



A CURSE FOR SCHOOLGIRLS

The cost of female hygiene products keeps many girls out of school – now activists are calling on the government to scrap tax on these items to ease the problem **BY KIM ABRAHAMS**

NO ONE loves that time of the month. The cramps, the bloating, the mood swings – it isn't much fun.

Yet women just get on with it, many armed with a steady supply of chocolate, a batch of painkillers and enough sanitary protection to cope with the flood. Life goes on pretty much as usual.

But for the poor and vulnerable, it's a different story. A period means missed appointments, no school and agonising about the ever-increasing price of female hygiene products.

One woman has had enough of the suffering of millions. Monja Posthumus-Meyjes, an advocate at Stellenbosch University Law Clinic, has made it her mission to make sanitary protection more affordable for the masses.

Products should be VAT-free, she believes, and she's thrown her weight behind the cause.

Her passion is evident when she speaks about the necessity for VAT-free sanitary products and – in an ideal world – the free distribution of these items in South Africa.

"Ninety days – that's the number of days that girls miss school each year because they don't have any sanitary prod-

ucts," she tells YOU when we meet her in her office on the university campus.

"These girls are either dropping out of school or getting really poor academic results. So they aren't on the same footing as their male counterparts."

It's an issue Monja feels so strongly about she and her team at the law clinic have made a written submission to the national treasury asking for female hygiene products to be included on the list of zero-rated VAT items.

"These girls are already caught in a cycle of poverty. By not giving them access to tampons and pads, the government is creating a situation where they are going to stay in that cycle."

Female hygiene products are taxed as they are considered a "luxury".

More than a year ago the University of Cape Town (UCT) student representative council's committee for health, environment and safety started a petition to get the government to drop tax on such products.

"Tampons and sanitary pads for many middle-class people are just an item on the shopping list but for most South Africans a R25 box of tampons eats into an already tight budget," the committee said in its petition.

Now that the VAT increase from 14% to 15% has come into effect, zero-rating



than R5 500 a month. Most of our clients earn around R1 500 a month.

"I wanted to fight this. The price of sanitary protection in SA is shocking."

Monja and her team – which includes candidate attorneys Danielle Louw and Erika Wright, and Dr Lize Mills and Silke de Lange of the university's law faculty, – are now awaiting the outcome of their submission.

If it's unsuccessful, they'll take the matter to court.

"We'll fight this with full force if our submission is rejected," Monja says.

It took five months for the team to complete their research into the problems some women face.

Monja and her team decided to draft their submission when they heard the treasury had employed an independent panel to review the list of items that fall under the zero-VAT umbrella.



By the end of May their 25-page research report was complete. They then used it to draft a three-page report to submit to the independent panel.

They want to see all female hygiene products, not just tampons and pads, included in the VAT-free list of items.

That includes period panties (underwear with built-in protection) and menstrual cups.

Along with the university's law faculty, the team looked at previous academic research and did a comparative study, reviewing what has been done in other countries and comparing it with what's happening in South Africa.

They'll know by 31 July whether they were successful as that's when the panel is scheduled to submit a formal recommendation to the treasury.

"If we aren't successful, we'll investigate further to see whether we can litigate in this matter. We'll look at fighting it in the equality court."

MONJA doesn't have any personal experience with "period poverty" but the cause is close to her heart. "The clinic exposes you to how bad things are for

many South Africans. I grew up privileged. I never had to go hungry at night or anything like that," she says. "But working at the clinic, I've become aware of how important each cent can be."

At a portfolio meeting back in 2016, the treasury argued that removing tax on sanitary products wouldn't be beneficial to the poor.

According to the treasury's presentation, a zero-VAT approach on sanitary products would affect only up to 6% of the most vulnerable in South Africa.

"They don't want to scrap the VAT because it will benefit only the rich," Monja says. "But I don't think it's a fair argument to make because it's a type of gender discrimination and an indirect form of economic discrimination."

The support from the university has been overwhelming, she says.

"When I walk around on campus, people just come up and say how fantastic everything is."

The need to alleviate period poverty has been compared to government's choice to issue free condoms. A period isn't a choice, campaigners argue, and the same consideration should be given to women in need.

"When they started giving out free condoms we were in the midst of an HIV epidemic. And it didn't affect just men but women too. Free condoms are there for the protection of men and women," Monja says.

"But – and it's a very big but – while we fight the HIV epidemic, there's no reason why funds can't be made available for free female hygiene products.

"We shouldn't have to weigh these two up against each other. Sex is a choice – your period isn't." ■

Monja Posthumus-Meyjes, an advocate at Stellenbosch University Law Clinic, is fighting to have all female hygiene products included in the zero-VAT list.

the products has become more urgent, campaigners believe.

For Monja, it all started when she noticed her female clients were missing their consultations with her. "For example, I was representing a woman who was divorcing her husband. At times she just wouldn't pitch.

"And when I really pushed these women to find out why they weren't attending some of their consultations, they started explaining their circumstances."

DRIED grass, leaves and newspaper – these are some of the objects poor women use to absorb the flow every month. Hearing such stories prompted Monja to take action.

Instead of leaving their home, these women cut themselves off from society whenever they have their period.

"You need to understand our clients are the poorest of the poor. To be a client at the clinic your income has to be less

THE COST OF PERIODS

- 30%** The percentage of girls who don't attend school when they have their period.
- 90** The average number of days a year such a girl will miss school because of her period.
- R2,33** The average price of a single house-brand pad.
- R40 000** How much a woman spends on average on sanitary pads in her lifetime.