

What do Queensland, Scotland and New Zealand have in common?

Women leaders who have advocated for the introduction of free sanitary products for their citizens. Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly is calling upon women leaders in South Australia's Parliament to get in step with their female counterparts at the state, national and international levels, and work together to introduce free sanitary products into schools, colleges and universities throughout the State before the end of this COVID-19 year.

Commissioner Connolly points to New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern; Member of the Scottish Parliament, Monica Lennon; and Queensland Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, who have all recognised that to address the issue of gender inequality, girls and young women must have access to essential sanitary items, regardless of whether they can afford to buy them or not.

In the same way toilet paper is seen as a necessity, Commissioner Connolly argues that access to free sanitary products for all young girls and young women throughout South Australia is essential. On the back of Anti-poverty Week and before National Children's Week (23rd Oct – 1 Nov), Commissioner Connolly wants to highlight the opportunity that exists to make real change on this fundamental rights issue here in South Australia.

Period poverty is alive and growing in Adelaide suburbs, regional centres and remote communities. People living in low-income families find it increasingly hard to afford menstrual products on top of basic necessities. Some young girls are disadvantaged further because their families do not prioritise their daughter's hygiene needs over other essential items.

Whilst a lack of product access and affordability are at the core of the issue, period poverty also includes having the freedom and privacy to use toilets, access to hygiene products and adequate disposal facilities. This lack of access and limited availability of period hygiene products impacts on the ability of girls and young women to participate in sporting, social and cultural activities.

The findings of the Commissioner's two recent surveys of more than 3,000 South Australian girls and young women demonstrate just how big the need is, with 1 in 4 surveyed reporting they had missed out on attending school due to not having a period product available. More than 2 out of 3 reported having to use either toilet paper, tissues, socks, or torn sheets to manage their periods because they could not afford other sanitary items.

On top of these figures, 1 in 4 reported that they knew only 'a little', 'not much' or 'nothing at all' before they had their first period, and 2 out of 3 reported that they felt very uncomfortable talking about periods at school with their teachers and peers.

For girls who start their periods in primary school the issues are magnified further with negative experiences capable of impacting on confidence levels that could feed into a lifetime of negativity being directed toward their own bodies. The impact of COVID-19 on household incomes has also exacerbated the problem.

After juggling the challenges of not having products, managing period pain, limited bathroom access allowed at school, a lack of sanitary bins in cubicles, and a deep anxiety about the shame of leaking on light coloured uniforms, the choice to stay home from school when you have your period is the clear and sensible one.

On top of the practical management their period requires, the taboo surrounding periods prevents open discussion, adequate education and support. Girls and young women talk about the need to be very secretive and discreet and many reported being bullied and teased and period shamed by males while they are at school.

Victoria introduced free pads and tampons in all government schools in July 2020. Communities in the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, USA and New Zealand have all adopted policies that firmly place the issues of period poverty and period shame on gender equality action agendas. In South Australia we have implemented a small scale pilot program of product distribution within public schools, but this is a far cry from the UK Period Poverty Taskforce assembled to look at access in schools, universities, hospitals, and custody, or the New Zealand version following suit, which clearly recognises that gender equality and the elimination of all forms of poverty go hand in hand.

Let's petition our female Members of Parliament to take a stand and do something about period poverty and period shame. Let's adopt a gender equity perspective that includes the eradication of period poverty in South Australia and leads to adoption of legislation that will deliver universal period product access to all girls and young women who need it before year's end.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly

Period shame undermines girl's confidence and stops them participating in social and community activities, especially sport. With our physical activity levels at all-time lows, girls are reporting they frequently miss PE because they don't have the right products, are self-conscious, or worse still, are told they shouldn't be participating in sport when they have their period.

The degrading reality of period poverty impacts on South Australian girls and young woman by limiting the opportunities they have to attend school and participate in social and community life in the same way South Australian boys and young men are able to.

Period poverty and period shame are significant gender equity issues. Unless men and woman start to have discussions in the public sphere that raise awareness of this pervasive issue, the chances of any real action being taken to eradicate period poverty across South Australia will remain a pipedream.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the work of the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People go to www.ccyp.com.au

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