



PERIODS

Activity Guide

This guide provides background information and prompts for further discussion around the *Bodies, Hearts, and Minds* toolkit activities ‘Seeing Red: Periods in History’ and ‘Seeing Red: Periods & Protest’. It may be useful when running the activities with groups.

You can also find associated ‘Learning Objectives and Curriculum Links’ that can be used to support teaching on topics related to personal, social, health, and wellbeing education in England (3.1), Wales (3.2), Scotland (3.3), and Northern Ireland (3.4) on the [Body, Self, and Family website](#).

CONTENTS

- 2-5** **Background:** A (very) brief history of periods
- 6-8** **Activity:** Seeing Red: Periods in History
- 9-10** **Activity:** Seeing Red: Periods & Protest



A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF PERIODS

There is a long history to stigma and secrecy around periods. In the Victorian era, doctors believed that a limited amount of energy circulated in the body. Because menstruation took up so much of this energy, women had no reserves for other activities. Doctors therefore advised against women taking part in sport or higher education. Unscientific beliefs about menstruation restricted women's lives.

In the early twentieth century more women started to enter the medical profession. These women were often involved in the feminist movement. They had to overcome many obstacles to obtain qualifications and enter medical practice. The Medical Women's Federation (MWF) challenged previous beliefs about menstruation. Their research showed that most girls did not experience ill-health during their periods, and that continuing with normal activities often helped girls overcome any discomfort.

The MWF's campaigns were important, but they could not tackle stigma at every level. Within wider society, there were few accurate sources of information about bodily processes. In school, biology lessons did not always cover human reproduction. Sex education lessons might discuss the menstrual cycle, but in scientific terms that young people found difficult to relate to their own bodies. Even in the twenty-first century, girls might be taught about periods in separate groups at school – leaving anyone excluded with little information.

There were few other routes to find out about periods. From the mid-twentieth-century, magazines aimed at girls and women might include

brief discussion of periods in health features or on problem pages. These discussions were matter-of-fact, and almost certainly helped readers to understand more about their bodies. However, advertisements for menstrual products in the same magazines often contained less positive messages about periods.

These advertisements featured in girls' and women's magazines from the late nineteenth century. To the present day, such advertisements often emphasise hygiene, secrecy, and concealment, potentially reinforcing stigma. Later in the twentieth century, advertisements also started to push the message that girls and women can do anything during their periods. Readers therefore received contradictory messages.

Until the late twentieth century advertisements for menstrual products usually *only* appeared in magazines for girls and women. Menstruation was perceived as part of a secret 'woman's world'. TV advertising for menstrual products was not commonplace in the UK until the 1990s. Magazine and television advertisements did not *show* the products at all until the late twentieth century. Until 2017, advertisements showing how the products worked used blue liquid – not the red of menstrual blood.

This culture of secrecy had important consequences for experiences of menstruation. Parents often found it difficult to talk to their children about periods. Adolescents who did not know about periods believed they were injured or dying if they found blood on their underwear. This could be very traumatic. Even when general knowledge improved later in the century, the conversations about menstruation between parents and children were often very awkward.

Such conversations often centred on the practicalities of managing periods, rather than the emotional consequences of menstruation. In the early twentieth century, most people used home-made menstrual cloths or 'rags' that were reused and washed by hand. These were often uncomfortable to wear, especially after multiple washes. In financially-stretched working-class households, rags were used until at least the mid-twentieth-century.

Sanitary towels were commercially available from the late nineteenth century, but these were expensive compared to rags. They were very bulky and uncomfortable to wear, requiring the use of a sanitary belt. Disposal caused problems. If schools did not have incinerators, adolescents had to carry used towels in their schoolbags to burn them at home.

Manufacturers gradually produced thinner and more wearable towels as the twentieth century wore on. It was only in the 1970s, when adhesive strips were put on the back of towels, that belts gradually fell out of use.

Tampons were first patented in the 1920s. They did not immediately take off in the UK. This was partly because they were expensive. In addition, the culture of secrecy affected individuals' understandings of their bodies. Many girls and women reported nervousness or difficulty on first using tampons. Parents did not usually recommend them to adolescents. Many believed that because tampons broke the hymen, users were no longer virgins. It seems that tampons became more popular from the 1960s – more active lifestyles, as well as the fashion for miniskirts, encouraged use of this 'discreet' product.

Today there is much greater awareness of the negative consequences of treating periods as a source of shame. Campaigners against period poverty have raised awareness of the challenges faced by people who cannot afford menstrual products. A better understanding of the history of menstruation will help to fight the stigma, secrecy, and shame that still surrounds this common bodily experience.



ACTIVITY: SEEING RED: PERIODS IN HISTORY

Task 1

The activity introduction provides some brief facts on the history of periods and contemporary period poverty. It lists some different names for periods, and asks participants what names for periods are used in their social groups.

The task aims to make participants feel more comfortable thinking or talking about periods. Discussing the names they use for periods establishes some shared understanding. Awareness that they use euphemisms or slang shows that embarrassment about periods is still common today.

Group leaders: It is important to take into account the age, gender composition, and confidence of the group. Younger adolescents may not have started their periods. They may not know much about periods. They could be nervous or feel embarrassed. Some participants might not want to discuss periods in mixed-gender groups.

If the group does not seem confident, encourage them to write names in the box provided or on a Post-It note instead of discussing the names amongst themselves. If the task is run in this way, read out some of the names and encourage discussion by asking questions such as ‘Why do you think people use that term?’.

Try to balance awareness of participants' sensitivities with an active demonstration that there is no need for embarrassment when talking about periods. Leading by example is especially helpful here.

Task 2

The task asks participants to consider two historical sources – a 'Silent Purchase Coupon' used for buying menstrual products in the 1920s, and an extract from an oral history interview – and to answer questions about them.

Looking at these two sources alongside each other encourages participants to think about attitudes to periods over time. They show that menstruation has been surrounded by secrecy and shame for a long time. The final discussion question asks participants to connect this history to attitudes today.

Group leaders: If participants approve of the 'Silent Purchase' system, encourage them to question their assumption. Ask questions like 'Why do you think it is a good idea?' and 'Do you think this system encourages the view that periods should be hidden?'. If participants think the system is a bad idea, encourage them to explain why.

Alison started her periods in the mid-1950s. Her account suggests that secretiveness was still common nearly thirty years after the advertisement featuring the 'Silent Purchase Coupon'. Encourage participants to reflect on whether attitudes had changed at all in that time.

Older participants could think about the qualities Alison associates with ‘femininity’ and why she believes these qualities are not compatible with menstruation. Alison is aware of the contradictions in some of her attitudes. Reflecting on these contradictions may help participants to understand how feminine ideals affected ordinary women’s sense of their own bodies and experiences.

‘TAKE HOME’ HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ Throughout the twentieth century, periods were often not spoken about or treated as shameful
- ✚ This secrecy and stigma was reinforced within popular culture
- ✚ People who grew up in this culture of secrecy and shame often internalised the idea that periods were dirty or embarrassing



ACTIVITY: SEEING RED: PERIODS AND PROTEST





Task

The activity asks participants to design their own protest sign to raise awareness of period poverty and the stigma around periods. Discussion questions prompt them to explain their designs, and to reflect on how history can help in understanding period poverty.

Deciding on themes to include involves summarising and prioritising key messages around menstruation. Thinking about how to convey those messages involves demonstrating their understanding of what causes stigma and how to challenge it.

Group leaders: The task can be run as an in-person activity, or participants can create the protest sign at home. When run as an in-person activity, putting participants into small groups to design the protest sign encourages further discussion. Making decisions about design prompts participants to think more deeply about period stigma and poverty.

Making a protest sign can be time-consuming. Make sure participants have access to materials including:

-  Paper
-  Colouring pens (red will be used a lot!)
-  Scissors
-  Glue

Remind them at intervals of the time remaining. Circulate around the groups so participants can ask questions.

At the end of the task, ask participants to show and explain their protest signs to the wider group. Use the discussion questions at the end of the task as prompts. This provides further opportunities for the group to discuss period stigma and poverty.

Participants are often proud of their posters. Displaying them helps to break down stigma around periods. Encourage participants to post their designs to social media with the hashtag #SeeingRed, and to look at other designs posted with this hashtag. Help them to understand that making these protest signs is a form of activism.

'TAKE HOME' MESSAGES

- ✚ Challenging stigma is a first step to breaking it down
- ✚ Openly talking about taboo topics breaks the culture of secrecy
- ✚ This act helps other people not to feel ashamed

