

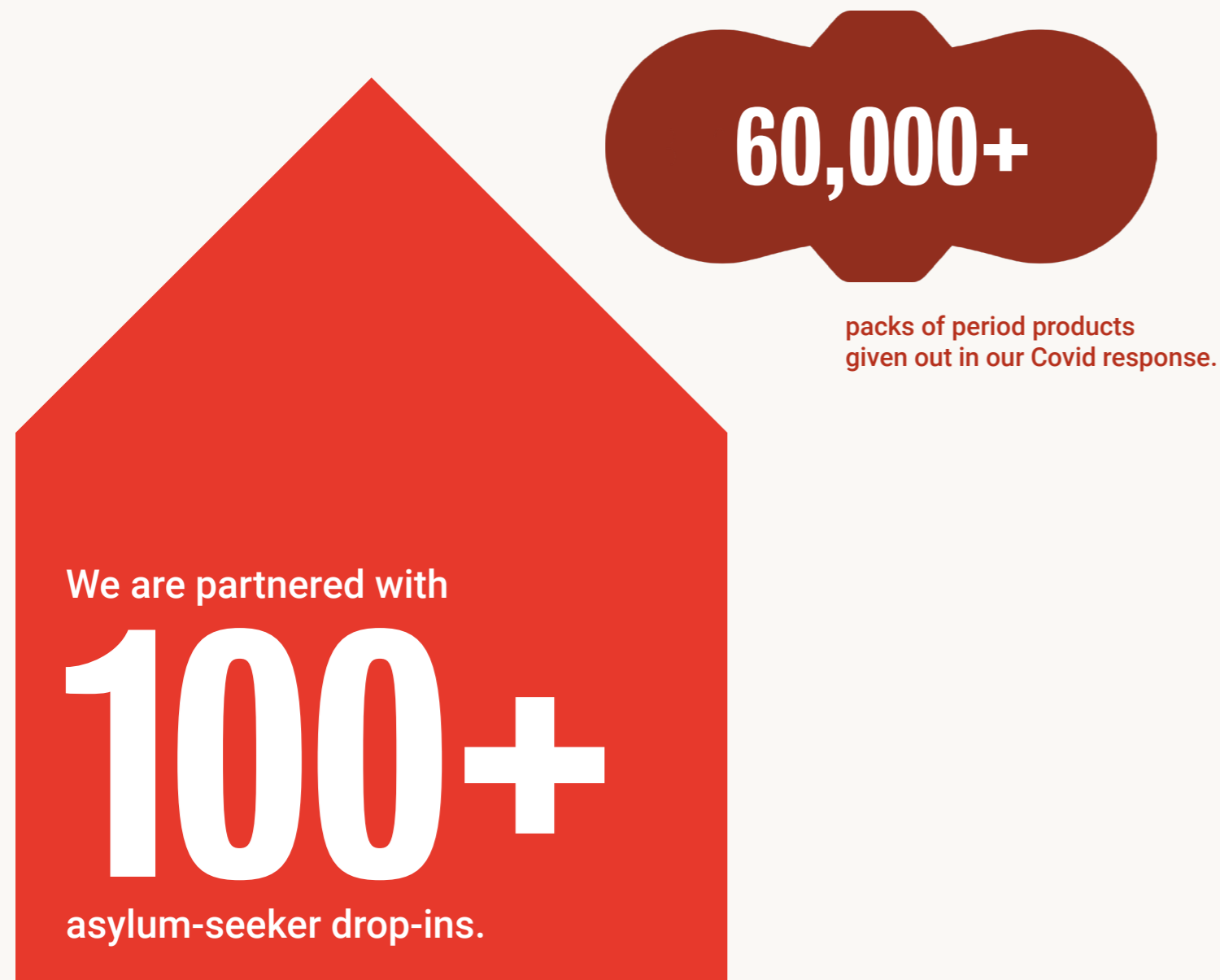


Bloody Good Research:

Periods and menstrual wellbeing in the workplace - the case for change.

01.

Who are we?
And what are we doing?



About Bloody Good Period

Bloody Good Period was started by Gabby Edlin in 2016 to create a sustainable flow of menstrual products for those who can't afford them.

What started as a whip-round amongst friends is now a growing charity, with a vision for menstrual equity - where the simple fact of bleeding doesn't stop anyone from participating fully in society, or in life.

We are partnered with 100+ asylum-seeker drop-in centres around the country, helping more women and people who menstruate have bloody good periods. Our Covid19 response has seen us distribute over 60,000 packs of period products since the start of lockdown in March 2020. We also provide education sessions to get vital menstrual and reproductive health information to those who would otherwise not be able to access it, and work with [Decolonising Contraception](#) to deliver our 'Decolonising Menstruation' project.

In 2021, through our Bloody Good Employers (BGE) initiative, we are setting our sights on UK workplaces. We believe that we can drive big change here, and improve the lives of people at work, nationwide. Over the last year, we've conducted research with both employers and employees. This report shares our findings. They underline the need for change, and open up conversations about what we do next to develop BGE and launch in 2021.

We are currently fundraising to build the programme, so if you are inspired by what you read here, we would love to hear from you.

02.

Our Theory of Change.



Our Theory of Change.

At the beginning of 2020, the BGP team spent time framing our theory of change for BGE.

Through this process, we committed to gathering evidence-based research, to explore menstrual inequality at work, and better understand this as a social justice issue.

Our research, together with work from colleagues dedicated to menstrual equity, tells us there is so much work still to be done. We are therefore committed to driving change for employers, employees, and broader society through our BGE initiative.

As we share this report, we want to share some of our theory of change ambitions too. And as we develop BGE this year, we will continue to scrutinise the best route forward for this work, ensuring that business case and moral argument both make sense, and so continue to underline the need for BGE.

02.

For Employees:

Short-term outcomes:

- More confident
- Better understanding of menstrual health
- Better mental & physical health
- Less anxiety and stress
- Feel more supported at work

Medium-term outcomes:

- Better life work balance
- More control of working hours & practices
- Greater trust in employer
- Better working relations
- Higher morale
- More productive

Long-term outcomes:

- Greater freedom & autonomy
- Long-term improved physical & mental health
- More stability
- Better career progression

For Employers:

Short-term outcomes:

- Happier workforce
- Improved HR systems
- Demonstrate practical & thought leadership
- Positive PR for that leadership

Medium-term outcomes:

- Positive internal culture shift
- Reputational gains
- Increased retention of staff
- Lower recruitment costs
- Employees with greater trust
- Managers with greater empathy
- Higher productivity

Long-term outcomes:

- Better performance
- Reduced gender pay gap
- More inclusive workplaces

Our Theory of Change.

For Society:

Short-term outcomes:

- More positive conversations about menstrual health
- Donations to BGP, enabling delivery of core work

Medium-term outcomes:

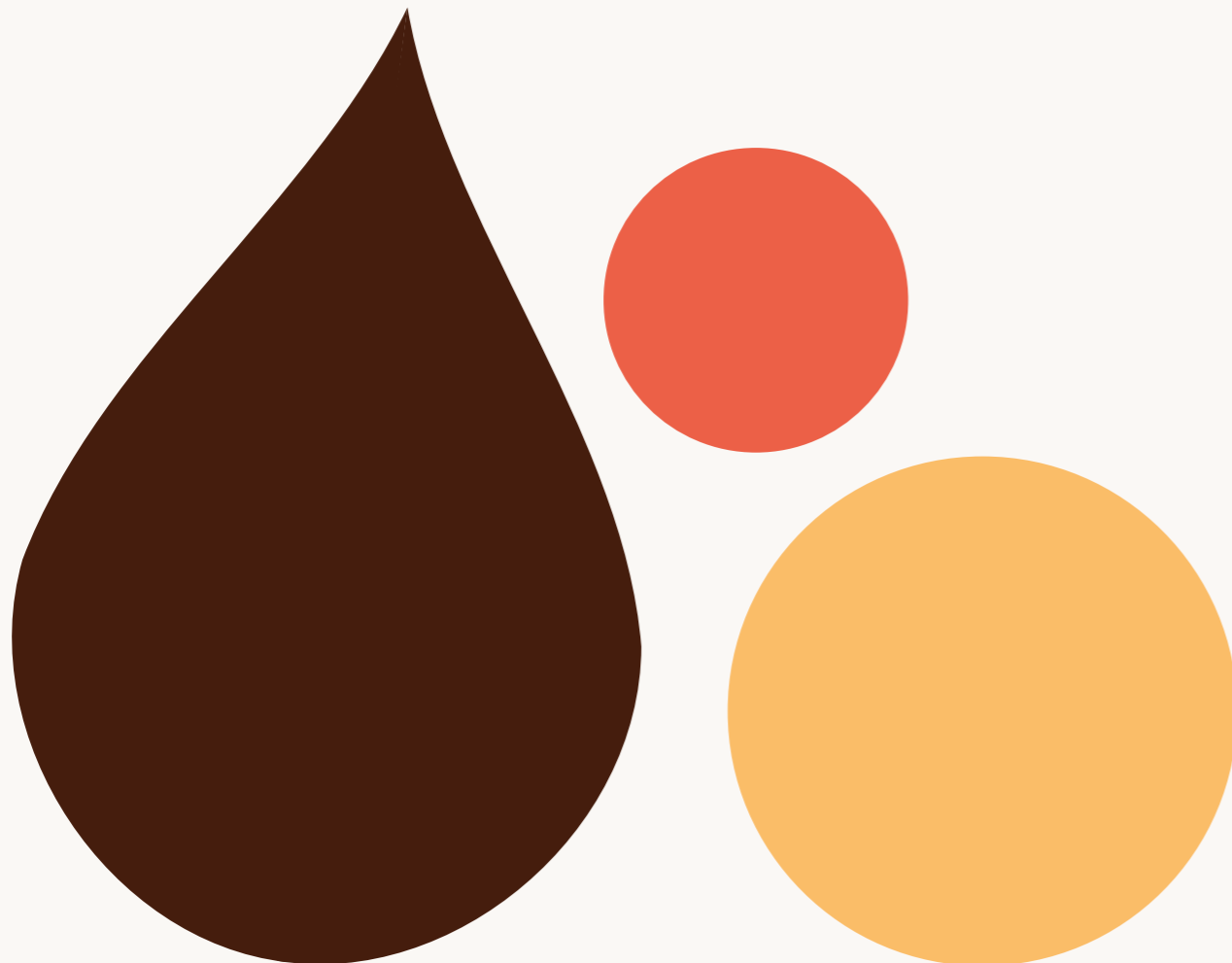
- A more open and supportive work culture
- More openness from men & those who don't menstruate to engage with menstruation

Long-term outcomes:

- Accelerated gender equality at work
- Wider cultural shifts
- More human workplaces fit for now, 2030, 2050 and beyond

03.

What this is (and isn't).



What this is...

This report brings together findings from two strands of research:

- A public-facing survey, managed by BGP, called 'Have Your Bloody Say' (HYBS)
- An employer-facing project, led by partner academic Claire Hutcheson (Birkbeck University)

It's important to say that we don't see these findings as particularly revelatory. Colleagues who have been in this space for far longer than us have been unearthing similar insight for decades. What these findings do strongly show, though, is an urgent need for BGE (and other work like it). This is especially true as the world grapples with the long-term implications of the Covid19 pandemic, and we have an opportunity to actively re-shape our worlds, including our workplaces.

Furthermore, this research shows both employers and employees reaching the same conclusions on the action needed around menstruation.

The business case for doing so is dovetailing with the need to act from a perspective of social justice - so from multiple angles, this is the right thing to do, and the right time to do it.

We believe that this report sets out, strongly, the need for change. We invite you to be part of that change by reading, sharing and acting - by doing so you will help to deliver more human workplaces, fit for now and our collective future.

04.

A note on privilege (and the limitation of our research).

Our responses (breakdown):



A note on privilege

It is vital that we recognise that the findings of our public-facing survey predominantly reflect the lived experience of white people who menstruate, and not all of society.

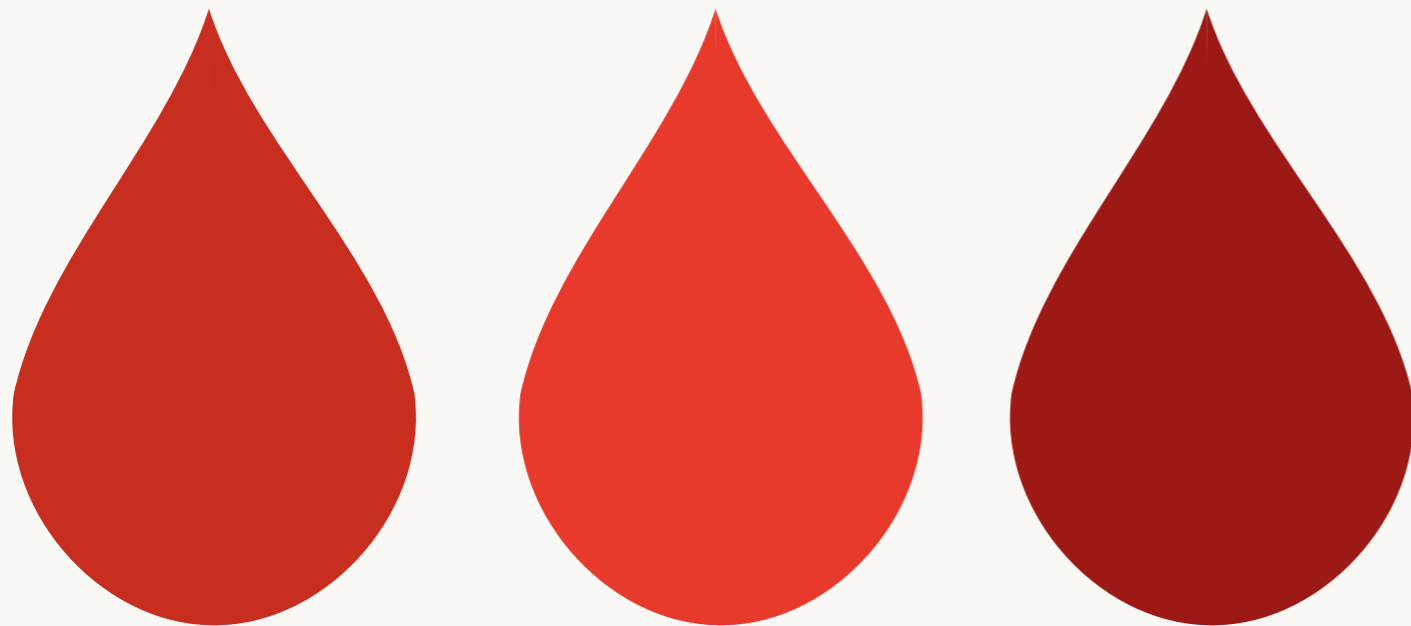
This in no way diminishes the importance of the participation and lived experiences of each of those 3,000 respondents; but we must remember that this cannot and does not tell the story of everyone's experiences - and especially not those of the groups with whom we deliver our core work every day.

The people we work with are some of most vulnerable in this country; they may have arrived here recently with dependents; they may have moved into an already marginalised community; they are likely to identify as a person of colour. In the case of asylum seekers, most are not allowed to work.

So we acknowledge that to work - and then additionally to work from home - is a privilege; to contribute to a survey on experiences of the workplace is a privilege; and that our society means that many people are excluded from that privilege. Our data tells a story, and it is certainly a story with limitations. **Through all of our work, this is a story that BGP fully intends to help re-write.**

05.

Summary: A concentric cycle of silence.



Summary

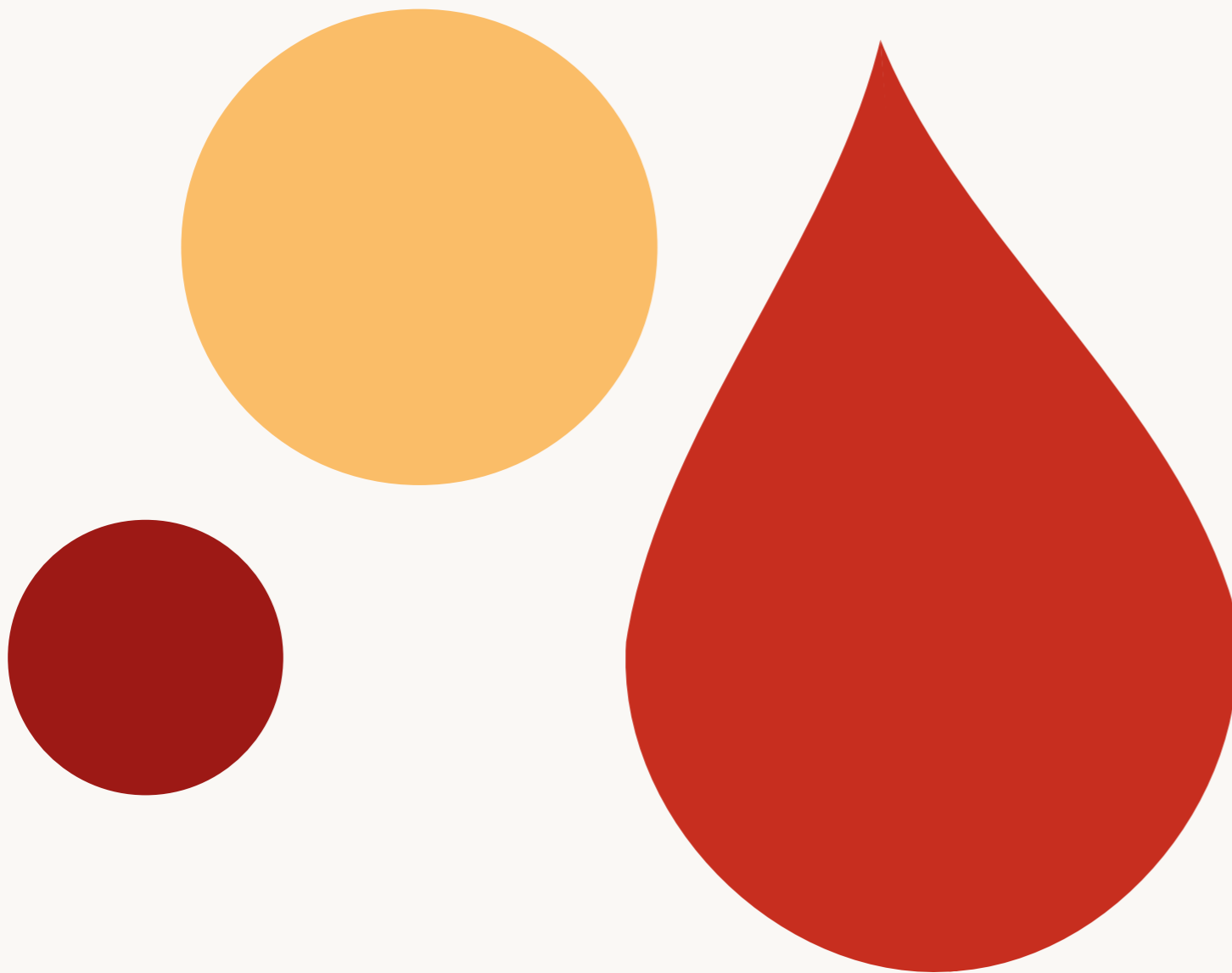
Claire's research has helped us to better understand contexts around menstruation in UK workplaces. She has delivered a deep, qualitative exploration of managers' perceptions of menstrual health issues, working with employers from renewable energy, healthcare and finance sectors.

The overall message is clear: a **'concentric cycle of silence'** often surrounds periods in UK workplaces. This particular phrase - 'concentric cycle of silence' was inspired by a reflection in one of Claire's research interviews, in which a manager working in renewable energy stated that issues surrounding menstruation **"can't be talked about, because they're not talked about"**. This **really** gets to the nub of the problems around **stigma, non disclosure, a lack of knowledge and rapport, and the poor culture and communications** that result from these themes.

In the Key Findings section, we share findings around themes, exploring them from employer and employee perspectives, making clear how restrictive and at times dangerous this cycle of silence can be for all concerned.

06.

Glossary for clarity.



Glossary

We wanted to make the meaning of these few terms clear for everybody, as we hope to be reaching some readers here for the first time with this work.

Agender people identify as having no gender, being without a gender identity, or not aligning to the idea or construct of gender. Agender is sometimes described as being *genderless*.

Cis means ‘on the same side as’. A cisgender person identifies with and aligns with the gender identity they were assigned at birth.

Cis female (short for cisgender female) is somebody who identifies as a woman and was assigned female at birth. They may also identify as a “cisgender woman”.

Concentric refers to shapes that share the same centre. In the case of this report - silence is at the heart of it all.

Genderfluid: A genderfluid person may be somebody who feels flexible in their expression and experience of gender, either by shifting between different genders, or experiencing aspects of several genders over time. Genderfluid may also apply to a person who feels open to identifying as a different gender to the one they currently identify with.

Genderqueer is an identity label that may be used by individuals whose gender identity and/or role does not

06.

conform to a binary understanding of gender. Genderqueer is sometimes used to express a feeling of ambiguity towards gender. Genderqueer is often used as an umbrella term for people who identify as non-binary, genderfluid, gender-questioning, gender non-conforming or in any way challenging established social constructs of gender.

Intersex is a broad term which applies to people born with (or later developing) any variation in sex characteristics that do not align with a typical male or female definition or presentation of those characteristics, i.e. chromosomes, reproductive glands, genitalia. Intersex individuals are typically assigned male or female at birth; whilst some may continue to identify with this label throughout life others may align with a different gender identity.

Menstruation is when blood and tissue from your uterus comes out of your vagina. It usually happens every month. Not all women menstruate, and not all people who menstruate are women.

Non-binary: A non-binary individual indicates a person whose identity is neither male or female (though may include aspects of one or both) and exists outside the gender binary. Non-binary is often used as an umbrella term for people who identify as genderfluid, gender-questioning, gender non-conforming or in any way challenging established social constructs of gender. Non-binary is sometimes shortened to NB or “enby”.

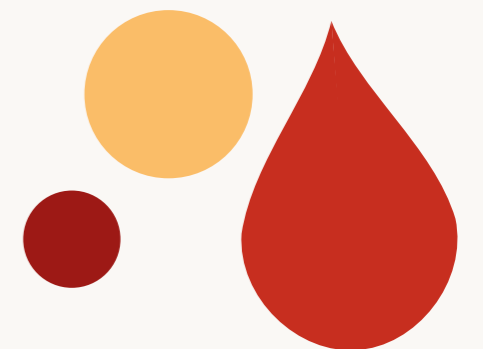
Glossary

Non-binary woman: A non-binary woman could refer to any of the following: a non-binary person who was assigned female at birth and shared a socialisation process typical to others identifying as women; somebody who is perceived socially as a woman but does not feel they align wholly with a female identity; somebody who feels partially female-aligned but partially something else; somebody who exists beyond the gender binary but feels closer to “woman” than they do to “man”.

PMS, Pre-Menstrual Syndrome, is a combination of symptoms that many people who menstruate get about a week or two before their period.

Transgender can apply to any group or individual whose gender identity differs from what they were assigned at birth. Transgender can also apply to a group or individual who has transcended culturally defined categories of gender. Transgender is often shortened to “trans”.

Transgender man: A transgender man is a man who was assigned female at birth. The shorter term “trans man” may also be used to refer to a transgender man.



07.

Key Findings: Stigma:

25%

never talk openly about periods at work.

When asked what their employers could do,

63%

said to normalise the conversation around periods in the workplace.

Key findings

The overarching theme, from both sets of research, is that menstruation is still hugely and consistently stigmatised.

We could cite dozens and dozens of shared experiences from both employees and managers, all evidencing the persistent stigma surrounding menstruation.

Claire sums the problem of stigma up perfectly here; “On the one hand women [and people who menstruate] are [deemed to be] lying about having menstrual health issues to get out of work, and on the other they are lying about not having menstrual health issues, to be at work.”⁽¹⁾

With 25% of HYBS respondents never talking openly about periods at work, the need for much more leadership and proactivity here is clear:

“I don’t take sick leave for menstrual issues, I use annual leave when I need to - probably 5-8 days a year. I feel a bit ashamed of this because I should be braver about my periods” White, non-binary, 40-49.

“I don’t know if it can be discussed, it just isn’t. It has felt more taboo to discuss in my English workplaces than back home (Argentina). Other than brief comments on “period pain” it’s just not discussed.” Latin American, cis female, 30-39.

Stigma is far worse in (many, but not all) cis male-dominated workplaces, which gives some good

07.

direction as to where BGE's work can have real impact:

"I find it extremely difficult because I get quite bad PMS with regards to emotion and my male manager thinks it is okay to ridicule me for this whilst also managing to say it is fake. So I would only ever talk about menstruation with my female colleague, never with male leadership"
British-Asian, cis female, 30-39.

Non-disclosure (or 'menstrual concealment'):

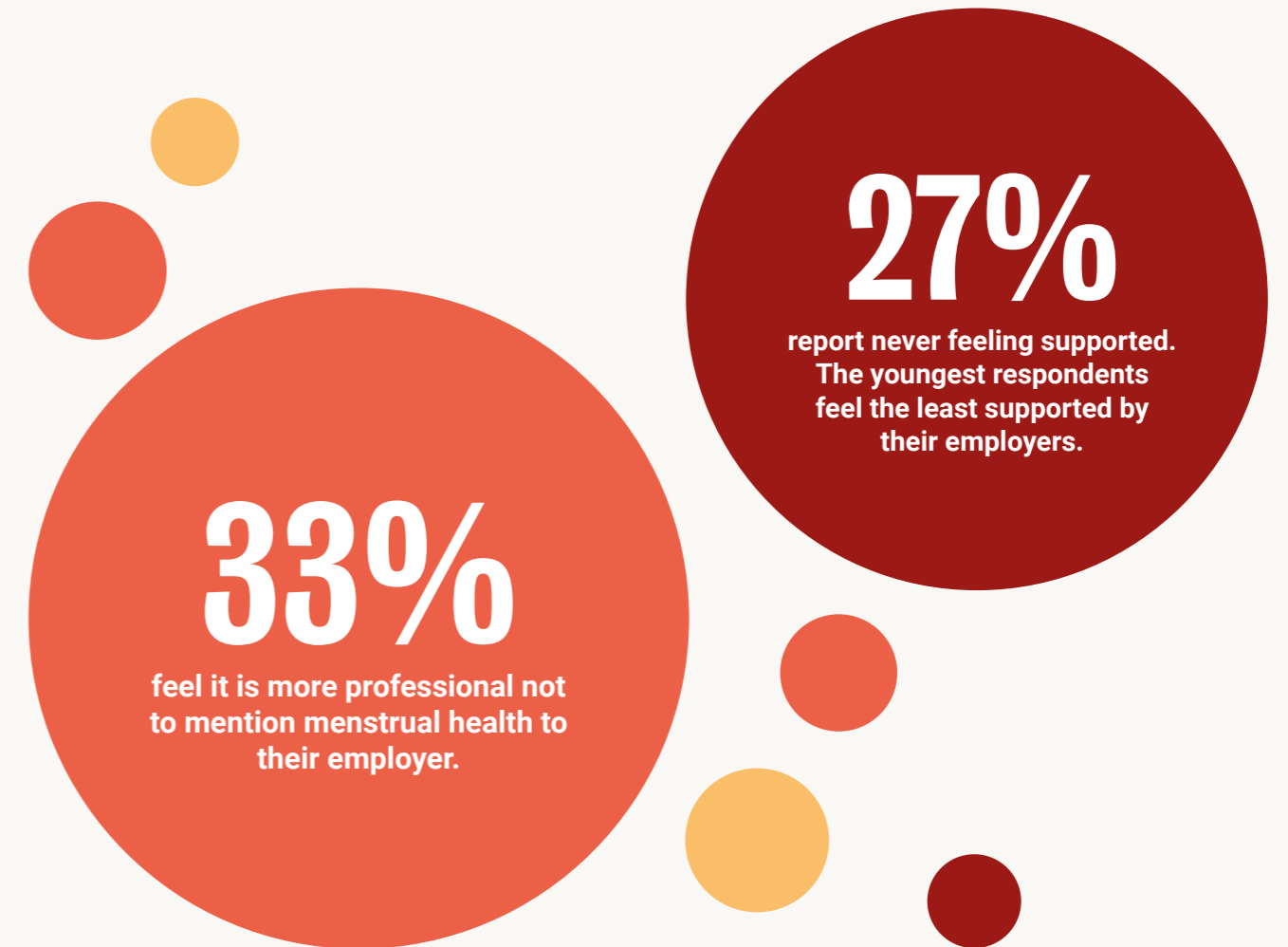
A culture of non-disclosure stems directly from the stigma surrounding menstruation. This is driven by a lack of trust, confidence, proactivity and leadership, with a third of HYBS respondents feeling it is unprofessional to mention menstrual health to their employer:

"It would feel like a more safe environment to speak openly about menstrual issues without fear of being judged, and to be taken seriously when having problems." Mixed ethnicity, cis female, 30-39.

Over a quarter (27%) of employees report never feeling supported. Not surprisingly, this is an issue that is more common amongst younger employees, which works against employers when it comes to retaining staff, and overall productivity:

"When I am on my period and not feeling great...it would be good to know that my employer was on my side." Black, cis female, 21-29.

Key findings



"While I think most of my colleagues are fairly open minded, one was once told off for talking about her period by a senior manager. The manager said the talk of periods would make a (male) member of staff uncomfortable." Mixed ethnicity, cis female, 30-39.

Here our survey respondent did not even feel comfortable fully disclosing that the uncomfortable colleague had been male - so we end up with multiple non-disclosure!

"My work is affected during menstruation, however I don't feel confident talking about this with my employer for fear that it would make me look 'flakey' or weak. Colleagues who take regular sick leave are seen as unreliable". White, cis female, 30-39.

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This leads to what Kate Seear calls 'menstrual concealment', a practice which continually reinforces and reminds people who are menstruating that it is best to conceal that they are doing so. BGE will work hard to help employers recognise the problems around menstrual concealment, whilst encouraging employees to move away from it.

Lack of Knowledge (Ignorance):

The stigma and non-disclosure surrounding menstrual health stems from a lack of knowledge and understanding. For that reason, the BGE initiative will be dedicated to building more of that crucial knowledge and understanding, which our research has identified is so clearly lacking in many workplaces.

A female manager in renewable energy shared that there is a culture of "brushing it off as if it's a really small thing, as if, 'well, every woman has them, most people are fine, so why aren't you?' sort of thing. I think there's a tendency to assume that your experience is the same as everyone else's."

This pattern of drawing on personal experience, as opposed to recognising that each is different, came up a lot. Another manager highlighted: "there is a tendency to draw on a personal point of reference, particularly if you have no issues yourself." Yet, as this participant observes, experiences of menstruation are hugely different, and workplaces need to recognise that

Key findings



"actually, people experience [menstruation] in such different way[s] that you've got to kind of understand that, and understand what would help them or how you can be flexible to help them". She goes on to share that both "typical and disordered menstrual

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health presents physical and mental implications that warrant consideration in terms of an individual's resources."

Despite this prevalent context, few workplaces would ask (or mandate) managers to consider how they would support employees experiencing either typical or disordered menstrual health. Instead 'support' is left to personal relationships, which, as we have seen, tend to centre around the senior person's experience of that issue. This means that, even amongst cis females, support is not a given:

- "Senior female colleagues tend to dismiss other female discomfort and pain due to periods." Asian-British, non binary, 21-29
- "I heard a Midwife criticising her colleague last week for taking sick leave for menstrual cramps!" White, non-binary, 21-29
- "Some women think that because they don't have painful periods that those of us who do are exaggerating. This doesn't help. I am in agony and actually often pick up colds during my periods which also adds to sick days" Black British, cis female, 21-29

For cis men, who don't have a direct point of reference in that they don't menstruate, there can be a significant gap in knowledge and understanding. No cis men learn about periods in the same way that cis females do (and the latter is often inadequate too, though that is a topic for a different report). Added to that, the reluctance of society at large to talk about periods means that a knowledge gap can be compounded by

Key findings

a gap in empathy. Unsurprisingly then, only 8% report always feeling supported by male colleagues, while 49% never get this. The most extreme manifestation of this lack of support, knowledge and empathy can be a genuinely unpleasant workplace:

- "Any attempts to discuss menstrual health at work have resulted in a nearby man moaning about our discussion either being 'gross' or him feeling excluded" White, cis female, 30-39
- "I would feel better talking about this to colleagues who also have periods, but usually have a cis male line manager and cis male dominated team." White, non-binary, 21-29
- "I was once asked by a male colleague why I'd taken my bag into the toilet with me. I wanted to say 'because I had to change my tampon (!!!) but didn't want to embarrass him - which is ridiculous!" White, cis female, 21-29
- "I can always talk about menstrual health with the women in my work but the men make it feel uncomfortable through their reactions" White, cis female, 21-29

A male manager working in finance sums up that "without full knowledge of a situation, not only will support not be possible, but there will be a perception of women in some way being dishonest or taking advantage". This is where alarm bells start ringing more loudly - as does an urgent call for company policies around menstruation. Ensuring that upfront, honest conversation is initiated for anyone that experiences menstruation at work, would bring a clear picture of what that person needs - which in turn would bring transparency, clarity and proactivity.

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It's important to say here that the majority of sick leave policies already allow anyone time off for health issues that impair their ability to work.

Severe pain or heavy bleeding are not nearly as uncommon as unknowledgeable employers may assume, which is why proactivity, communication, and kindness are so important when shaping policies.

Menstrual health researcher and Director of Menstrual Matters Sally King writes that “there is still more we can do to make working life more comfortable for people who menstruate, without accidentally implying that ‘all women’ are debilitated by menstruation.”⁽²⁾

Mental health: what cost?

If support is not in place, menstruation can, in various ways, generate burden in the workplace. This can have an impact on mental health, with some upsetting consequences:

“I don't feel confident talking about this with my employer for fear that it would make me look flakey or weak. Colleagues who take regular sick leave are seen as unreliable and so I will tend to struggle on, regardless of how I feel. I tend to have migraines during my period and this often results in me losing my sight for a bit but there is a culture at work of ‘plough on’, no matter what.” White, cis female, 30-39.

Key findings



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A male manager working in finance shared this reflection on this idea of burden:

“If you come to work every day, and you have pain, and uncertainty about the intensity of that pain; uncertainty about [whether you’ll be able to] last the day, [and] about how your boss is going to react... It would be pretty damn high pressure for someone to work in that situation.”

And here, a female manager working in finance, shares reflections on the experience of her team:

“And I imagine, although I must confess it isn’t something that I’ve thought about, but I imagine that around their time of the month, the women on my team are probably finding customer service harder to cope with emotionally.”

For both managers quoted here, it feels like something is dawning on them - but prior to participating in research focused on this topic, menstruation at work just hadn’t been actively considered. We simply don’t provide the time and space for people to discuss menstruation. Yet doing so opens up an important way for people to manage their mental health at work:

“A male colleague has joked that I’ve been ‘PMS’ing’, which has made me very uncomfortable, because my period does greatly affect my mental health at times and can be extremely painful.”
Asian, cis female, 21-29.

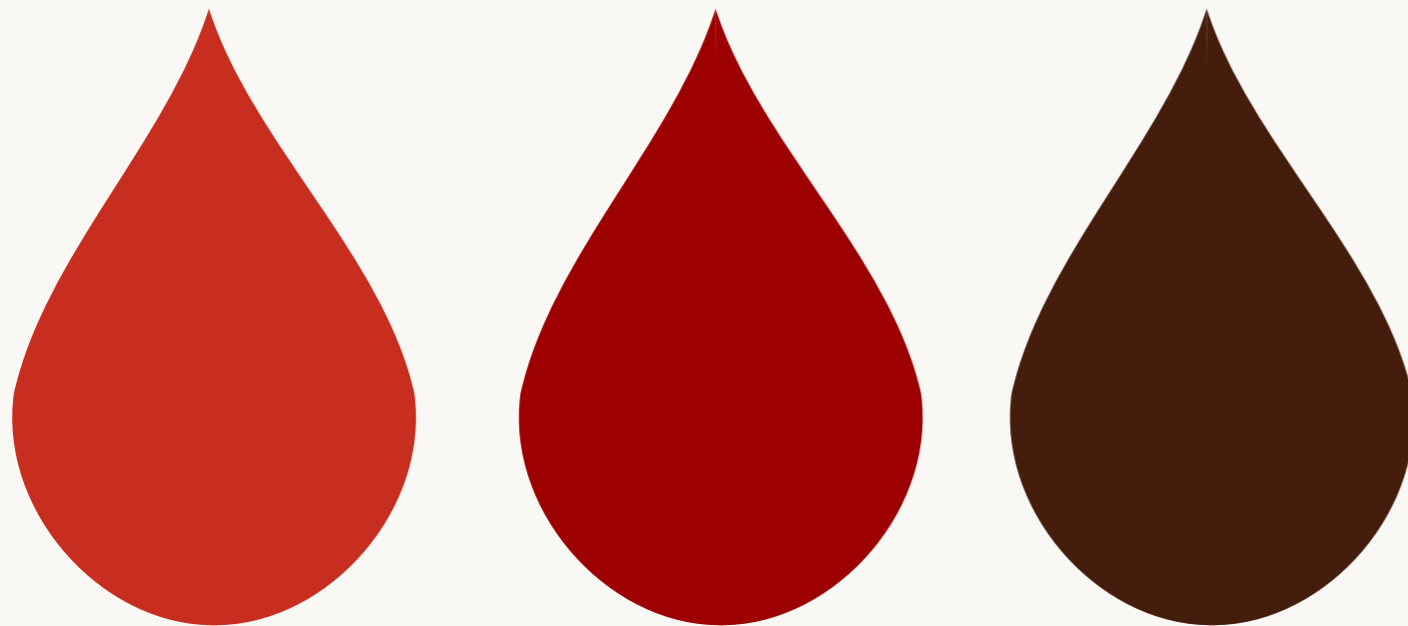
Key findings

“I think just being able to talk freely about periods would take the pressure off not only my menstrual health but mental health too. It shouldn’t feel like an issue but it does, until workplaces learn to normalise periods.” White, cis female, 30-39.



08.

Conclusions: Calls to action for us all



Conclusions and Calls to Action

Proactivity and Policy: Reflecting on these findings, there is clearly a dearth of proactive conversation and understanding within UK employer settings.

We think this really speaks to a need for greater proactivity at a leadership level. In making time for managers to begin to understand the individual needs of team members, and for the support that meets those needs to be formalised as policy. This is backed up by a male manager working in finance:

“If you have something in policy, people tend to accept it more, because they would hope that it’s balanced or well thought through, and it [makes it] comparable with other groups as well....Let’s get [menstruation] out there, let’s get it out in the open. We need to brief managers as to what is appropriate, brief them so that they understand more”.

It is essential that we have these conversations at a senior level, as this female manager in the health sector recognises: “the more senior the person talking about [the issue], the more it will [resonate]”.

She went on to identify the “importance of communicating to those in positions providing support, ensuring uniform responses, so that employees can have confidence that raising an issue will result in the appropriate action.”

Proactive buy-in, at senior level, is a complete step on from informal, awkward conversations behind closed doors, and will be vital to changing the conversation around periods at work.

08.

Places getting it right:

We know it can be done. We are building good relationships with employers across the UK who are already making moves to be more supportive of people who menstruate. Indeed, 10% of HYBS respondents said they are well supported. We've had inspiring conversations with ambitious, forward-thinking employers, and have heard some positive employee experience too:

- “My work does provide tampons and good quality organic cotton pads in the female toilets which I greatly appreciate. They also have sinks in toilets themselves and I'm a cup user so that's a massive plus, too.” Mixed ethnicity, cis female, 20-29
- “I'm extremely lucky that both my managers are progressive women, and the only man in the team has very good politics. This is the first time in my professional life that I have felt so comfortable.” White-Jamaican-Chinese, cis female, 30-39
- “In my current role I would feel comfortable telling my manager but would probably just tell the team that I manage that I'm off sick but with no detail. I am lucky that I am able to (outside of covid times) wfh or take sick leave whenever it suits me without much scrutiny. Whereas I'm sure others probably don't have that.” Mixed ethnicity, cis female, 30-39

We want to encourage a rolling-out and stepping-up of this positive approach - a complete opposite to the lack of leadership which, sadly, was still a dominant theme in our research.

Encouraging Rapport:

Leadership endorsement of an initiative like BGE is essential, but it needs to come with different layers of support and rapport throughout an individual's experience at work. How we all get on at work is shaped by the way things play out with each other, day in, day out. It is a relationships game, and we have seen that the knowledge, understanding and empathy needed for a good rapport around menstruation is mainly lacking in that game - typically, but not exclusively, amongst cis male colleagues.

BGE will provide the templates for a more human-centred approach when it comes to menstruation, encouraging a proactive understanding of the needs of the individual. This does not mean that the onus will be placed on the individual to speak about their needs if they don't want to, but the openness to discussion must be made clear, to avoid the distinct lack of rapport that feels prevalent in our research.

Flexibility, Productivity and the Business Case:

Some elements of work contexts have changed for the better since the dawn of Covid - for example, increased flexibility, through working from home, and therefore more opportunity to manage pain in the comfort of home as opposed to in the office. From a BGE point of view, this has accelerated some of the campaigning we want to drive into UK workplaces. We are confident that as we develop BGE, the business case will become increasingly clear.

08.

We will be drawing on the experience of other inclusive employer initiatives, ensuring that we iterate our own work, improving our approach as we go.

We are confident that BGE will be a useful tool for attracting new talent for employers, as well as a good HR addition for retaining existing staff. This is particularly pertinent when we consider that it is young employees who feel least supported in this area. As cited in Claire's literature review, to show proactive commitment here, "supervisory and organisational support, can enhance an employee's ability to cope with job demands, thus [showing] organisational benefits in promoting workplace wellbeing and supporting women with menstrual health issues."

We want to ensure we take this opportunity to actively reshape and improve our workplaces for the better, and formalise the flexibility Covid has demanded, applying the same principles and benefits to menstruation.

Time for more change (it's about bloody time):

Claire concludes that; "Without exception, participants reported menstrual health as being a topic that is not discussed openly in the workplace. The silence on menstrual health captures the different ways this silence is manifest; stigma, taboo, non-disclosure, concealment, and interestingly, a cycle of silence in

Conclusions and Calls to Action

which menstrual health issues cannot be talked about because they are not talked about."

It is nothing short of shocking that there remains such confusion around something as universal as menstruation. Similarly, in 2021, it is shocking that women and people who menstruate are, all too often, assumed to be lying in at least one way when it comes to their experiences of menstrual health.

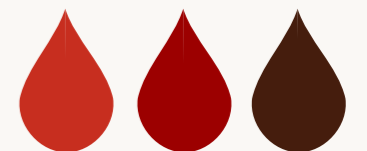
BGE will tackle these issues by building the knowledge, understanding and empathy that's currently missing. It will help employees to feel that they are properly understood, respected and invited to thrive, through the way they are treated each day. It will help employers to do the right thing, for their business and for their social consciences. It will help to build workplaces that are, quite simply, more human, and bloody better for it.

Bloody Good Employers is aiming to launch in Spring 2021. We are currently fundraising to make this happen.

If you want to support this work, and would like to explore a launch partnership, please email joe@bloodygoodperiod.com to discuss.

Ethics:

The research featured from Claire Hutcheson was carried out in accordance with Birkbeck's ethics policy (Birkbeck, 2020), and the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2016).



09.

**With huge thanks to our collaborators:
The following individuals have given
time and support to this project,
which is greatly appreciated.**

Special thanks to Claire Hutcheson, MSC student in 'Organisational Psychology', Birkbeck University. Thank you Claire, for responding to our research brief, and for allowing us to draw upon your work so generously.

Claire was supported in her work by Business Psychologist and Founder of [See Her Thrive](#), Clare-Louise Knox, postgraduate teacher of Women's Mental Health and ESRC PhD Scholar at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London.

3000 respondents to our Have Your Bloody Say survey, and everyone who supported in sharing it and driving responses. Special thanks to the team at The Menstrual Health Hub, a female health nonprofit and social impact business, who were instrumental in helping us share the survey.

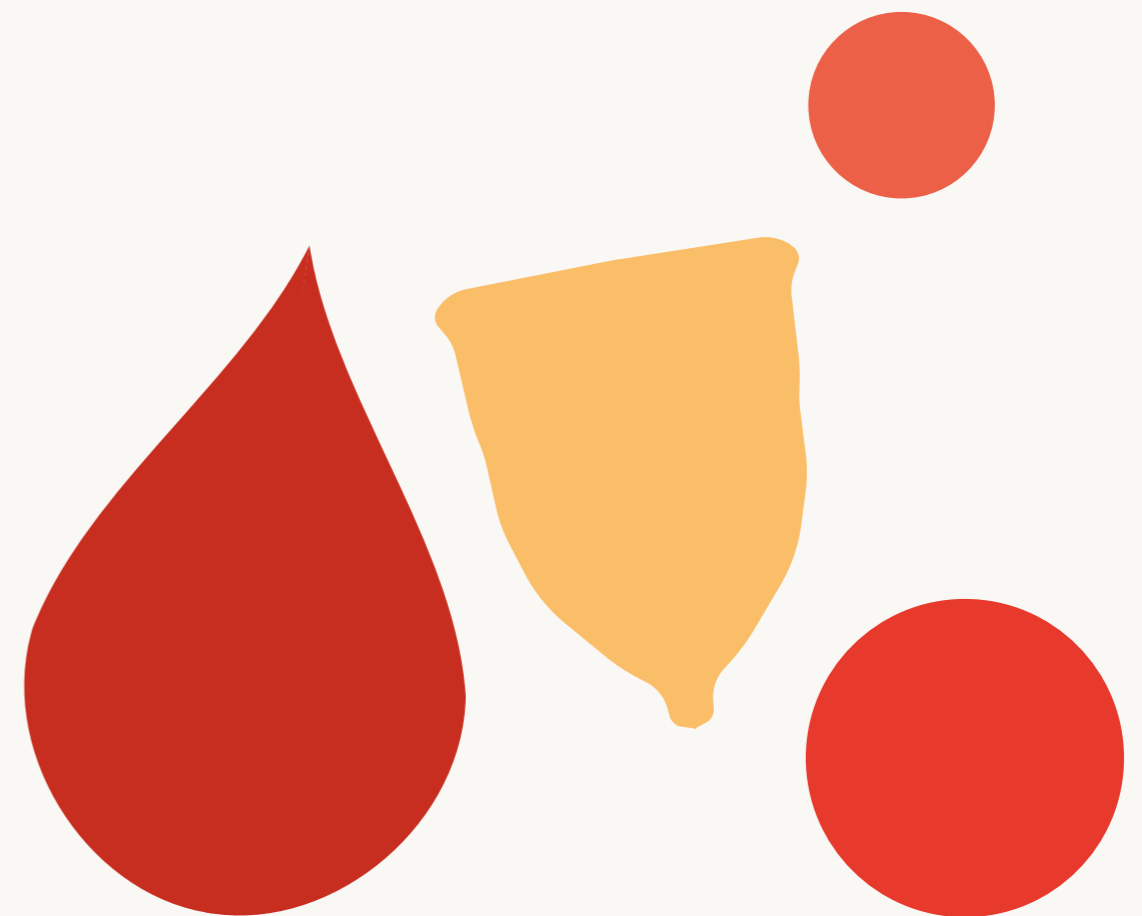
**You have added massive momentum to this work.
Thank you so much.**

With thanks...

The following individuals have given time and support to this project, which is greatly appreciated:

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And a massive thank you to Becca Liversidge for making this look the way it does!



SEE HER THRIVE[®]



© 2021 Bloody Good Period

Bloody Good Period fights for menstrual equity and the rights of all people who bleed. We don't believe that anyone should be at a disadvantage just because they menstruate. We give period products to those who can't afford them, and provide menstrual education to those less likely to access it. And we help everybody talk about periods.

Bloody Good Period is a registered charity: 1185849 / Bloody Good Period Ltd Company Number 11801410.
The Bloody Good Period name is a registered trademark. www.bloodygoodperiod.com.

This research was conducted in collaboration with [See Her Thrive](#), a UK consultancy on a mission to improve education, awareness and support for women's health in the workplace. See Her Thrive acted as consultants to Bloody Good Period in the initial stages of the project to help shape the research, provide industry insights from their expertise in this area and contribute to the strategic aims and objectives of the Bloody Good Employers initiative.