

## Transcript

### Sheffield International Documentary Festival

*Lifting the Lid*

[MUSIC PLAYING]

#### **Chella Quint:**

I'm Chella Quint, and I'm researching the history and stigma of one of the last remaining taboos in our society.

It's something that happens naturally to over half the world's population. I'm talking about the reproductive cycle-- menstruation. Periods.

Now, before we go any further, are you sitting comfortably? Are you sure? A lot of people feel weird hearing periods talked about openly. In the past, advertisers weren't very comfortable talking about it either. I'm going to explore the history and stigma of periods by looking at the way so-called feminine hygiene products have been traditionally packaged and advertised.

Like all ads, disposable fem care product ads shared different messages at different times in history. Back in the 1920s, by marketing them as sanitary towels, companies could sell surplus bandages manufactured during World War I. Thanks to some of the earliest advertising messages, menstruation went from being thought of as a natural process to an unhygienic bleeding wound.

In the '30s and '40s, the buzzwords became "safety", "shield", "protection". Wartime words for wartime years. But protection from what exactly? Here's an ad from 1935. Look at the expression on that lady's face. She looks like she's watching a horror film. The words and the images in the ads were really scary. They served as metaphors for the social horror of getting your period and leaking through your clothes.

It's no wonder many people still use euphemisms today. Anything from the mostly harmless "time of the month" to something more ominous like, "the curse".

In the '50s, advertisers made sure that periods became totally invisible. Look at this wrapped box. It's bath salts? No, it's candy. Both guesses were wrong. Not only did you have to hide your stains, you had to hide the products advertised to hide your stains. And nobody was supposed to talk about it.

Sanitary towel and tampon company marketing departments shaped the attitudes of people who saw their ads or who used their branded school resources. As a culture, we don't really

talk about menstruation. Schools are required to teach it as part of the national science curriculum, but they only touch upon it very briefly and they don't discuss the taboos.

Recent changes to the curriculum mean that schools are being instructed to teach about the menstrual cycle without details of hormones. Things seem to be taking a backward step.

Lucy Emmerson, from the Sex Education Forum, advises on sex and relationships education, and recently campaigned for improvements to be made to reproductive health topics in the national science curriculum.

Hi, Lucy.

**Lucy Emmerson:**

Hello.

**Chella Quint:**

So what would you recommend schools do to confront the period stigma?

**Lucy Emmerson:**

My first bit of advice would be to start early enough, before children have experienced puberty and started their period. And then make sure the teaching includes boys as well as girls, and covers a lot of things about different products and changes to the body. And essentially teaches the correct names for genitalia. Because without basic body science, you've got nothing to build on.

**Chella Quint:**

People may not be used to them, but why is it important to talk about reusable menstrual cups and cloth pads?

**Lucy Emmerson:**

It saves money. It's good for the environment. It's one of the choices out there, and with any bit of sex education, it's about informing children and young people about what's out there. Letting them make choices. Giving them answers to factual questions, and talking about their feelings and views on different aspects of growing up as well.

**Chella Quint:**

So we definitely need to talk more about periods in schools. But what about today's ads and packages? Many of today's ads and packages use the same messages of shame and fear-- be

discreet. When you're talking about periods, you have to whisper. And of course, hide your blood.

Helen Griffin, at the Development Education Centre South Yorkshire, heads up the Gender Respect research project.

Hi, Helen. So what is the purpose of the project?

**Helen Griffin:**

The Gender Respect project is inspired by the One Billion Rising event. And its big aim is to challenge violence globally through challenging gender inequality, and helping children and young people in school to become aware of gender inequality issues.

**Chella Quint:**

So what have you found already?

**Helen Griffin:**

We are finding that issues, particularly around body image, are really important to children and young people. They are feeling restricted in one way or another.

**Chella Quint:**

Would you say there are unwritten rules about how boys and girls are expected to behave?

**Helen Griffin:**

Girls particularly are kind of really bound by some very strict parameters of what they should be as a girl. Society's sort of dominant view of them is sort of objectified, really. So passive. If you're not happy in your own body, which is part of you, inescapably, then that's going to affect how you see yourself as a whole person.

**Chella Quint:**

In my research, I've noticed that the language used in the ads from the past is the same as the language used in modern ads. How could this affect someone seeing those now?

**Helen Griffin:**

Basically, they're saying that there's a whole important part of their life that happens from puberty onwards every month for most girls that is something that is wrong. Something that needs to be hidden, controlled, kept a secret. And it's like, what is that saying about being a girl generally?

What our project is trying to do, sort of more broadly with gender inequality, is actually help children and young people to sort of be thinking critically about those things. Looking at how it's seen by society, and analysing those kinds of adverts. And saying, you know, giving a bit of perspective for young women.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**Chella Quint:**

Adverts don't have to control the conversation. Maybe it's time we lifted the lid on this last taboo, and talked more openly about menstruation.