



Suffering in silence; end the taboo around menstrual health

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



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The taboo around menstrual health, coupled with a lack of awareness, means that many women and girls are living with painful yet treatable menstrual conditions for years. The NFWI calls on the Government, schools and health service providers to improve menstrual health education and gynaecological services, thereby increasing early diagnosis and prompt treatment of any problems.

Proposer's position

The proposer is concerned with historical and ongoing taboos associated with talking about menstruation and gynaecological problems. A lack of appropriate education and reluctance on the part of many women to talk about menstrual issues due to this stigma means that underlying health conditions associated with menstrual health are potentially being missed. These health conditions include endometriosis and polycystic ovaries. Women may not realise what to expect from their period so will not present to their GP when they should. If they do, they may not be taken seriously. It will only be years later that the underlying condition will be diagnosed, with women suffering in the meantime. The proposer would like to see better education in schools to tackle the stigma of menstrual health, as well as to build awareness of what is and what isn't a 'normal' period. She would like doctors to be better trained so they are more sensitive to the issues and can instigate treatment earlier.

The scale of the problem

According to the charity Wear White Again, 1 in 5 women in the UK experience heavy periods, yet more than half never speak to their GP about it. Recent research conducted by Plan International UK shows that there is still stigma surrounding periods:

- 48% of girls in the UK are embarrassed by their periods.
- Only 22% feel comfortable discussing their periods with their teacher.
- 14% of girls say they did not know what was happening when their periods started.
- 49% of girls have missed an entire day of school because of their periods, of which 59% have made up a lie or an alternate excuse.

Compounding the problem of stigma, Endometriosis UK notes a lack of understanding that exists around what constitutes a 'normal period' and when you should seek advice. It is estimated that around 62% of women who have experienced it are not aware that heavy periods are a medical condition.

In about half of women with heavy bleeding, no underlying condition is found. However, heavy periods can be indicative of other health conditions, such as fibroids, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), or endometriosis. It is estimated that in the UK 1 in 10 women (or 1.5 million) suffer from endometriosis, at a cost of £8.2 billion in lost work and treatment; 1 in 3 suffer from fibroids; and 1 in 5 suffer from polycystic ovaries. However, these figures may underestimate the number of women with these conditions as they can go undiagnosed or be present without any symptoms.

Many conditions relating to heavy or painful periods, such as endometriosis, can impact fertility. It is thought that 30-50% of women with infertility will have endometriosis. While there is no cure it is treatable, but on average it takes 7.5 years to get a diagnosis. In the meantime, women and girls can be suffering from crippling pain and very heavy periods which can result in missed school and even admission to A&E. Women with PCOS may suffer from weight gain and excessive hair growth, as well as irregular periods, which can cause fertility issues.



The current situation in the UK

The NHS recommends that women see their GP if they're worried about their periods. However, evidence suggests that some women are not taken seriously by their doctors when they present with symptoms. According to research conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women's Health, 40% of women with endometriosis needed at least 10 GP appointments before being referred. The APPG's 2017 report on its Informed Choice Inquiry is therefore calling for greater awareness of menstrual health among all healthcare professionals.

It is also recognised that a better understanding of what a 'normal' period is and when to seek medical advice is needed among women and girls. To help address this, Endometriosis UK is calling for menstrual wellbeing to be included as part of the Religious and Sex Education curriculum in England. The Government's draft guidance, on which it is currently consulting, is quite light on detail in this area stating that "*...programmes should include understanding of and preparation for menstruation, for all pupils.*" The final guidance is expected to be finalised in advance of June 2019.

In addition, in September 2017 a campaign was launched by Wear White Again to encourage women to visit their GP if they are experiencing heavy periods. The 'Am I Number 5?' campaign, which is supported by Endometriosis UK and Wellbeing of Women, aims to raise awareness of heavy periods as a medical condition that can be treated.

In Wales, there is evidence to suggest that there are differences between what young people want to learn as part of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) and what they are being taught. In December 2017, an expert panel, established to inform the development of the future curriculum on this subject, recommended that the curriculum should place a greater focus on rights, health, equality and equity. However, it did not mention menstruation specifically. In its response to the review, the Welsh Government said it would rename SRE 'Relationships and Sexuality Education' and put it on a statutory footing whereby schools have less discretion over what they teach (currently in some schools SRE doesn't extend beyond the biological aspects of human relationships). The new curriculum is due to be implemented in 2022.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, federations and WIs could raise awareness of the stigma surrounding menstrual health and help to tackle it by providing opportunities to talk about the problem within their communities. The WI could also bring the issue to the attention of healthcare providers.

Nationally, the NFWI could support the APPG on Women's Health in its call for greater awareness of menstrual health among all healthcare professionals.

Arguments for the resolution

- Menstruation and gynaecological problems remain relatively hidden, and are specific to women. The WI could use its profile to shine a spotlight on the issue and change the nature of the conversation that people are having about menstrual health, so that more women come forward when problems appear.

Arguments against the resolution

- The Government is currently consulting on the RSE curriculum in England, which will be finalised by the time of the Annual Meeting in 2019. This is unlikely to be reviewed again in the near future. Is this aspect of the resolution therefore achievable?

Further information

Endometriosis UK: <https://www.endometriosis-uk.org>

Plan International UK: <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/plan-international-uks-research-on-period-poverty-and-stigma>

Video content:

This video by the BBC helps to explain Polycystic Ovary Syndrome:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfFfKrUUjEI>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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