

THE BLOODY MANIFESTO

A PERIOD MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE



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It should not be a taboo to talk about a natural process inherent to half of the world's population. But rather, it should be shameful to neglect it. Period.

This manifesto aims to shed light on the bloody truth behind conventional disposable & single-use menstrual products while calling on the European Commission to empower half of its population by giving them the right to an informed choice and access to safe, fair & circular menstrual products.

What is the problem?

A natural process occurs every month for (*at least*) half of the world's population: menstruation. But this is of course not a problem!

The problem is the menstruation taboo associated with menstruation, which leads to a lack of proper education, information and perpetuates the lack of accessibility to safe (*toxic-free*), fair (*tax-free*) and circular (*reusable*) products that menstruators need.

Nowadays, the vast majority of menstrual products being sold on the EU market (and globally) are single-use items: including pads, liners and tampons, which lead to serious **environmental**, **economic**, **health** and **social** impacts from production to disposal and beyond.¹

Although better alternatives for menstrual products, such as reusable products (i.e: period pants and cups) as well as toxic-free and plastic-free products have existed for decades, the population that knows about them or that uses them regularly is still the minority.

1. For further information, check the Annex of this manifesto



This is due to many factors:

💧 **Period taboo:** We cannot deny that the current societal structures and systems in which we live perpetuate a taboo around menstruation. Despite periods being 100% natural, 100% powerful, and 100% the agency of the menstruator - our society has had a lot to do with the way periods are dealt with, leaving menstruators misinformed, discouraged and disempowered.

💧 **Misinformation & lack of education:** This factor is very much connected to the Period taboo. By living in a society where talking about periods seems embarrassing and shameful, menstruators feel intimidated and unconfident. Therefore, education and information on the subject is not encouraged.

💧 **Interest of multinational companies:** Companies selling cheap single-use plastic and toxic menstrual products currently dominate the EU marketplace and they prioritise their profitable disposable products over the environment and people's health.

💧 **Unavailability:** Reusable and toxic-free products **are not** widely accessible in most EU countries, which is also linked with the point above. In fact, evidence suggests that these products are mostly available at online shops, specific handcraft markets and are generally rather hard to find, in particular they are less available in the mainstream retailers, such as supermarkets and local commerce.

💧 **Inaccessibility:** Menstrual products **are** also **not** economically accessible to many people that need them. Although reusable menstrual products can result in big economic savings in the long-term for menstruators, the initial investment can be a barrier for some, especially for those most in need.



How can we solve it?

We need the EU to take the lead on supporting and empowering menstruators to be their own agents - by setting up the policy framework - so they can feel educated, confident and free to make their own choices about their bodies, their purchasing power, and their periods!

This can be done with policy support that guarantees:

- 🔴 a **European wide reuse target** of 30% by 2030, to be increased to 60% by 2040 for menstrual products, combined with a separate collection target for recycling of the remaining single-use menstrual items of 40% by 2025, 70% by 2030 and 90% by 2040;

- 🔴 **period education programs** in schools, so that menstruators can make informed choices about their period and body, including understanding all kinds of menstrual products and their associated impacts (i.e: single-use) as well as their benefits (i.e: reusables) and how to use and dispose of them properly;

- 🔴 **widespread availability of toxic-free and reusable menstrual products** in particular in large retailer outlets and pharmacies across the EU (at least in the same proportion to single-use items), accompanied with awareness raising measures on the benefits of reusables compared to single-use menstrual products;

- 🔴 **economic incentives for reusable menstrual products** to overcome barriers to entry (i.e: discounts for reusables and/or levies for single-use products); as well as strong encouragement for Member States to reduce or eliminate taxes on reusable menstrual products;

- 🔴 a **legal obligation for manufacturers of menstrual products to phase-out hazardous chemicals and eliminate the use of toxins in their products**, as well as to disclose the ingredients' list of their products; and

- 🔴 that **free products be made accessible** to those in need.



By taking these measures the EU can help change current consumption patterns by moving away from disposability, addressing the environmental, health and economic impacts related to single-use menstrual products all together, and help fight menstrual poverty and inequality, while empowering half of its population and being a champion of women's issues.

Why should it be the EU's priority?

According to the EU's circular economy objective, **by 2030 all products placed on the EU market should be safe, fair and circular**. In fact, the European Commission, through their Communication on the European Green Deal and the new Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), have confirmed their intention to focus on waste prevention and reuse, as well as to prevent environmentally harmful products from being placed on the EU market.

In addition, this is not an environmental and economic issue only, but a social issue in the first place. In this regard, the EU has committed to follow a social welfare transition to a sustainable economy leaving no-one and no place behind, with social investment as a top priority including in: education, working conditions, healthcare and long-term care, social inclusion and minority rights, and gender equality.

Furthermore, tackling this issue can help the EU meet the UN Sustainable Goals 4, 5, 6, 10 and 12, by reinforcing education systems, reducing inequalities, ensuring equitable access to essential period products, empowering people, fighting pollution, reducing overall waste generation, improving the management of chemicals and toxic wastes, ensuring responsible and informed consumption as well as sustainable development.



Supporting Organisations:*

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* up to date as of October 7th 2021.

The **manifesto will remain open for sign ons** from Organisations, Members of Parliament, and individuals **until 1st Nov 2021**. It will then be updated to reflect new sign ons at that point and sent out to the European Commission. You can support the manifesto here: <http://bit.ly/signmanifesto>



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With thanks also to the 172 supporting individual citizens around the world.

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ANNEX²

Unraveling single-use menstrual products

What are they made of?

- **Single-use menstrual pads:** conventional single-use menstrual pads are usually made out of 90% plastic. Polyethylene is the most abundant plastic, and it is usually mixed with other materials which are distributed based on the different layers, including bleached wood pulp and sodium polyacrylate, with an inner layer of polypropylene, adhesives and various fragrances.
- **Tampons:** single-use tampons are mainly composed of absorbent materials (over 90% of the tampon) and a thin layer of plastic in the absorbent part, either rayon, cotton, polyester, or a mixture of these fibres, which are usually bleached. Tampons also come with plastic strings made out of polypropylene or polyethylene fibres.

On top of that, every single unit of these items also comes wrapped in plastic, and in case of tampons, they are usually also encased in plastic applicators.

What are the impacts associated with single-use menstrual products?

Environmental impacts:

- **Production:** The production phase of these items accounts for a large proportion of the environmental impacts from these product's full life cycle. The impacts generated during the production process result mainly from the use of large volumes of wood pulp, cotton, viscose rayon, the production of super absorbent polymer (SAP), and other components such as polyester, polyethylene, polypropylene, adhesives, and dyes. Wood pulp can be the source of deforestation, soil impoverishment, and can lead to high depletion of natural resources. Similarly the lumbering process and other machine operations can result in the emission of CO₂ and other GHGs due to the use of gasoline powered devices.

In addition to the depletion of natural resources (wood, crude oil, etc.), significant amounts of water and energy are used during the manufacturing process, as the production and usage across Europe and the globe is enormous. A Life Cycle Assessment of tampons conducted by the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, found that the largest impact on global warming was caused by the processing of LDPE (low-density polyethylene), used in tampon applicators as well as in the plastic back-strip of a pad - requiring high amounts of fossil fuel generated energy.

Just one year of menstruation for the average menstruator amounts to 5.3kg of CO₂ equivalents. Therefore, the average annual consumption of approximately 46 billion single-use menstrual products in the EU-28 equates to 245,000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalents.

2. The data and information provided in this Annex can be found at [The environmental and economic costs of single-use menstrual products, baby nappies and wet wipes](#)

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- **Waste and disposal:** It has been estimated that in the EU-28 nearly 50 billion units of single-use menstrual products were consumed in 2017, meaning an annual generation of about 590,000 tonnes of waste.

The varied composition of these products, together with the presence of organic substances after use makes their recycling technically and economically expensive. Therefore, in Europe, the waste generated by these products typically ends up in landfills or incinerators (if they are not littered in the environment) wasting resources and invoking negative environmental impacts.

Sending such a large amount of single-use menstrual products to landfills requires high land occupation rates and the plastic parts can take up to 500 years to break down.

- **Marine litter:** Single-use menstrual products are one of the top 10 single-use plastic items most commonly found in the EU marine environment. The European Commission ranks the category known as “sanitary applications” as the fifth most common single-use plastic items in Europe. These top 10 items make up 86% of all single-use plastic in beach litter and are responsible for more than half of plastic marine litter.

These items are usually flushed down the toilet by consumers (due to a lack of information/education or inappropriate labelling) and thus, they enter the marine environment through the waste water release system. Single-use menstrual products flushed down the toilet can also cling to bends, junctions or obstacles in the sewer and accumulate to form highly resistant solid compact masses blocking pipes and pumps. They also release a substantial amount of microplastics (small pieces of plastic litter <5mm in diameter) into waste water, which may be transferred to the environment or the sewage sludge. In particular during storm events, the overflow resulting from high water levels and rainwater in combined sewers (most European cities operate combined sewer systems in which both wastewater and stormwater are drained in one sewerage system) is then discharged into waterways. The excess flows have the potential to cause pollution in receiving waters as a result of the debris and contaminants. The negative impacts of plastic marine debris include both the impacts generated by chemical components and the visible and physical damage.

The impacts caused by these products in public sewer systems, as well as their management, treatment and clean-ups, leads to high costs for public administrations and for consumers themselves, as is further explained below.

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Economic impacts:

- **Waste management costs:** As already explained, these products are collected under the residual municipal waste stream. **The collection costs related to this waste stream in Europe may be significant, varying from €1 per inhabitant per year in some regions of Greece and Italy, to almost €10 in Ireland.**

In addition, there are costs resulting from the final treatment of this waste stream, consisting of incineration, landfill and/or mechanical biological treatment (MBT). Most Member States currently have landfill taxes in place for the disposal of non-hazardous municipal waste sent to legal landfills. The level of taxation ranges widely, from €3 per tonne in Lithuania (2017) to up to €87 per tonne in Austria and €93 per tonne in the United Kingdom (2016). The total typical charge to landfill of one tonne of municipal waste in the EU (the tax, plus the middle of the range of gate fees) ranges from €17.50 in Lithuania to up to €155.50 in Sweden.

With regards to incineration costs, the level of taxation ranges widely in Europe, from €8 per tonne in Austria to €52 per tonne in Denmark. The total typical charge for incineration (tax plus the middle of the range of gate fees) for one tonne of municipal waste in the EU ranges from €46 in Czech Republic to €174 in Germany. The money collected from the tax goes directly to the general budget of the State and it is not transferred to municipalities that achieve good results, and it is not connected to any national actions regarding waste reduction/recycling.

- **Marine litter costs:** The economic costs associated with marine litter can be differentiated into three large groups:
 - **Actual economic costs linked to expenses:** costs of cleaning up the beaches, costs associated with the obstruction of the engines, costs of hospitalisation due to the impact on human health, etc.
 - **Economic costs caused by loss of production or income:** income losses in the fishing industry due to a reduction in the population of fish or its own pollution, loss of income in the tourism sector, etc.
 - **Economic costs associated with welfare:** impacts on human health, loss of aesthetic and cultural values, etc.

Single-use menstrual products and other sewage related debris, cause substantial damage to the sewer networks. Some of the consequences of flushing such products down the toilet include: blocking of pipes which cause drainage problems; clogging the screens of pumping stations, clogging pumps and inhibiting electronic sensors (creating knock-on effects for pumping stations leading to sewage spills).

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It is estimated that the maintenance and unblocking of these facilities, together with the waste disposal of sewage debris removed in wastewater treatment plants costs the European Union between €500 - €1,000 million per year. This cost is passed on to all consumers through water bills regardless of whether they use these products or not.

Health impacts:

Many of the mainstream single-use menstrual products (pads and tampons) and their packaging contain plastic and other synthetic materials like rayon, adhesives, artificial fragrances and toxic chemicals such as phthalates, bisphenol-A and petrochemical additives, which are recognised environmental pollutants and are also known to be endocrine-disrupting substances linked to some diseases, such as heart diseases, infertility and cancer.

Synthetic fragrances added to these products can be made from a cocktail of up to 3,900 chemicals (styrene, chloromethane, chloroethane, chloroform, acetone, among others). Some of them are identified as carcinogens, neurotoxins, irritants, hormone disruptors and reproductive toxicants. The chemicals in these products can also modify the pH balance of the individual. Even traces of dioxin, created when these products are bleached white, and pesticides and herbicides, including glyphosate, can be found in menstrual products. However, most of the time these chemicals are not disclosed on the product by the manufacturer.

Also, when littered in the marine environment, these toxins can be released in the water or directly ingested (in the form of microplastics) and introduced into the marine food cycle. This plastic debris also attracts and concentrates other marine pollutants such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene (DDE) and nonylphenols, allowing these substances to be added to the food chain when the debris is eaten. Some of these plastic components contribute to the transport of invasive species (also known as rafting) and microbial contamination.

Furthermore, the contamination of water due to marine debris could also cause serious problems for humans such as an increased risk of bacterial (eg E. Coli) and viral contamination of coastal waters. The consumption or contact with contaminated water can increase the risk of contracting hepatitis, cholera, typhoid fever, diarrhoea, bacillary dysentery and skin rashes.

Finally, when these products end up in incinerators, the burning of plastic and other substances present in the waste releases dangerous substances such as heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), and other toxins into the air alongside ash waste residues, impacting on public health and food production.

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Social impacts:

- **Menstrual poverty:** Where statistics are available, **nearly one in five women struggle to pay for basic single-use menstrual products on a monthly basis in the EU. Not being able to afford menstrual products can significantly reduce the quality of a menstruator life. Menstruators from low-income families in Europe might not be able to attend work, school, or even socialise during their periods (usually around 5 days a month), impacting on their education, work and long-term prospects.**
- **Period tax:** Menstrual products are currently classed as luxury or non-essential items by the European Commission, so they can be taxed in some countries. Almost half of the 28 EU Member States apply the same VAT on menstrual products as on jewellery, wine, beer and cigarettes. In 10 of these countries, this rate is over 20% (Hungary, Croatia, Switzerland and Denmark). Other countries, such as Spain and France, apply a reduced VAT rate to menstrual products and Ireland is the only country that does not have a tax. **Period taxes further increase the aftereffect of menstrual poverty.**
- **Gender inequality:** The cost savings associated with menstrual products are especially important if we consider that they are often connected to politics of gender; disproportionately affecting womxn (cis-women, transpersons and non-binary individuals) who typically have less disposable income. In fact, across the EU there is an average gender pay gap between men and women of as much as 16%.

Irrespective of these many negative impacts caused by single-use menstrual products, these harmful items dominate the EU single market regardless of the existence of reusable & toxic-free products.

What are the benefits of reusable menstrual products?

Among the **environmental advantages** of reusable products compared to single-use products there is also huge waste prevention potential. The use of a reusable menstrual product (i.e. cup or panties) results in **annual savings per menstruator of about 5kg of non-recoverable waste (or a reduction of 99% of the waste that would be generated using single-use products)**. In fact, if only 20% of menstruators would opt for the menstrual cup instead of single-use options, the amount of waste could be reduced by nearly 100,000 tonnes per year.

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Reusable products also offer **social and economic benefits for menstruators**. For instance, using a reusable menstrual product instead of single-use tampons or pads, would result in **annual savings of €18 to €119 per person and over a lifetime savings could exceed €4400**. Therefore, considering the potential economic savings that reusable menstrual products can bring, making them widely available and accessible across the EU will help reduce menstrual poverty.

Likewise, the potential waste reduction can be translated into **high economic savings for the municipality**, due to lower management and treatment, as well as a reduction in the costs coming from removing waste from beaches and seas, as litter and sewage related debris would be reduced.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the **health benefits** that may be associated with the use of reusable products. Many single-use tampons and pads are made of chemically-infused materials, including endocrine-disrupting phthalates, glyphosate, BPS, BPA and other undisclosed ingredients, that we place directly in, or right next to, our bodies, which can be easily absorbed into our bloodstream. Therefore, switching to reusable, toxic-free and plastic-free menstrual products can help reduce a menstruator's exposure to toxic substances.

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This manifesto was written as part of a joint European task force within the #breakfreefromplastic European movement and the Zero Waste Europe network. Check out our website for more information: <https://periodpower.eu/>

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