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“I read that girls were missing school for a week because they had their period and couldn’t afford sanitary towels or tampons. I thought this was something everyone ought to be talking about.”

An article on the BBC Schools website said that girls were missing school for a week because they had their period and couldn't afford sanitary towels or tampons. They had to choose to use socks or toilet paper or miss out on school.

I read this and was appalled. I know what it's like to feel stressed about missing a couple of days of school, especially in the run up to GCSEs or A levels, knowing how much that would leave me to catch up on when I got back.

Before I saw the article, I had never heard of the term 'period poverty'. As soon as I heard about it, I thought this was something everyone ought to be talking about. The government wasn't coming up with solutions or addressing the problem, so I started a petition on Change.org, asking for free menstrual care for all girls entitled to free school meals. I honestly thought that this made perfect sense. I thought nobody will be opposed to this.

I talked to my family and friends and this made sense to them too. I had hoped to get 50 signatures over a couple of weeks. In fact, I got 2000. Now I have more than 270,000. There is so much support, but period poverty is still something that not enough people have heard about and this needed to change.

My instincts were right. People's immediate response when they hear about it is 'What can I do to help?' I started organizing events using Instagram and Twitter. We organized a peaceful protest in December, right outside the Prime Minister's bedroom, and 2000 people came. We had amazing speakers including Daisy Lowe and the MP Jess Phillips. I didn't know how many people would come but I told my friends and they told their friends. It really took off.

The taboo around periods is ridiculous and the response to what we were asking for was amazing. When the petition was so successful, I naively expected a good response from the government. Nothing happened, but in March 2018 they announced that they'd allocate £1.5 million from the tampon tax fund – the money gained from putting aside the VAT from sanitary products – to help tackle period poverty, in addition to supporting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged girls and women, so that was one step forward. They also made a long-term pledge for VAT-free menstrual products.

Unfortunately, the government was still arguing that parents need to budget in order to cover the cost of sanitary protection, but these girls can't go to their parents and give them the choice of paying for food or pads. Many feel there's a stigma or taboo about discussing periods, which means they can't talk to their parents or their teachers at school. Sometimes teachers give girls their own pads, but that's not fair on them.

My family is quite open about periods. They have never been a hidden thing; they are just seen as part of life. They all encourage me with the campaign; my grandfather has been especially supportive. The more I campaign, the more ridiculous it seems that there is a taboo. It's so obvious that periods are a normal bodily process and it's ridiculous if we can't talk about them. Periods should be celebrated. They are the reason we can reproduce. They are not something to be embarrassed about.

At my primary school I had no education around periods. I remember the teachers saying, 'If anyone needs pads, they are in

the teachers' toilets.' I didn't know what they were talking about. My mum had started young, so she sat me down one day and explained. I remember thinking, 'Why don't girls younger than me feel OK about talking about them?'

I still think there is a huge gap in education. There's a lot that needs to be changed in the way the education system deals with periods. After finishing my A levels I continued to raise awareness about my campaign. I went to New York to an event at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where I was one of three award winners, winning the campaign for FreePeriods. I knew I would continue with the campaign for as long as it took to achieve my goal. Then after university I want to work in human rights.

I think it's so important that teenagers don't shy away from taboo topics or things you think people don't want to know about. No issue is too small.

To succeed, you need to be confident. I started this campaign from my laptop at home. The internet has given people such an opportunity to connect with people using social media and the internet and make your voice heard. The more I have worked on this, the more confident I have become.

I have found that the support has been overwhelmingly positive, but there are always a few who post 'Why are you talking about periods while I'm eating my breakfast?' and 'Periods are disgusting.' Others say, 'I'm sure everyone can afford sanitary products. Surely they can find a pound.' This shows the level of ignorance. People are unaware there is such a great gulf between the rich and poor.

YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD!



#FREEPERIODS

Credit: Alice Skinner

I would like to thank the BBC for opening my eyes to this issue. Also, my school was really supportive. I had to reschedule lessons and they changed my exams times so I could address a conference in America. Once I got an email asking me to go on the ITV news at one o'clock that day, and school was amazing. They let me miss a lesson and they are proud of what I've done.

I spoke at an international Facebook conference about safety online. Everyone on the panel had achieved things for the good through social media. We were all saying, 'It can be used for good.'

Then the government announced that there would be free sanitary protection in primary and secondary schools and colleges. They had listened to the campaigners. I was really thrilled. I think this is a hugely important and significant pledge and it means that no teenager will have to compromise their education because they have a period and can't afford period products.

We still have a huge amount of work to do to battle the ridiculous stigma around periods, that is so often culturally entrenched. We need to stop with the shame and embarrassment that we often feel when we talk about them. I think once we achieve that, and periods are a subject that men, women, boys and girls talk about freely and without reticence, then we will be a step closer towards achieving gender equality. It seems a long way off, but we are making progress.

There are so many issues that we can help to highlight and address. To me, this campaign is evidence that a teenager can elicit change in government policy. Age shouldn't stop anyone

from believing that they can make the changes they want to see. We need to shout for the things that matter to us.

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#FreePeriods



www.freeperiods.org

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