

Insights Report: Period Poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand

With our Insights work, YWCA Auckland is looking into what life is like for young women living in Aotearoa New Zealand today, topic by topic. Using an explicitly feminist and intersectional lens, we aim to highlight the top issues affecting young women in Aotearoa New Zealand within that particular topic and offer key interventions and solutions that can be done on an organisational and an individual level.

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OVERVIEW

Access to education should not be determined by a child's gender, yet almost a quarter of New Zealand women have missed school or work because they have been unable to afford sanitary items.

No access to sanitary products, teasing from peers, unsupportive teachers, and their own shame and fear - all can disrupt a girls' ability to fully participate in their education. It's hard not to see Period Poverty as a gender issue when the consequences negatively impact girls' development and potential.

Period Poverty disproportionately impacts those girls and women from lower socio-economic communities and thus becomes an issue of equity as well. All women and girls should have the same full access to a product that is a necessity for a large portion of their lives.

At the root of Period Poverty is the persistent taboos and shame around menstruation. This stigma makes it hard for a girl to explain a sudden need to go to the toilet with "miss, I'm on my period" or to ask for help in understanding what is happening to their body.

Period Poverty is but one barrier of many that can keep a girl from their education. It is a barrier however that can easily be taken away. Great examples and interventions from around the world show what can be done to address period poverty. Critical to progress is taking action across sectors and at all levels.



FRAMING THE ISSUE

Period Poverty has garnered a lot of media attention in the last several years which has fuelled growing public outrage over the issue.

The consequences of not addressing period poverty in NZ are serious:

- Almost a quarter of New Zealand women have missed school or work because they have been unable to afford sanitary items.
- Girls and young women are resorting to makeshift measures such as wearing socks in their underwear, or using types of paper or torn sheets and cloth as sanitary protection. This leads to increased risk of infection.
- Girls are not able to fully participate in sports, other extracurricular activities, and social events.
- Some girls resort to shoplifting sanitary products

KidsCan Survey

In 2017, KidsCan conducted a survey, thought to be the first of its kind in New Zealand, to understand the level of period poverty Kiwi girls and women are experiencing. There were 5,000 responses nationwide and the results were released in 2018.

- 53.1% said they had found it difficult to access sanitary items due to cost at some point (8.6% frequently, 44.5% occasionally).
- 23.6% said they had missed school or work due to a lack of access to sanitary wear.

One in three respondents said they had had to prioritise buying other items, like food, over sanitary items. When they couldn't afford them, most (53.8%) resorted to toilet paper, but 7.7% had used rags, 3% old cloths and many mentioned using disposable or cloth nappies.

27% of the survey respondents were aged 15-17 years. In the under 17 age group:

- 7% were currently struggling frequently to afford sanitary items.
- 29% said they had missed school or work due to having their period and lack of access to sanitary wear.

Overall, 6% of respondents said they were currently struggling to afford sanitary items. Of those:

- 84% had had to prioritise other items such as food over buying sanitary wear.
- 65% said they had missed school or work due to a lack of access to sanitary wear.



The stories shared by 1300 of the respondents included:

"Too expensive and often babies nappies and formula came first. Have used a disposable nappy more than once at night."

"We had to use a pad for an entire day to make them last and not go out for fear of leakage."

"Single mama. Bills to pay food to buy. Can only afford to buy when they are on special."

"I have to sacrifice a day or two of food to be able to afford what many call 'a female luxury'"

"It's a luxury item for us, and our kids come first... I'll just fold a length of loo paper"

"Condoms are given out like confetti but why not menstrual items?"

"When my daughter got her period I made sure she got pads and I had no money left when it was my turn."

Timeline of action on Period Poverty in NZ:

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|-------------|--|
| July 2016: | Countdown, The Salvation Army and MP for Manurewa Louisa Wall, launched an initiative via The Foodbank Project to help stock the charity's foodbanks with sanitary products. |
| April 2017: | Pharmac rejects request from a private citizen to fund sanitary items saying they are not medicines or medical devices. |

	The government announced it would give \$50,000 to the children's charity, KidsCan, to supply schools with sanitary products.
July 2018:	Countdown drops the price of its Homebrand and Select sanitary products to make them more affordable for women and girls in New Zealand.
	A one-off forum was held in Wellington to discuss solutions, including representatives from KidsCan, Salvation Army and Countdown
October 2018:	University of Otago's Dr Sarah Donovan examined Data relating to menstruation from the Minister of Health's NZ Health Survey. Dr Donovan is preparing an application to Pharmac asking for funding for sanitary products for all school-aged girls.
November 2018:	KidsCan reveals results of their survey on Period Poverty.
June 2018:	The Positive Periods campaign was launched. Created by Dignity NZ, the campaign is calling for the government to fully fund sanitary products in all New Zealand schools. It includes templates of letters for members of the public to email the Ministers of Health and Education as well as a discussion paper that outlines how the policy can be implemented with costings.
TBC	A Period Hui

How We Conduct Our Insights:

Along with desk research, community consultation was undertaken with representatives from those actively working in the Period Poverty space in New Zealand.

SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

Among all the elements of addressing period poverty, the following have the potential to accelerate progress toward eradicating this barrier to girls and women's achievement:

- Government fully funds free sanitary products for school age girls and young women.
- PHARMAC subsidises cost of sanitary products
- GST removed from sanitary products
- Period education aka Menstrual Health Management (MHM)

NZ Government fully funds free sanitary products for school age girls and young women

In 2017, the Scottish government alongside public partners carried out consultation; research and piloting¹ to come up with their robust and soundly evidence-based £5.2m scheme to fight period poverty. Since August 2018, students at schools, colleges and universities across Scotland have had access to free sanitary products. Earlier this year, an extra £4m was rolled out to local Scottish authorities to widen the number and range of places free sanitary products are available.

In March 2019, the UK government announced² it is set to take measures to ensure sanitary products are free across all schools in England. The move was a result of years of work by

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/access-free-sanitary-products-programme-government-commitment-business-regulatory-impact/pages/1/>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/free-tampons-secondary-schools-period-poverty-education-amika-george-a8815626.html>

activists — most notably #FreePeriod Campaign by Amika George³ — fighting to end period poverty in the country.

The governments of Wales⁴ and BC, Canada⁵ made similar announcements in April 2019.

Providing free sanitary products to students attending schools supports the equality, dignity and rights for those who menstruate and ensures that lack of access to products doesn't impact on a student's ability to fully participate in education at all levels. It will also save students (and their families) money and help to reduce stigma and anxiety associated with periods.

The anecdotal evidence coming out of the scheme in Scotland is saying is that free sanitary products helps students become much more open, communicative, and positive about menstruation.

"In a society as rich as Scotland, no one should have to suffer the indignity of not having the means to meet their basic needs. We also want to continue to reduce the stigma and address the overarching gender equality and dignity issues that affect everyone who menstruate, regardless of their income."
– Scottish Communities Secretary Aileen Campbell⁶

Providing free sanitary products will send a message to all students that menstruation is nothing to be ashamed of.

Currently in New Zealand there are organisations (Dignity NZ, My Cup, The Wā Collective, United Sustainable Sisters) and charities (KidsCan, SPINZ) working to provide girls and women necessary sanitary products at schools throughout NZ. They all do this in differing ways, mostly buy one, give one schemes or collecting and distributing product donations. They work on differing scales. My Cup, The Wā Collective, United Sustainable Sisters have localised beneficiaries; KidsCan, SPINZ and Dignity run nationwide systems. A great many schools throughout NZ, mostly low decile, are benefiting from these initiatives.

KidsCan is the biggest player in the field, running a nationwide system to supply schools. CEO Julie Chapman has said she would be happy to partner with the Government to bring in a similar scheme to what Scotland has. They already have the supplier relationships in place and the nationwide distribution network to make it work.⁷ What we need is the political will and public support to make this change.

PHARMAC subsidises cost of sanitary products

When Pharmac is considering an application for subsidisation of a product, they first have to decide whether the products fall within its funding powers. Legally, the agency can only fund medicines, medical devices, or products which provide "therapeutic benefits relating to a health need".

Pharmac rejected an application it received from a private citizen in late 2016, asking it to cut the cost of sanitary products. The government funded drug-buying agency found

³ [#FreePeriod Campaign by Amika George](#)

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/13/period-poverty-wales-schoolgirls-to-be-given-free-sanitary-products>

⁵ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/free-menstrual-products-bc-1.5086346>

⁶ <https://news.gov.scot/news/expanding-access-to-free-sanitary-products>

⁷ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/106588081/kiwi-charities-spurred-on-by-worldfirst-scheme-to-fund-sanitary-items-at-schools>



menstruation was a "normal function" and that sanitary products were not medicines or medical devices.

Pharmac also said the funding application was too broad and did "not provide sufficient information" to make its case.

Pharmac is being inflexible on this point. A very strong case for sanitary products being therapeutic or meeting a health need can be

made, as young women who cannot afford the products are contracting serious infections because they are reusing sanitary pads and tampons. This in turn affects their future, their future ability to have children, to be well and not be weighed down by illness.

Pharmac has said it is open to considering future applications targeting groups of women with specific health needs. Women suffering from endometriosis, for example, can suffer from extremely painful periods and heavy bleeding which is debilitating.

Remove GST from sanitary products

GST in New Zealand is designed to be a broad-based system with few exemptions, such as for rents collected on residential rental properties, donations, precious metals and financial services. This makes the argument for exempting sanitary products from GST a hard one to justify.

Britain and Australia, who have recently decided to remove the GST from tampons and other female sanitary products, have a wide variety of exemptions for "necessities" such as basic foods, as well exemptions for some items deemed to have a beneficial impact on society, such as newspapers, books and magazines. In these countries, the debate around GST tended to centre on "evening things up" between different products that were or were not taxed.

The New Zealand Government established the Tax Working Group in late 2017 to investigate ways of reforming New Zealand's taxation system and making it "fairer." One of the considerations would be GST and what goods and services the tax is added to. There was hope that the group would recommend removing GST from sanitary products.

The final report came out in February 2019 and clearly stated that the Group did "not recommend removing GST from certain products, such as food and drink, on the basis that the GST exceptions are complex, poorly targeted for achieving distributional goals and generate large compliance costs. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the benefits of specific GST exceptions are passed on to consumers."⁸

Talking to other opportunities to improve the tax system, the Group suggested, "...there are more effective ways to increase progressivity than a reduction in the rate of GST. Increases in welfare transfers would have a greater impact on low-income households. Changes to personal income tax can also have a greater impact on low- and middle-income earners"⁹. They also added, "Further, if GST is removed from one good or service, it becomes difficult to argue against further exceptions on similar grounds."¹⁰

⁸[Future of Tax: Final Report Volume I - Recommendations](#) Page 22, paragraph 87

⁹ Ibid, page 104, paragraph 47

¹⁰ Ibid, page 104, paragraph 48



A strong case can be made that removing the GST on sanitary products will not do much to help the cause of gender equality. The issue is that all women – especially those on low income – unlike men have to pay for sanitary products, not that they have to pay 15% extra.

A more real solution to the problem would be, for example, to keep the tax and use the money generated from the tax on sanitary products to provide free sanitary products to

women earning below a certain level of income. Another approach could be adjusting welfare payments to ensure necessary items are covered.

Improve period education

The New Zealand Curriculum advises that schools take a holistic approach and that sexuality education happens across the year, and is woven into different topics. The topic of menstruation is most likely confined to sexuality education classes, if these happen. Children are meant to be taught body parts and the basics of these from Y0-3, with teaching about pubertal changes occurring in Y4-6. What is most probably happening is that menstruation education, and pubertal change education is not happening at primary school – rather it happens at intermediate level.¹¹ This is problematic as there are many young women (and trans boys) who are going through puberty and may have started menstruating prior to intermediate school.

New Zealand collected national level data for the first time on age of first menstruation in the 2014/5 NZ Health Survey (Ministry of Health). The survey included a specific question to female participants answering the Sexual and Reproductive Health Module about their age when they first started menstruating. This data was released in 2017 and was analysed by Dr Sarah Donovan and her team at the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, Wellington.

“Our analysis of the data shows that the average age of first period is roughly 13.2 years; this finding is in line with the findings of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (drawing on a sample of 415 girls). However, while it is often assumed that girls usually get their periods at high school, the new findings confirm that this is not the case for nearly 50 per cent of New Zealand girls,” Dr Donovan says.

“Most significantly, these new data about age at first menstruation per school year indicate that we need to target health education, resources and support to an even younger age group in order for NZ girls to be prepared to manage their periods without disruption to their schooling and without embarrassment,” Dr Donovan says.

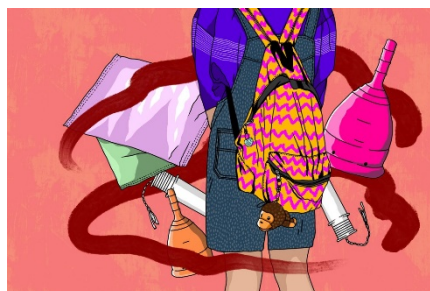
The analysis found:

- Nationwide, around 11,700 girls – 4,150 in Year 7 and 7,550 in Year 8 – start menstruating during the intermediate school year.
- The researchers estimate that about 1,900 girls nationwide (6.3 per cent or one in 16 girls) start menstruating while of primary school age
- Nearly half of all girls (48.7 per cent) have started menstruation before they start secondary school.

¹¹ <https://thehellocup.com/lets-talk-about-periods-in-schools/>

These data show that across the country, about 14,000 girls each year are starting menstruation before high school (with more than expected at primary/intermediate age), suggesting that primary school is the correct place for in-school education about managing periods (including managing period pain, a very common issue).¹²

This indicates strongly that we need to target health education, resources and support to an even younger age group in order for NZ girls to be prepared to manage their periods without disruption to their schooling and without embarrassment. This is an especially pressing issue given, worldwide; the age of initial onset of puberty is reducing.



As the New Zealand curriculum is broad with little detail, our children could be learning nothing, a little, or a lot about menstruation.

We need men and boys, to be menstruation champions and period education should be taught to all genders. Eileen Joy, a sexual health educator in Auckland, New Zealand said in an interview on the Hello Cup blog that, "The curriculum does not say anything about separating boys and girls however I firmly believe that ultimately it is not a good thing to separate children by gender."

Joy's opinion on this is based on several things:

- Separating children adds to an air of secrecy about menstruation which is unhelpful. There is already a lot of stigma about menstruation being a dirty little secret; words like 'hygiene' subtly enforce this idea. Keeping it separated strengthens this idea, especially in boys, and adds to their thinking that menstruation is dirty and shameful.
- Separating children by gender forces trans children and non-binary children into the very awkward situation of having to declare a gender, or out themselves. Teachers often cannot know in advance if any of their students are trans or non-binary, so to simply say 'it doesn't matter because none of my students are' is ignorant.
- Keeping children together fosters the fact that respect is a must, from all genders.
- There is an assumption that boys don't need education on menstruation. I counter that by saying how will they understand menstruating partners? How will they help support any menstruating children they have in the future?

To counter the possibility that young women may not feel safe in the mixed classes, or able to ask questions, Joy suggests having an anonymous question box, and always stay afterward to answer questions individually.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY YWCA AUCKLAND

- Join the Positive Periods campaign as a supporting organisation and campaign to get menstrual products free in all schools across NZ with partners
- Collaborate with Dignity NZ and connect them to our Equal Pay Awards/Gender Tick organisations
- Period Poverty Hui
- Promote period destigmatisation
- Co-submit PHARMAC application requesting subsidising of pads in low decile schools with Dr. Sarah Donovan from the University of Otago in Wellington.

¹² <https://www.otago.ac.nz/news/news/otago697129.html>

KEY PLAYERS IN NZ

[Days for Girls](#)

Put together sustainable feminine hygiene kits to send to developing countries. They have teams and individuals throughout NZ who sew and put the kits together.

[Dignity NZ](#)

Dignity uses a 'buy one, give one' approach so that companies can provide sanitary items not only to their staff, but also to local students who are lacking access to pads and tampons, causing them to miss school.

Set up the Positive Periods campaign.

[Feel Good Period](#)

Auckland based, they provide Buy One Give One packs during adolescent period talks at schools. Not sure if they are still operating, their FB page has not been active in a year.

[Go With the Flow](#)

Based in Wellington. Collect and distribute sanitary products to the women's refuge, homeless folk right there on the street, night shelters and soup kitchens, low-socioeconomic community houses, schools and education centres and Foster Hope New Zealand.

[Hello Cup](#)

A NZ made menstrual cup. Want to normalise conversations about menstruation.

[I am Eva](#)

NZ made period panties. Donate 5% of all I am Eva underwear to charities in New Zealand who are committed to supporting and empowering wahine, and who are addressing period poverty.

[KidsCan](#)

Added sanitary items to the list of school essentials it provides more than three years ago. KidsCan supplies schools nationwide with sanitary items to help remove any barriers to learning. Last year the charity has supplied more than 16,000 boxes of tampons, pads and liners to hundreds of schools – decile 1-3.

[My Cup](#)

My Cup is a Social Enterprise helping to alleviate period poverty by the sale and distribution of Menstrual Cups with their buy-one-give-one model.

[Nest Consulting](#)

Has a focus on health and wellbeing and holds a number of contracts in the health and wellbeing sector and also develops and delivers innovative, fun and accessible programmes nationwide.

Have two workshops for girls, teens and their mothers/female carers around their bodies and menstruation, puberty etc. An in-school short programme called [Cycle Smarter](#) and a one-day workshop for 10-12 years old girls with their mother or female carer called [A Celebration Day for Girls](#)

[Oi](#)

Buy One Give One, plus they match every donation made

[Shine](#)

Auckland based, accept sanitary product donations

SPINZS (Sanitary Products in New Zealand Schools)

Purchasing and distribute sanitary products to schools where period poverty is known to be an issue.

SPINZS long-term vision is to see sanitary products free of charge on a general practitioner's prescription to those in need, just as condoms are today.

The Food Bank Project

The Foodbank Project is an initiative of The Salvation Army, it is a not-for-profit, self-sustaining online shop that makes it easy for anyone to donate groceries to Kiwis in need.

You can donate a Women's Bundle (tampons and pads) or individual packets of tampons and pads. Sanitary products are in the Essentials Bundle as well. Their foodbank hubs are in desperate need of women's sanitary products, to support those families in need and get their girls to school.

The Period Place

Social enterprise, provide period education and increasing accessibility to ethical period products aiming to reduce period stigma, environmental impacts and period poverty.

United Sustainable Sisters

Auckland based, providing cups and washable pads to women. Use a social enterprise model to create and distribution. Raise awareness and provide education on reusable menstrual options.

Wā Collective

NZ made menstrual cups. They partner with students' associations at three universities to supply Wā Cups and promote menstruation education.

Relevant International Agreements:

- International Conference on Human Rights Tehran, Republic of Iran (1968)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)
- Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994)
- Beijing Platform for Action (1995)
- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015)
- Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) (2005)
- Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- The Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health (2010)
- Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) Commitment to Action (2014-2015)
- ICPD Beyond 2014 Framework of Action (2014)
- The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health (2016-2030)
- Report of the High-Level Working Group on the Health and Human Rights of Women, Children and Adolescents (2017)

Eliminating period poverty is linked to the achievement of several SDGs and targets, including:

SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

- 1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day
- 1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
- 1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

- 2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
- 2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages

- 3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
- 3.8 Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
- 3.c Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing States

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

- 4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
- 4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
- 4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

- 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
- 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual, and other types of exploitation
- 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
- 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

- 9.1 Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and trans border infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all

SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

- 11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

- 13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries

RESOURCES

Community Members

We undertook community consultation with some of the people working on Period Poverty. We acknowledge their generosity and knowledge:

Jacinta Gulasekharam, GM and Co-Founder, Dignity NZ

Danika Revell, Co-Founder, The Period Place

Soala Wilson, Co-Founder, SPINZ

Liz Peterson, Project Manager, United Sustainable Sisters

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