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## **Advocacy Committee Strategy- Creating a Cycle of Empowerment from a Cycle of Shame**

Our mission is to end menstrual stigma in the UK within a generation and replace it with a positive narrative that empowers girls to access the support they need during their periods and to feel confident about themselves and their bodies.

We believe that young people are uniquely placed to catalyse progress to end period poverty and shame. Many young people are directly affected by menstrual stigma during an important window in their lives, are more aware of gender inequality and are still forming their attitudes to menstruation. If they become shame free then they will raise the next generation to be shame free, breaking the intergenerational cycle of stigma.

### **Who we are:**

We are a committee of young women who have experienced disadvantage or inequality because of our periods leading a network of young people committed to ending period poverty and shame.

We are chaired by Irise's Advocacy Trustee and lead and shape Irise's strategy in the UK, in particular we champion Irise's commitment to listen to girls, nurture leadership among young people, amplify their voices and enable their advocacy on this neglected girls' rights issue.

We share Irise's vision of a world where no girl<sup>1</sup> is held back by her period and believe that the voices and leadership of young women is critical in realising this important goal.

We are committed to approaches that nurture leadership, build the skills of girls and young people and that, most importantly, turn traditional power structures and hierarchies on their head. We strongly believe that when young people have the tools and opportunity they can create meaningful change in their communities at the local and national level- in fact we believe that change is rarely possible or sustainable without them. We expect to lead rather than just be listened to and will build an ethos and environment where all people's contributions are valued and recognised.

We work with young people across the UK but mostly in the North of England to end menstrual stigma in their communities through advocacy, volunteering and fundraising. We capture their experiences and learning and use it to shape national level discourse and policy development on this issue.

We aim to build a long term relationship between young people and our cause, creating a movement and community that will last a lifetime and that will see period poverty and shame consigned to the history books.

### **Period Poverty and shame:**

In the UK, 27% of girls have used a product for longer than intended because they couldn't afford a fresh one, 1 in 7 girls don't know what's happening when they start their period, and more than a quarter don't know what to do, leaving girls poorly equipped to make decisions about their own bodies. Approximately half of girls feel embarrassed about their period and 70% of girls aren't allowed to go to the toilet during school lessons resulting in feelings of low self-esteem<sup>2</sup>. Research

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<sup>1</sup> Our strategy focuses on adolescent girls and young women but we fully acknowledge that not everyone who menstruates identifies as a woman and not all women menstruate.

<sup>2</sup> TINGLE, C. & VORA, S. 2018. Break the Barriers: Girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK. London, UK.

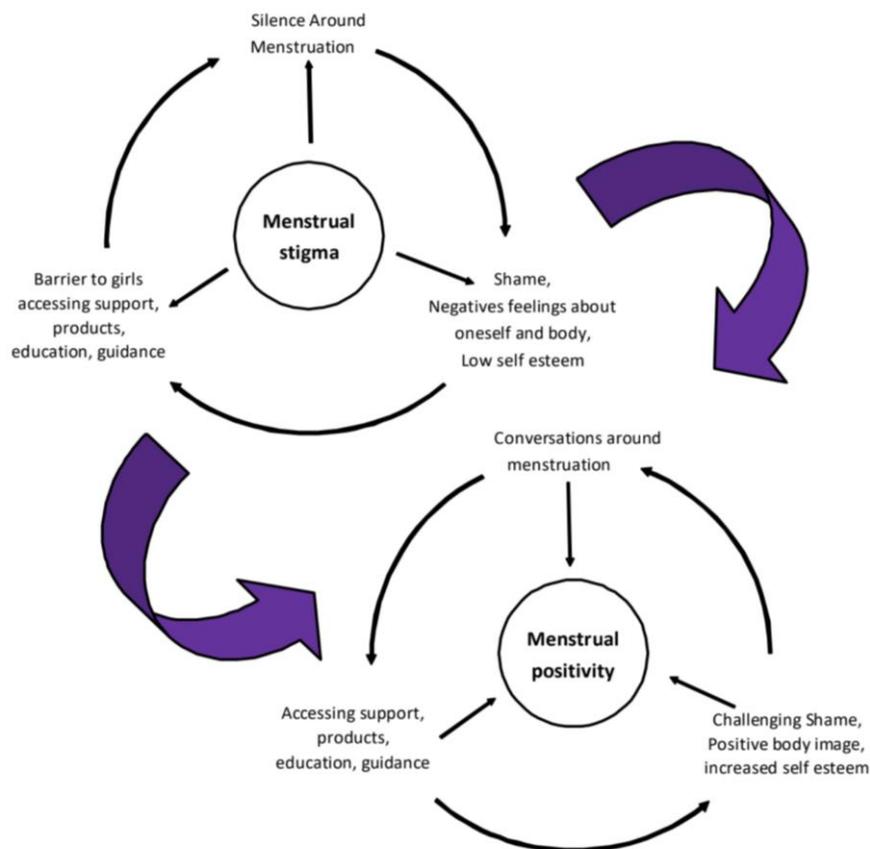


has also shown that menstrual taboos lead to women being perceived as less competent and likeable in the workplace if they are known to be menstruating<sup>3</sup>.

Period poverty and shame are made up of a toxic triad<sup>4</sup> including:

- Lack of access to a choice of affordable menstrual products and gender sensitive facilities that enable menstruation to be managed with dignity
- Lack of evidence based education that also explores the gendered and social experiences surrounding menstruation and puberty
- Stigma, a system of problematic societal values surrounding menstruation that lead girls to experience shame.

We believe that stigma is driving the neglect of girls' needs by keeping their voices silent and their needs overlooked. Conversely, it can also be a catalyst for change- by transforming the social norms at the root of stigma we can normalise menstruation and through doing that normalise being a girl. By ending the shame associated with an intrinsic part of being female we can help build a society where are people are valued and everyone is supported to realise their full potential.



<sup>3</sup> Roberts T et al (2002) "Feminine Protection": The Effects of Menstruation on Attitudes Towards Women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 26: 2; 131-139.

<sup>4</sup> TINGLE, C. & VORA, S. 2018. Break the Barriers: Girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK. London, UK.



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## **Our role:**

We believe that our role in ending stigma within a generation is three fold:

- To build a movement of young people and equip them with the tools they need to end menstrual stigma in their communities
- To generate and share learning about young people's experiences of menstruation and their critical role in ending period poverty and shame with policy makers and programmers
- To help others use our approach so that young people across the UK can be empowered to catalyse change

## **Our strategy:**

Our strategy is focused around the following objectives:

### **1. Support girls to stay, healthy and happy during their periods**

We know that girls and boys feel more comfortable learning about menstruation and puberty from their near peers and that they want a space to ask questions and explore the gendered and social aspects of their experiences of adolescence. Young people in the advocacy network will volunteer as part of Irise's projects in the UK, working directly with girls and boys as part of developing and testing effective interventions.

We believe that projects to improve girls' experiences of menstruation are more effective when they are led by young people and their communities. This ensures that interventions are context specific and culturally appropriate. We will work with young people through our Agents of Change program, providing them with the mentorship, tools, and support they need to develop and lead projects in their own schools and communities. We anticipate that our Agents of Change (aged 18-30) will work in partnership with champions (aged 11-18) to facilitate a process of empowerment and education that will dismantle menstrual stigma and ensure girls have access to the information and support they need during their periods.

### **2. Enable young people to advocate locally and nationally to end period poverty and shame**

We believe that research, policies and programmes to address menstrual health will only be effective if they respond to the voices and needs of young people. We will work with our network to capture their experiences of menstrual related disadvantage and amplify their voices so that effective and responsive solutions can be developed. Our Advocacy Committee will work closer with Irise's CEO to represent these views and experiences in national discussions about policy and practice.

A key goal of our Agents of Change program is to enable young people to advocate for change in their own communities. This means working with people in power and those with influence to introduce policies, initiatives and commitments to end period poverty and shame. In particular, grassroots advocacy will be required to realise changes in national level policy and curricula at the local level. For example, schools must opt into the government's plans to provide free menstrual products and advocacy from young people will help ensure that products reach girls who need them in a shame free and empowering way.



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### **3. Create and share our learning with others to accelerate progress**

We will create opportunities for students and young professionals in our Advocacy Network to research and evaluate our work, producing evidence that can inform the work of others. We will also place an emphasis on creating replicable training, resources, and processes that others wishing to work with young people to end menstrual stigma can adopt.

We will collaborate with the wider Irise team to share this learning with other organisations through presenting at conferences and meetings and providing training and consultancy to others.

Irise believes that period poverty and shame is a global gender equality issue. Women and girls experiences may be hidden but they are shared. We will create opportunities for young people to volunteer and visit our east Africa team so that they can form international friendship and exchange learning with the young women championing this cause in their communities in east Africa.

### **4. Create a sustainable movement that can complete the process of achieving social change**

We recognise that the process of social change will take years and are committed to building a movement that can complete this process.

We will integrate relationship building and resource raising (including increasing access to funds, time and expertise) into the Advocacy Committee and Network's goals and activities. This means that as the network grows the resources available to deliver our mission will grow with it.

Our commitment to mentorship and training will build the capacity of the network to grow our resources and engender a sense of investment and ownership that will motivate growth.

Alongside this, our network building activities, including annual events and communications designed to develop a shared identity, will build strong relationships between people and our cause, creating an organic infrastructure that can catalyse its own growth.

#### **Our approach:**

We are committed to building a 'cycle of empowerment.' Practically, this means:

- Institutionalising a cascade of mentorship and training where everyone involved in Irise uses their experience to support others to develop their skills.
- A commitment to a facilitated approach where individuals are given the tools and support they need to develop their own understanding.
- Working in partnership with girls, other young people and their communities to co-produce solutions that are context specific and sensitive.
- Creating a journey where young people can progress through different types of engagement with Irise, developing their skills, leadership and ownership of the organisation and cause as they do.

#### **How we will work:**

We will be led by the young people in our network, working with them to map their networks and build relationships with local organisations and individuals who can help them achieve their goals.



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