



The charity for girls' equality

A TOUGH PERIOD

YOUNG AUSTRALIANS SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS ON THEIR MENSTRUATION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH



Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian authors of this report acknowledge and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise sovereignty was never ceded and that this land always was and always will be First Nations land. We recognise their ongoing connection to land, waters and community, and we commit to ongoing learning, deep and active listening, and taking action in solidarity.

We recognise the ongoing fight for First Nations justice and the long and continuing history of discrimination and disenfranchisement of First Nations people in Australia. First Nations people have been fighting for the right to vote, Treaty and Truth-telling since invasion. First Nations people were not allowed to vote until 1962, and were not recognised as citizens until 1967. The fight for self-determination for First Nations people continues, with calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth, as expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. At the time of this report, the Australian Government has committed to implementing the calls of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, starting with a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament. However, First Nations justice will only be achieved with both a Voice and Treaty. We stand in solidarity with First Nations people to address injustice, self-determination and First Nations leadership.

Cover image: Artwork by Plan International Australia Youth Activist Niranjana.

Artist Statement

Menstruation is natural process of our bodies for those of us with a uterus and so many of us experience it regularly. I wanted to capture the diversity of the individuals and their experiences of dealing with periods in my artwork. Even though it's a natural biological process, people who have periods are constantly navigating shame and taboo around it, all the while experiencing period poverty. I wanted my work to reflect the vastness of the issue and the need for a collective uplifting of those who bear the brunt of period poverty and shame. Access to menstrual products, care and education is life-saving and so is the recognition and destigmatisation of menstruation. I hope all people who menstruate can see themselves in this artwork and feel supported.

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is in the grip of a devastating cost of living crisis, and it is young people who are bearing the brunt of it.

A recent cost of living report found that 90% of Generation Z – young people born between 1997 and 2009 - have reduced their spending to cope with the cost of living, compared to 59% of Baby Boomers. Likewise, 70% of Generation Z also admitted to feeling financially stressed due to inflation, while 29% of Baby Boomers felt the same way.

Earlier this month, an interim report from a Senate inquiry investigating poverty in Australia [released detailed evidence](#) of welfare payments being insufficient to meet the cost of essential items, including menstrual health products. The inquiry heard evidence of “dehumanising poverty”, including women using rags because they could not afford pads or tampons.

Wherever there is poverty, there is period poverty, and this can have profound and

“

Period poverty in Australia is a pervasive and painful issue – and the massive financial pressures young people are facing right now is only making period poverty worse,”

**Plan International Australia
2023 Youth Activists**

lifelong impacts on adolescent girls’ lives: it can prevent them from going to school and deny them an education; stop them from playing sports; significantly affect their mental health and wellbeing; impact their employment; and prevent them from accessing basic necessities such as food or electricity.





Artwork by Plan International Australia Youth Activist Niranjana.

This study has found that the cost of living crisis has significantly exacerbated period poverty in Australia – particularly amongst the Gen Z population – and there’s no relief in sight.

On any given day, around 300 million women and girls globally will have their periods. Yet, we still treat this normal biological process as ‘secret women’s business’ – and it’s something that puts girls and women all around the world at a disadvantage.

Shockingly, our research shows that in Australia, the current cost of living crisis has led to 60% of Gen Z and Millennials – equivalent to almost 6 million women and people who menstruate – now finding it harder to afford period products

Periods don't stop when times are tough, or in an emergency. But all too often in crisis situations, girls, women and people who menstruate struggle to manage their periods with dignity, as access to basic supplies and essential health services becomes limited.

This is true across the world – from countries which have been hit hard during the global hunger crisis, to countries which have been torn apart by conflict, to those struggling with the rising cost of living, such as the one we are seeing unfold right now in Australia.

- **However, young people who menstruate have the solutions for how we can end period poverty in Australia. We asked our youth activists for the changes that would have the most impact. They called for:**
- **1. Funding to provide free menstrual health products in all public bathrooms.**
- **2. Menstrual health subsidies for those from low socio-economic status backgrounds and those doing it the toughest and struggling the most with the rising cost of living.**
- **3. Information in health clinics on where to access free menstrual health products and menstrual pain treatments**

METHODOLOGY

In April 2023, Plan International Australia (PIA) commissioned YouGov to collect data on the cost of living crisis and period poverty amongst 500 Australian people who menstruate, in both city and regional areas, aged 18-42. Plan International Australia designed the survey together with Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights experts; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) professionals; and Gender in Emergencies specialists. This factsheet is part of wider, global report and builds on PIA's previous research into how people managed their periods during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary: 517 people aged 18-42 who menstruate in Australia completed the questionnaire, including: 202 "Gen Z" young people and 315 "millennials"; 346 from capital cities and 171 from regional areas; 122 who identified as earning under \$50,000 a year;

183 who said they rented a property; 91 who identified as living with a disability; 209 who said they came from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background and 81 who identified as LGBTQI+.

Baby Boomers:

Born 1946-1964

Gen X:

Born 1965-1980

Millennials:

Born 1981-1996

Gen Z:

Born 1997-2012

Gen Alpha:

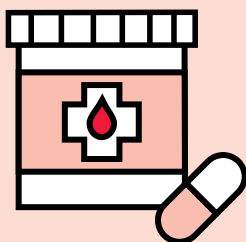
Born early 2010s-2025



KEY FINDINGS



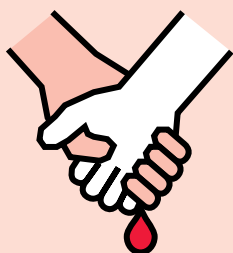
Almost 6 in 10 Gen Z and Millennial women are finding it more difficult to pay for menstrual health products than they were before the current cost of living crisis (57%). This figure rises to 64% for Gen Z.



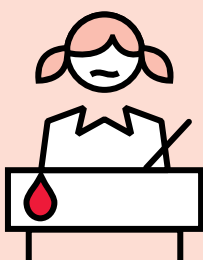
More than half of Gen Z and Millennial women are finding it more difficult to pay for menstrual pain management medication/treatment than before the current cost of living crisis (53%). Again, Gen Z are feeling it more, with 57% finding it more difficult. And those with lower household incomes are also finding it much tougher.



When asked in which ways difficulties paying for menstrual health products and/or menstrual pain management medication are having an impact on other areas of your life, the main **impact was on mental health and well-being** (37%). This was particularly an issue for those outside of the capital cities (48%), those not working (45%), those renting (46%), and those on household incomes under \$50K (47%).



More than 1 in 4 (26%) of Gen Z respondents said that the difficulties they now experienced in paying for period products and period pain management had **impacted on their sexual relationships**.



16% of Gen Z people who menstruate said it was **impacting their education**; 16% on their workplace participation.

LEADING ISSUES FOR YOUNG

AUSTRALIANS WHO MENSTRUATE

1. Difficulty or inability to pay for period products

Almost 60% of Gen Z and Millennial people who menstruate said the cost of living crisis had impacted their ability to pay for period products, with that number climbing to 64% for Gen Z young people. To put this into context, 12% of women in the UK said they were struggling to pay for period products in 2022¹.

As a result, young people are using cheaper products, changing them less often, and sometimes, going without products at all. This is having a significant impact on young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Angelina: With sustainable options, it carries a significant financial burden, because you have to buy them initially, and not everyone can afford that. For the longest time I was just not able to buy a menstrual cup because I just didn't have enough money in my bank account.

Those with household incomes under \$150K are also finding it much tougher, with 1 in 4 (25%) of people earning less than \$50,000 per year foregoing other necessities such as food or electricity in order to afford pads or tampons.

Further to that, 91 out of the 500 respondents identified as living with a disability, and 66% of these said that they are now finding it more difficult to pay for period products.

Of those who are finding it more difficult to pay for menstrual health products than previously, the main way they cope with this, is to buy a cheaper brand of single use menstrual health product (56%). Worryingly 1 in 5 say they are changing their single use menstrual health product less frequently than recommended (20%).

“

in Katherine in the NT was going for \$25 a packet. I don't know about you, but most people I know use two packets of pads each period cycle, and \$50 per period is just frankly unaffordable.”

Plan International Australia
Youth Activist Georgia



In the Gen Z cohort surveyed, 15% said they were entirely dependent on donated period products from university student services or local charities to manage their menstruation. Others said they were reliant on parents or family members to purchase products for them.

“Last year I was Women's Officer at my uni. I'd say like majority of contact I had from students was asking if we could have more free pads and tampons around the place. So, there was definitely a big demand for it. The scope of the department is very wide, but that was still like the main thing we received contact about, because people were struggling to afford them. But, all the products were provided by the students, not from the uni. And university staff are doing their best, but there's not enough funding for these things.” – Plan International Australia Youth Activist Chloe

Almost 6 in 10 (59%) of regional respondents said they were finding it harder to buy period products. Alarmingly, one in 10 Gen Z

respondents, and one in 10 regional respondents, say they are living without menstrual hygiene products or using alternate materials (such as toilet paper) (10%).

“An Australian charity recently shared that a packet of pads in Katherine in the NT was going for \$25 a packet. I don't know about you, but most people I know use two packets of pads each period cycle, and \$50 per period is just frankly unaffordable.” – Plan International Australia Youth Activist Georgia



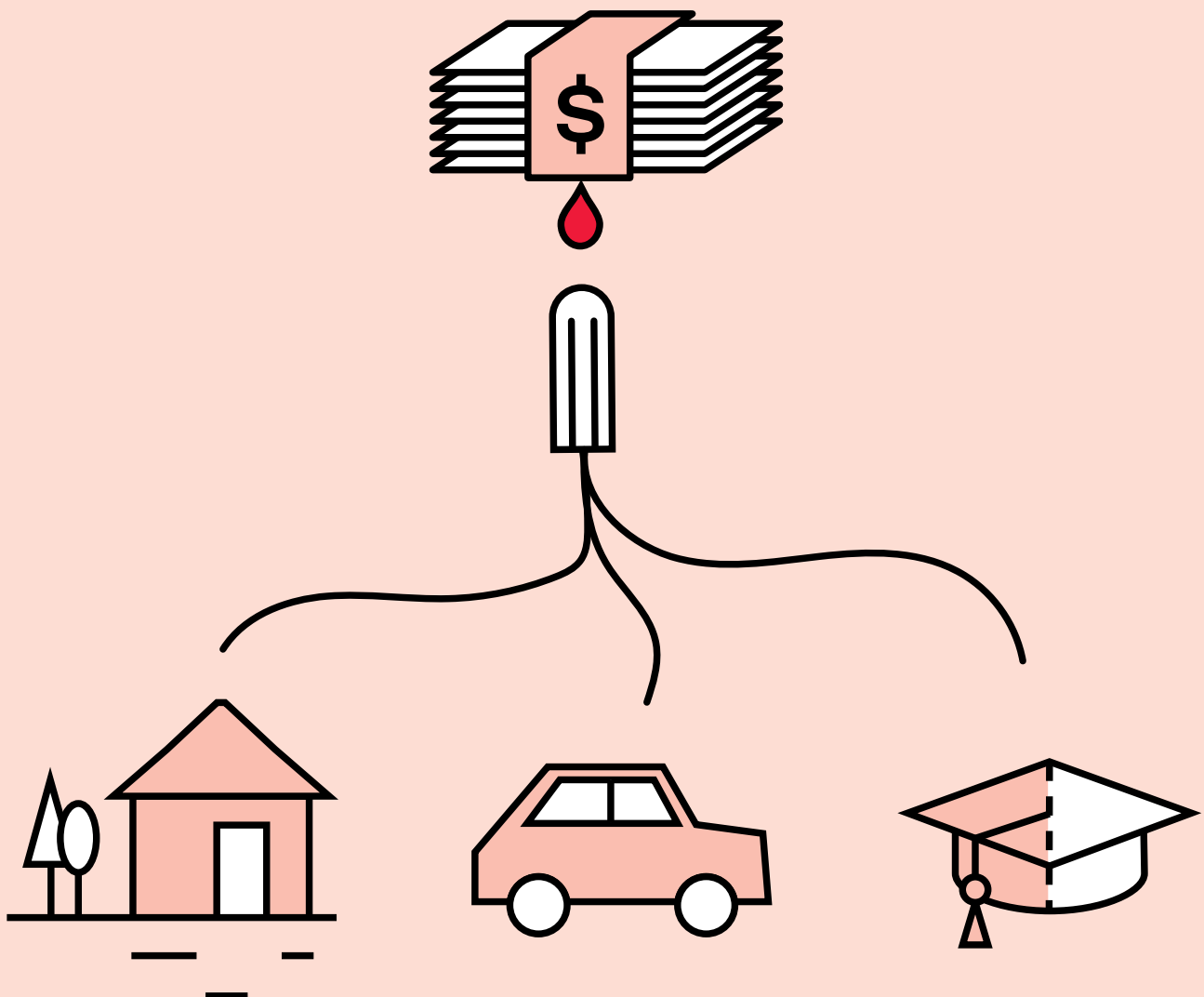
\$10,000

Every month hundreds of millions of girls and women menstruate around the world. In Australia, it is estimated that on average, a person who menstruates will spend \$10,000 in their lifetime on period products such as pads and tampons – not including pain management.

If period products were free, this could give a young woman the ability to pay for:

- A home deposit for a \$500,000 property, for a young person taking advantage of a government first home buyer scheme²
- A safe, second-hand car³
- Half of the average HECS debt

“The \$10,000 figure scares me. As someone who's currently unemployed due to my disability, I don't have \$10,000 across my lifetime just to spare.” – Plan International Australia Youth Activist Rhiannon



While we welcome the significant progress that has been made by state governments around Australia to make period products free in all state schools, we call on the Australian Government to follow in the footsteps of Scotland and make period products free for all via a Periods Products Act, that would distribute products to councils and local authorities who could provide free products to anyone who needs them.



Plan International Youth Activists 2023.



Image: Sourced from Unsplash

2. Difficulty or inability to pay for period pain management or treatments:

More than half of Gen Z and Millennial women are finding it more difficult to pay for menstrual pain management medication/treatment than previously (53%). Gen Z and those with lower household incomes are finding it much tougher.

Young people told us this is having a significant impact on their health and wellbeing: some foregoing GP appointments for sexual and reproductive health issues due to the cost; and others noting increased physical pain and poor mental health due to lack of pain medication and treatment.

Of those who are finding it more difficult to pay for menstrual pain management medication/treatment than previously, the main ways to cope with this are: buying a cheaper brand of menstrual pain management medication/treatment (38%), buying a cheaper type of menstrual pain management medication/treatment (33%), and living

without menstrual pain management medication/treatment (30%).

“I had someone reach out to me and in particular with the increasing cost of living they were saying that they're menstrual pain management costs them so much as well as the IUD for their period management.” Plan International Australia Youth Activist Angelina.

“A family member of mine has really, really bad period pains to the point where sometimes she has to miss out on school. And there's no accommodation for that. It's really hard for her to go up to a teacher and say: ‘I missed class because of period pain’. It's not normalised, and the impact it has on you isn't recognised enough.”
- Plan International Australia Youth Activist 2023.

Our YAS also noted that migrants and CALD communities faced additional barriers to managing their periods safely, affordably and without shame.

Worryingly, young people – particularly students - from these communities highlighted in our focus group research that a lack of access to free healthcare, coupled with cost of living pressures, meant they were unable to afford to see a doctor to treat endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome or other sexual and reproductive health concern.

“Moving to Australia and being a migrant, you don't actually have the same accessibility to insurance. So I didn't have Medicare for the first couple of years I was here. And so if I had to get a blood test or something, that would cost me exponentially more than anyone else who lived in Australia. A lot of people experiencing endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome need to see doctors regularly, and without Medicare, that's a debilitating cost to endure. That has a great impact on mental health as well, not being able to afford that sort of care.” - Plan International Australia Youth Activist Niranjana.

Young people from diverse cultural backgrounds also flagged the additional layers of cultural stigma they faced around using different types of periods products such as tampons, and not being able to ask family for support in purchasing these products.

“Growing up I wasn't taught how to use tampons, and so I think there's another element of, if I need period products and I'm going to be offered them by my friends or from somewhere else, if it's a tampon, I might not be able to use them, which in itself is quite a distressing situation.” Plan International Australia Youth Activist Angelina.

“Within migrant communities especially, there's a lot of stigma around menstruation to the point where it's kind of taboo to ask about it, sometimes even to other women. It's like you're hiding something really bad. But in

reality, it really isn't. And for me that meant that I was really scared of using things like tampons or menstrual cups, and I didn't know that I could use them because I was always told that it wasn't right.” Plan International Australia Youth Activist 2023.

“

Moving to Australia and being a migrant, you don't actually have the same accessibility to insurance. So I didn't have Medicare for the first couple of years I was here. And so if I had to get a blood test or something, that would cost me exponentially more than anyone else who lived in Australia...”

**Plan International Australia
Youth Activist Niranjana.**



3. The significant impacts that heightened period poverty is having on mental health and wellbeing; sexual relationships; education; and employment

When asked in which ways difficulties paying for menstrual hygiene medication and/or menstrual pain management medication were having an impact on other areas of their life, respondents said the main impact was on mental health and well-being (37%). This was particularly an issue for those outside of the capital cities (48%), those not working (45%), those renting (46%), those on household incomes under \$50K (47%), and those living with a disability (46%).

More than 1 in 4 (26%) of Gen Z respondents said that the difficulties they now experienced in paying for period products and period pain management had impacted on their sexual relationships. 16% of Gen Z people who menstruate said it was impacting their education and 16% said it impacted their workplace participation.

Our youth activists spoke about the ways in which period stigma contributes to young people's mental health, and how this could be exacerbated by the cost of living.

“Over the last few years in particular, I have really tried hard to destigmatise periods for myself, but there are always those elements of ‘ohh if I’m not changing my period products enough, will I smell? Will there be leakages? That’s going on the back of your mind. Having those like subliminal thoughts really does impact you over the course of the day. If your period lasts longer than a week, that is a quite a long

amount of time to be worrying about something in the back of your mind, which you wouldn't have to worry about if you had adequate access to menstrual products – or if you did not have a uterus.” – Plan International Youth Activist Angelina.

Period poverty and stigma amongst gender diverse people

Our YAS spoke strongly about the need for menstrual products to be for people of all gender identities who menstruate, and how LGBTIQ+ people may experience additional barriers to accessing menstrual health products, with negative impacts on their mental health.

“If free menstrual products are provided, it’s often only in women’s bathrooms. It’s an awful situation to put a lot of gender diverse people in and it should really be an issue for everyone and should be provided in all bathrooms. And so we need to talk about all people who menstruate, not just women.”
– Plan International Australia youth activist Angelina.

“It is quite dysphoric for gender diverse people to go through periods and the affordability and accessibility of period products definitely has a compounding effect on mental health.”
– Plan International Australia youth activist Niranjana.

SPOTLIGHT ON FIRST NATIONS' EXPERIENCE

- Cost, Infrastructure and Cultural Safety

For First Nations young women, girls and gender diverse young people living in remote communities, the costs of menstrual health products are significantly higher than elsewhere. A packet of pads is reported to cost on average \$10-15⁵, and national charity Share the Dignity reports that remoteness can increase the cost of menstrual health products by 100%⁶. There is also limited access to pain relief⁷, and underwear and reusable menstrual products are often either not available, or also very expensive⁸.

Although there is little documented evidence of costs of menstrual health products in remote communities in 2023, it is safe to assume that inflation and the cost-of-living crisis has further compounded affordability issues. However, for First Nations people who menstruate, the cost-of-living crisis is amplified by more systemic barriers that impact the ability to access menstrual health products and pain management.

Lack of sufficient access to working taps, toilets, showers and bathrooms – all things that are essential to good menstrual health management – is also a critical issue facing First Nations people who menstruate in remote communities. A lack of investment in housing means overcrowding, which not only means a lack of privacy, but it also places strain on hardware such as taps, showers and toilets – meaning that they break down quickly, and lack of services for remote communities' delay repairs substantially⁹. There is also a lack of access to appropriate laundry facilities, and combined with the cost of washing supplies, it is difficult to wash underwear¹⁰.

There is also a lack of appropriate and women/gender diverse friendly bathrooms in schools. It is reported that First Nations girls may miss school when on their periods, as they feel more comfortable changing their pads or tampons at home¹¹, or they may miss

school due to embarrassment at having to use unhygienic alternatives because menstrual hygiene products are unaffordable¹².

A lack of culturally safe menstrual health education is also a key gap. Cultural taboos and stigma around periods, caused and perpetuated by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, often mean that First Nations people who menstruate experience shame when managing their periods. First Nations girls and young women often do not feel comfortable buying menstrual products if a male relative is working at the one community store, and shame can prevent culturally safe discussion of periods and menstruation. Decolonising attitudes towards periods and cultural safe menstrual health education that is designed and led by First Nations people is a key part of achieving period equity.

How are organisations responding?

Aboriginal organisations are leading the way in improving access to menstrual health programs and providing culturally safe education for First Nations young people. Happy Box, a non-profit organisation led by Wiradjuri-Yuwaalaraay woman Marley Morgan, provides toiletries and sanitary items to First Nations women in remote communities¹³.

The Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service Mission has developed a Menstrual Health Management booklet, supporting communities, teachers and health services to understand the barriers for First Nations girls for good menstrual health management, and how to create and support girl-friendly schools and bathrooms¹⁴.

Access to menstrual products is also being supported by non-Indigenous organisations such as Share the Dignity, whose Indigenous Menstrual Health Program delivers menstrual health products to remote communities¹⁵. They recently partnered with the Royal Flying

Doctor Service in the Northern Territory to use existing flight routes and outreach health clinics to help distribute menstrual products¹⁶.

Recommendation:

1. For First Nations girls, young women and gender diverse young people, providing free or subsidised menstrual products is critical, but more systemic challenges need to be addressed, including lack of access to WASH and supporting menstrual health programs that are led and designed by First Nations community organisations.



Image: Sourced from Unsplash

RECOMMENDATIONS

Plan International Australia, together with the 10 youth activists who have contributed to this research, are calling for the following:

1. Funding to provide free menstrual health

products in all public bathrooms: it's a requirement that public bathrooms provide toilet paper and hand soap, but why not menstrual health products? When over half the population require them, they are as critical as toilet paper and should be treated in the same way.

2. Subsidies for those doing it the toughest:

menstrual products should be subsidised for those from low SES background and struggling the most with rising cost of living.

3. Information in health clinics: health clinics should be able to provide patients with information about where to access free menstrual products, so people who menstruate always know where they can go if they need.

4. Greater, and earlier education about

periods in schools. Addressing period shame and stigma helps address period poverty. Not having access to period products or suffering anxiety about leakage and bleeding can lead to period shame – which in turn can have a significant impact on a girls' wellbeing and educational opportunities.

Stand in solidarity with young people around the world experiencing profound period poverty – purchase a PIA dignity kit now and help end period poverty!

Plan International Australia is currently distributing dignity kits to communities in need all around the world. A Dignity Kit has all of the essentials people who menstruate need to manage their periods during a crises, from the global hunger crisis, to conflict settings and climate disasters. The kit includes menstrual pads, body soap, washing soap for clothes, toothbrushes, shampoo and toilet paper. You can pay it forward and purchase a dignity kit, which will [help a girl manage her period, here.](#)

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/2022/05/27/cost-living-12-british-women-are-affected-period-poverty>
2. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-01/labor-affordable-housing-shared-equity-scheme-campaign/101028354>
3. <https://www.racv.com.au/royalauto/transport/reviews/safest-used-cars-under-10k.html>
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51629880>
5. Indigenous girls in remote areas skip school because they lack pads and tampons: <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-girls-missing-school-during-their-periods-the-state-of-hygiene-in-remote-australia-79348>
6. <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/end-period-poverty/indigenous-menstrual-health>
7. <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/end-period-poverty/indigenous-menstrual-health>
8. Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service mission – Menstrual Health Management booklet: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/50061cbb84ae216bb5cb9339/t/580d7649ebbd1a2239a1a6ee/1477272727211/MHM_brochure_e-version.pdf
9. <https://stories.uq.edu.au/news/2022/how-housing-affects-health-on-remote-Country/index.html>
10. Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service mission – Menstrual Health Management booklet: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/50061cbb84ae216bb5cb9339/t/580d7649ebbd1a2239a1a6ee/1477272727211/MHM_brochure_e-version.pdf
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12. <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/end-period-poverty/indigenous-menstrual-health>
13. Happy Boxes expansion brings sanitary products to women in remote communities: <https://nit.com.au/21-04-2022/2982/happy-boxes-expansion-brings-sanitary-products-to-women-in-remote-communities>
14. Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service mission – Menstrual Health Management booklet: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/50061cbb84ae216bb5cb9339/t/580d7649ebbd1a2239a1a6ee/1477272727211/MHM_brochure_e-version.pdf
15. <https://junkee.com/period-indigenous-remote/331649>
16. 'Dignity Drive' hits the skies for remote NT communities: <https://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/sant/news/dignity-drive>



The charity for
girls' equality

TOWARDS A BETTER TOMORROW

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