

PERIODS IN A PANDEMIC

MAGNIFYING GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE UK

*A summary of two Empower Period members
master's dissertations*



CONTEXT

Throughout 2020, as part of their masters dissertations, two Empower Period members undertook research on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on period equality in the UK. This briefing summarises their research and key findings, highlighting the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people with periods.

Chloe McGuinness: How has the power and control of women and girls been affected by the COVID-19 crisis? A study into the impact of lockdown measures on women and menstruation in the UK.

Ellie Edon: The Political Economy of Menstrual Inequalities: A Critical Analysis of the Period Policy Landscape in the United Kingdom. Research interlinking two key issues: the political economy, and the lived realities of menstrual inequalities and period advocacy.



**EMPOWER
PERIOD**
transforming period
fear into freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is permeated with social, economic, cultural, and gendered values so it is no wonder that during the hardships of the coronavirus pandemic menstruation has become a topic illuminating structural gendered inequalities.

Back in 2018, Plan UK noted that in the British context of austerity, a rise in homelessness and food bank use, and a lack of accessible menstrual health education, period poverty was becoming a problem increasingly difficult for those in power to ignore. Unfortunately, in the light of the difficult events of the past year, it has become apparent that the continued challenge of equitable access to menstrual products is just one obstacle that those who have periods face. These challenges continue to become more pronounced as the true impact of the pandemic becomes clear and are only set to worsen if the gendered aspects of the pandemic and its aftermath are not actively considered and incorporated into policy.

WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

Research is already highlighting the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on women and girls across the globe and the UK is no exception.

Women have been a driving force in the British emergency response to the coronavirus and they deserve recognition and celebration. However, as a result of being more likely to work in the retail, social, and education sectors, women are more likely to have been exposed to the coronavirus.



Women continue to disproportionately take on care responsibilities in both the public and private spheres, further increasing the risk to this group of contracting the virus. **39% of working mothers in the UK are classed as a 'key worker'**,³ simultaneously taking on the risks of heightened exposure whilst continuing to support their children amidst school closures.

WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

In the private sphere, Women's Aid found that almost **70% of domestic abuse survivors in the UK have experienced increased abuse during the pandemic**⁴ whilst Save the Children has demonstrated that already-urgent levels of gender-based violence have also increased⁵ Early data indicates that reliance on donated menstrual products has increased in some communities⁶ with some **women experiencing period poverty for the first-time during lockdown**⁷.

Concerns have been raised about the representation of women in politics during the emergency stage of the coronavirus pandemic. Not only is **Boris Johnson's COVID-19 daily meeting 100% male**⁸ but at the height of the pandemic in March, there were 2.7 men for every woman on radio and television programmes⁹. Although this has far from silenced women from speaking up through sustained activism on social media, the absence of female perspectives in the context of decision-making means that it is likely that **women's needs are being deprioritised**, putting women's ability to remain healthy and well during and after this pandemic at risk.

PERIOD ADVOCACY IN A PANDEMIC

Period poverty related policy in the context of the UK continues to be underpinned by the assumption that providing menstrual products will solve the problem of menstrual inequality, instead of treating the lack of provision as a symptom of underlying gendered power structures. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of women, girls, and people who menstruate represents an opportunity to broaden the discussion around menstrual health and period poverty to adequately incorporate these structural gendered inequalities.

“It’s made us realise we are all in these together, regardless of gender, race, etc.”
British Woman

Without considering this root cause, the shame and stigma that clouds many people with periods will continue to exist. This creates a broad remit for period advocacy as we move forward into 2021. Period policy advocates must work strategically in existing systems to influence change, continuing to shape and change the government’s product focused response to period inequities.

KEY FINDINGS

FROM RECENT RESEARCH IN PARTNERSHIP WITH IRISE

Access to sexual and reproductive health services has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly the availability of in-person appointments.

- "The doctors seem to think the issue is not urgent. My contraceptive implant was due to be removed in January and I've still not been able to get an appointment." British Woman
- "My appointment took place over the phone, during which my suspected endometriosis was dismissed by a male doctor who knew nothing about my situation." British Woman

Lockdown may have resulted in a resurgence of pre-existing mental health conditions, particularly amongst young women.

- "The lines between work and home life have blurred, no longer have set routines and found myself not getting dressed, not eating properly, I couldn't get my anxiety medication for over a week which affected my mental health." British Woman

Worries around employment are prevalent amongst British women, impacting their sense of control and power over their own lives. Their ability to save for the future has been particularly affected.

British women are concerned about male bias in political decisions.

- "...the fact that individuals were able to play golf (a male-dominated, middle class sport) was one of the first easing of restrictions to be announced, whereas women were not able to have partners accompanying them to pregnancy checkups/births." British Woman

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