



WHICH IS THE LUXURY ITEM?

Believe it or not, they both are, all thanks to the UK. *Stylist* investigates why we're

controversial taxes on sanitary products in being penalised for having periods

WORDS: LIZZIE POOK

PHOTOGRAPHY: PIXEYES

When you think of 'luxury goods' what springs to mind? An indulgent £30 lipstick? A case of vintage champagne? A 60-foot monster yacht moored in Portofino Marina (for use on the weekends when you're not kicking back at your villa in Martinique, naturally)? What is undoubtedly not so high-end, however, is the tampon rattling around at the bottom of your bag collecting fluff. Or the old packet of sanitary towels you keep squirrelled away in your pants drawer at home. Funny, then, that both these essential (and I think we can all agree they are essential) items are considered, and taxed, as luxury goods by the UK government.

That means a 5% levy on something half of the UK population (approximately 32 million people) will need to use on a monthly basis for a large part of their lives; for a bodily function that represents our ability to conceive and indeed *give birth* to members of the human race. Without sanitary products, we would not have normal working lives – unless our bosses want to give us five days of grace each month in order to apply some damage control at home. Not only that, without them we would be jeopardising our health; poor feminine hygiene is a major cause of infection and even death in many developing countries, and the UN has declared poor menstrual hygiene a human rights issue. Nevertheless, these life-saving items are classed, by the UK government at least, as *non-essential*, and we're the ones paying through the nose for that. By the way, the list of things they *don't* consider to be luxury items includes crocodile steaks, men's razors, flapjacks, edible flowers and helicopters. Excuse me while I hurl my keyboard out the window.

But now, there is a growing body of 'menstrual activists' railing against the tax. As well as campaigners on Twitter, such as @BloodyDisgrace and @HomelessPeriod, 21-year-old student Laura Coryton recently

collected more than 226,000 signatures for a petition she hand-delivered to Chancellor George Osborne calling for taxes on sanitary products to be axed. "Nobody should pay for something that is essential to the very fact that they are alive," she tells *Stylist*.

The issue is even slowly seeping its way into parliament (excuse the visual). The female vote has been identified as particularly important in this week's general election. But it's not just the NHS, austerity cuts and foreign policy that could influence our decision. Each political party has offered up their stance on the 'tampon tax', too. UKIP have declared themselves advocates of scrapping the tax. Ed Miliband called the VAT "ridiculous", but David Cameron said, because of EU tax laws, lowering the tax would be "quite difficult to do".

ABSORBING THE COSTS

Apply some crude maths to the situation and the need for change becomes clear. Calculations by *The Guardian* suggest a woman will spend, on average, just under £2,000 on sanitary towels over her menstruating years. That means a woman earning minimum wage must work roughly 38 full days to pay for her lifetime's supply. Which leads us to the question – would this be happening if men had periods? Many would argue

"GLORIA STEINEM WROTE THAT IF MEN GOT PERIODS, THEY WOULD 'BRAG ABOUT HOW LONG AND HOW MUCH'"

a resounding 'no'. "The idea of women even getting small tax breaks for menstrual products provokes incredulosity because some people lack an incredible amount of empathy and because it has something to do with vaginas," says feminist writer Jessica Valenti. In 1986, Gloria Steinem wrote that if men

got periods, they would "brag about how long and how much", and that sanitary products would be "federally funded and free". We can't help thinking she might have a point.

Granted, abolishing tax on these products isn't an entirely simple process. Following the

European Union's decision to standardise tax across the continent, no separate member state can revise VAT allocations without the consent of the rest of the EU. But this is surely within our reach. The average tax on sanitary products across Europe is 17.5%, so we're not even the worst off. Cutting it completely

A BLOODY HISTORY...
Stylist charts some of the most notable moments in the history of menstruation

3000 BC: Ancient Egyptians invented the first tampons, made from papyrus. Ancient Greeks made theirs out of lint wrapped around wood and Romans used wool.



INNOVATIVE EGYPTIANS LED THE WAY IN TAMPON MANUFACTURE

1970: Judy Blume published *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the first book to portray a character's first period in a storyline.



JUDY BLUME MADE PERIODS THE FOCUS OF A NOVEL

2010: Several major American television networks banned a Kotex advertising campaign for mentioning the word 'vagina'.

2011: Always was the first company to show blood in an advert for sanitary towels. They broke the "women bleed blue liquid" rule but only in print.

1878: The *British Medical Journal* published a statement 'confirming' that menstruating women were medically unable to successfully pickle meat.

1946: Disney released the short animated film *The Story Of Menstruation* as an educational aid. "Don't let [menstruation] get you down," the narrator advises.



COURTNEY COX DARES UTTER THE WORD 'PERIOD' ON TV

1985: While appearing in a Tampax commercial in legwarmers and a leotard, Courtney Cox became the first person to say the word 'period' on American TV.



RUPI KAUR'S SELF-PORTRAIT WAS REMOVED BY INSTAGRAM

2015: Instagram removed self-portraits of artist Rupri Kaur with menstrual blood on her pyjamas. Kaur's brilliant response was: "Your misogyny is leaking."

would benefit around 250 million European women. Tell us that doesn't make sense.

CULTURE OF SHAME

However, this is not just a finance issue. These taxes are part of a wider problem: a culture that has conditioned us to see periods as disgusting, vulgar and taboo; that makes us blush when we recount our first period; and shames us into hiding a tampon up our sleeve when we go to the toilet in the office. As sad as it is, society is still repulsed by menstrual blood (a scrape on the knee or a nose bleed just doesn't provoke the same reaction). Last month, *Stylist* columnist Lucy Mangan caused debate on Twitter after announcing to her million-odd column readers that she was on her period at the time of writing. "I know, it's disgusting," she wrote. "I should be hiding in a cave or something until my monthly time of womanly awfulness has passed and I can re-emerge – possibly after some

kind of purification process or temple ritual that will cleanse my shame – into the light." Hundreds of readers responded, calling Mangan "brave" and "brilliant" for tackling such a needlessly controversial issue head-on.

Indeed, menstruation was deemed too controversial to feature in *Fifty Shades Of Grey* – the scene in which Christian Grey removes a tampon from Anastasia Steele before they have sex was cut. Depictions of it are removed from Instagram – recent photos posted by poet and artist Rupri Kaur of menstrual blood staining her pyjamas were promptly deleted by the site – and even the language surrounding periods reinforces just how 'disgusting' they are. When she is on her period, a woman is "on the blob", she is "surfing the crimson wave", it is "shark week".

On the other hand, we also sterilise representations of periods to make them 'cleaner'. Advertising has a huge part to

play in this. Think about it. How easy is it for you to associate periods with roller skates, or playing tennis, or wearing tight-fitting gym wear and hurling yourself around an aerobics studio? Not so much. Yet these are the euphemistic images fed to us in TV adverts. And you'll

find no mention of blood (imagine the horror). Instead, you'll find a neatly manicured hand demonstrating the efficacy of a sanitary product by dipping it in a glass of blue water.

Of course, it's not just in the UK. Period shame is felt and reinforced across the globe. In India, Bangladesh and other parts

of Asia, women are ostracised and called 'unclean', when they are menstruating. They are cast out from their villages, they cannot worship their gods, they are banned from kitchens in case they turn meat rancid, rot pickle and poison food. Women are also derided for speaking out. Coryton tells me she has been relentlessly trolled on social media following her Stop Taxing Periods campaign, called a 'complaining woman', and accused of shoving something distasteful down men's throats. One disgruntled (male) emailer even suggested that if she was unwilling to pay tax on something to "shove up her messy hole" she should stuff some old newspaper up there instead. How very charming.

THE PHYSICAL IMPACT

Are these people aware, one has to ask, that periods have the potential to knock a woman sideways? That she can be forced to weather excruciating shooting pains (in her groin, down her legs, sometimes up her behind like a hot poker), that she might have migraines, nausea and a ludicrously bloated stomach? Sure, many women will never have to resort to a dose of ibuprofen strong enough to stun a rhino, but many of us (three quarters in fact) suffer from PMT. Ten per cent have found

reduced attention spans and were slower and less accurate in completing certain tasks. In February, tennis player Heather Watson cited her period as the reason she crashed out of the Australian open, describing herself as "light-headed" and "low on energy". So while we're certainly not suggesting we should be wrapped in cotton wool every month, given a cup of sweet tea and shepherded off to bed, it's important to acknowledge that periods can make life difficult for some women. "I have about 10 migraines in the space of two weeks and it is impossible to function," says Pauline Napier, 37. "I'll have to leave work because of the pain and spend the rest of the day on the sofa in tears."

However, some countries are taking notice. A law introduced in Taiwan in 2013 entitles women to three days of menstrual leave annually. Japan has offered menstrual leave since 1947 and Indonesian women are entitled to two days a month. Some argue this is sexist, and that more money should be ploughed into making periods less painful instead. Others believe they would be seen as weak by their bosses if they did take it. Nevertheless, it's always there.

It's hard to imagine similar laws being implemented in the UK – it could also be argued that there is nothing more sexist than suggesting a woman can't do her job because she is on her period. But what we can fight for is an overhaul in the way sanitary products are seen by UK politicians and for them to take this issue to Europe. Reducing the 5% tax on sanitary towels and tampons would not only save us money and help put an end to the marginalisation of issues traditionally associated with women, it would work towards removing the harmful, unnecessary and frankly ridiculous stigma that surrounds menstruation. Sign the petition at change.org or join the debate using #tamponsax to make your voice heard.

ADDITIONAL WORDS: KATIE O'MALLEY PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES