



**PROGRESS FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION REQUIRES MENSTRUAL HEALTH EQUITY,
*PERIOD!***



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International Day of the Girl calls on the global community to reflect on actions needed to ensure the rights, dignity and autonomy of girls, including the often-overlooked issues of menstrual equity and menstrual health management.

More [than 500 million people who menstruate worldwide experience the burden of “period poverty”](#) the financial, mental and emotional strain associated with the inability to access quality, affordable and culturally acceptable menstrual health products. Period poverty has dire real-life, health, education and social consequences, and disproportionately harms low-income individuals and communities. There are [131 million girls](#) who are not in school today — 100 million of whom are high school age. The number of girls attending school diminishes significantly during the transition from primary to secondary education, which is around the same time girls experience their first period.

This is no coincidence.

Millions of girls struggle to participate in school at least once every month due to the lack of acceptable menstrual health products or facilities. [One out of every 10 menstruating youth miss school while on their period for this reason.](#) For instance, a girl could struggle to use or change a sanitary pad at school because she doesn't have access to a private bathroom stall, clean water to wash her hands or a place to discreetly dispose of used menstrual products. On top of these barriers, “period stigma” can lead to girls being teased by their peers while menstruating, negatively affecting their educational experience. A [study in Ethiopia](#) found that school dropout is common among girls who cannot access period products and experience humiliation by classmates when their clothes are stained with blood. For girls who remain enrolled in school, missing classes during menstruation causes them to [fall behind their male peers](#), compounding existing inequities in educational attainment and leading to social isolation.

Studies show that more than [50% of girls in low- and middle-income countries have inadequate access to menstrual health resources](#) — this number is even higher in rural areas. This can interrupt their education and cause them to turn to unhygienic and unsafe alternatives, which can lead to other reproductive health vulnerabilities. The lack of menstrual health supplies or private facilities at school drives many girls to walk long distances to change pads at home, resulting in missed class time and impacts to personal health and social-emotional well-being. Those without any resources may resort to creating makeshift period products out of paper, rags or leaves, sometimes causing infections that, if untreated, can lead to long-term impacts, including infertility.

“At PAI, we know that lack of access to menstrual health information, supplies and support are barriers that stand in the way of advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality and the full autonomy and sustained achievement of girls and women,” says Rahwa Weldemichael, associate director

and gender justice specialist at PAI. “But we also know that the challenges of poor access, stigma and a lack of awareness around menstrual health can be solved. I have seen firsthand how program interventions that supply girls with the menstrual health products and facilities they need, particularly in rural areas, decrease school drop out rates.”

We see examples of this in the work of our partners around the world, like [Copper Rose Zambia](#), a leading youth-focused, girls’ empowerment organization in Zambia. They offer menstruation education, training and product distribution programs with youth to normalize and increase awareness of menstrual health management.

“For young girls in rural areas, it’s hard for them to open up when they start their menses (menstruation) and talk to anyone about it,” shares Ruth Mwaka Litaba, a youth and gender specialist with Copper Rose.

This period stigma can make menstruation feel like something to hide and result in girls lacking information about menstruation, including not knowing what kind of menstrual supplies are available for them to use.

“The training has been focused on giving girls encouragement to say this is a normal process, this is something you should go through with pride,” explains Melody Chisanga, Copper Rose’s district coordinator.

While some countries like [Scotland](#) are paving the way for free and accessible period products for all, in many places around the world, including in the United States, a large number of menstruators struggle to access quality supplies. Menstrual products are basic necessities that should be available to everyone who needs them but are becoming increasingly unattainable worldwide. Over a lifetime, the average person who menstruates spends about [\\$18,000 on period products](#). These costs are further exacerbated [by inflation and current global economic trends](#).

Copper Rose takes a novel approach to this issue by teaching girls how to make reusable pads, which the girls can then sell to the organization. This generates income for the girls and increases their economic security. It also provides Copper Rose with a supply of pads they can distribute in the community. This work has the added benefit of educating the wider community on menstrual health management, helping to break down stigma.

The ability to confidently manage menstruation in a healthy, safe and dignified manner is crucial to girls’ empowerment and education. Education has been shown to [significantly improve their quality of life](#) through increased social and political participation, fewer unintended pregnancies and maternal deaths, lower HIV transmission rates and delayed marriage. Menstrual equity ensures that girls have autonomy over their bodies and education, thus we cannot achieve global goals for girls’ education if menstrual inequity persists.

Addressing insufficient menstrual health management globally is one of the key needs recognized by the [Keeping Girls in School Act](#) in the U.S. Senate. This legislation, led by Senator Shaheen (D-NH), intends to close the gap between girls and boys completing secondary education by authorizing the U.S. Agency for International Development to develop programs and support partners on the ground to address these

challenges. **By supporting this critical bill, the United States can empower girls around the world and invest in their futures by breaking down barriers to education, such as a lack of access to menstrual health supplies.** [Contact your senator today](#) and ask them to support the Keeping Girls in School Act.

Girls should not be forced to choose between going to school and safely managing their health. **Period.** Autonomy to navigate the unique experiences and challenges that come with girlhood, including menstruation, is crucial to a girl's development. Destigmatizing and increasing access to menstrual health and hygiene are critical to furthering sexual and reproductive health and rights and increasing opportunities for girls' education, equality, safety and long-term success.

Effectively addressing menstrual health needs will take all of us. We must challenge the stigma around menstruation and work to ensure that everyone can access menstrual health supplies.

As Buumba Siamalube, advocacy and youth engagement manager for Copper Rose says, "Menstrual health is not a woman's problem, its society's problem and we all have a responsibility to play."

About PAI

PAI champions policies that put women, youth and at-risk communities in charge of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. We work with policymakers in Washington, D.C., and our network of more than 120 community-based partners across 36 countries to remove roadblocks to access sexual and reproductive health services and support. For nearly six decades, PAI has helped communities succeed by upholding their basic rights.

To learn more, visit www.pai.org and follow PAI on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

About CRZ

Copper Rose Zambia is an organization that works to deliver a world where adolescent's sexual and reproductive health is made a priority. It was established in order to give young people a platform to make a difference. Its founders believe that young people are NOT leaders of tomorrow, but leaders of today.

To learn more, visit copperrosezambia.org and follow Copper Rose Zambia on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).