



# INCLUSIVITY & DIVERSITY – UK EXPERT VIEWS

**Authors:**  
Dr Annalise Weckesser, Gemma Williams, Dr Angela Hewett,  
and Amie Randhawa, Birmingham City University





## INTRODUCTION

**This brief serves as a resource for period poverty and menstruation education initiatives that strive to include *all* young people. It summarises the insights of experts who work with underrepresented groups and advocate for inclusive menstruation equity. This brief explores:**

- obstacles to engaging young people who face additional forms of stigma and hardship
- the importance of recognising the intersectional<sup>1</sup> diversity of marginalised groups as well as shared common experience
- why inclusivity is central to the evolving period poverty movement.

## METHODOLOGY

In the UK, there is a dearth of research examining the menstruation-related experiences and needs of young people of a diversity of backgrounds (for a summary of some such research, see *Further Reading: Menstruation and Marginalisation in the UK*, in this brief). To generate knowledge in this area, we conducted 'expert interviews'<sup>2</sup> with 14 specialists working with young people and/or advocating for inclusivity within the menstruation equity movement. We conducted one-on-one, semi-structured qualitative interviews over the telephone. Interviews were digitally recorded on encrypted equipment, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed.

Birmingham City University's Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance for this study. Participants had the opportunity to read, amend and approve interview transcripts. While interviewees could choose to remain anonymous, the majority consented to have their name and/or their organisation's name included in this brief.

<sup>1</sup> K. Crenshaw (1989) coined 'intersectionality' in 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, to conceptualise overlapping forms of discrimination faced by black women. The concept has been widely applied to other contexts; 'intersectional' has come to mean the complex ways the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, able-ism, homophobia and transphobia) combine or intersect.

<sup>2</sup> Bogner A., et al. (2009) *Interviewing Experts (Research Methods Series)*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## DIVERSITY OF EXPERT EXPERIENCE

Interviewees came from a variety of sectors, including public health, libraries, education, academic, third sector/charity, and advocacy. They serve, work with or advocate for underrepresented groups from a variety of backgrounds. Such diversity is evident in the following summary of those who took part in the interviews, their affiliate organisations and communities they work with:

- Kenny Ethan Jones of Bloody Good Period and Rachel Benson of Youth Cymru are trainers and advocates for transgender (trans), non-binary and intersex inclusivity.
- Robyn Steward, is a researcher and author of *The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods*. Gillian Leno is a specialist in accessible Relationship and Sex Education for young people with learning, physical and sensory disabilities and autism spectrum conditions.
- Neelam Heera and Nikita Aashi Chadha, are from Cysters, a reproductive health charity addressing barriers to health faced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women and recently by trans-men and non-binary people as well. Emma Shakir conducted research examining the relationship between menstrual health campaigns and BAME women.
- Bryony Farmer provides education via YouTube on reusable period products and issues faced by those with chronic conditions.
- Community librarian Caroline Varney-Bowers of 'The Tricky Period' project, which distributes free period products in rural Norfolk. A representative from T.E.E.S. (Together, Engage, Encourage, Support) which distributes free period products to those facing in-work poverty in North East of England.
- Manjit K. Gill, founder of Binti, and Tina Leslie, founder of Freedom4Girls, both began addressing period poverty in the UK after working on similar initiatives abroad.
- A second representative from Bloody Good Period, which provides an education programme for asylum seekers, refugees and those who cannot normally access female reproductive health information.
- One organisation participated anonymously; it provides menstruation education and free period products to 'vulnerable' young people, including those who are homeless and those who are parents at a young age.

## STIGMA AND OBSTACLES TO ENGAGEMENT

“ Sometimes it's really hard to gain access to work with those young people, because by definition they are 'vulnerable,' they might not be in school, etc. ”

Anonymous

Many interviewees identified obstacles to including young people who face additional forms of stigma and hardship in free period

products programmes and/or menstruation education. Initial disbelief that economic period poverty is a reality in UK communities is

sometimes a barrier to obtaining funding. Manjit K. Gill of Binti reflected on such an experience, stating “In this funding donor’s world, I guess she had access” to period products, “she just couldn’t believe that there wasn’t access.” Such disbelief may also pose a barrier when approaching organisations to collaborate with in order to reach young people. For example, a participant stated that some schools “don’t see” economic period poverty because it is a “hidden problem” due to the shame that surrounds both menstruation and poverty: “Young people don’t ring up the school and say, ‘Yeah, I’m not coming to school because I can’t afford period products’” (Anonymous).

“Stigma,” reflected a representative from Bloody Good Period, “is undoubtedly the biggest frontier” in addressing issues of engagement and starting conversations about menstruation. Expert interviewees also viewed wider, societal period stigmas as barriers to inclusion of underrepresented groups. For example, in relation to trans-inclusivity in period poverty activism, Kenny Ethan Jones states:

“It’s about breaking down the stigma around periods as a whole, and then trans men will slowly start to feel like they can step into the conversation. But that stigma needs to be broken down as a whole first... We already face enough stigma.”

Indeed, while menstruation taboos are near universal, interviewees argue that some communities face additional forms of stigma that pose barriers to inclusion in period poverty and menstruation education initiatives. Expert interviewees working with BAME communities reported that initiatives in religious and cultural communities must be sensitive to the taboos that surround periods, but also women’s reproductive health more generally. Neelam Heera founded Cysters because “there wasn’t actually any support out there both from, or for minority communities... I wanted to address these cultural issues.” Cysters is made up of those who reflect the community and have established trust through grassroots relationships. Thus, Heera explains, engaging BAME communities is less of a barrier because “we are already in the space.”

## INTERSECTIONAL DIVERSITY AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

Expert interviewees emphasised recognising internal diversity within marginalised communities. They warn against labelling young people based on one aspect of their identity or social position. Many reported adopting intersectional approaches in their own work to better understand and meet the needs of young people who occupy multiple, cross-cutting identities. As Rachel Benson of Youth Cymru stated:

“There can be a danger really, when you’re working with a particular group to... fail to recognise the diversity, and all the intersections within... So as well as trans people who are also disabled, there are those who might have a chronic illness

that then might affect their experiences of menstruation... or it could be the language that would or would not include them.”

Similarly, Nikita Aashi Chadha stated, “I think an intersectional approach is always needed” and illustrated by problematising the term ‘BAME’: “I don’t like lumping together all black and minority ethnic people because there are so many different experiences within.”

Robyn Steward explained that “every autistic person is different,” and so to capture multiple perspectives she surveyed over 100 people with autism to inform her book, *The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods*. As well as diverse experiences of menstruation for people

with autism, there are elements of shared experience. Neurotypical people learn subtle social cues to navigate period taboos. Those with autism, however, might not always ‘pick up’ the unspoken norms surrounding such things as “how to tell someone discreetly that your period started when you’re in school, or how to ask if you can go to the loo or borrow a pad” Steward explains. Those with autism, she says, often have more literal understandings of language and might think “But you’re not actually borrowing the pad because the person wouldn’t want it back. And they’re not expecting you to bring them another one to replace it.” With such literal interpretations, menstruation education that employs period euphemisms and advertisements that use blue liquid to represent period blood can be confusing. Menstruation may also break routines that are important to some with autism. Steward found that those with sensory sensitivities may prefer cloth pads, period pants or menstrual cups, but such options are often not discussed with those with autism.

Standard menstruation education has

also been found inadequate for those with learning and/or physical disabilities. Gillian Leno finds such young people are often left “frightened” when they begin their periods, as “why they’re bleeding” has never been “very well explained.” Instead, Leno finds, they are only told that periods are a “mess” that they must “tidy up” every month. Young people with disabilities are often excluded from celebratory menstruation narratives of becoming an adult. As Leno stated:

“When we were taught about periods, it’s... you’re going to grow up into a woman and your body’s going through this wonderful change. One day you might have a baby. Oh, no, well that’s not sanctioned if you’ve got a learning disability... ‘Get back, no babies for you, scourge on the community’...”

In response to poor reproductive health education for those with disabilities, Leno started a support group and periods are a popular point of discussion. “They want to talk about it as a shared experience,” Leno reflected, it is about having that “sense of belonging.”

## INCLUSIVITY AND THE EVOLVING PERIOD POVERTY MOVEMENT

**“Inclusivity matters because so many different people are included in this shared experience [of menstruation], but there are so many different individual experiences... The movement itself, no matter how well intended it is there are nuances we will continue to miss along the way unless there is change in terms of who’s involved...”**

**Representative, Bloody Good Period**

Expert interviewees viewed inclusivity as central to period poverty and menstruation education initiatives. On why inclusivity matters in relation to period product access, Caroline Varney-Bowers stated that it is because periods should not “hold someone back from achieving everything that they can.” In relation

to menstruation education, Gillian Leno stated, “Everybody regardless of their age and their abilities, their background, their religion, their gender – we are all entitled to this very basic information about our bodies.”

A menstruation equity movement that

includes voices representing a diversity of experience is key to creating inclusive period poverty initiatives on the ground. Emma Shakir stated “BAME women in the UK have been left behind in the menstrual health campaign.” Much of the campaign takes place online, thus those who do not have equal access to information and services on the internet face ‘digital exclusion’ explained Shakir. Bryony Farmer finds, in relation to online advocacy around sustainable period products, that “most of the people I see doing it are white women” and this “potentially whitewashes the whole industry and makes it seem like a very privileged thing.” Social media is key to facilitating period poverty campaigns and initiatives. Some interviewees expressed concern that

via social media, period poverty becomes a ‘fashionable bandwagon’ that could ‘die out’ like a passing ‘fad’.

Nikita Aashi Chadha warned against ‘white saviour’ approaches within the period poverty movement. She stated, “There’s a real onus on marginalised or oppressed groups to be the problem solvers” in relation to engaging, or communicating the needs of, communities, “which is problematic because although we might harness some insight, we don’t harness any of the structural power.” This leads to tokenistic approaches to diversity. Thus, whether those with decision-making power over resources themselves represent and reflect a diversity of experience needs consideration.

## **TRANS-INCLUSIVE PERIOD POVERTY INITIATIVES: “AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE PROGRESS ACROSS THE BOARD”**

“I do understand that a lot of companies and schools and people that provide gender-inclusive period information are concerned about taking that space away from cis women” reflected Kenny Ethan Jones, model and trans activist working with Bloody Good Period Project, “but that’s not what’s happening. It’s just that we deserve to be respected as well, because this is part of my lived experience as well.” Many interviewees reported facing ‘backlash’ and transphobia via social media when adopting gender-neutral language, due to the notion that inclusion of the trans community leads to the exclusion of cis women. Such a notion, Jones stated, links “femininity to periods,” but not all cis women menstruate, and “a cis woman who should have her period, but doesn’t due to health reasons, I’d hate for her to feel excluded.”

Gender-neutral language (e.g. ‘people who menstruate’) in menstruation education is important, explained Jones, else trans-boys/men, non-binary and intersex people who have periods “may exclude themselves” and not receive vital health information. People may fear using incorrect gender pronouns. Rachel Benson explained, “It’s a process of listening and learning and evolving in terms of language... I definitely don’t always get it right... It’s important to consult young people... be led by the language they are comfortable with.”

Jones believes solutions to transphobia lie in pushing for corporations and the media to adopt inclusive language, images and practices as they have more influence and thus more power to enact change. As Benson stated, when making inroads in relation to period poverty, “whenever there is progress, that’s the opportunity to make progress across the board.”

# CONCLUSION

As highlighted in *Menstruation Learning Brief 1: Centring the Voices of Young People*, there is little UK-based research on young people's experiences of menstruation and menstruation education. Further, research to date has focused predominately on the experiences of (cis) girls. There is a dearth of research exploring the menstruation experiences of young people from a diversity of backgrounds, especially those facing additional stigma and hardships. This brief begins to address this research gap by summarising the insights of experts working with underrepresented groups and/or advocating for an inclusive period poverty movement.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all those who participated in this expert interview study for sharing their valuable insights on issues of marginalisation and menstruation in the UK.



## FURTHER READING: MENSTRUATION AND MARGINALISATION IN THE UK

Bloody Good Period and Women for Refugee Women (2019) *The effects of "period poverty" among refugee and asylum-seeking women*. London: Bloody Good Period and Women for Refugee Women.

- Found refugee and asylum-seeking women cannot afford period products or can only afford low-quality period products. Women experience menstrual ill-health/irregularity due to stress caused from destitution. Calls for free period products in all government accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers.

Chrisler, J.C., Gorman, J.A., Manion, J., et al (2016) Queer periods: attitudes toward and experiences with menstruation in the masculine of centre and transgender community. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 18(11), pp.1238-1250.

- US-based<sup>3</sup> study with the masculine of centre and transgender community on attitudes towards and experiences with menstruation. Participants had generally positive attitudes towards menstrual suppression and reported avoiding public restrooms during menstruation due to practical and psychological concerns.

McCarthy B.P. (1980) *Disabled Eve: Aids in menstruation*. London: Disabled Living Foundation.

- Found most period products are not suitable for those with disabilities and feelings of shame/embarrassment in association with needing assistance with the 'intimate' procedures involved with menstrual hygiene.

Steward, R., Crane, L., Mairi Roy, E., et al. (2018) "Life is much more difficult to manage during periods": Autistic experiences of menstruation. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(12), pp. 4287-4292.

- Examines autistic experiences of periods, including sensory issues, impact of menstruation on work and social lives, and the importance of increasing menstruation knowledge of young people with autism and their parents/carers.

Vora, S. (2017) *Tackling period poverty: Report 2017*. Bristol: No More Taboo.

- Found homeless and low-income women improvise (with toilet paper, nappies, etc.) when they cannot afford period products, lack access to safe, private and clean washing facilities. Calls for improved communication and advertisement of where free period products can be located.

---

<sup>3</sup> Due to the absence of UK-based research on transgender experiences of menstruation in the UK, US-based studies have been included.