

# New campaign aims to tackle period stigma to keep girls and women playing sports

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Sports stars like [Simone Biles](#), [Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone](#) and [Katie Ledecky](#) dazzled fans at the recent Paris Olympic Games with their performances. But off the pitch, many athletes also used the Olympics to

draw attention to deeply entrenched inequities and challenges facing girls and women in sport, such as [body confidence](#) and [support for athletes with small children](#).

A new initiative, [Sport Your Period](#), is making waves by paying athletes to discuss their menstruation experiences. The effort aims to shatter the taboo of menstruation, a long overlooked problem in the sports world.

This campaign is sponsored by the [menstrual product company Knix](#) and aims to normalize period talk, especially for adolescent athletes.

Olympians like Canadian beach volleyball player [Brandie Wilkerson](#) and American rugby player [Ilona Maher](#) have been promoting Sport Your Period over the past year by wearing small red dots during competition. Notably, [U.S. women's gold medal soccer player Megan Rapinoe](#) is the lead spokesperson.

This initiative builds on the candidness of elite athletes who spoke out about menstruation publicly. New Zealand golfer Lydia Ko and Chinese swimmer [Fu Yuanhui](#) both made headlines for casually sharing their menstrual woes during competition, yet [sports media](#) still often reacts with surprise or discomfort about period talk, showing that it remains a taboo subject.

## **Girls at risk of dropping sport**

Despite the Paris Olympics being billed as the "gender-equal Olympics," there remains a glaring lack of structural support and policies to address the ways menstrual health—and sexual and reproductive health rights more broadly—impact women's and girls' participation in sports from grassroots to elite levels.

In fact, adolescent [girls drop out of sport](#) at twice the rate of boys, often citing [menstruation and body image concerns](#) as key factors.

[One in two teen girls skip sports due to their menstrual period](#). It's clear that menstrual health is a widespread, largely unspoken and somewhat understudied obstacle for female athletes of all ages.

[A global study of nearly 500 adult athletes](#) showed that, while 87 percent reported their [menstrual cycle](#) impacted their performance and training, only 35 percent had ever discussed it with their coaches. Nearly one-quarter felt they didn't understand how their menstrual cycle affected their sports performance, and about 28 percent felt their coaches lacked knowledge on the subject.

Despite efforts to improve coaching education and pathways in sport for girls and women, there is almost no formal menstrual health education for coaches or athletes. Although brand initiatives like [Nike Sync](#) offer training advice, and the [Power to Play Period](#) project (founded by Sarah Zipp, co-author of this article) provides education and resources, these efforts are limited.

Few structural policies address the larger issue athletes and coaches face regarding menstrual health. Some elite sports teams, such as the [U.S. women's national soccer team](#), have employed experts to help align training with menstrual cycle phases.

Additionally, some national and professional teams have adjusted uniform policies to reflect the challenges of managing menstruation during competition.

However, these efforts rarely include adolescent girls or focus on their participation. The Knix campaign stands out by specifically targeting adolescent athletes and promoting menstrual health literacy.

## **Sexual and reproductive health rights**

According to the [World Health Organization](#), sexual and reproductive health rights encompass efforts to eliminate maternal mortality, provide accessible health services, address sexual and gender-based violence, and manage sexually transmitted infections.

Sexual and reproductive health rights include menstrual health, such as access to accurate information, affordable and appropriate menstrual care products and adequate toilet facilities. They also include the right to education about menstruation and the elimination of related stigma and discrimination. Ensuring menstrual health and hygiene is integral for promoting reproductive health and gender equality.

Amid escalating global rates of sexual and gender-based violence and the climate crisis, a [recent report from the United Nations](#) highlighted concerns about the impact of climate change on women and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights, as well as experiences of sexual and gender-based violence. The report suggests links between climate change, sexual and gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights have been largely overlooked.

In fact, sexual and reproductive health rights also include the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, including comprehensive sexuality education. On this front, a number of [sports for development non-governmental organizations \(NGOs\)](#) use sports as a platform to improve knowledge about menstrual health, sexuality and awareness of sexual and reproductive health rights.

Recent studies have underlined the importance of a [trauma-and violence-informed approach to sport for development programming](#) that focuses on promoting sexual and reproductive health rights and supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. For example, a trauma-and violence-informed approach would account for broader structural and social conditions, like including access to safe spaces and affordable

menstrual products for sport participation.

## **Menstrual health is absent in sports policy**

But how can awareness campaigns like Sport Your Period, along with the advocacy efforts of NGOs, lead to real structural and policy changes that better support menstruating athletes?

Policies such as providing menstrual products, teaching about menstrual health, adjusting uniform regulations and improving toilet facilities can help advance gender equality and promote sexual and reproductive health rights. Yet few sports organizations address these taboo topics.

Leaders and policy-makers in sports federations, governing bodies, leagues, clubs and schools must develop policies that recognize menstrual health as a fundamental right and a significant barrier for participation. They must also address discriminatory practices and foster supportive environments where women and girls who participate in sport at all levels feel comfortable discussing menstrual health issues.

Organizations like the [Women Win Foundation](#), a leader in the sport for international development sector, offer valuable insights for ways to normalize menstrual health in sports and [improve menstrual health literacy](#). But these ad hoc efforts leave too many adolescent athletes and coaches behind.

What's needed is a more comprehensive approach to menstrual health education for coaches and athletes through the sports organizations that govern global, national and local sports systems. Campaigns should not just focus on elite athletes, but speak to the needs of adolescents trying to participate in sports, recreation, physical activity and play at all levels.

We can—and must—do more to support [adolescent girls](#) striving to

reach their sporting dreams, whether that means aiming for the Olympics or simply moving their body freely without needing to worry about stigmatization and exclusion.

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