

[#MeToo is MILLIONS of times bigger than we know](#)

By Brenda Birrell, [The Global Uplift Project](#)

Every person deserves to be respected and valued. Nobody should have to face sexual degradation simply because they wish to make a living.

But our response to #MeToo will be measured not by how we seek justice for beautiful, famous, powerful, and wealthy women, although their cause is unquestionably just. Rather, the measure of us will be how we protect those who are also preyed upon but who are plain, anonymous, powerless, and poor.

Their numbers dwarf the Hollywood ladies by *hundreds of millions*, though you have never seen them.

In the developing world, as many as 50,000,000 girls drop out of school every year because they have no way to deal with their periods. Yes, I know that word elicits a queasy feeling, at least from half of us. But it is reality if humans are to reproduce.

We *must* be able to talk about it because menstruation is inextricably linked to the sexual abuse of *tens of millions* of young women a year. Here's why.



That's me—in the middle—in South Africa

When a girl starts her period, if she doesn't have a way to deal with the flow of blood, she will begin missing a week of school every month. By the end of a year she will be so far behind she will likely drop out. Her choices at 12 or 13 years of age are bleak.

She can work in the fields. She can be married off. She can become a domestic servant. Or, she can be sold into the sex trade.

Millions of such girls become targets for sexual abuse every year because they don't have parents or teachers around to protect them. The trauma and humiliation of pervasive, unremitting sexual predation scars them for the rest of their lives. It is a scar that effaces the psyche of all of humanity.

I was in South Africa in June, distributing kits of reusable sanitary pads to newly-menstruating girls. The kits last three years, long enough in most cases for the girls to finish school. There, they are protected. At least most of them are.

At the end of one presentation, a woman teacher stayed in the room until everyone else had left. She came up to me, sheepishly, and started crying. I held her until she was able to calm down and tell me what was wrong.

She told me that she had had her first period when she was 13, and had missed a week of school. She had stayed home, sitting on leaves, dried corn husks, anything absorbent she could find.

When she returned the following week one of her teachers asked why she had been absent. She told him, and he said she need never worry about missing school again, that he would provide her with sanitary supplies.

She was elated because she wanted to become a teacher herself and knew that she needed to stay in school for that to happen. But there was a catch...



Girls in South Africa receiving GEP Kits

The teacher, a man, told her that the price of one sanitary pad was one sex act. She had no other way to afford it and no other way to stay in school. So, she "bought" the pad.

Over the next 5 years she "bought" 3 pads a month from the man. She would carefully wash, dry and reuse the pads to minimize having to go back for more. They were lumpy and uncomfortable after being washed, she said, but she couldn't face going to him any more often.

That was 20 years ago. She finished school and became the teacher she had hoped to be. She is now shepherding and protecting dozens of girls entrusted to her care.

But she still didn't have a solution for how to help them deal with their monthly period. She was helping a few girls, but on her own limited salary (about \$300-equivalent per month) she couldn't do much.



Girls at a girls' school in Kenya receiving GEP Kits

Her tears of anguish turned to tears of joy when she realized that, together, we would provide her girls with washable, reusable supplies that would enable them to stay in school, and without them having to service any lurking creeps. The girls do not have to pay any of the \$9 cost.

The non-profit I work with provides these pads, not only to young women in

South Africa, but in Zambia, Kenya, Nepal, and other countries. The stories of coercion, degradation, and abuse are the same wherever we go. It is literally a species-level problem.

But it is one from which we *can* elevate ourselves, much as we have from the scourges of smallpox on the biological side, and slavery on the social. The question is not the means, but the will.

Providing developing-world girls an inexpensive way to deal with their period might be the most cost-effective liberation of human potential on the planet.



Distributing GEP Kits in Nepal

In fact, if we will only take the outrage we feel here at home for what has happened to the most fortunate women in the world, and apply just a little of it to the tens of millions of young victims who cannot champion for themselves, we will be a long way toward beginning a world-changing process.

It's a daring goal, isn't it? Equal education and equal treatment for all, free of sexual predation? But nobody is equal until everybody is. And everybody is bigger when

anybody is. That includes all of us.

We are at what may be a millennial tipping point where great strides can be made for humanity. I hope to see a world where my granddaughters won't need #MeToo. But whether it changes in our lifetimes or not, all of us—women *and* men—will be bigger human beings and the world will be a better place for our having mustered the courage to start.

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If you would like to help just one girl by sponsoring a GEP Kit, [click here](#). If you need to, get 8 of your friends together and each contribute one dollar.

If you have a women's group, or work group, please consider everybody sponsoring just *one* Kit. *Every dollar donated* goes to provide Kits for girls in the developing world.

To see a short video about the *Girls' Equality Project*, [look here](#). To see Project details, [click here](#). To read a Project Impact Statement, [click here](#). To learn more about , visit www.tgup.org.

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