



# Cysters – Womens Support and Awareness Group



## *Our Cysters Project*

[www.cysters.org](http://www.cysters.org)

witter: @cystersgroup



# Who are we?

- ▶ Cysters – Women's Support and Awareness Group is a grassroots charity dedicated to improving the health, educational, human welfare, and opportunities for women living and affected with reproductive health and gynaecological problems.
- ▶ We recognise that reproductive health, chronic illness, and the social attitude to women's health can be an emotional strain; we want to support you every step of the way.
- ▶ Cysters aim to reduce the cultural barriers, tackle exclusion issues and ensure equality for all irrespective of their access to information, protects or health awareness. We work within marginalised communities, those living under the poverty line, BAME and LGBTQ communities.
- ▶ We are culturally sensitive and inclusive of all.



# Projects we run

- ▶ Cysters Smear – Awareness Events on Cervical Screening in order to increase the uptake within BAME communities
- ▶ Cysters Chat – Support Group meetings across Bham on Reproductive health issues, from PCOS, Endometriosis, Fibroids to Gynae Cancers and Fertility issues
- ▶ Workshops on specific reproductive health issues
- ▶ Our Cysters Project – Tackling Period Poverty
- ▶ Online support groups
- ▶ Research projects – on various womens health issues, for example PCOS studies with University of Birmingham



# The project

- ▶ “*Our Cysters*” – To tackle period poverty in Birmingham, by asking for donations of menstrual products items and providing those to those who need them.
- ▶ We believe that individuals who menstruate deserve a dignity period, and all these individuals are “*Our Cysters*.”
- ▶ We use this as an opportunity to go into schools and other organisations too hold workshops on menstrual wellbeing and reproductive health.



# Period poverty

- ▶ It is hard to imagine that in that individuals are missing school, university or work using old clothes or tissues to replicate a disposable sanitary towel. A number of people are living below the poverty line.
- ▶ It has been reported by teachers and in the media that girls are getting sanitary towels from their teachers at school as well as missing time off school. If each student misses a minimum of 5 days off school, that would amount to 60 days per year. The lack of accessible and affordable menstrual products keeps them at a disadvantage in terms of education, preventing their mobility and productivity.
- ▶ Conversely this problem is not limited to those from a low-income background. This is a massive, global and societal issue. It can affect all individuals of all stages of their lives, in poor communities, which makes this cause all the more important.
- ▶ This also includes individuals who are homeless.
- ▶ Contributing factors include, the expense of commercial menstrual pads, lack of access to pain relief, leakage from poor quality materials, limited education about menstruation, limited access for support during this time, fear caused by myths, embarrassment and low self-esteem.





# Our goal

- ▶ Every female deserves access to safe and hygienic menstrual products. Our goal is to help these individuals reclaim the dignity that poverty denies them. We hope by this small gesture that it is enable individuals too to make a lasting and positive impact on the communities by giving back to the community at a later stage.
- ▶ From an educational perspective, it would also mean that on average a single girl who would have ordinarily missed 5 days per month (60 days per year) will have a better education, possibly leading to better grades and later higher wages.
- ▶ This knowledge and understating of the effects of menstrual health, dignity and impact will also be passed on their community and children.



# Cysters Solution

- ▶ We will donate menstrual items etc. to those who need them, splitting them between charities working with homeless women and the schools within the Handsworth School of association – and those who ask us for products
- ▶ We will also look to provide reusable menstrual pads and cups which are a sustainable resource, allowing girls to wash and re-use them rather than having to buy non-reusable sanitary pads every month.
- ▶ However we recognise that this will not be appropriate for women who are homeless.
- ▶ Reusable products are inexpensive and environmentally friendly. The social benefit of the implementation of this concept can greatly mitigate the disadvantages many disempowered girls endure during their process of maturing.
- ▶ It will provide a platform to teach about reproductive, menstrual and gynaecological health, when teaching girls about how use re-usable sanitary towels and cups.
- ▶ We aim to distribute the products, and then go into the schools and offer workshops around reproductive and menstrual wellbeing.
- ▶ We will also focus on practical strategies for coping with monthly periods. Looking at ways to keep healthy during menstruation and how they acquire, use and dispose of blood-absorbing materials.



# What have we learnt?

- Interestingly we held a focus group with BAME women on their thoughts around period poverty, a number of women reported that as children they had to use tissues etc in place of menstrual products, but this wasn't seen as poverty but rather that menstrual products weren't important in the home compared with other expenses. It was said in the focus group, "buying dad the good meat for the week was more essential than pads."
- We feel that these are indicators that womens menstrual is traditional seen as unimportant compared to the needs of the males within the family. These are based on cultural attitudes towards menstruation general within BAME communities.
- Some cultures are taught from an early age that menstruation is dirty, and blood spoils food. Our founder Neelam, was recently featured on the BBC about her experiences, and being told to stay away from the Kitchen when on a menstrual cycle. Cysters aim to tackle these cultural myths and teach the correct information to the community in a cultural sensitive way.
- There are religious believes around the purity of womens during a menstrual cycle, so again conversations around this can be often taboo and embarrassing for some women. Some women report being afraid of reaching out if facing poverty as it is an area that they are encouraged not to speak about.
- The conversations around period poverty and menstrual health is much more than the issues of poverty, there is an element of cultural patriarchy and barriers.





# Environment



The average disposable towel takes 5000 years to biodegrade.

Teaching females at a younger age about the options of reusable and environmentally friendly menstrual items will affect lead to an overall reduction of waste.

We know that flushing menstrual items down the toilet is still a problem, leading to the pollution of beaches and oceans, so this alterative may alleviate this.



# Who needs it?


Although we are aware of the impact of not having menstrual products towels on schoolgirls. Cysters have extended our project across all sectors, low income families and homeless women.

Long term we want to have a “bank” of menstrual items, alongside current provisions such as food banks.

We aim to have a wellbeing hub, with a food/menstrual product bank, as well as access to workshops and regular support group services on reproductive and mental health. We also want to use this time to tackle some of the cultural issues around reproductive wellbeing and menstrual health.



# How has Cysters achieved this?

- ▶ By engaging with local business/organisations and asking them to collect a box of monthly donations, that we can collect. The items are then given direct to either the schools or organisations working directly with homeless individuals.
  - ▶ We have been asked to speak at various networking events about the need to support grassroots community projects such as Cysters.
  - ▶ Created an Amazon “Wishlist” of items that we have asked people to purchased on our behalf. It includes items such as wipes, menstrual products and underwear.
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# What have we done

- ▶ We have engaged with Handsworth Association of Schools, we drop products at their Hub and Schools collect what they require.
- ▶ We have collaborated with Chambers Of Commerce who have held period poverty donation drives for us, it has also opened up meetings and conversations on period poverty within cooperate organisations.
- ▶ Working with corporate organisations to utilise their CSR policies to collect products for us
- ▶ Galvanised the community by working with various sectors.
- ▶ Working with local Temples and Gurdwaras as a donation station, and to have a box of products in the temple for the community. Such as the Nishkam Centre.
- ▶ Created a partnership with Sandwell & Dudley Hospital on their Period Poverty drive within the hospital
- ▶ Various donation stations



# How could the Council support us

Financially support a Project Co-ordinator to run this project on a part time basis and to deliver workshops within schools and community organisation on menstrual health.

Including grassroots organisations in conversation around menstrual and reproductive health in Birmingham, as we have a voice for marginalised and BAME communities which are often missed out when tackling sensitive topics.

Providing us with Space for us to keep donations, and office space.





# Future

- ▶ Spearheading this project as a collaborative effort of dedicated volunteers organisations and reach out across networks.
- ▶ We hope that by taking a collaborative approach we can reach more in need and share the workload of tackling period poverty in Birmingham and the west midlands.
- ▶ We have opened up conversation around other issues around menstrual health, such as heavy menstrual bleeding, early indicators of reproductive health issues such as endometriosis, fibroids or pcos.