

# THE EMPOWER PERIOD FORUM

Youth led action to end period poverty and  
shame

November 2020 - July 2021



**“It seems those in power don’t really care about  
us”**

**“We need to be heard... it’s harder than they  
realise”**

**“It’s easy to feel like your life is out of control  
because we don’t always have much power as  
young people, and the pandemic has just made  
that worse”**

# An urgent need for action

Over the past year and a half, Irise has hosted the Empower Period Network, a collective of young people and youth led groups leading their own initiatives to end period poverty and shame in their communities.

As the pandemic raged on, the network became increasingly frustrated with the lack of national discussion and support for those experiencing period poverty and shame, despite growing evidence that the challenges were getting worse. To combat this disillusionment, some of the most passionate young advocates in the Empower Period Network came together to create the Empower Period Forum, a space for young activists to come together, plan and deliver national level advocacy and campaigns to end period poverty and shame.

"My involvement with The Forum and Irise International is a great opportunity for me to meet like-minded period activists in completely different fields of practice and be able to understand the intricacies of strategising and planning for long-term impact to make the world a better place!"

*Maria, 24*



# Young people leading, diversity and lived experience at the centre

The Empower Period Forum set out to capture the diversity of experience of period poverty and shame, menstrual health issues and related challenges among young people in the UK and enable their voice and leadership through participation in the forum and its campaigns and consultations.

- Just under 20% of The Forum's leadership are fulfilled by those under the age of 18
- 40% of The Forum's leadership includes those who have a disability (including menstrual health related issues (PCOS, Endometriosis), mental health issues and other physical disabilities)
- 1/3 of The Forum's leadership are those who are from racial or ethnic minority groups
- At least 12% of those involved in The Forum identify as either/and non-binary and belonging to the LGBTQAI+ community
- 97% of those involved in the advocacy work of The Empower Period Forum have lived experience of the challenges it aims to address including either experiencing or having had experienced menstruation, period poverty and shame and embarrassment.
- 60 young people from across the UK took part in a national consultation to capture their experiences and priorities for realising period equality for all. This included:
  - A LGBTQAI+ support group (specifically non-binary and trans community)
    - Young female refugees and asylum seekers
    - School aged children through schools and youth groups
    - Young people at risk of sexual exploitation

# What young people said

## About spaces that enable their leadership and voice

### What does a successful forum look like?

*"A forum that represents a wide range of people, shares experience and learning, collaborates so that different strengths can be harnessed."*

*"Inclusive of all women and facilitating different viewpoints, not all period experiences are the same"*

*"To be led by young women and people with periods"*

- Is diverse, inclusive, and welcoming
- Is led by young people and supported by their allies
- Has clear aims and goals which translate to genuine impact
- Represents those with lived experience and amplifies marginalised voices
- Empowers and supports
- Collaborates and consults
- Is transparent and accountable

### What makes you feel included in a group?

*"Having my voice heard, having my value recognised and feeling like I bring something to the group"*

*"Able to communicate ideas and listen to others ideas - to build knowledge and develop own view based on others"*

*"Everyone being able to speak and bounce of each other's ideas"*

- All voices are valued, respected, and responded to
- The atmosphere is friendly and fun
- Emotions and experiences are shared.
- There is no judgement or jargon

## About realising period equality for all

### How do we achieve period equality?

*Allie, 15 - "We need to educate and inform to remove the stigma, and once the stigma is gone it will be easier to convince governments to help abolish period poverty."*

*Isla, 21 - "I think education helps with dismantling the stigma of period shame. I think more pressure on the government to recognise people's issues that period poverty creates."*

*Natalie, 21 - "I think that achieving period equality starts with an in-depth understanding of what having a period looks like for those from a range of backgrounds, before we can begin to create solutions."*

- By transforming period shame into period pride
- By expanding access to materials and information
- By creating safe spaces to talk about periods
- By centring equality and intersectionality
- By being supported by people who don't have periods

### What is needed for women and people with periods to thrive?

*Alice - "Removing the negative stigma surrounding women who are menstruating is a huge step in the right direction."*

*Charlie, 18 "Empower people with periods by giving them resources regarding where they can access free sanitary products and how to manage their period better. This can be helped by combating stigma around periods to help people with periods speak up for the support they need, rather than thinking they are dirty."*

*Lily - "Create safe spaces that are accessible to all girls and women to feel free and able to talk about periods"*

- Menstrual education
- Menstrual-related healthcare
- Infrastructure for menstruation (e.g., bins in primary schools)
- Accessibility of products (particularly for sustainable options)
- Representation in positions of power
- Tackling harmful social norms

# What's Next

## Terms of Reference

The Empower Period Forum finalised their [Terms of Reference](#), a document that outlines the values, structures and goals of the Empower Period Forum. The Forum remains open to new members - either individual activists or youth-led groups. Visit [www.irise.org.uk/the-forum/](http://www.irise.org.uk/the-forum/) to find out more.

## The Campaign

The data collected from the community consultations included a wealth of stories and experiences of menstrual related barriers faced by young people in the UK will be used to drive the next phase of The Forum's activities- campaigning for change.

**The biggest challenges young people had experienced were receiving inadequate menstrual health education (or none at all), and barriers to accessing appropriate treatment and support for menstrual-health related issues.**

Forum members identified a vicious cycle of period inequality that young people with periods in the UK face due to these connected experiences of disadvantage:

Across our society there is limited access to menstrual health information, including in the home, in schools and within the healthcare system. When this lack of understanding combines with the experience of period stigma, young people feeling disempowered and unable to advocate for their menstrual health needs to be met within a healthcare system that does not actively recognise and prioritise menstrual health related issues. This creates a physical and mental burden for those affected that limits their ability to realise their highest attainable health and wellbeing.

The Forum has enabled young people to identify menstrual-related issues that hold them back and will now provide a platform for them to lead advocacy to break this cycle of disadvantage.