



# The effects of “period poverty” among refugee and asylum-seeking women

A collaborative report by Bloody Good Period  
and Women for Refugee Women

October 2019

## INTRODUCTION

Bloody Good Period (BGP) and Women for Refugee Women (WRW) have prepared this briefing to highlight how the lack of access to period products particularly affects refugee and asylum-seeking women.

## WHAT IS PERIOD POVERTY?

Period poverty affects women, girls and people who menstruate all over the world. It is usually defined by a lack of access to period products, compounded with a lack of informed choice of products and menstrual education. Periods are frequently shrouded in shame and stigma, perpetuating the invisible nature of the issue.

## ABOUT BLOODY GOOD PERIOD

Bloody Good Period is a charity which provides menstrual products and toiletries to asylum seekers, refugees and those who can't afford them. These products are currently distributed through 40 drop-in services and groups in London and the UK to over 2000 people per month.

Gabby Edlin founded Bloody Good Period when she realised that food banks and drop-in centres were not supplying menstrual products in the quantity or at the frequency that is required by a menstruator living in poverty (i.e every month), and most were not thinking to supply them at all.

**“The stress of being a refugee has led to me having heavy and irregular periods: I don't know anymore when I am going to bleed.” — Female Refugee, 2017, from “Meeting Point”, Leeds**

Menstrual products are essential – and unlike toilet paper, are not free in public areas (or in GP clinics, as condoms are), leaving many to go without pads or tampons, or to use toilet paper, rags, socks, or nothing at all. The intensely powerful stigma associated with periods further compound the issue that products are not considered essential to the general public, including those least likely to access them.



**which is what asylum seekers receive in state support**

When we first started BGP, and the media and press became interested in the idea of “period poverty”, we were inundated with requests to interview the women and people who menstruate about what it was like to live with “period poverty”. However, it is imperative to understand that period poverty does not exist in a vacuum. It, of course, exists in the general sphere of poverty, and the women and people who menstruate who receive the products BGP supplies are, more often than not, forced into the situation they find themselves in because of the unique and cruel way our country deals with those seeking asylum.

**£37.75 per week, which is what asylum seekers receive in state support is not enough to live on, let alone enough to**

purchase adequate period products each month. Many asylum-seeking women, as WRW documents below, do not even receive these low levels of state support.

Some charities and drop-in centres of course considered this, and did their best to provide pads to the women who requested them, as and when they could. However the very nature of periods is that they happen every month, and are often, as described in the testimonies, irregular and heavy. It is not enough to rely on a scant and irregular supply that may or may not be there when you need it. Understanding that drop-ins were already stretched in terms of funds and logistics, Bloody Good Period was founded to ensure that partnered drop-in centres could rely on a regular, high quality supply of products, at the frequency and amount which suit those who work so hard to make a welcoming atmosphere for refugees.

Although there is scarce data and research around period poverty in the UK, there is even less (or nothing) regarding the experiences of those seeking asylum or with refugee status. At BGP, we believe these groups to be most marginalised in terms of access, and their needs must be considered. Bloody Good Period have recently been appointed co-conveners of the Access Workstream of the Period Poverty Task Force,

and feel that it is crucial to report on the experiences of people who are seeking asylum, as people who not only suffer from the stigma of menstruation in their home countries, but find it compounded when faced with the UK's own silence and shame around periods.

Many of the women BGP work with at the drop-in centres are vulnerable and in situations of extreme poverty and stress. We give period products because they help a person cope with a natural bodily function which is shrouded in shame, silence, and **which unfairly costs half of the population thousands of pounds in their lifetime\***. We do not expect the women who receive the products to feel

that they have to unearth traumatic experiences in order to continue this relationship. When consulted, one woman explained "even thinking about my period feels traumatic to me".

However, as conveners of the Period Poverty Taskforce, we are now in the unique position where we are able to advise government on how access to period products should look in the UK, and that these issues must also be brought to the public's awareness. We believe that testimony must be heard in order to encourage those in power to act. Partnering with Women for Refugee Women allows us to work with women whom we know will be supported throughout any trauma which may be caused by telling their stories. WRW runs a range of empowerment activities to ensure that women are equipped with the skills and knowledge required to tell their stories in a way that is safe and impactful. Refugee women themselves are best placed to speak about their own experiences and shape solutions to the period poverty that they face.



**is the average spend on periods in a lifetime\***

**\*Approximate calculation by Bloody Good Period: £4 on tampons, £4 on pads, plus £2 panty liners = £10 × 12 months × 40 years = £4,800**

# ABOUT WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) is a London-based charity which supports women who are seeking asylum in the UK, and challenges the injustices they experience. WRW runs a range of activities for refugee and asylum-seeking women, including English classes, drama groups, and advice sessions. Above all, WRW works with refugee and asylum-seeking women in order to build their confidence and skills to speak out and advocate for themselves.

The great majority of people who seek asylum are not allowed to work and must rely entirely on the state for support. People who have made a claim for asylum and are waiting for an initial decision or the results of an appeal can apply for support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This can take the form of cash only, or accommodation and cash support. In 2019, the amount of subsistence is **£37.75 per week (significantly lower than income support levels, currently at £73.10 for those aged 25 or over).**

Many of the women we work with are not even able to access this low level of support. Instead, they are living destitute, with no access to stable and safe accommodation, and are entirely dependent on charities for food, warm clothes and other basic needs. Destitution is defined here as having no cash support or benefits, no accommodation and no right to work.

**According to the British Red Cross, there are thousands of destitute refugees and people seeking asylum living in Britain today.** Over the years, WRW and our regional partners in Birmingham, Coventry and Manchester have seen hundreds of destitute women.

A sizable minority of women WRW works with become destitute due to delays in receiving Section 95 support. A smaller number become destitute because they never applied for this support; many of these women reported that they were unaware of their



**significantly lower than income support levels, currently at £73.10 for those aged 25 or over.**

entitlements. The vast majority of women, however, experience destitution once their first asylum claim was rejected after an unsuccessful appeal. WRW and other organisations have previously published research on the reasons why many women who flee persecution may be unfairly denied asylum. These include the difficulties women face in disclosing their experiences of sexual violence; inadequate legal representation; and the culture of disbelief displayed by Home Office decision-makers.

Women who are refused asylum may apply for subsistence support (£35.39) and accommodation under Section 4(2) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This support is given only when she meets very narrow criteria, such as a physical impediment to travel or that she has substantial new evidence for her asylum claim. The woman usually needs high quality legal advice to prove eligibility, making it very difficult to access Section 4 support.

Destitution has a devastating impact on the women WRW has interviewed, the effects of which will be documented comprehensively in an upcoming public report to be published in February 2020. Our preliminary findings have already illuminated some of the grave challenges faced by destitute asylum-seeking women, including their difficulties in accessing period products.

Plan International UK recently highlighted that 10% of girls in the UK were unable to afford period wear. **Among 78 women WRW interviewed, 75% struggled to obtain period pads or tampons while destitute, forcing them to overuse a period product, improvise period wear or beg for money to buy a pad.** Those women who never struggled were either consistently given period products by charities or no longer had periods due to their age or health issues.

More than one in ten women said they struggled throughout the entire time that they were destitute – which could be many years – whilst around one in five said they struggled “most of the time”. We have also found that asylum-seeking women in receipt of government support have struggled to access period products, overusing a pad or purchasing low quality products.

Here, we provide four testimonies from destitute refugee women, which shed light on the practical challenges the women faced in obtaining pads, as well as the menstrual shame and stigma they grappled with. The stories capture the difficult, often heart-breaking, decisions refugee women are forced to make when denied the lawful means to support themselves.

# TESTIMONIES

By Marie

## A NAPPY FOR MY BABY OR A PERIOD PAD FOR ME?

My name's Marie and I'm a mother to Abina, who was a new born baby when I became destitute in the UK.

Menstruation, it's a natural thing but I see it as something that should be kept to myself. In West Africa, where I'm from, if a woman has her period other family members are not supposed to come close to her because you're seen as dirty. That feeling stuck with me for a long time.

**Not having enough money to buy pads was heart-breaking and stressful.** I would enter into any public toilet to get tissues that I could use instead. I was too ashamed to ask a stranger for a pad. I've worked before, I've been independent in my country. It felt shameful to ask someone to take care of my period; it's so personal. I couldn't ask other refugee women for pads because they were in the same position as me; they weren't allowed to work and they had no money.

I was living in Birmingham at the time I struggled. I had no money of my own, no money to get the bus. Nothing. There were charities that gave out pads but I wasn't able to go there unless a friend from church took me. And when I got there, there weren't always enough. So many women were in the same situation; we all needed the pads. So if I didn't get any from charity, I was forced to find another way...

**There was a time when I had to use my baby's nappy as a pad. That was so degrading.** If I was given a bit of money by a friend, it was hard to decide what to do. Do I buy nappies for my child or food? I always sacrificed the pads.

**The stress of destitution changed my menstruation cycle. I was so worried about where we would eat, what would happen, I began bleeding more often.**

I remember one time when Abina got ill. She wasn't eating and didn't sleep all night because of the sickness, and I had to take her to the hospital. I was on my period then and had no pads, as usual. We waited for hours in the hospital before the doctors saw her. It was the middle of the night and I kept running to the toilet for tissue, trying to comfort Abina at the same time. I was so scared of staining my clothes in public. It was the same when I went to appointments for legal advice; often I was on my period with only tissue in my pants.

I'm able to buy pads now, but I get the cheapest because they're so expensive. The money I get from asylum support is not enough to buy better quality ones. Thankfully, Carriers of Hope in Coventry, where I volunteer, gives me pads now and again.

There's a stigma about periods in my culture, as I said. I think many African women see it in the same way as I used to see it. There needs to be more education about what it means to have your period, so people don't think you're unclean. Actually, if you have a period it usually means your system is working well. You should be happy about it! I think more education for asylum-seeking women would be good too. The workshop we did about periods at Women for Refugee Women really opened my eyes. Because of that, I don't see myself as dirty anymore. And I feel like I understand my body.

But so many other women can't come out and speak

about their periods or about the problems they have in getting pads. I know it, the stress I went through of being homeless, without funds. I'd be so happy if refugee women with no money were helped to get them out of this ordeal...

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By Jolie

### HAVING NO PADS... IT MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A BEGGAR

My name's Jolie and I claimed asylum in 2012. **When I was destitute I relied on tissue from public toilets because I didn't have money to get my own pads.**

Any money I got, from charities or churches, I had to use for food.

There's one day that I will never forget. I was homeless and living for a short while with a family that I met through church. My period started suddenly and I didn't have any pads. So I went to Tesco to use the toilet there and put some tissue in my pants. When I came out it was raining so heavily, but I couldn't just go back to the house. I often spent all day outside because I was never given any keys and had to wait for the family to get back. I was wearing a white skirt that day. I got so wet and because I didn't have a pad blood came out of my underwear and stained my clothes. I was so embarrassed. I ran back to the house to see if there was anything hanging on the washing line that I could wear. **There was a long cloth, and even though it was wet, I wrapped it around me. Then I went to the closest McDonalds, tore my white skirt, and used a piece as a pad.**

I remember the first time I had a period in that family's house. The woman I was living with found out I was

on my period and got so angry: "ugh, oh my god!". She said she didn't want to catch an infection. Those words, they killed me at the time. I said I was sorry but I was in so much shock; I wasn't expecting that kind of reaction from another woman.

Should I end it, I thought. It was all getting too much.

**The stress of being destitute made my periods heavier, but I never asked her or anyone else for pads. I was very ashamed to even tell someone that I was on my period. It's how I was brought up.** There's no education about it where I'm from. You'd never mention that you were on your period; it's just not what women in my culture do. I was so scared people would look down on me if I begged for pads or think I wanted money for drugs. I saw it as a shameful thing.

I found out that there were some charities that could give pads to refugee women but that was only two years later. Now I get benefits from the government. We get little but I manage to make it work. Sometimes I get pads from charities, so that helps.

**I would love to see free pads for vulnerable women: minority women and women who are destitute. For those of us who don't have papers, it should be something that we can access for free.**

Women for Refugee Women have made me realise that there's nothing wrong with periods. It's part of being a woman and there shouldn't be a stigma against it. But I think people need to talk about it.



If there is more education and awareness about menstruation, for both women and men, it will help us to see periods as natural.

Let it be something that is seen as normal.

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By Stella

### **FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BUYING FOOD OR PADS**

**Back home in the DRC, my parents would know that my period is coming and they would look after me. Now I am here on my own and I don't have anyone who will take care of me.**

Because I am seeking asylum, I don't have any money and I am not allowed to work. When I first came to the UK I had a big problem getting period products because I was outside of London and I didn't know of any charities that could help. I would take a bath towel and cut it and fold it into my pants, and then keep washing it. When I went to sleep my sheets would become dirty and I would have to wash them all the time. It was so difficult for me, to keep clean was so hard and I felt so much shame.

Sometimes I would need to buy the big pads in the shop but I could never really afford them. **I tried to save the little money I had for food, so often when I got my period I would have to go hungry.** It is not good to ask your friends for pads when they are in the same situation – you have to try and prepare yourself. I would cry to myself because the money I got was not enough for me to survive on.

Since coming to London, charities have been helping me to get pads. I don't have any support from the government, so I am dependent on them. **If the charities don't give me pads, then I have to use tissue. My periods are so heavy that I have to change my pad every hour, so tissue really is not enough.**

When I get my period my body hurts and I vomit. I feel so bad I just want to stay in bed. At first it is too much and I can't go out because I am scared that people will see that I have my period. I feel stressed and isolated. Sometimes I get an infection that makes me feel itchy.

The government should help us asylum-seekers. **We are sleeping outside; in the bus, in the park. We are not allowed to work. We don't have food. It is no good; it gives us too much stress. People don't see what we are going through. To have to cope with your period on top of all this is too much.**

We need to be able to get free period products. Charities in London do a lot to help with this but it would be so good if we could get pads at church or when you visit the hospital and GP. Perhaps pads could be offered at the end of these appointments. Pads should also be available at schools, so that girls can have access to them and learn how to use them properly.



By Testimony

**“YOU FEEL WORTHLESS WHEN YOU CAN’T GET SOMETHING THAT YOU REALLY NEED”**

I come from a small, poor community in Nigeria where there is a lot of stigma around periods. As girls, we were not given any education about what to expect. When we first saw the blood, we would scream and think that something is wrong with us. Maybe your grandmother would explain that you need to use cloths or cotton wool to manage your period, but we didn't get much more advice than that.

Here in the UK it has been so difficult for me to get period pads, because I am not allowed to work. At first, I didn't even know what period pads were because in my country we would use cloths. In the asylum accommodation where I was staying in London there was a man who would give us rations of the essentials, like toothpaste, tissue and pads. When my period came I had to go and speak to the man who would give me one period pad a day. If I needed more I would have to go and explain to him. It was too embarrassing to do this because this is a woman-to-woman thing, so **I would use one pad for the whole day. I couldn't afford to buy more. One time, I went to the toilet in the night and noticed there was blood in my pants. I didn't have any pads, I didn't even have tissue. I didn't know what to do and I couldn't trust the people I lived with. I took my towel and laid it on my bed. The next morning I stood up and had a shower and washed my pants. When I was walking it felt sticky. I just felt so degraded, ashamed and disgusting.**

When I had to leave that accommodation I managed by making a list of basic needs and choosing the one that was the most important. I would try to budget around when I would start my period. **Just before my period I knew I really had to get pads urgently and so I would have to go without things like food.** I was always counting the pads that I had left and trying to make them last. I have had lots of bad experiences with my periods.

**I used to put tissue on top of pads to make them last longer. One time this caused me itching. I had to get antibiotics and the doctor said that it was from wearing pads for too long.** I remember the embarrassment another time when I had to use a pad for too long and it leaked and stained my trousers. I had to tie my jumper around my waist and go like this for the whole day because I couldn't get another pad. And there was another time at college when I started my period and I didn't have a pad in my bag. The staff there told me I should keep pads in my bag, but how could I? I couldn't afford them. I thought, 'why is life so difficult?' You feel worthless when you can't get something that you really need.

When I first came here and put in my asylum application I missed my period. I wasn't pregnant, I think it was just the stress of not knowing what will happen to me; not knowing how to manage. I had questions about what was happening to me but I didn't know where to go for help. There were a few months when I became homeless and had no support at all. I missed my period once again then. When my period did come, I couldn't get any pads so I had to use tissue. Not having a place to stay makes you vulnerable, people can take advantage of you. The fear and worry of staining my clothes made it even worse.

I wish that pads were freely available. It is really bad that pads are so expensive because it is something that women have to go through every month. It is discrimination, everyone should have access. I never knew where to get pads. And even when there was a charity that could help, you still have to travel. If you don't have money you can't travel. There should be somewhere that you can get pads within walking distance. Church would've been the best place for me to get period products. And I think that pads should be freely available in all government-provided accommodation for asylum-seeking women.

For interviews with asylum-seeking women who have experienced period poverty and other experts, please contact  
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Women for Refugee Women is a London-based charity which supports and empowers women who are seeking safety in the UK to tell their own stories and advocate for a fairer asylum process.

[www.refugeewomen.co.uk](http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk)

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WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

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[www.bloodygoodperiod.com](http://www.bloodygoodperiod.com)

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**Please note, re: Task Force:** This report is a product of joint work from Bloody Good Period and Women for Refugee Women. Although the report informs the work of Bloody Good Period, it is separate from the organisation's work on the Taskforce. The Taskforce will continue to lead more general work to end period poverty, through its workstreams, drawing on existing research which would possibly include that of BGP and WFW.

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