



Irise UK Strategy- Empower Period: realising period equality for all

2021-2025

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The Fundamental Principles of Irise

Driven by Passion

We are driven by our shared passion for positive change. Our passion makes us courageous and committed to bold action on behalf of our community.

Powered by Community

Our community is at the heart of everything we do, continually shaping the Irise group, our vision and priorities. We partner with the wider communities we exist within because change is most possible when it is pursued together.

Enabling Diverse Leadership

Everyone has within them the power to lead and shape their community and world. Irise enables those affected by an issue to rise-up and lead transformative social change.

Realising Equality for All

We are committed to leaving no one behind and building inclusive solutions that involve and benefit everyone affected by the challenges we address.

Accountability through Evidence

We use evidence to unearth neglected issues, amplify the voices of those affected and hold ourselves to account for creating long lasting, meaningful impact.

Building Radical Solutions

We are focused on learning and innovating to change the parameters of the challenges we face. We pioneer and champion solutions that address the root cause.

Collaborating for Change

We are one global movement. All groups are equal, with an equal stake and an equal commitment to support one another. Irise pursues partnership, working with allies from all spaces and places in pursuit of our core vision and principles.

Committed to Sustainability

We pursue long-lasting, sustainable change, prioritising long term solutions over short term fixes- even if the investment is greater and the journey is harder.



Defining the Challenge

Period Equality means a world where having a female body does not hold you back from realising your full potential. It requires better:

- **Provision:** Increasing access to products or services that improve the opportunity, health and wellbeing of those affected by period inequality.
- **Protection:** Eliminating harms that result from having a female body and ultimately eradicating the harmful stigma and social norms that surround the female body.
- **Power:** Enabling diverse, female leadership so those affected by period inequality can restructure their communities and societies to realise period equality for all.

Our Period Equality framework (below), produced in consultation with young women, girls and people with periods across contexts where we work summarises the different policy and intervention areas where having a female body and the social norms surrounding it interact with societal norms and structures to create disadvantage (or enable empowerment).



Economic empowerment- interaction between the female body and workplace policy and environment can hold back or enable people to realise their full potential. Having a female body is, on average, more expensive than a male body and when these costs are borne by vulnerable individuals an additional barrier to economic prosperity is created. Economic security is a key enabler of civil and political participation and leadership so when workplaces and wider society fail to cater to the needs of the female body, female leadership suffers.

Leadership and Voice- when diverse, female leadership is lacking from decision making spaces their vital perspective and insights are side-lined increasing the likelihood of bias and blind spots. Period



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inequality creates a cycle of disadvantage by making it more difficult for those affected to realise their potential as leaders, perpetuating leadership structures that fail to meet their needs.

Sanitation, Hygiene and Menstrual Materials- lack of access to sustainable, affordable menstrual products and appropriate facilities create a practical barrier to participation and a psychological burden of anxiety, indignity and even fear of harm when safe and private spaces are not available.

Access to education- everyone lacks access to stigma free information about the female body and young people miss out on education, including physical education, because of unmet menstrual and reproductive health needs.

Reproductive health- women struggle to access stigma free, culturally sensitive, supportive healthcare. They face multiple barriers and delays and experience reduced quality of life as a result.

Mental Health and Wellbeing- having a female body creates a significant mental burden directly related to stigma, shame and barriers accessing support.

Safety- having a female body increases the risk of adverse events and health outcomes due to a combination of harmful social norms, stigma and data bias. This ranges from practices like Female Genital Cutting to harassment in public spaces to worse health outcomes for women when understanding of disease is dominated by research focused on the male body.

Period equality means...

- Work environment and policy cater to the needs of the female body, including during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and menopause.
- The additional cost of having a female body is not born by the individual in a way that prohibits their ability to realise their full potential.
- Diverse, representative leadership is achieved in decision making spaces, in particular on bodies, committees or in research intended to meet their needs.
- Female specific sanitation needs are met in all schools, workplaces and communities.
- Everyone has access to culturally sensitive, shame free information about the female body, including menarche, the menstrual cycle, menopause, pregnancy, childbirth, common menstrual disorders and reproductive health more broadly.
- No one misses out on educational opportunities, including physical education and sport, because of unmet menstrual or reproductive health needs.
- Everyone has access to supportive and timely medical care for menstrual and reproductive health concerns.
- Everyone is comfortable and confident about their bodies, their identity and their capacity to lead.
- Harmful sociocultural associations between menstrual and reproductive health events and the role and value of the female body are ended or replaced. For example, menarche is no longer associated with readiness for marriage, childbearing or associated with harmful practices like Female Genital Cutting and period poverty is no longer a trigger for Gender Based Violence.
- The gender gap in health research is closed so data bias does not cause inadvertent harm.



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All our work creates change within this framework across three levels:



Practices and perceptions- we transform the lives of those affected by period inequality through enabling them to come together and overcome the challenges they face- forming communities of change.



Structures and stereotypes- we enable our communities of change to work with the wider local, national and international community to create environments that empower those affected by period inequality.



Data and dialogue- we partner with governments and academic institutions to generate learning and advocate for the changes needed to institutionalise sustainable change for all.



The situation in the UK:

Economic Empowerment

- Young Women's Trust estimate that 1.5 million young women have lost income since the start of the pandemic- bearing the brunt of the economic fallout.
- Bloody Good Period estimate the lifetime cost of having a period in the UK is £4,800 just one of the additional costs of having a female body.
- A survey by Bupa found that 23% of women have taken time off work because of their period with 36% not telling the truth about why they were unable to work.
- Our needs assessment found that young women working from home during the pandemic found it easier to manage their periods and work than they had prior to lockdown- demonstrating how simple, overlooked measures can level the playing field.

Leadership and Voice

- Our needs assessment found that young women do not feel represented or listened to by those in power. One young woman told us, *"It seems those in power don't really care about us, especially women."*
- Only 24% of people working in STEM in the UK are female. Evidence suggests that 30% is the critical mass level at which a minority group of women become able to influence real change¹.
- Plan's ["The State of Girls' Rights in the UK"](#) report found that girls are frustrated with the empty words of female empowerment. They do not feel heard in public life and do not feel represented by parliament. Girls care deeply about political issues and have more access to information than ever before, but they are critical of the way female MPs are treated.

Sanitation, Hygiene and Menstrual Materials

- Period poverty is getting worse- 3 in 10 girls struggle to access menstrual products (an increase from 1 in 10 before the pandemic) with a third of girls who can't afford menstrual products too embarrassed to seek help².
- Almost 70% of girls aren't allowed to go to the toilet during lesson time³.
- Our UK needs assessment found vulnerable groups, including those from low income households, refugees and asylum seekers and homeless women, are at high risk of experiencing period poverty and struggling to access support.

Access to Education

- Plan UK report that over half of girls have missed school because of their period⁴.
- Although menstrual health is now included in the SRE curriculum, delivery has been significantly disrupted by the pandemic. Our prior work and needs assessment suggest that young people from ethnic minority groups, those with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle the most to access appropriately tailored information and support.

Reproductive Health

- Our systematic review found that women commonly reported being dismissed by healthcare providers. When they received a positive response this was identified as a transformative intervention for many women.
- The All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into endometriosis care found despite 1 in 10 women suffering from endometriosis, it takes an average of 8 years to get a diagnosis and this has not improved in over a decade.

¹ <https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk/statistics/2019-workforce-statistics-one-million-women-in-stem-in-the-uk/>

² <https://plan-uk.org/period-poverty-in-lockdown>

³ <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk/break-the-barriers-our-menstrual-manifesto/locked-out>

⁴ <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/almost-half-of-girls-aged-14-21-are-embarrassed-by-their-periods>



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- Our needs assessment found that barriers to accessing care increased during the pandemic with the exception of at-home abortions which again demonstrates how simple measures can have a transformative impact.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Our needs assessment found that the mental health of those Irise supports is in crisis as a result of the pandemic- they are anxious, lonely and hopeless and many no longer believe change is possible.
- Our systematic review found a significant mental burden resulting from women's menstrual experiences and research in the US has shown that women are less likely to receive aggressive treatment for pain, and more likely to have that pain reported by their doctor as "emotional", "psychogenic" and "not real."⁵
- Menstrual experiences have worsened [for a third of young women](#) due to the pandemic due to increased pain & irregularities.

Safety

- Our needs assessment found that the injustice of unequal safe access to public spaces has been felt more keenly over the last year by those that Irise supports, with implications for mental health and wellbeing.
- Rates of domestic abuse and vulnerability to sexual exploitation have also significantly increased.
- The lack of gender analysis in pandemic policy reflects a broader bias.
- Learning from male bodies is frequently still the default⁶. In the UK less than 2.5% of publicly funded research was dedicated to reproductive health, yet 1 in 3 women experience a gynaecological or reproductive health issue. This means roughly 16% of the population will experience an issue that receives only 2.5% of the annual research budget⁷. In May 2021, Health Secretary, Matt Hancock acknowledged, "For generations, women have lived with a health and care system that is mostly designed by men, for men."

⁵https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1144&context=fac_pubs

⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/550S18a>

⁷ <https://www.ukcrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/UKCRCHealthResearchAnalysis2014-WEB.pdf>



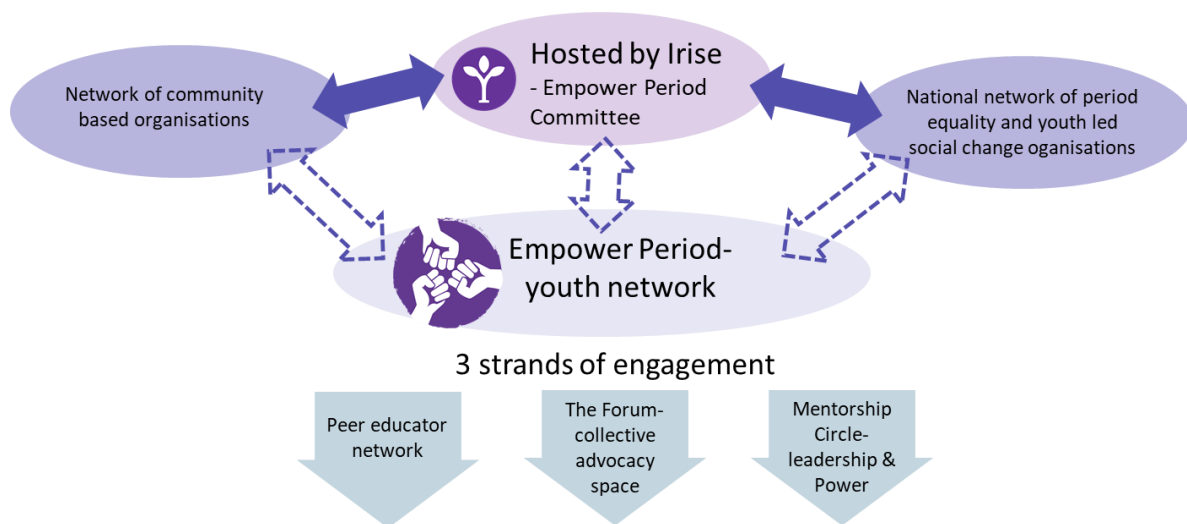
Our Approach

Young people are uniquely positioned to end the shame and stigma that surround the female body within a generation. Thanks to the advocacy of young people, the UK government committed to end period poverty and shame in the UK by 2025 but the situation is currently getting worse.

Our ambition is to enable the youth-led movement and their allies in the UK to hold the government to account and lift 1.6 million young people⁸ out of period poverty and shame by 2025, catalysing progress towards Period Equality for all by 2030.

We will:

1. Put our youth-led Empower Period network at the heart of our UK strategy and work, enabling them to identify and pursue their priorities, putting Irise's resources at their disposal.
2. Mobilise our national network of period equality and youth-led social change focused organisations, academic partners behind realising the priorities of our Empower Period network through learning, advocacy and campaigning.
3. Deliver direct support to those most affected by period inequality through our network of community-based organisations and via our growing online community of peers alongside creating opportunities for those receiving support to join advocacy efforts.



⁸ There are approximately 16.27 million young women and girls between the ages of 11 and 30 in the UK. Data suggests that at least 1 in 10 are negatively affected by period poverty and shame although more accurate monitoring is urgently needed.



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Our Priorities

1. Enabling diverse, female leadership

We will transform the hopelessness those we support are experiencing by putting their leadership at the centre of all our programming and advocacy, alongside creating spaces and mechanisms within Irise that nurture, support and celebrate emerging leaders, including peer mentorship, small grants for youth-led groups and young advocates and creating leadership positions within the Empower Period forum and network and within Irise itself for young female leaders from underrepresented groups.

2. Ending the stigma around the female body

We will enable our network to end the stigma and shame that surround the female body through taking direct action to address the failings of the systems and institutions that support them, via building a national network of peer educators who can step into the gap and empower others by creating online resources and delivering content in schools and communities that includes fact based education and shares near peer experience, alongside continuing to create and deliver 'empowerment packs' that focus on choice and control of your menstrual product, body and life.

3. Empowering the most marginalised

We will combat the structural inequality that has been worsened by the pandemic by delivering direct support to the most marginalised people affected by the issues we address through the community-based organisations that know them best including those with disabilities, young women from ethnic minority groups, young carers, young people in care, young women from low-income households, refugees and victims of domestic abuse and other forms of exploitation. Through direct, practical support we will build their confidence, capture their experiences and priorities for change and when appropriate, enable their advocacy via the Empower Period Network.

Key Enablers

1. Supporting the agency and power of young people through continuing to develop the institutional policies and mechanisms that enable their genuine involvement and leadership.
2. Collaborating to measure and track period poverty, shame and inequality in the UK so the movement can hold the government and other stakeholders to account.
3. Creating opportunities for influential and powerful women and other allies to connect with the Empower Period network and champion their cause.
4. Developing corporate partnerships to meet the immediate needs of the most marginalised, including getting reusable, sustainable options to those living in period poverty.
5. Enabling the network to sustainably fundraise through events and sponsored challenges that align with the strategic priorities.