



WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



WHAT'S THE BLOODY BIG DEAL?

HOW AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES AND EDUCATIONAL
INSTITUTIONS CAN HELP BREAK THE MENSTRUAL TABOO

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Please contact Dr Sarah Duffy at menstruation matters
menstruationmatters@westernsydney.edu.au

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Western Sydney University acknowledges the peoples of the Darug, Tharawal, Eora and Wiradjuri nations.
We acknowledge that the teaching, learning and research undertaken across our campuses continues the teaching, learning and research that has occurred on these lands for tens of thousands of years.

Western Sydney University,
Locked Bag 1797,
Penrith, NSW 2751.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian women and girls are disadvantaged in their education and working lives by shame, stigma and a lack of support around menstruation. Research conducted by Western Sydney University has found that most young women regularly experience period pain; as a consequence, girls and women are missing class and disengaging from extracurricular activities, including physical activity. They don't feel comfortable talking to their teachers or lecturers about how their education is impacted by menstruation¹ and as a consequence lack information and supports to manage their symptoms.

Ongoing research led by Professor Jane Ussher has found that many women face barriers in the workplace due to the stigma they encounter when discussing their periods and the changes they need to work and manage their symptoms effectively. The changes might be as simple as working with a heat pack on their abdomen to manage their pain, improving access to sanitary bins or allowing employees greater access to toilet breaks. These challenges can be particularly pronounced for women with endometriosis or other menstrual disorders.

This white paper presents compelling evidence that changes are needed to ensure Australian girls, women and people who menstruate can participate fully in education and work. We start by explaining how silence and stigma about menstruation creates obstacles to women and girls' full participation in education and work. We then share our research about women and girls' experiences at schools and universities and what our vision for the future is. We then discuss how menstruation impacts on women in workplaces and share our vision for change. Many

Australian businesses are doing their bit to support women and girls, we share their inspiring stories in this white paper. Finally, we put forward a blueprint of how we can work with educational institutions and workplaces who want to better support their staff or students to work towards gender equity and a fair go for all.

¹ Armour, M., M. S. Hyman, M. Al-Dabbas, K. Parry, T. Ferfolja, C. Curry, F. MacMillan, C. A. Smith, and K. Holmes. "Menstrual Health Literacy and Management Strategies in Young Women in Australia: A National Online Survey of Young Women Aged 13–25 Years." *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology* 34, no. 2 (2021):135–143.

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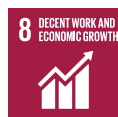
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1 WHO ARE WE? AND WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

We are a team of leading multidisciplinary Western Sydney University researchers with complementary expertise. We are united by our belief that menstruation – or periods – are not shameful, dirty or bad, but a natural bodily process. This white paper presents compelling evidence that changes are needed to ensure Australian girls, women and people who menstruate can participate fully in education and work.

Across the globe at any given time an estimated 800 million people² are menstruating. This could be your friend, the colleague sitting beside you or the barista making your morning espresso. Many people you might interact with each day are bleeding.

Greater action towards achieving menstrual equity aligns with United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically:



² Hehir, I. "800 Million." Unicef, May 27, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org.au/blog/stories/may-2019/800-million>.

2 THE CHALLENGE

The challenge we all face as Australians is that women and girls are missing out on education and work due to a lack of infrastructure, policies and practices in place to ensure that having a period doesn't stop someone from learning or working. Part of the problem stems from periods being something many girls and women feel ashamed of, or unable to talk about. This stops them from getting the support they need.

Research conducted at Western Sydney University has found that 9 out of 10 women and girls have period pain, that 1 in 2 students don't feel they performed as well in a test or an exam due to symptoms, and that 3 out of 10 girls are skipping class due to painful periods.³

The problem is not resolved when girls leave school or higher education, but can continue in the workplace. These issues are particularly challenging for women with menstrual disorders like endometriosis. Western Sydney University research found that 1 in 10 women with endometriosis reported losing their job due to their medical condition and over half of the women in the study experienced issues in their workplace due to requests they had made in order to manage their symptoms.⁴

2.1 BREAKING SILENCES

We want to talk about menstruation because people are suffering in silence. Some of us don't understand how menstruation might impact others, because we simply don't talk about it.

We know that people experience menstruation differently. For some people a period can be a positive experience. But for others menstruation can invoke tiredness, fogginess, headaches and debilitating pain.⁵ These symptoms can impact their work, study, physical activity, social activities and relationships.

Some people lack the means to afford to buy menstrual products⁶. Or they don't have easy access to a place to wash their hands well enough to change a tampon or dispose of menstrual products in a dignified and hygienic way.

The time when menstruation stops – menopause – and its effects on women's lives is also in need of more attention. This white paper will focus on menstruation; however, we recognise that menopause can be a particularly challenging time for some women and that it deserves its own dedicated white paper.

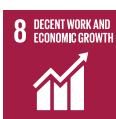
2.2 PERIOD DIGNITY, OR EVEN PRIDE

We sometimes use the term girl or woman when discussing periods. We do this to acknowledge that there is a gendered element to the experience. However, we understand that transmen and nonbinary people also menstruate and face both similar and unique menstrual health challenges.

In this white paper we will explain how stigma, shame and lack of support for menstruation is a problem. We then discuss the role educational institutions, workplaces and community organisations can play in facilitating and enabling menstruators to participate fully and equally in life.

We will present a vision for the future – a future where people are empowered to manage menstruation with dignity and perhaps pride.

This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



³ Armour, M., M. S. Hyman, M. Al-Dabbas, K. Parry, T. Ferfolja, C. Curry, F. MacMillan, C. A. Smith, and K. Holmes. "Menstrual Health Literacy and Management Strategies in Young Women in Australia: A National Online Survey of Young Women Aged 13–25 Years." *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 135–143.

⁴ Armour, M., J. Sinclair, C. H. M. Ng, M. S. Hyman, K. Lawson, C. A. Smith, and J. Abbott. "Endometriosis and Chronic Pelvic Pain Have Similar Impact on Women, but Time to Diagnosis is Decreasing: An Australian Survey." *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (2020): 16253. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73389-2>.

⁵ Armour, M., K. Parry, M. A. Al-Dabbas, C. Curry, K. Holmes, F. MacMillan, T. Ferfolja, and C. A. Smith. "Self-Care Strategies and Sources of Knowledge on Menstruation in 12,526 Young Women with Dysmenorrhea: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *PLoS One* 14, no. 7 (2019): e0220103.

⁶ Duffy, S., O'Shea M., and van Esch, P. "Imagine having your period and no money for pads or tampons. Would you still go to school?" *The Conversation*, (2021) <https://theconversation.com/imagine-having-your-period-and-no-money-for-pads-or-tampons-would-you-still-go-to-school-156570>

Periods are frequently described and talked about in negative terms, making people feel they are something to hide⁷

2.3 SHAME, SILENCE AND STIGMA

Periods are a taboo topic in our society and are too often the butt of jokes. This is a result of periods being shown in educational materials, popular culture and period product advertisements as an inconvenience that should be hidden. Periods are frequently described and talked about in negative terms, making people feel they are something to hide⁷. This is a problem because it results in those who experience periods feeling shame about a normal bodily function. Shame, silence and stigma can prevent people from getting the period products, information, support or medical help they need.⁷

Period stigma is a threat to gender equity for women. This is because, without support, menstrual disorders like endometriosis and dysmenorrhea can negatively affect work or education.⁸ Women from diverse cultural backgrounds may be at greater risk of experiencing stigma, which can prevent them from being able to access support while they learn or in the workplace. For example, for some women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, any discussion of menstruation is highly sensitive and is silenced as 'shameful'.⁹ Similarly, menstruation is considered private 'women's business' in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

cultures, making it a sensitive topic to discuss, particularly with men.¹⁰

Transmen often do not feel safe using public restrooms due to fear of being 'outed' as trans, putting them at risk of violence or discrimination on the basis of being both trans and a person who menstruates.¹¹ They can also experience difficulties in the disposal of menstrual products, due to a lack of the appropriate sanitary bins.¹²

Young women, who have had less practice discussing or managing menstruation in public, may find it more difficult to discuss menstrual symptoms that impact their work or education, and may experience anxiety about managing period products in the workplace.¹³ It's important to recognise that there is not a consistent experience of menstruation and it's crucial to listen to the voices of menstruators about their experiences and what they need to participate fully in education, work and life.

6
OUT OF 10
school students
wouldn't feel
comfortable talking to
a teacher about their
period*

8
OUT OF 10
university students
wouldn't feel
comfortable talking to
a lecturer about their
period*

This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



7 Hawkey, A. J., J. M. Ussher, J. Perz, and C. Metusela. "Experiences and Constructions of Menarche and Menstruation among Migrant and Refugee Women." *Qualitative Health Research* 27, no. 10 (2017): 1473-1490. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316672639>.

8 Young, K., J. Fisher, and M. Kirkman. "Women's Experiences of Endometriosis: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Qualitative Research." *Journal of Family Planning & Reproductive Health Care* 41, no.3 (2015): 225. <https://doi.org/10.1136/fprhc-2013-100853>.

9 Chrisler, J. C., J. A. Gorman, J. Manion, M. Murgo, A. Barney, A. Adams-Clark, J. R. Newton, and M. McGrath. "Queer Periods: Attitudes toward and Experiences with Menstruation in the Masculine of Centre and Transgender Community." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 18, no.11 (2016): 1238-1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1182645>.

10 Frank, S., and J. Dellaria. "Navigating the Binary: A Visual Narrative of Trans and Genderqueer Menstruation." *In The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 69-76. 2020.

11 Brantelid, I. E., H. Nilv r, and S. Alehagen. "Menstruation During a Lifespan: A Qualitative Study of Women's Experiences." *Health Care for Women International* 35, no.6 (2014): 600-616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.868465>.

12 Curry, C., Ferfolja, T., Holmes, K., Parry, K., Sherry, A., Armour, M. (in press). Menstrual Health in Australian Schools. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*. (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1080/25742981.2022.2060119>.

*Source: Armour, M., Ferfolja, T., Curry, C., Hyman, M.S., Parry, K., Chalmers, K.J., Smith, C.A., MacMillan, F. and Holmes, K. "The Prevalence and Educational Impact of Pelvic and Menstrual Pain in Australia: A National Online Survey of 4202 Young Women Aged 13-25 Years." *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, (2020); 33(5): 511-518.



3 PERIODS AND EDUCATION

3.1 HOW DO PERIODS IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS DURING THEIR EDUCATION?

This is a big topic to cover, but we'll do our best.

You could be a school student who carries around an extra uniform in their bag or you opt out of sport and physical activity because you are afraid of menstrual leaking. You feel ashamed and are scared to talk to anyone about the symptoms you are experiencing. When you learn about menstruation in school, you learn about how much it will hurt and how it will put you in a bad mood. You might even learn that it's a matter you need to attend to privately.

OR you might be an adult who is studying and struggling to make ends meet so you use the pill to skip your period continuously because you can't afford products.

OR maybe you have endometriosis and find your pain impacts your ability to attend class or exams.

OR maybe you go to a school that provides you with a choice of free period products in the bathrooms. You learn about how menstruation is a natural process and how you can effectively manage your symptoms and still participate in school, sport and work.

You have educators who encourage you not to miss class and instead allow you to sit in class with a heat pack to help you manage your symptoms or let you take a break if required. You might even see an educator ease their own symptoms with a heat pack. You are in an environment where you can talk about your period freely and others do the same.

Menstruation might begin at primary or high school and is likely to continue through higher education and the workforce. If the experience starts out in an informed, inclusive and supportive environment, we'll be setting up our youth for a bright and equitable future.

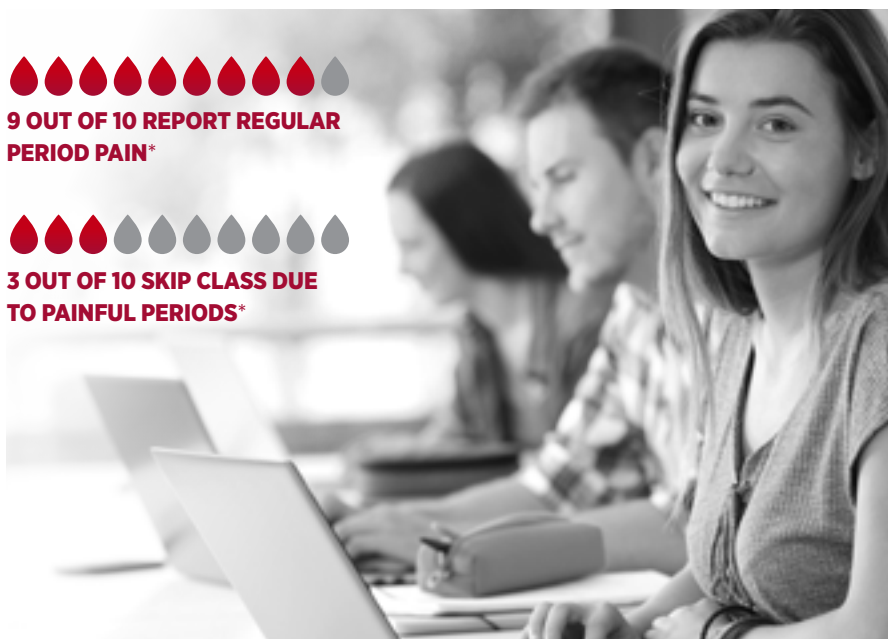
1 in 2
feel they didn't
perform as well in a test
or assignment due to
symptoms*



9 OUT OF 10 REPORT REGULAR PERIOD PAIN*



3 OUT OF 10 SKIP CLASS DUE TO PAINFUL PERIODS*



This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



*Source: Armour, M., Ferfolja, T., Curry, C., Hyman, M.S., Parry, K., Chalmers, K.J., Smith, C.A., MacMillan, F. and Holmes, K. "The Prevalence and Educational Impact of Pelvic and Menstrual Pain in Australia: A National Online Survey of 4202 Young Women Aged 13-25 Years." *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, (2020); 33(5): 511-518.

“Understanding that it does affect our concentration and ability to learn. It’s a serious issue and a lot of us can’t help it and we don’t want to feel humiliated because we can’t focus and seem stupid.”

“Give boys and girls the same information about periods. Schools divide us when it comes to ‘tricky subjects’ because we are told boys don’t need to know about it. They do need to know.”

“I have endometriosis. The pain is excruciating and all I’m told is to shrug it off, I have had to leave mainstream schooling and resort to distance education because of this. Schools need to be aware of conditions like endometriosis that affects 176 million women in the world and is treated as just a bad period.”

3.2 PERIODS@SCHOOL: HARDER THAN IT NEEDS TO BE

We thought that we would let young women speak for themselves. The quotes below are from a survey of 5,007 young women aged between 13 and 25.¹² Here’s what they had to say about what schools can do to better support them when they have their period.

“Let me go to the bathroom to clean up when I have bled through my uniform (a female teacher refused for me to leave the classroom despite blood all over my dress and chair, and pleas from fellow classmates).”

“At my school, the sanitary bins overflow and used pads and tampons are spilt all over the floor. It’s disgusting and makes me not want to go to the bathroom (which doesn’t help when I’m on my period and have no choice but to bleed through my clothes or go to the stinky toilet). I also think teachers should allow women to go to the bathroom even IF it was just recess/lunch.”

“They could supply medication and better heat packs. They could also let us know that we don’t have to participate in sport if we have cramps. They can also give boys detention when they make a massive deal about girls on their period.”

“Getting pads/tampons from the school office is such an awkward experience and no one ever wants to.”

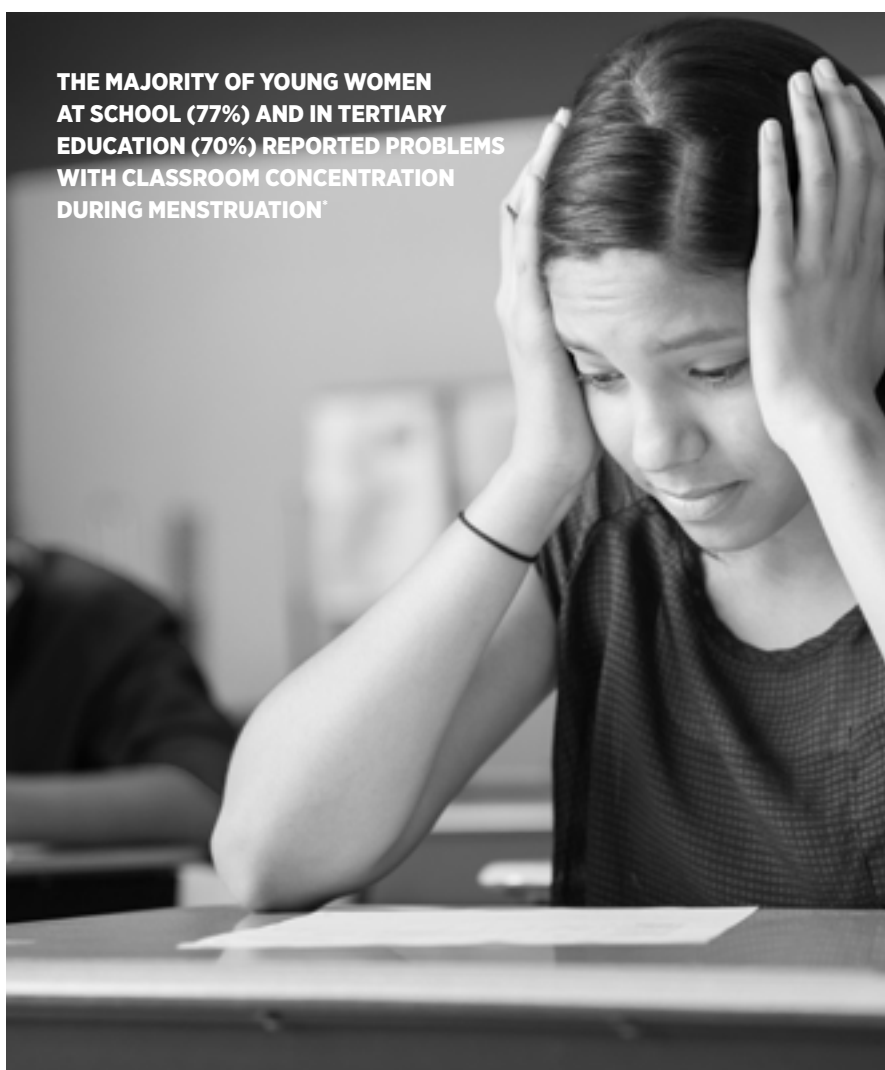
¹² Curry, C., Ferfolja, T., Holmes, K., Parry, K., Sherry, J., Armour, M. (in press). Menstrual Health in Australian Schools. Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education. (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1080/25742981.2022.2060119>.

Over a third of respondents missed at least one class or the whole day in the past three menstrual cycles due to their symptoms*

3.3 OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE – SCHOOLS AND ADULT EDUCATION

If we listened to students, we could design ways to solve this problem. As the students shared in their stories, multiple changes are needed. These include:

- 1 Better education for all students about the realities of periods. There are some promising programs in Australia, such as 'Menstruation Matters' (a website developed by Western Sydney University researchers) that teaches what a 'normal' menstrual cycle looks like, as well as how to identify symptoms that are consistent with a more serious menstrual disorder.
- 2 Guidance for educators about how to best support all students to manage their symptoms and remain engaged in their education.
- 3 Educational institutions need to offer students a choice of free period products, so students aren't missing out on their education or leaking due to a lack of access to this essential item. These products need to be available in the toilets where students need them.
- 4 Periods need to be talked about openly outside of the biology classroom. They are a normal part of life and need to be treated that way.
- 5 Clean and safe toilets.



This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



*Source: M. Armour, C. Curry, and F. MacMillan, "Period Pain is Impacting Women at School, Uni and Work. Let's Be Open about It," The Conversation, (2019). <https://theconversation.com/period-pain-is-impactingwomen-at-school-uni-and-work-lets-be-open-about-it-118824>.



4 PERIODS AND WORK

4.1 HOW DO PERIODS IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS AT WORK?

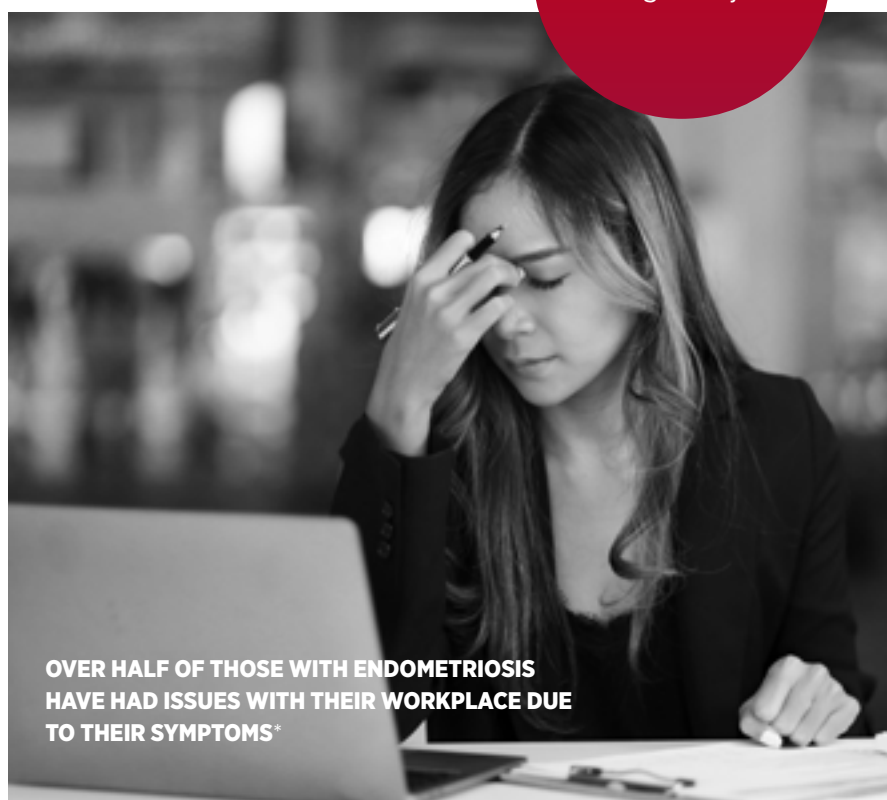
You might be a low-income employee and struggle to afford menstrual products. Your workplace could make it difficult for you to take toilet breaks to change your menstrual products and dispose of them. Or the toilets you have access to at work may not be clean or safe for you to use.

You might work in an environment where you are worried you'll be seen as weak or unreliable if you need time in your work day to manage menstrual symptoms and get your work done. You might have endometriosis and struggle to meet your work commitments due to your symptoms.

Or you might work in an environment where you can notify your colleagues you need to take an hour to rest and recover before you return to work, and your colleagues fully support this. You could have some well-designed flexibility in your working hours and access to a range of leave options. Your employer might even provide menstrual products in the bathroom so if you ever need them, you have them.

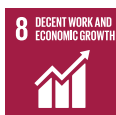
Our point is that there are a variety of ways that menstruation is experienced. And the attitudes and behaviours of the people around you, and the menstrual policies in the environments where you work, can significantly impact your menstrual experiences. We'll share some real-life experiences and research about women's experiences of menstruation in the workplace and explain our vision for the future of workplaces.

Over one in ten people reported losing their job*



OVER HALF OF THOSE WITH ENDOMETRIOSIS HAVE HAD ISSUES WITH THEIR WORKPLACE DUE TO THEIR SYMPTOMS*

This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



*Source: Armour, M., Sinclair, J., Ng, C. H., Hyman, M. S., Lawson, K., Smith, C. A., and Abbott, J. "Endometriosis and Chronic Pelvic Pain Have Similar Impact on Women, but Time to Diagnosis is Decreasing: An Australian Survey," *Scientific Reports* 10(1) (2020): 16253, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73389-2>.

4.2 PERIODS@WORK: HARDER THAN IT NEEDS TO BE

4.2.1 WOMEN IN TRADES: NOWHERE TO GO

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) has recently released a report that found that one of the greatest challenges women who work in the electrical industry face is access to amenities. They literally have 'nowhere to go'. Women currently make up 2% of the union's members, which the union believes reflects the gender composition of the industry. The ETU understands that recruiting more women to the industry presents an enormous opportunity; however, if the industry doesn't rise to the challenge and meet its employees' (across genders) basic human rights for clean, safe and hygienic toilets, then the industry's growth and potential will not be achieved.

Picture this: you're a new apprentice in the energy industry. You're thrilled to be working in this field and you are starting a new rotation at a substation. You arrive for your first shift with your toolbox and lunch bag, ready to meet the new team. You feel a familiar but unexpected sensation. You think you might have your period. S*#T!

You ask to be shown to the toilets. There are no female toilets. This is standard in the industry. There is one toilet with no sanitary bins. You have a heavy flow. How are you going to dispose of your tampon when the time comes? You're too far from a McDonalds to drive there and make it back in time in your break, and you don't want to be seen as skiving off on your first shift.

You check the bin room and see that it hasn't been emptied in what looks like years and you can hear the family of rats – no-go. You consider placing your tampon in your pocket in the disposal bag you've been given by your employer, but it might fall out – no-go. Could you put it in your toolbox? You share your toolbox with your colleagues – no-go.

You consider talking to your boss, a man in his 50s you met 5 minutes ago, another no-go. With a sigh, you realise your only option is your lunch bag.

This is an actual story told by a member of the ETU to the White Paper Research Team.

I have been locked in an onsite toilet in the middle of summer for three hours, because they (male co-workers) thought it was funny.

Case study – Jodie*
(from ETU Report, Nowhere to Go)
*Name has been changed

This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



"I don't ask for support, but I don't feel comfortable asking for support. Even mentioning it in passing has gotten odd responses in the past. I just have to tough it out. It means I basically pass out from exhaustion when I get home."

"My workplace is very flexible in terms of 'work from home' days or taking a long lunch, coming in early or leaving early. Nothing specific to supporting women with PMS but I know that if I need a day at home with my period pain, my work will allow it (without needing to know exactly WHY)."

4.2.2 PREMENSTRUAL DISTRESS AND WORK

More than time off, women need flexibility in their work day to manage the symptoms of menstruation and meet their work commitments. Recent research has found that 67.7% of women wished they had greater flexibility in their tasks, including working hours and school, to manage their menstrual-related symptoms.¹³ The study found that 13.8% of these women missed work due to their symptoms.

Research conducted by Liberty Victoria's Rights Advocacy Project has similarly found that menstruation impacts 88% of people who menstruate at work. Over 65% of these people have no access to viable leave options or flexible working arrangements.¹⁴

Ongoing research at Western Sydney University led by Professor Jane Ussher has found that women are often reluctant to say that premenstrual distress is the reason for needing time off work, or flexibility in their workday. Here are some stories from this research:

"Overcoming the stigma of PMS is already a challenge in a male-dominated workplace. Any discussion would just reinforce the stereotype that women are less able or less suited to the corporate working environment."

"I feel as though my premenstrual moods affect me more at work than when I'm at home (maybe as I'm more comfortable letting off steam with loved ones, than I am with work colleagues)."

¹³ Schoep, M. E., E. M. M. Adang, J. W. M. Maas, B. De Bie, J. W. M. Aarts, and T. E. Nieboer. "Productivity Loss Due to Menstruation-Related Symptoms: A Nationwide Cross-Sectional Survey among 32,748 Women." *BMJ Open* 9, no.6 (2019): e026186.

¹⁴ Bethune, S., T. Cronin, A. Dalton, S. Lloyd, and S. McNamara. *A Policy for Equality: Painful Periods as a Workplace Issue*. Liberty Victoria, 2022. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6126d454650f333db2d27357/t/621596e87b30b6044527e3dc/1645582069573/LV+RAP+-+A+Policy+for+Equality+-+Painful+Periods+as+a+Workplace+Issue+%2823+February+2022%29.pdf>.

4.3 OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE – WORKPLACES

Menstrual leave policies are increasingly being adopted by Australian businesses. Based on the experience of businesses that have implemented them, as we discuss in the following pages, these policies have promoted trust, increased employee satisfaction and broken down the silence and stigma around menstruation.

A policy is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it needs to reflect the workforce, the type of work being undertaken and the existing infrastructure of the business. It is not necessarily only about well-designed flexibility and leave options. It could be that period products are placed in all bathrooms, or that employees are trusted to manage their time and get the job done.

It's about acknowledging that menstruation impacts on a significant portion of our workforce and that there are changes that can be made to ensure they have the support they need to participate fully. Australian employers we have spoken to for this white paper who have implemented policies suggest the cost-benefit analysis leaves no room for debate. The real cost is not doing anything.

We would like to see employers:

- 1 ask their workforce what they need
- 2 develop a policy, and the supporting infrastructure, that enables employees to meet their work commitments and manage their menstrual symptoms
- 3 monitor and evaluate the policy and its implementation.



This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



5 EMERGING POLICIES AND PRACTICE

In this section, we share case studies of emerging policy and practice from Australian organisations that are supportive of menstruation. The case studies were collected by the White Paper Research Team and are published with their permission. They demonstrate how workplaces or community organisations can support their staff through menstrual policies, or help vulnerable Australians access the menstrual products they need, or advocate to change workplace practices to enable women to work with dignity.

5.1 FUTURE SUPER: A NON-TRADITIONAL POLICY IN A TRADITIONAL SPACE

Future Super is an Australian superannuation fund with over 40,000 members and over \$1.5 billion in funds under management. Future Super's purpose is to create a future free from climate change and inequality. The fund doesn't invest in fossil fuels and is one of Australia's fastest growing impact super funds.

The business runs quarterly surveys to assess the engagement and energy levels of its team. In 2020, for the first time, the business examined these metrics by gender and found that engagement levels (Net Promoter Score) for men (86%) were much higher than for women (38%). Following these results, Future Super conducted a focus group with female staff members to understand what management could do to increase women's engagement. A menstrual and menopausal leave policy was suggested, which was seen by management as 'low-hanging fruit' that could be implemented quickly and cost effectively.

The menstrual and menopausal policy was modelled on one developed by the Victorian Women's Trust. The first step in the policy is for staff to make themselves comfortable in the office in a way that helps them manage their symptoms, like using a hot water bottle to reduce pain.

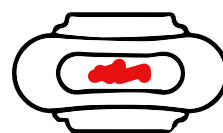
The second step is working flexibly to manage symptoms, such as starting earlier in the day, or logging off for an hour to rest and making up the time at a later date.

The final option for staff is accessing leave. Future Super currently has a policy that offers staff 6 days of paid leave per year to help them manage their mental health. The business decided to offer the same amount of menstrual and menopausal leave and is open to adjusting the duration as necessary. Future Super found that employees rarely take a full day: the leave is most often accessed in the form of a few hours here or there.

Future Super's Chief People Officer, Leigh Dunlop, said that 'offering menstrual leave to staff hasn't cost the business much in a financial sense, it's not dissimilar to what a business would spend on a team-wide pizza lunch or a ping-pong table'.

The policy has resulted in gains in employee engagement, satisfaction and trust. Since the policy was implemented, engagement levels of women have risen substantially: in March 2021, they were 76% for men and 71% for women.

When a team member is taking leave, and as an impactful way to reduce menstrual stigma, they use the period emoji (shown below) to signal to their colleagues on Slack (the team communication tool used by Future Super) that they are taking some time to manage their symptoms. All in all, Future Super is a staunch advocate of its menstrual and menopausal policy.



The policy has resulted in gains in employee engagement, satisfaction and trust.

“...without the policy staff are ‘suffering in silence; periods are a normal thing that happens, and if you have the right people in your team and the right policies in place, this empowers them”

5.2 MODIBODI: A LEADER IN DESTIGMATISING WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES

Modibodi® is an award-winning Australian organisation which is best described by its founder, Kristy Chong, as having a solution for anything that ‘leaks’. The company is probably most famous for its scientifically proven, leak-proof period undies that are designed to be sustainable, reusable and practical.

Kristy, wanting to be a leader in destigmatising periods, incontinence and bodily leaks, decided to introduce a menstrual, miscarriage and menopause policy for her staff. ‘We’ve introduced these policies

as part of our commitment to talk openly and honestly about periods, to normalise conversations about menstruation and to remove any stigma and shame associated with a normal, natural part of life. To help change those attitudes, we need to start in our own office, and this new policy is one action we can take now to help do that’.

Modibodi has found no drop in productivity since introducing the policy, however it has found an increase in trust and engagement amongst employees.

Kristy further stated that without the policy staff are ‘suffering in silence; periods are a normal thing that happens, and if you have the right people in your team and the right policies in place, this empowers them’.

Finally, Kristy said, most organisations today have an EAP (employee assistance program) in place. In the beginning that was surprising, but then it became the norm. Why not a menstrual, menopause and miscarriage policy?



5.3 SHARE THE DIGNITY: TIRELESS TRAILBLAZERS FOR MENSTRUAL EQUITY

Share the Dignity provides vulnerable women, girls and anyone who menstruates with access to free menstrual products. Without this support many people have to choose between buying food or sanitary items. The charity has delivered over 3.2 million packets of pads and tampons and over 617,000 essential-filled handbags. And the need continues to grow.

Working to redress shame and bring dignity and choice to those experiencing homelessness, domestic violence and period poverty, Share the Dignity founder Rochelle Courtenay's advocacy and continued work focuses on education and attitudinal change: 'We need to stop thinking of this as a taboo topic – education and attitudinal change is key'.

5.4 PIXII: MAKING PERIOD PRODUCTS ACCESSIBLE

Pixii is an Australian social enterprise that offers schools and businesses cost-effective and eco-friendly pads and tampons that can be placed in bathrooms for students, employees and customers to access for free.

With the goal of ensuring everyone, regardless of their gender, has their hygiene needs met, Pixii's corporate social agenda results in 50% of all profits being directed to One Girl, a charity supporting girls and young women to access education and skills development.

If period products are easily accessible and free, then people who menstruate can focus on their work and education without the stress of finding a solution if they are caught without the products they need.



5.5 WE'RE BLOODY ESSENTIAL: FIGHTING FOR A FAIR GO

'We're Bloody Essential' is a campaign organised by the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union asking for free period products to be made available in bathrooms. The union argues that 'dignity at work includes being provided basic hygiene facilities. Toilet paper is essential and so are sanitary items like tampons and pads. No-one chooses to bleed – it's just a fact of life like going to the toilet'. Sophie, one of the campaign organisers, highlighted that staff rooms in many retail outlets are stocked with coffee and tea, cornflakes and vegemite, why not pads and tampons?

We're Bloody Essential makes the point that many of the employees in the industries it covers are low-income workers, and also young people who may experience their first period at work. Further, many employees in this sector cannot choose to go to the bathroom when they need to; yet, in the pandemic, we have classified them as essential to our society.



We're Bloody Essential



6 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

6.1 AN INVITATION TO PARTNER WITH WESTERN

We are seeing positive change. This ranges from how we talk about periods to how we treat those who have periods. Scotland is the first country in the world to make period products free for all.

Language matters, and Australian organisations such as Woolworths are helping breakdown period stigma. Woolworths has renamed their 'Feminine Hygiene' aisle to 'Period Care' in a huge step forward in destigmatising menstruation.

In 2019 Libra broke with traditional menstrual marketing strategies to show images of blood on a woman's leg in the shower. This was part of its #bloodnormal campaign, which also included an employee composing an email saying they would work from home due to a heavy period.

The more we see realistic depictions of periods in the media, and the more we talk about menstruation openly in our educational institutions and workplaces, the more we break down the stigma and silences that lead to shame and suffering.

As Australians, we pride ourselves on equality and giving everyone a 'fair go'. It's time that we start thinking more about those who menstruate when we plan and manage our educational institutions, workplaces, sporting arenas and public spaces to ensure no-one is left behind.

6.2 WHAT RESEARCH AT WESTERN HAS IDENTIFIED

Impactful research at Western Sydney University has asked:

- 1 What are the current gaps in the services and support provided in educational settings and workplaces to people who menstruate?
- 2 What are the current unmet needs that should be addressed to enable full participation in education and work?
- 3 How might these needs be addressed through infrastructure, policy and practice?

This research has identified the current *lack of*:

- access to clean toilets with places to hygienically change and dispose of sanitary items
- open discussion about menstruation and its impact on workplace performance and education
- effective policy to enable participation in work, such as flexible work and leave arrangements
- effective measures to support engagement in work and education, such as the use of heat packs in classrooms and workplaces
- free product provision in educational institutions and workplaces to ensure people who menstruate aren't missing out on education or are afraid of leaking due to a lack of access to products
- awareness of problematic language, such as demeaning jokes or bullying related to menstruation

- guidance for educators and managers about how to best support students and employees to manage their symptoms and remain engaged with their education and work
- evidence-based and value-free education about menstruation in schools for all students.

Western Sydney University researchers can work with you to overcome the obstacles identified above. This process would be tailored to your individual needs, but would most likely include the development of policy and practices that would better support the needs of people who menstruate, including *increasing*:

- + menstrual health literacy for students, educators and supervisors
- + infrastructure investment to ensure that period products and disposal units become standard items in toilets, like soap and toilet paper
- + adoption of policies and practices that normalise menstruation

This aligns with the following sustainable development goals:



6.3 WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE CAN WORK WITH YOU?

If you're an organisation or educational institution that would like to implement a menstrual policy or collaborate in research to understand how these issues affect your students or employees, we can work with you to first understand the needs of your students, workforce and management. We can then facilitate the development and implementation of the necessary infrastructure, policies and practices that will meet your organisational goals and support your people.

We will discuss with each individual organisation how we can best work with you to meet your needs. However, based on our experience, projects are likely to follow this structure:

1 UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF THE INSTITUTION

2 UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

3 FACILITATE THE CO-DESIGN OF A SOLUTION WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

4 PILOT INTERVENTION

5 ASSESS INTERVENTION & DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO SCALE UP OR MONITOR AND EVALUATE

This white paper was jointly led by Dr Sarah Duffy and Dr Michelle O'Shea. But it is the work of a collective of passionate and skilled Western Sydney University researchers who are listed alphabetically as follows:

Dr Mike Armour is a senior research fellow in reproductive health. Mike's research focuses on endometriosis, and period pain, and he has a keen interest in improving menstrual health literacy and non-pharmaceutical interventions. His research is around empowering people to better understand menstruation to help reduce the negative impact of these conditions at work, and in education and life in general.

Dr Sarah Duffy is a researcher with 10 years experience investigating issues relating to policy and practice in the workplace. Sarah has worked closely with businesses to understand how gender equity issues are impacting on the workforce and what policies and practices can be put in place to strive for equitable and productive workplaces.

A/Prof Emilee Gilbert is a feminist sociologist, with 20 years of experience in gender equity for women's health. Emilee has worked with health and workplace agencies and schools to develop programs and strategies to improve health outcomes. Emilee's qualitative approach to research provides rich and in-depth insights into people's experiences, and allows her to recommend tailored solutions.

Ms Hollie Hammond is a research assistant who has worked across research projects exploring various aspects of institutional gender equity. She recently completed her honours thesis on the gendered nature of precarious employment in higher education and is currently involved in research examining issues of menstrual equity.

Dr Alex Hawkey is a research fellow in women's sexual and reproductive health, with nearly 10 years experience working on menstrual research. She is a board member of the international Society for Menstrual Cycle Research and is interested in how sociocultural contexts influence experiences of menarche, menstruation, menopause and management of endometriosis.

Dr Michelle O'Shea is a researcher with more than 10 years experience in gender equity. Her research and advocacy is directed at illuminating and problematising issues relevant to gender inequity and inclusion in institutional contexts. She is committed to agitating for and enabling attitudinal, practice and policy changes that destabilise inequities for individual, societal and business impact.

A/Prof Meg Smith has an extensive research record in the area of gender equity which is a key prerequisite to sustainable employment outcomes. Her expertise in pay equity investigations and institutional explanations for the undervaluation of feminised work has been the basis of research consultancy, expert opinion and submissions to parliamentary inquiries.

Dr Chloe Taylor is an exercise scientist specialising in women's physiology. Chloe provides expertise in the impacts of the menstrual cycle on physical aspects of well-being, specifically the effects of menstruation on energy levels, exercise capacity, and the control of body temperature and blood pressure.

Prof Jane Ussher is a Professor of Women's Health Psychology, with 35 years of experience in menstruation research. Past President of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, and a trained clinical psychologist, Jane has developed effective psychosocial interventions to reduce the impact of premenstrual distress. Through self-help information, or a one-off group meeting, these interventions facilitate coping with negative premenstrual change, and enable full engagement in school or work.

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