

CHANGES, CHALLENGES, AND CHAMPIONING JUSTICE • A STUDY OF UK YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF PERIOD MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Written by:

Sarah Dickins,
*Feminist Data Specialist, Restless
Development Youth Researcher*

Lily Hallam,
*Restless Development
Youth Researcher*

Samantha Streibl,
*SRHR and Women's Rights
Specialist, Restless Development
Youth Researcher*

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed multiple significant and unprecedented challenges for youth-led activism, youth civil society, and social movement organising worldwide. One of the most common, yet under-studied, challenges is young people's individual and collective experiences of period (in)justice in a world that still stigmatises and invalidates our needs.

Periods During a Pandemic was a youth-led research project funded by Restless Development UK, as part of their 2020 Build Back Better Young Leaders Programme. The programme aimed to explore how COVID-19 impacted young people aged 18-35 in the UK and identify powerful areas of youth-led organising for a more just post-pandemic world through this youth-led research.

This research amplified the menstrual health experiences of some 615 young people from across the UK during the pandemic. These young people responded to a short, anonymous survey disseminated amongst youth civil society on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, as well as via youth rights networks by email, from September to December 2020. The final report was analysed, written and produced by an entirely youth-led civil society team and published by Restless Development in April 2021.

The study represents the first and largest research project of its kind in the UK: not only focusing on young adult menstruators' otherwise overlooked experiences of menstruation during the pandemic, but also as the only such project designed, developed, and delivered by a wholly youth team as an example itself of youth civil society organising.





Challenges and Changes: Managing Period (In)Justice In Lockdown

One of the primary findings from this study was the significant, and often challenging, changes that both young individuals and youth civil society face in relation to menstrual health management and justice in the UK. These included varied new symptoms, reduced resources, lack of professional medical care, or government policies to support young menstruators and youth period campaigns.

Nearly 60 per cent of respondents experienced significant and varied changes to their periods, with the most common changes being longer (30 per cent), more painful (14 per cent) and heavier (12 per cent) bleeding. A small number of respondents even noted that their period symptoms had changed after having contracted COVID-19.

These additional, often complex, symptoms were aggravated by the lack of wider support, resources, and policy serving both individuals and youth communities. Nearly a third of respondents (29 per cent) said that they had less or much less access to menstrual resources in comparison to their pre-pandemic experiences. Worryingly, this was even more pronounced for young people further marginalised due to intersecting factors, such as race or socio-economic status, with 37 per cent of respondents from Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds saying they had less or much less access to period resources. Moreover, nearly half (45 per cent) of Black, Asian, mixed and other minority ethnic respondents said that they changed one or more key products because their usual brands were unavailable, unaffordable or inaccessible. This compared to around a third (30 per cent) for their white counterparts.

Also, young people and youth-based movements have found it more difficult to organise collectively during the pandemic. Even well-established menstrual health organisations, such as Bloody Good Period and the Red Box Project, who previously thrived on the draw of collaborating and congregating in groups of like-minded people, risk losing their people power.

Volunteering, a foundational pillar for many youth-based period justice organisations and initiatives, became impossible almost overnight. Online volunteering has been able to somewhat respond to the needs of these youth civil society organisations. However, this approach arguably further amplifies societal inequalities. Online volunteering relies on the organisers having the skills and capacity to facilitate digital organising, and the volunteers having the equipment, bandwidth, and knowledge to participate and contribute meaningfully.

“Our youth-led research project not only provides unique insight into the experiences of often overlooked demographics in the UK, but also demonstrates how youth-led research can contribute to recovery and rebuilding initiatives, both in the UK and globally.”



“Our report recommends that young menstruators and communities should be involved throughout menstrual healthcare planning to ensure that healthcare professionals respond appropriately to young people’s varied needs and experiences, creating safe environments where young menstruators feel heard, supported and can access clear information and advice.”

Resilience and Rebuilding: Learning from Young People and Youth Movements

Despite these challenges, our research also showed high levels of resilience, creativity, and adaptation from young people and youth civil society in the face of lockdown. Many respondents shared examples of their new coping mechanisms, from adjusting their working from home behaviours to meet their menstrual needs, to transitioning to reusable period products such as washable underwear and menstrual cups.

Of the 30 per cent of respondents who changed one or more key period products during the lockdown in 2020, more than half (52 per cent) did so partly or entirely because they wanted to try more environmentally-friendly methods of menstrual management. A small but notable sub-section of young people had also begun to use (or even create their own) digital cycle tracking apps, so they could better anticipate and advocate for their needs throughout the month. In this sense, the research showcased young people’s efforts to respond to current period challenges and rebuild behaviours in pursuit of a more sustainable and gender-equal world.

In terms of collective youth organising, the research project similarly demonstrated young people’s adaptability and responsiveness to the challenges of the pandemic. The study itself was designed as an act of youth campaigning in response to the menstrual health injustices of the research team and our communities. The study became both a form of (self-)affirmation by amplifying the voices of young menstruators, and a way of calling on policymakers, healthcare providers and youth civil society to take steps towards a just future for all menstruators, everywhere. The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), for example, used this study to help explore the impact that menstrual health has on education and how young activists are transforming menstrual health education, as part of their advocacy around Menstrual Hygiene Day 2021.

As youth-led menstrual movements were forced to change their modes of working, innovation led to more cost-, time- and labour-efficient resourcing. Many organisations have experienced a significant and sudden shift in fundraising throughout 2020 to COVID-related funding being prioritised, for example, as donors have focused their attention on supporting COVID relief efforts, with the unique needs and experiences of young menstruators in the UK overlooked. Continuing into 2021, this has had two primary influences on menstrual justice movements.



While many organisations adapted their focus to COVID-related programming and designing new projects responding to new needs caused by the pandemic, it has also offered youth civil society an opportunity to reflect on the need for higher amounts of unrestricted funding. In turning greater attention to public fundraising, youth-focused organisations may be better able to use their funding for the greatest need at the time, even if the significant extra effort involved in public fundraising can make this approach prohibitive to volunteer-led youth movements.

Perhaps the most crucial shift, however, was the innovation seen in engaging service users and campaigners on digital platforms. This has been particularly evident in UK organisations' increased delivery of online Comprehensive Sexuality Education (including menstrual education), rights awareness and advocacy, and signposting services. The power of youth-led digital campaigns has also gained new visibility in 2021, with Amika George becoming the youngest recipient of the Member of the British Empire (MBE) award for her online period poverty campaigns. She has subsequently used this platform to reaffirm the importance of youth civil society activism for period justice on social media.

Using Our Voices: Recommendations for Youth Civil Society and Partners

“Ultimately, youth civil society needs many more platforms to empower themselves, advocate for their needs, and create unique and genuinely youth-led initiatives for young menstruators in these unprecedented times.”

Our youth-led research project not only provides unique insight into the experiences of often overlooked demographics in the UK, but also demonstrates how youth-led research can contribute to recovery and rebuilding initiatives, both in the UK and globally.

As part of this research report, we concluded with the following core recommendations to youth civil society and their healthcare, policymaker and other partners to ensure that all young people and communities can access the menstrual health resources they need. As demonstrated by the inequalities revealed in this study, we need much more extensive research on the unique, disproportionate challenges experienced by young Black, Asian, Mixed and other minority ethnic menstruators to truly address menstrual injustice.

Our report also recommends that young menstruators and communities should be involved throughout menstrual healthcare planning to ensure that healthcare professionals respond appropriately to young people's varied needs and experiences, creating safe environments where young menstruators feel heard, supported and can access clear information and advice.

“The participatory methodology used in this study granted our research team the space to create an open dialogue on personal challenges and shared experiences.”

Finally, employers should make efforts to support the needs of their menstruating staff, particularly in relation to flexible and remote working policies.

Youth-led period justice doesn't stop here. The participatory methodology used in this study granted our research team the space to create an open dialogue on personal challenges and shared experiences. This starting point allowed us to focus on intersectional realities, validating the complex and varied impact COVID-19 has had on menstrual health management: individually, collectively and societally. Ultimately, youth civil society needs many more platforms like this to empower themselves, advocate for their needs, and create unique and genuinely youth-led initiatives for young menstruators in these unprecedented times.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.

