

community

CAMPAIGNERS

Newsletter



Community Campaigners are supporters of ActionAid who volunteer some of their spare time to learn campaign skills, build their own feminist leadership and come up with creative ways to inspire people to take action. From resisting the global patriarchy to advancing systemic change – there's so many ways you can be involved with what they do, and writing is just one of them.

Community Campaigners share their individual opinions in this newsletter. These are not reflective of the opinions or official stance of ActionAid as a whole.

Hello I'm Esme, Community Organising Specialist at ActionAid UK. For nearly two years, I've overseen our amazing Community Campaigner Network. We continuously champion Feminist Behaviours, always questioning our approach, sharing power, dismantling biases, and valuing self and community care. Through every project, big or small, we're growing our collective strength.

I have the pleasure of introducing this edition of our Summer Newsletter written by some of our incredible Community Campaigners!

Our newsletter provides a space where we can delve into important issues and in this edition, we will be sharing some personal thoughts of members of our newsletter team from breaking the period taboo to women's entry into the workplace, and the complexities of feminism.

Sharvari opens the discussion with her activities from World Menstrual Hygiene Day, addressing the stigma surrounding periods and the need for open conversations to tackle period poverty.

Mishita and Aroma cowrite an intriguing long read to explore the concerning rise of misogynistic online communities and the misconceptions surrounding feminism. Lastly, Marietta provides her opinions on the historical context of women in the workplace and its impact on mental health.

Finally, I conclude the newsletter by sharing how our network is expanding, and why we're setting the foundation to establish local groups in regions across the UK. While this idea has taken time, with the upcoming global climate justice campaign, we'll have a blueprint to begin. Interested? Read on to find out how you can be a part of it.

Esme

ActionAid UK

Changing the world

SOLIDARITY

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“ Hi, I’m Sharvari (she/her) and I joined ActionAid because I could see that this was an organisation that puts girls and women first. I wanted to be part of it, to make the kind of change that I want to see in the world and that I know girls and women deserve.



‘World Menstrual Hygiene Day’ – Sharvari

Ironically as I sit here writing this, I’m actually on my period and, quite appropriately, I am experiencing quite the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. Having not had a period for 18 months, I’ve been reflecting a lot on what my period means to me, the feelings I associate with it and how these have changed. While before I was almost indifferent to my period; yes, I found it annoying while I had it but the rest of the month, I didn’t really give it a second thought.

Once I lost it, however, I felt deeply sad. It felt like I’d lost something very sacred. While I know that being a woman isn’t defined by having a period, it still felt like I’d lost my womanhood. When I got it back, I felt deeply grateful. Not just for the return for something that I’ve now come to appreciate is so important to me, but also because of how easy it is for me to have my period with dignity. It is incredibly normal to have a period in my immediate family and the circles of people I surround myself with. As it should be. But I know that so many people who menstruate are not afforded the same luxury, including in the UK. Getting my period back also made me realise that, for me, my period is a symbol of growth and good health but for many a period is thought to be “dirty” and is something to be ashamed about.

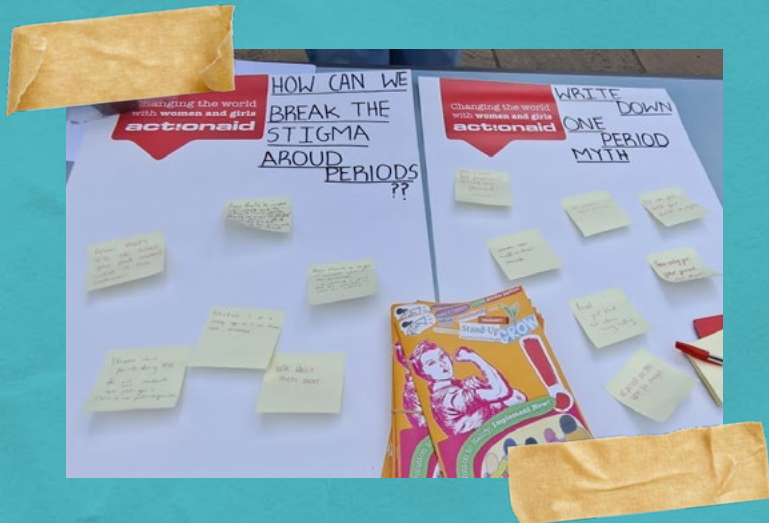
There is a deep-rooted stigma around menstruation in many cultures. This has meant that many are unable to access menstrual hygiene products. These products should not be viewed as a luxury. While the UK has scrapped the tampon tax meaning that in the UK sanitary products will not be charged VAT, many places around the world continue to charge VAT for these products. They are also incredibly expensive, especially for those living in poverty which perpetuates period poverty across the globe.

As with tackling most complex issues, it starts with a conversation in my opinion. So, the idea for the campaign for World Menstrual Hygiene Day began...

To celebrate the day, I was going to talk to a bunch of strangers about periods to start to chip away at the stigma. I figured if we could bring menstruation into regular discourse, we can move past the taboo and eventually celebrate this part of us.

“We can create a whole person just within our body. Blood is the true gift we hold. No shame, but beauty in the struggle” quote from a passerby at a stall I ran at my university.

And I wasn’t the only one who thought this. When we asked people what they thought could break the stigma, so many people said “Talk about it. Talk about it with friends, Talk about it with family. Talk about it with your sons, your fathers, your boyfriends, and your partners.” This last one fazed me. I found it incredibly challenging, at the beginning, to reach out to men passing by our stall, which goes to show just how potent the stigma really is.



The second most popular idea was better sex education. Boys are often separated from girls during sex-ed while girls receive “the talk” which is frankly ridiculous. Why should boys be exempt when it is absolutely guaranteed that they will encounter a menstruating person at some point in their lives?

These separate sex classes are also incredibly damaging for trans people as they can force them to misgender themselves in order to fit in.

Other ideas included: having free period product dispensaries in all toilets, keeping period products at a consistent, affordable price, and doing more research into the effects of periods on health. Although these would help, they would not tackle the root of the issue, as this is a systemic issue, which can only be dealt with through better education and more conversations.

We also asked people to jot down any period myths they’ve heard and there are some seriously weird ones.... I hope you’re ready for a good laugh!

ActionAid is running an incredible campaign [#Shareabetterperiod](#) to combat period poverty.

Your money will go towards teaching people how to make reusable pads, facilitating workshops, advocate for their rights and providing menstrual hygiene kits during humanitarian crises. What’s stopping you - go and donate!

Period Myths...

1. Period products are attached to the body and not the underwear
2. Period blood is like pee; you can just hold it in
3. “You’re in a mood because you’re on your period”
4. Everyone’s periods are the same
5. “Always” is the best pad brand
6. “Only those five days are an emotional rollercoaster - it’s the whole damn month”
7. You only lose 1tbsp of blood
8. Women only get their period at a full moon



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My name is Aroma (she/they) and I joined ActionAid to spur discussion on women’s development and representation in social action and politics. I want to change narratives around the roles we play societally and take this opportunity to help collate experiences to inform myself and others on different trends in feminism and its intersectionality.



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Hi! I’m Mishita (she/her) and I joined ActionAid because it felt like an opportunity to make an impact in the lives of countless women, especially those under-represented, that I grew up with. I wanted to go beyond just being aware of different issues and make active efforts, no matter how small, to better those conditions.

I no longer identify as a feminist: the growing backlash and portrayal of feminism in media

– Mishita and Aroma

Around the 1990s, university student Alana started a blog called “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project” for a community she termed “INVCELS” (incels), who, like her, had been unlucky in the pursuit of love. Nearly two decades later, it has transformed into a nasty misogynistic online community, primarily consisting of men, that positions women as the root of all societal problems. Men in these groups have found a more mainstream appeal in the “palatable” form of alpha-male podcasts that spew the same hateful rhetoric but try to validate it using biological essentialism. .

Biological Essentialism is the practice of stereotyping an entire community to a set of traits that are attributed to their biology rather than understanding the role of societal conditioning in a person’s behaviour. For example, a recurring statement made by these podcasts is that “Men always look for multiple partners; it is in their (biological) nature to cheat.” In addition to the fact that such blanket statements possess no scientific basis and attempt to generalise behavior for an enormous (and diverse) group of individuals, it is a dangerous line of reasoning since the same “biological urge” can be used to justify cases of rape or sexual assault.

The podcasters also explicitly oppose feminism, stating it to be the reason for the “breakdown of the family unit” and hold the “modern woman” responsible for society’s decay since she threatens the idea of the traditional household and, as a result, the traditional man. Additionally, feminism is (incorrectly) perceived to be a movement aimed at oppressing men or, colloquially, “man-hating,” which further seeks to distance young men from a movement intended to help us all.

Defining “masculinity”

One of the biggest goals of such podcasts is to rejuvenate the notion of masculinity. But what podcasters really refer to is ‘toxic masculinity,’ characterised by traits such as aggressiveness, suppression of emotions, and consistent efforts to assert power. Such traits are evidence of the affinity towards the ‘alpha, beta’ hierarchy, which has been debunked yet is still the nexus around which men are urged to model their behaviour. Moreover, masculinity itself is no rigid construct and can be understood as a set of behaviours exhibited by anyone identifying as a man. When there are different kinds of men, can there be one masculinity whose defining characteristic is simply being masculine?

Evidently, what is disguised as attempts at “helping young men” or “establishing masculinity” are actually just ways of reinforcing archaic gender roles. They establish motherhood and caretaking as the sole objectives in a woman’s life whilst actively shaming and discouraging someone from venturing into alternate avenues. your honest feedback to those discussions and to your manager, seek mentors in other women in the organisation, actively seek areas and opportunities for professional growth and, of course, always remember to give back and support the other women, younger or older, in your organisation and community to continue the progress

To help... or simply make profit?

The podcasts advocate for damaging behaviours (poorly attempting to disguise it as life advice instead) that harm not only women whose autonomy is viewed as a threat to society but also non-binary, trans, and other identities that exist outside of the straight cis white heteronormative societal norm. Such ideologies also hurt men, who are told to suppress their emotions and revel in a superficial camaraderie based on the shared goal of manifesting a debunked ideology.

By conjuring the demise of the traditional man – creating a problem, they also benefit from selling the solution, aka their self-help guides. There seems to be no better scapegoat for men’s problems than feminism and women. And if they can make money doing it, why not?

One of the biggest sources of income for podcasters comes from selling courses that are advertised as the “ultimate guides” to making money or becoming successful. And when the idea of success itself is defined by the podcasters, it is evidently much easier to advertise courses that cater to the made of (not to mention incessantly reinforced) idea of success. They profit by scamming people through fearmongering about a falsely constructed problem of “feminism destroying masculinity” and then subsequently sell solutions to it.

Feminism as a caricature

Netizens who support the “modern woman bad” ideology like to fervently point towards a rise of supposed “feminazi-ism;” wherein the true meaning of feminism is lost and a more radicalized form has taken place that supports erasure of masculinity. “Centrists” like to point out that feminism has lost favour due to its branching into radical means of expression. This has made the word “feminism” into a pejorative – often mocked on the internet. The use of the label feminist has been on the decline since 2016, a study suggested – even when ideas regarding equality and equity are quite popular.

Oftentimes the nuance from the word feminism is removed to portray it in a caricature-like manner: it is common to see feminism as a prerequisite to some moral decay to a civilized society. Media plays a huge role in the unconscious bias at play when we hear the word feminist; the constant use of negative stereotypes has created connotations around the word that have led people to reject the label. Cue the “anti-social justice warrior” era of 2016, wherein anti-feminist ideas were prevalent on the internet and heavily promoted by YouTube algorithms, leading to the hysterical view of feminism we now have.

This type of content often disguises itself as humor; as street interviews, podcasts and low effort commentary channels; the comments praise women that fit their ideal and shame women who don’t.

Behind the scenes...

Everyday interactions contribute to systemic changes. These are young people who are voting for the future. Young men who are looking to find some catharsis for their declining mental health and are afraid to speak up are being fed content that finds a way to blame women for some growing moral decay. This is dangerous and it is currently happening.

A staggering decline in mental health for men in general and increasing loneliness may force them down a pipeline of content that promises them something that may seem like a solution for their problems - hyper masculinity.

An Observer investigation revealed how young men are led down that pipeline – wherein they are consuming content that talks about how men have difficulty expressing emotions that then lead to how the “modern woman” is a cause for societal moral decay - also linked to leading them to extremist political ideologies.

Let’s debate: feminism is not needed anymore

The debate around “feminism has gone too far” is deflection at best. How, you might ask? The statistics speak for themselves. The reality is, women-hating incel groups are on the rise, men still tend to be the majority perpetrators of violence and the human rights index for women in a majority of countries is still far less than ideal. In the context of UK, 99 per cent of reported rape cases DO NOT end up in conviction.

#MeToo faces immense backlash as being a product of modern feminism perpetrating “false sexual harassment cases”. Contrary to what is told to a vulnerable audience of young men who often face mental health issues, it is very rare for these cases to be false, and the burden of proof lies upon the victim in court of law - unless proven, how are women faking their stories objectively? It also undermines the stigma women regularly face for opening up about abuse.

So, am I still a feminist?

To be a feminist, you believe in equity, equality and consent.

Feminism is an ideology that believes women require equity to reach equality. Often people pose the question - “what rights do women not have?” and the answer to that is the freedom to choose, consent and practice what they want. Social attitudes towards women are bound to put them in a position wherein they follow gender roles, regardless of their opinion on them. Feminism provides access to policies and decisions embedded in law to help them practice their rights - rights that all humans have but are stripped of.

It provides a solution to a very complex problem - patriarchy. This affects both men and women. Staunch gender roles enforced by patriarchy affect men’s mental health and deny women their freedoms.

We are in this together - regardless of gender. Let us not be distracted from the pressing issues that we face.



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It's not an easy task to find a way to make an impact in this world and to find the right cause to put your efforts in. After doing my research and after years of following ActionAid's news, I knew I found a charity and cause of supporting women's rights and socioeconomic equality that really resonated with me, and I am grateful for being part of this community.

Women's entry to work and mental healthy in the 1800s

– Marietta

In the last edition of the newsletter, [I took a quick look at some reports about mental health and I offered my own opinion of what we can do to create a healthier environment in the workplace](#). Building on this, I want to share with you some pieces of UK history that I consider as underpinning attitudes to women's mental health in the workplace.

Our predecessors fought for women's current position in the workplace today and we are still working our way to an equal landscape in the workplace in matters of pay, opportunities, managerial positions, perspective and treatment. But how did women start getting into the workplace? And what was the cost of that mentally?

Looking at the 18th century in Britain, we see a lot of women working domestic jobs, as well as working in farming and other agricultural positions, women working in factories, for textiles, pottery and paper. The census of 1841 includes a lot of fallacies, including considering family members as workers, so one can imagine how tough it is to find a reliable source for the statistics of that time.

Right around that time is when male physicians are diagnosing the most cases of hysteria for women, being deemed initially as a disease of the uterus, but thereafter deemed as a nervous disorder, that “weaker nervous systems” could be affected by (Ross, 2022). At the same time, men with the same symptoms instead of hysteric are given diagnoses such as melancholia or hypochondria.

Women's position in the workplace and women's mental health only started being taken seriously in the 20th century, with a lot of women creating their own organisations and communities to support each other to ensure that their mental health was treated equally with men's.

I don't think corporations today on average have figured out how to achieve an appropriate space for people to strike a balance with their workload and demands set upon them, but significant work and progress is being made.



As we conclude this edition, I hope you've been able to reflect on how open dialogue and education can be key to breaking the taboo and silence around periods, and how advocating for equitable workspaces, and dispelling myths about feminism, can create a more inclusive and understanding society.

Actionaid International has kick started our climate justice campaign. I will be working with our Climate and Gender Justice Working Group and anyone else who is keen to get involved to raise awareness of “[How the Finance Flows](#)” - a groundbreaking report that reveals a stark reality – British banks are contributing significantly to the climate crisis by investing trillions of dollars in climate-damaging fossil fuels and industrial agriculture, the two primary drivers of climate change.

Take Action: This report forms the basis for our campaign and next year we will be gearing up for a wave of activity but in the meantime, if you haven't done so already, I urge you [to sign the petition](#) calling on banks to cease financing these harmful practices – [you can access the petition using this link](#).

This activity will allow us to trail connecting people at a constituency level to shape our long-term vision of setting up local Community Campaigner groups from 2024. While these plans have been taking some time it reminds me that change often requires patience and persistence. Or in the words of Audre Lorde:

“Revolution is not a one-time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown responses.”

The climate justice campaign is our opportunity!

Email me to get involved: esme.roslin-sprason@actionaid.org

Let us continue to support each other and work towards building a network of committed activists and a future where everyone can thrive with dignity and respect.

climate injustice

Thank you for reading!