



## #MeToo is millions of times bigger than we know

By Brenda Birrell

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. Rather, the measure of us will be how we protect those who are plain, anonymous, powerless, and poor.

They have no platform, no voice, and nobody to speak for them. 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.

When a girl starts her period, she commonly begins missing a week of school every month. By the end of a year she is 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 as a child bride. She can become a domestic servant. Or, she can be sold into the sex trade. Sexual predation is relentless. The trauma and humiliation scars them for life.

The nonprofit I work with manufactures and distributes washable sanitary pads to girls in the developing world. Each kit of 8 pads allows a girl to manage her period so she can stay in school. A kit lasts for three years, long enough for the girls to finish school. There, they are protected. At least most of them are.

At the end of one presentation I was making in South Africa, a woman teacher stayed behind after everyone else had left the room. 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 her first period when she was 13, and missed a week of school. She stayed at home sitting on leaves, dried corn husks, anything absorbent. When she returned the following week one of her teachers asked why she had been absent. She told him, and he said 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...

The teacher told her that the price of one sanitary pad was one sex act. She had no other way to stay in school. So, she “bought” the pads. 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 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 dozens of girls entrusted to her care. But on her limited salary she couldn't help them with the matter of their periods.

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.

We provide these pads at no cost to young women in South Africa, 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 girls in the developing world with a way to deal with their period might just be the most cost-effective liberation of human potential on the planet.

In fact, if we will only take the outrage we feel here at home for what powerful, wealthy women have faced, and channel just a little bit of it to helping powerless, poor girls, 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.

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 simply begun.



###

Brenda Birrell is Program Director for the *Girls' Equality Project* at the nonprofit The Global Uplift Project. To learn more, help, or contribute, visit [www.tgup.org](http://www.tgup.org).