



European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Statement on Period Poverty and Menstrual Health and Hygiene on International Women's Day

The year 1975 was not only the International Women's year but also the year in which the United Nations General Assembly recognised the 8th of March as the International Women's Day (IWD). Nowadays, it is celebrated in more than 100 countries and an official holiday in more than 25. It is unfortunate that the Menstrual Hygiene Day on the 28th of May is not experiencing such widespread acceptance. Nonetheless, the IWD is marked by worldwide rallies, demonstrations, and marches on women's rights, gender equality, women's achievements and societal stigma which women are facing globally and on a daily basis.

On this day, ESU would like to raise awareness on Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) and period poverty within society and Higher Education (HE). Half of the world's population and a daily average of over 300 million women are menstruating whereas an estimated 500 million women and girls globally face constraints.¹ Menstruation is a natural process in which the [endometrium](#) is expelled from the uterus if fertilisation did not occur.^{2,3} However, menstruation is stigmatised, connoted to shame and advised to be kept hidden, it has been labeled as an abomination and even misconceptualized as poisonous and weakening the immune system until the beginning of the 20th century.⁴

This stigmatisation is also perceived as one of many barriers for Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH), which combines Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), so the management of hygiene associated with the menstrual process, with systematic factors, linking menstruation to education, equity, empowerment, health, well-being and rights.^{1,5} Even though most MHH interventions and research have focussed on low-income countries, recent studies postulate the need to invest in MHH in high-income countries as period poverty is rising.^{6,7} This term relates to financial, social, cultural and political barriers in accessing menstrual education, products and access to healthcare services.⁶ This occurrence is visible throughout Europe, as an increased number of ESU's member unions, e.g. from France, Italy, Poland, etc., are raising awareness on period poverty within the student population. The devastating influence of period poverty and reduced access to MHH on mental-well being, health and social status are well known. However, data on period poverty and access to MHH within the student population and in the general population is

scarce to non-existent and not prioritised by governments. Thus, the recent efforts by ESU's member unions, which for example revealed that 33% of students in France⁸ need financial help to afford sanitary products, are crucial to raise awareness and develop national and Higher Education policies. This applies especially during the Covid-19 pandemic where advocacy is crucial, as access to MHH is not included in countries' national emergency response interventions and policies, which further negatively impacts students and those in precarious situations.¹

A common approach from student unions to counteract period poverty and increase accessibility to menstrual products is the demand to reduce or abolish the so-called tampon tax. Since 2007, the European Commission has set a minimum of 5% VAT application^a on sanitary products whereas most countries declare these as non-essential products like tobacco, beer and wine. The ranges of taxation vary drastically between member states from higher VAT percentages such as in Hungary with 27% and Croatia, Switzerland and Denmark with 25% to 0% taxation in Ireland^b.⁹ In addition, unions such as [UDU](#), [La Fage](#) and many others, are demanding that sanitary products are freely available to all students at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

UNICEF postulates that investing in MHH and counter-acting period poverty will increase participation in education, provide improved economic benefits, health and mental health and is central to advance gender equality.^{1,5} Moreover, it is crucial to challenge myths and beliefs around the menstrual cycle and dissociate menstruation and pain to decrease menstrual related stigma and discrimination, which could be achieved through education.⁶

Hence, on the International Women's Day and on every day, ESU stands in solidarity with the students' unions and other stakeholders fighting for the access to adequate Menstrual Health and Hygiene and decreasing period poverty and demands:

- National stakeholders to start investing in and ensuring equal access to MHH and start monitoring the situation of students and the general population regarding MHH and period poverty
- The European Commission to adhere to their [EU Action Plan on VAT](#) proposal which will grant countries the possibility to abolish the tampon tax by 2022. Governments to abolish or drastically reduce the tampon tax at national level accordingly
- HEIs to offer free menstrual products to all of their students^c
- National governments and HEIs to increase awareness on MHH and period poverty and investing into de-stigmatising menstruation within HE

^a Council Directive [2006/112/EC](#) of 28 November 2006 on the common system of value added tax date of effect 01.01.2007

^b Was implemented before the 2007 directive application

^c Examples: This was recently (23.02.21) announced in France and will be introduced nationwide in 2021 and this is already introduced at specific HEIs like in Germany (University of Applied Sciences Merseburg)

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