

Initiative proposal against menstrual poverty for the municipality of Amsterdam

Subject

Agree to the initiative proposal by council members Yemane (GroenLinks), Ahmadi (Bij1), Bouhassani (PvdA) and Wehkamp (D66), Kabamba (Lijst Kabamba), Bloemberg (Partij voor de Dieren), Khan (DENK)

from 09-11-2022 titled: *Tackling menstrual poverty in Amsterdam*

The City Council of Amsterdam

With regard to the initiative proposal by members Yemane (GroenLinks) and Ahmadi (Bij1), Bouhassani (PvdA) and Wehkamp (D66) of 09-11-2022 titled: *Tackling menstrual poverty in Amsterdam*,

Noting in part the administrative response to the initiative proposal and its consideration in the council committee on Education, Health Care and Poverty Reduction;

Decides:

I. to approve the said initiative proposal;

I. to request the College of the Mayor and Aldermen ['Wethouders'] to:

A. To investigate how public institutions (e.g. schools including elementary schools, pharmacies, youth clubs, community centers, libraries, asylum seeker centers, municipal buildings, family doctors' offices, public restrooms, homeless shelters and public health centers), and other places where people are at risk of not being able to buy menstrual products, can, regardless of gender identity, papers and income, ensure menstrual products are made available, doing so, possibly in partnership with the Armoedefonds and/or with partial funding from the Master Plans;

B. To explore ways in which menstrual poverty and the provision of menstrual products can be included in the municipal anti-poverty policy, for example through the City Pass, without it affecting other anti-poverty measures;

C. In working out these decisions, include the private sector (such as manufacturers of menstrual products) and civil society (such as menstrual poverty advocacy organizations, local neighborhood partners and the Food Bank);

D. Work with civil society organizations, healthcare facilities and schools to shape an educational campaign explaining what menstruation means, what products are available, how they work and how to use these products hygienically and safely. The information campaign should also address the stigma surrounding menstruation and menstrual poverty and refer people to organizations where they get menstrual products if they do not have access to them themselves.

I. take note of the administrative response to the initiative proposal.

Legal basis

Article 147a, paragraph 1 of the Municipal Law

Initiative proposal

Introduction

Across the Netherlands, people are experiencing the profound effects of rising inflation and energy costs, which come on top of existing uncertainties such as the housing crisis. The situation is no different in Amsterdam. One in five Amsterdam residents live around or below the poverty line, with an overrepresentation of women and girls. Although measures are being taken to combat rising poverty, such as broadening the access requirements for the Food Bank, in 2022, more and more people who previously did not live in poverty now find themselves in financial difficulty. For example, even with the

announced price cap, more than half of the lowest-income households will experience energy poverty next winter, according to recent calculations from research firm ABF Research.¹ That means these households will spend 10% or more of their spending income on energy bills. The increased charges mean that poverty also increases among people who do not live below the poverty line, such as self-employed workers, students or people with precarious employment contracts. Poverty has a huge impact on a person's life. Long-term poverty affects all areas of life and can be passed on generationally. Chances of employment and a good future decrease, while the chances of poor (psychosocial and) physical health increase.

Menstrual poverty

Poverty is a serious barrier to participation in society. Menstrual poverty is an additional obstacle for people who menstruate, thereby reducing equality of opportunity. According to a 2019 exploratory research report by the Bovengrondse, menstrual poverty entails: "limited access to the resources you need to safely and comfortably get through your period."² These resources take three forms: access to blood collection products, proper sanitary facilities, and knowledge about menstruation. Menstrual poverty reduces the ability of people who menstruate to participate in school, work and sports activities. For example, there are young people who miss school because they cannot buy menstrual products and thus cannot get through their day normally.³ Menstrual poverty therefore greatly impacts the lives of those affected. According to the WHO, menstrual health is therefore a human rights issue.⁴

In 2020, Scotland became the first country in the world to provide menstrual products for free. Menstrual products have been offered there for free in public places such as pharmacies, community centers and youth clubs since this summer. The Scottish Parliament voted unanimously, and not without reason, since menstrual poverty is a major problem in Scotland. Some 10% of menstruating people in the country cannot afford menstrual products. In other countries, combatting menstrual poverty is also a topic of discussion and policy-making. In France, free menstrual products are provided at universities. In Spain, there are also plans to provide menstrual products at places like schools and prisons. In addition, Spain will soon be the first country to have a menstrual leave law, entitling people with severe menstrual complaints to days off.⁵ The problem is also being recognized at the European level: in 2019 the European Parliament called on all member states to abolish VAT on menstrual products.⁶

Menstrual poverty in the Netherlands

Menstrual poverty is also a problem in the Netherlands. Research by Plan International NL from June 2019 showed that 9% of girls and women between the ages of 12 and 25 sometimes lack the money to buy menstrual products.⁷ One in four social workers knows or suspects menstrual poverty among the youth they assist, according to a Kinderhulp survey of 700 social workers.⁸ Menstrual poverty is particularly prevalent among people living around or below the poverty line. Clients of the Food Bank, single mothers, home- and houseless people, and undocumented people regularly struggle to afford

¹AFB Research. (2022). *Impact van het prijsplafond energie voor verschillende inkomensgroepen*.

² De Bovengrondse. (2019). *Verkenning van menstruatiermoede in Nederland*.

³ Plan International. (2019). *Schaamte bij menstruatie*.

⁴ WHO (2022) WHO statement on menstrual health and rights, 50th session of the Human Rights Council Panel discussion on menstrual hygiene management

⁵ Het Parool. (2022). [Onderzoek: kwart van de Amsterdamse vrouwen heeft niet altijd geld voor tampons of maandverband](#).

⁶ Parliament resolution (2019). *Gender equality and taxation policies in the EU*.

⁷ Plan International. (2019). *Schaamte bij menstruatie*.

⁸ Kinderhulp. (2019). *Kinderhulp onderzoekt menstruatiermoede*.

menstrual products. The Food Bank generally does not have menstrual products in their packages because non-perishable products are less likely to be donated. In addition, this would not help undocumented people because they do not have access to the Food Bank.

The Armoedefonds has started to provide free menstrual products in several places. The [national anti-poverty] fund cooperates with local aid organizations to set up these distribution points. There are currently about 1,000 distribution points in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, there are 29 so-called Menstrual Distribution Points (MUPs). These distribution points can be found for example at colleges, community centers, GP practices and at locations of the DOCK foundation. The aim of these distribution points is to offer menstrual products that are as accessible as possible. People are not asked about their income. The Armoedefonds does depend on sufficient funding to run this initiative. Currently, there is a hold on applications, as the demand is greater than the resources the Armoedefonds has available. The Neighborhood Feminists foundation also runs 27 distribution cabinets, their so-called Menstruation Stations, in Amsterdam. The great interest in this initiative shows the importance of expanding the number of dispensing stations.

The consequences of menstrual poverty are dire. In the absence of menstrual products, unsanitary, inappropriate alternatives are used, such as toilet paper or newspaper. Moreover, tampons and pads are used repeatedly or too long, which can lead to infections or even toxic shock syndrome. In addition, people report suffering from skin irritations due to the use of cheaper products. This leads to additional health problems and associated health costs. Moreover, they also indicated that they do not have money for painkillers, even though these can be desperately needed during menstruation. Menstrual poverty not only has physical consequences, but also social consequences. People without access to menstrual products have to stay home more often and are more likely to miss school or work as a result. Research commissioned by Always from 2021 shows that over 25,000 Dutch girls and young women miss classes due to a lack of money to buy sanitary pads or tampons.⁹

Menstrual poverty in Amsterdam

Menstrual poverty is a major problem in Amsterdam. Recent research (undertaken in October 2022) in Amsterdam shows that more than a quarter of those surveyed do not always have money for menstrual products. The survey, by Neighborhood Feminists, shows that menstrual poverty is linked to rising costs, which means that more and more people are suffering from menstrual poverty. 41% of those surveyed find it more difficult to purchase menstrual products now than six months ago. This increase particularly affects younger age groups; nearly half of young people between 18 and 24 say they have more difficulty paying for menstrual products than they did six months ago. For this reason, people are cutting back on other products, the survey shows. Nearly 90% of those who struggled to buy menstrual products reduced their spending on other products, such as groceries, household products or health products. People also use inappropriate and unhygienic alternatives, as shown in the survey by Neighborhood Feminists. Of those experiencing menstrual poverty, 63% said they had to use alternatives, such as toilet paper or newspapers.¹⁰

The role of the city council

In 2020, the Arnhem City Council voted in favor of a study on the issue of menstrual poverty in the city. The aim of the proposal was to provide products free of charge through social institutions such as the Food Bank, community centers and pharmacies. Motions have since been filed in Amstelveen, De Fryske Marren, The Hague, Elst, Groningen, Nieuwegein, and Rotterdam recognizing the local severity of menstrual poverty and underscoring the need for municipal solutions. Following suit, The Hague and Rotterdam have taken steps to address the issue. The Hague provides a budget for the Poverty Fund so that they can establish dispensing points. In Rotterdam, low-income residents can buy menstrual products through the youth credit on the Rotterdam Pass.

⁹ No Ties, commissioned by Always. (2021). *Menstruatiearmoede onder meisjes en jonge vrouwen*.

¹⁰ Neighborhood feminists. (2022). *Amsterdam menstrueert*.

Taboo and lack of knowledge

There is a double taboo surrounding menstrual poverty. For many people, talking about menstruating feels uncomfortable or inappropriate; added to that is the discomfort in talking about poverty. The 2019 exploratory research report by the Bovengrondse on menstrual poverty and the 2022 survey by Neighborhood Feminists show that menstrual poverty is not purely a matter of lack of money. The taboo surrounding menstruation and limited education also contribute to the problem. This can prevent people from knowing what is needed for healthy hygiene during menstruation. Also, people may not recognize medical conditions around menstruation, such as endometriosis, as well or in a timely manner. The taboo surrounding talking about menstruation makes the problem of menstrual poverty remain hidden. Therefore, it is also often not on the radar of helping organizations. The aforementioned study by Plan International shows that as many as one in three young people find it uncomfortable to talk about menstruation with friends. In addition, 86% of participants are embarrassed when they leak, and nearly half say they feel dirty during menstruation. Taboo and stigma create additional barriers to seeking timely medical or financial help, with serious consequences. Menstrual equality thus includes not only access to menstrual products for everyone who menstruates, but also education about menstrual problems and related reproductive health. Addressing menstrual poverty effectively therefore requires proper education in schools to increase knowledge about menstruation and menstrual products and break taboos.

Breaking the stigmas and taboos surrounding menstruation is, above all, important for gender equality. Non-menstruating people can walk into a public restroom with the expectation that their basic physical needs will be met: toilet paper, soap and running water, for example. For menstruating people, this is different. Menstrual products are basic necessities for living your life. Not being able to assume the presence of menstrual products negatively affects participation in work, school and sports. It increases the inequality of opportunity between non-menstruating and menstruating people.

In conclusion

Access to menstrual products is a basic need. Lack of menstrual products can have negative health consequences, is a source of stress and shame, and contributes to gender inequality. It is time for Amsterdam to work to fight this issue. Amsterdam, like other G4 cities, must be ahead of national policy by addressing menstrual poverty at the municipal level. This also fits the progressive and social character of our city. Amsterdam residents living in poverty are just as entitled to menstrual products as any other Amsterdam resident. Therefore, the Amsterdam municipality must commit to combatting to this problem.

The responsibility to combat menstrual poverty does not lie solely with the municipality. In 2019, then-Secretary of State for Social Affairs, Tamara van Ark, said the following about the provision of free menstrual products: *"In the Netherlands, the cabinet favors an integral approach that focuses as much as possible on the variety of causes of poverty"*.¹¹ Additionally, with regards to the responsibility of municipalities in implementing poverty policy, she stated: *"They know the local situation and can provide customized work."* Progress is crucial at both the national and municipal levels. Therefore, we also call on the national government to support local policies through a national information campaign to combat stigmas and taboos surrounding menstruation.

The GroenLinks, BIJ1, PvdA and D66 groups propose the following:

1. To investigate how public institutions (e.g. schools including elementary schools, pharmacies, youth clubs, community centers, libraries, asylum seeker centers, municipal buildings, family doctors' offices, public restrooms, homeless shelters and public health centers), and other places where people are at risk of not being able to buy menstrual products, can, regardless of gender identity, papers and income, ensure menstrual products are made available, doing so, possibly in partnership with the Armoedefonds and/or with partial funding from the Master Plans;

¹¹ <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20192020-978.html>

2. To explore ways in which menstrual poverty and the provision of menstrual products can be included in the municipal anti-poverty policy, for example through the City Pass, without it affecting other anti-poverty measures;
3. In working out these decisions, include the private sector (such as manufacturers of menstrual products) and civil society (such as menstrual poverty advocacy organizations, local neighborhood partners and the Food Bank);
4. Work with civil society organizations, healthcare facilities and schools to shape an educational campaign explaining what menstruation means, what products are available, how they work and how to use these products hygienically and safely. The information campaign should also address the stigma surrounding menstruation and menstrual poverty and refer people to organizations where they get menstrual products if they do not have access to them themselves.

Attachments

Members of the City Council

M. Yemane (GroenLinks)
N. Ahmadi (BIJ1)
A. Bouhassani (PvdA)
A. Wehkamp (D66)
C. Kabamba (Lijst Kabamba)
J. Bloemberg (Partij voor de Dieren)
S. Khan (DENK)