EU at 27%. Equally Sweden maintains a 25% VAT on menstrual products.
- **Free Products in Public Institutions:** Mandate provision of free menstrual products in public schools and universities, and government buildings.
 - The visible, routine availability of menstrual products in public institutions sends a message that menstruation is natural and should not be hidden. This would help foster a more inclusive environment in public and educational spaces.

3. Education & Awareness

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch menstrual awareness campaigns in the 24 languages with the intent to;
 - Raise awareness about menstrual poverty and inequality in access.
 - Normalise menstrual health, and remove taboos.
 - Promote menstrual literacy among youth and parents
 - Lead a fact based narrative, and eradicate myths around menstruation.
 - Engage men and boys in the conversation

4. Health & Research

- **Inclusion in Public Health Data:** Ensure menstrual health indicators are included in Eurostat and EIGE health surveys.
 - This would include data on access, absenteeism, and menstrual disorders.
- **Research Investment:** The EU has shown great support for research and innovation in women's health through Horizon 2020 and Horizon funding projects. It's important to ensure funding for scientific research on menstruation, menstrual-related conditions (e.g., endometriosis), and product safety and innovation continues over the next mandate.

5. Workplace

- **Menstrual Leave Guidelines:** Encourage Member States to develop voluntary frameworks for menstrual leave or flexible working arrangements.
 - Steps have been taken in Spain as of February 2023 regarding frameworks for menstrual leave. The Spanish government has passed a law which entitles women experiencing menstrual pain to paid time off of work, provided that it was authorized by a doctor.

6. Intersectional and Inclusive Approach

- Recognise and address that youth, people experiencing homelessness, migrants, asylum seekers, and people with disabilities, are **more susceptible to menstrual poverty**. With this in mind the European Commission should ensure there is particular attention placed towards these groups when creating and rolling out the EU Menstrual Health Strategy.

7. Global Leadership & Cooperation

- Include menstrual health in EU **development aid and humanitarian policies**.

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- When an emergency erupts, sexual and reproductive health and rights are among the most neglected of basic needs. A lack of menstrual health supplies during an emergency can restrict mobility, with long-lasting impacts when it comes to school, work and community.
- The EU through DG ECHO should work to include menstrual hygiene kits as a standard element of emergency response packages for refugees, displaced people, and disaster-affected populations.
- Advocate for menstrual health as a human rights and gender equality issue in **international forums**.
 - The EU must step up its advocacy for resolutions that recognise menstrual health as a component of the right to health, education, and dignity. Equally it should also support and co-sponsor country statements or side events on menstrual equality during UNHRC sessions.
 - In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted its resolution on menstrual hygiene management, human rights, and gender equality. It calls upon states to ensure that women and girls have access to adequate facilities, information and products for optimal and effective menstrual hygiene management. However this resolution remains the first and only international document that is solely focused on menstruation.