

#FreeToBleed: The imperative to provide free sanitary pads

Livity Africa and AmandlaMobi

Menstruation is a natural process that girls and women will go through at some point in their lives. It is disheartening that something as natural as a period can infringe on the basic human rights of girls, women and people with uteruses. The lack of menstrual hygiene products that people face contributes to both their disempowerment and health.

For young girls, menstruation is an addition to the heap of gender disparities they have to face in life.



1. Affordability

Sanitary products are not affordable in South Africa. For example, a pack of 18 *Always Maxi Pads* costs around R40. Considering how this is a monthly occurrence and many girls and women come from poorer backgrounds, some may end up using anything from rags, tree leaves, old clothes, toilet paper, newspapers, cotton wool, cloths or anything that can stop them from bleeding out.

2. The right to education

The education of girls is a primary focus of development efforts in developing nations because female school achievement is believed to have long-lasting and far-reaching economic effects. This means that girls are more likely to not do as well as they could in school simply because they are menstruating – something that is completely out of their control.



3. Stigma and human dignity

The subject of menstruation is often taboo, and has many negative cultural attitudes associated with it, including the idea that menstruating women and girls are 'contaminated', 'dirty' and 'impure'.

4. Health Risks

There are some studies that link poor menstrual hygiene with urinary or reproductive tract infections and other illnesses. There is an impact of poor menstrual hygiene on the psycho-social wellbeing of girls and women, such as increased stress levels and anxiety caused by fear of bleeding out and the inability to an adequate supply of sanitary products. This social anxiety is heightened in a classroom setting and affects learning.



Department of Health

As found in the Bill of Rights, Chapter 2(27) — “everyone has the right to have access to health care services including reproductive health”.

Considering the many health risks described in this presentation and presented by a lack of access to adequate sanitary health products, we believe that the Department of Health therefore has a duty to make the issue of menstrual hygiene products a priority.

Department of Basic Education

Menstrual education should start from an early age. Girls usually start puberty around 10 years old, therefore proper education should be provided for both girls and boys so as to also break the stigma some may face.



Department of Social Development

The mandate of this Department is “to empower communities and engender self-reliance by creating conditions for sustainable livelihoods”; in addition, the mandate states that the department commits itself to “endeavour to create a better life for the poor, vulnerable and excluded people in our society”.

Department of Women in the Presidency

The department's own mandate states that it exists to “champion the advancement of women’s socio-economic empowerment and the promotion of gender equality”.



1. Dischem's One Million Comforts Campaign
2. Corporate Social Investment projects by various companies
3. Dignity Dreams with Deputy Minister in the Presidency, Buti Manamela
4. Subz Pads and Panties



In April this year, Livity Africa, through the VIP Parliament Challenge campaign and working with Pontsho Pilane, launched a petition in partnership with Amandla.mobi asking South Africans to add their signatures in our call for national government departments to provide free sanitary products for girls and women. We asked South Africans from all walks of life to help us convince national government to realise President Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation 2011 promise for free sanitary pads to disadvantaged girls and women. So far we've reached over 3700 signatures and counting. Other media outlets have also come on board to help us amplify the message and call to action of the petition.



“I had to use newspaper as a child because my parents could not afford pads for me. By 11 o'clock, I could not even stand up because bleeding was too much. I had to sit at my desk while kids played outside so I could wait for it to dry up. Can you imagine the embarrassment when boys know you're on your period? But back then kids were different. I didn't continue with my studies. I'm asking the government to please take a step about this as it's important.” - *Keleabetswe Motlhale, North West*

I have three daughters and two have come of age. Having to imagine them miss school because of their periods is a disturbing thought as I know the importance of education in this day and age. My daughters are fortunate and privileged but how many young women are there out there who are not so lucky. I want to give to other daughters what my daughters have. As an African I know it takes a village to raise a child and I am a resident of that village. - *Oupa C*



- This parliamentary committee write to the President requesting an update on the 2011 announcement that the sanitary pads would be available soon.
- An expansion on the various ongoing initiatives such as Dignity Dreams and Subz Pads by various government departments. It is important that government supports the initiatives that are already providing solutions to the problem.
- For a long lasting and sustainable solution, a national policy must be created and it must be prioritised and added to the National Development Plan 2030.
- Research into menstrual hygiene be conducted by the committee and/or any of the previously mentioned departments in order to understand the severity of the problem of lack of sanitary products.
- Districts should ensure that all primary schools have established and functional school health clubs and girl-education movement (GEM) clubs. Each school should have a trained and well-motivated senior teacher to support and advise school girls reaching puberty.



Thank you

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