



# Situational analysis of girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK and policy and programmatic responses to this

Plan International UK is seeking suitably qualified and experienced researchers to carry out a situational analysis of girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK and policy and programmatic response to this.

This Terms of Reference outlines the purpose of the research, the deliverables, what we are looking for in a researcher and budget and timeline.

## About Plan International UK

Plan International UK is a global children's charity. We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. As an independent development and humanitarian charity, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children, so that children can realise their rights.

At Plan International UK we believe that girls' rights are universal, but across the UK as well as internationally, girls' rights are threatened by poverty, gender inequality, violence, unfair policies and ingrained discriminatory attitudes.

## What do we know about girls' experiences of menstruation?

In 2018, Plan International UK commissioned research into girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK: [Break the Barriers: Girls' Experiences of Menstruation in the UK](#).

We have also produced a number of learning briefings in partnership with Birmingham City University as part of a two year programme: [Let's Talk. Period | Plan International UK \(plan-uk.org\)](#):

[Learning briefing 1: Centring the voices of young people](#)

[Learning briefing 2: Best practice and innovations in UK period poverty initiatives](#)

[Learning briefing 3: Inclusivity and diversity](#)

[Learning briefing 4: Evidencing and evaluating period poverty initiatives](#)

[Our State of the Girls' Rights in the UK Report](#) (2019-2020), our [Wales Insights report](#) for 2019- 2020 and our [research on the impact on girls rights during the coronavirus pandemic](#) provide further insight into girls experiences of menstruation.

Alongside this work, Plan International UK have carried out a number of snapshot polls with girls to increase our understanding of girls' experience of menstruation. Most recently, we have conducted polls into the impact of the pandemic on [access to period products](#). Further information about our polls on menstruation can be found at our [media centre](#).

The findings from our research, polls and work with partners, highlight that girl's face a 'toxic trio' of issues related to menstruation. This 'toxic trio' includes a lack of proper education around periods, the stigma and shame around menstruation and the cost of period products.

### **Lack of proper education around periods**

Our research shows that there is inadequate 'real world' education about menstruation in many schools across the UK and that this lack of education contributes to lack of knowledge and understanding about menstruation amongst girls and other menstruators. For example, one in seven girls (14%) report that they didn't know what was happening to them when they started their period, while more than a quarter (26%) didn't know what to do. With many young people lacking a good understanding about menstruation, myths and taboos are allowed to flourish whilst for some young people, a lack of understanding can lead to unresolved health problems.

Other sources of education outside of school settings are not always reliable or consistent. For example, although many girls spoke about the importance of family members, particularly mothers, sisters and other female relatives as important sources of information, the extent to which girls felt supported depended on the nature of their relationship. In some cases, girls reported that they felt embarrassed or awkward when speaking to family members. Similarly, whilst the internet was viewed as an important source of information on menstruation, for example, as a platform for attempting to resist and challenge traditional norms about menstruation through online interactions with peers on forums, it was also recognised as a source of misinformation, reinforcing stereotypes and fuelling worry and distress for some girls.

### **Stigma and shame around menstruation**

Girls feel and experience considerable stigma and shame around menstruation in the UK – with menstrual secrecy and concealment being a key theme that emerged from our work. Many girls report feeling worried about leaking, for example, and the negative reactions and discrimination they might face as a result of a leak. This in turn can lead some girls to actively change their behaviour such as avoiding white clothing or abstaining from certain activities such as swimming. Indeed, stigma and shame around menstruation was felt across many areas of young people's lives: from mental health, body image and self-esteem, to limiting activities and behaviours and creating barriers to communication and knowledge about bodies, and ways to care for them.

Our research has found that a culture of secrecy and embarrassment around periods is felt acutely in schools. Nearly two million girls (64%) aged 14-21 in the UK have missed a part day or full day of school because of their period. Of those girls who report missing school because of their period, many said that they felt anxious about leaking, and one in five girls had been teased or bullied because of their period. Worryingly, more than a third (36%) of girls that have missed a part day or full day of school because of a period say they have struggled to catch up on schoolwork as a result of missing time off school. There is growing

concern that in schools, access to toilets is inadequate, with some girls' reporting they are not able to go to the toilet during lesson time, further contributing to anxieties about leaking.

### **The cost of period products**

There is growing societal and political awareness of the problem of 'period poverty': the lack of access to period products due to financial hardship. Experiences of period poverty can lead to significant mental burden, reduced participation in activities and a loss of dignity and self-esteem.

Our latest survey found more than a third (36%) of girls aged 14-21 in the UK have struggled to afford or access period products during the Coronavirus pandemic - up a fifth on last year. That is equivalent to over one million girls in the UK. Half of these girls did not have enough money to buy period products at all at some point over the past year.

## Purpose of the situational analysis

The purpose of this situational analysis is to inform Plan International UK's strategic decision making about what we do next in response to girls' experiences of menstruation, through our programming and influencing work.

To do this, we need the analysis to explore:

- What current research exists on girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK?
- What progress has been made on tackling the period related issues (toxic trio) girls face since 2018?
- What is the existing UK 'Period Poverty' stakeholder map? Which organizations are operating in this space and what do they cover?
- Where can Plan International best add value?

Through answering these questions, we hope to be able to identify how Plan can make a difference in changing the negative ways girls currently experience and understand menstruation and what the routes to making change are.

## Research questions and approach

### **1. What research and evidence exists on girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK?**

Plan International UK's last comprehensive piece of research on girl's experiences of menstruation was in 2018. To ensure that our understanding is up to date, we would like the situational analysis to begin with a brief literature review on UK research that exists about the 'toxic trio' (access to period products, menstrual education, shame, stigma and taboo) and to identify if there are any additional barriers that girls' experience. The literature review should also include research on the impact Covid-19 has had on girls' experiences of menstruation (positive and negative) and access to period products.

### **2. What progress has been made on tackling the period related issues girls face since 2018?**

Drawing on the issues identified from the literature review, we want to understand what initiatives and policy changes have been established over the last two years to address them

and how effective these policy changes/ initiatives have been. We have outlined below some initiatives we would like the research to cover, as a minimum.

*Policy changes/ Initiatives that address a lack of education on menstruation:*

- The introduction of statutory relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) in schools in England in September 2020.
  - o What research exists, if any, on how confident teachers feel to teach about menstruation?
  - o How effective is Government support to help teachers deliver the new curriculum and content on menstruation?
  - o Does the curriculum meet the 'real-world' needs of girls based on Plan International UKs research findings about what girls want?
  - o What are Government plans to monitor the roll out of RSHE?

*Initiatives that address stigma and shame around menstruation*

- Public awareness raising campaigns to reduce shame or stigma (by Government, Local Authorities, Corporates, activists) and impact.
- Programmatic interventions directly to girls or influencers addressing stigma and shame.

*Initiatives that address the cost of period products*

- The [DfE scheme](#) to ensure learners can access period products in their place of learning.
  - o What is the uptake from schools and what have been the barriers to uptake?
  - o How are schools ensuring girls and other menstruators can get access to these products?
- Do any initiatives exist that increase access to high quality and eco-friendly period products?

*Other*

- An update on key policy developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that address the toxic trio and contextualise policy change in England.
- Any other relevant policy changes in England (new policy, budgets, regulations, statutory guidance, laws) or initiatives to address girl's negative experience of menstruation.
- Case studies of leading organisations driving change in any of these initiatives

### **3. Where can Plan International UK best add value?**

Based on the analysis above, researchers should recommend where Plan International UK could best add value to address and change the negative ways girls experience and understand menstruation.

Recommendations should be based on where researchers have identified a lack of progress in addressing a particular issue and why (what the barriers are to making progress) and routes to change to address it that Plan International UK could take forward.

Lack of progress could be because there are gaps in interventions to address a particular issue or because the interventions that exist have been ineffective (short term nature of intervention, lack of awareness, flawed policy etc).

Routes to change to overcome these barriers could include Plan International UK:

- Developing direct programming work with girls
- Advocating for policy change
- Driving forward a campaign on a particular issue/ producing a campaign toolkit
- Developing an awareness raising strategy

Partnership with relevant corporates to challenge stigma/shame

## Deliverables

We would like the situational analysis to be conducted in two stages. The first stage should involve researchers producing a written report with the findings of the literature review, progress made to tackle the 'toxic trio' and recommendations for Plan International UK.

In the second stage, we would like researchers to facilitate a workshop with Plan International UK staff to discuss the recommendations and gather feedback. This should lead to a final report and recommendations. A full timeline for deliverables are outlined below.

## Researcher profile

Researchers should be suitably qualified and have experience/ expertise in the following areas:

- Experience of working with charitable organisations similar to Plan International UK and the strategies used to make change (Policy and campaigns, Programme work etc.)
- Experience of sector mapping
- Experience of conducting literature reviews
- Expert understanding of girl's experiences of menstruation, including the problems of menstrual stigma, taboo, lack of menstrual education and access to menstrual products, would be desirable.

## Application process

Plan UK welcomes a response to these Terms of Reference, with a CV and short written statement that demonstrates how the required qualifications and competencies will be met. Please include examples of any relevant previous work.

Responses should be sent to: [sally.thomas@plan-uk.org](mailto:sally.thomas@plan-uk.org) no later than Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> December. Remote interviews will be conducted the following week.

## Proposed Timeline & Budget

The allocated budget for this work is £3,000 - £5,000 inclusive of VAT. Payments will be made by BACS upon submission of an invoice.

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| Submission deadline to apply | 1 <sup>st</sup> December   |
| Interviews                   | 7 <sup>th</sup> December 2021  |
| Proposed start               | 14 <sup>th</sup> December 2021 (or as soon as possible)  |
| Proposed completion          | Deadline for written report: 7 <sup>th</sup> January 2022<br>Workshop: 11 <sup>th</sup> -14 <sup>th</sup> January 2022<br>Full completion: 19th January 2022 |