

# Peridot.

How many women have had that moment of dread when you get your period unexpectedly while at school, work, or just out in public, and realise that you don't have pads or tampons on you?

We believe too many.



As a group of female masters students on the Design and Technology Futures course run by Taltech and EKA, when we were asked to envision how we would want to see personal hygiene change in the next 2 to 5 years, the answer was simple: we envision a society where period products are easily accessible to all women, and the stigma surrounding the topic of period hygiene no longer exists. Is this realistic? That would depend on whether or not society continues the movement to eliminate period poverty. Throughout the course of a semester-long project, we explored the topic of period hygiene, the challenges and the headway being made in some countries.

Period Poverty is an issue affecting women across the globe, that leads to women falling behind on daily activities, often having to use unhygienic ways to tackle their periods and

not getting the help and information needed. In the UK, 1 in 5 households have struggled to afford products for their daughters, even in Estonia, a recent study by Procter & Gamble showed that 4.5% of girls have missed school due to not having access to products. A quick google search, and you will find countless stories of women who have struggled to afford period products, resorting to using diapers, toilet paper, even socks. The campaigns of recent years have highlighted just how bad this issue is, and have done a great deal to tackle it.

When we think about it, issues surrounding period hygiene stem from the long running stigma surrounding the topic, and the idea that periods are something women should deal with privately and discreetly. If you look back at advertisements for pads or tampons, they all follow a theme: "This product is so discreet, no one will know!". Then we have the oh-so-familiar blue liquid used to illustrate blood. Or you have the advertisements where women are radiant, posing with a pack of pads or tampons with a gentle smile on their faces. It does seem, however, that companies are finally catching on. Tampax released a talk-show type skit advertisement last year in which the host explained how to properly insert a tampon, with hands demonstrating. A great leap forward, right? So we thought, but not everyone agreed. This ad was in fact taken off air in Ireland after the network received

complaints that it was “inappropriate”. Social media was awash with discussion, and it was, quite frankly, disheartening to see just how many women commented almost the same thing:

“I’m a woman, I have daughters, so I’m not a prude, but this ad is just inappropriate and shouldn’t be on TV! It’s far too sexual!”

So we must ask, just how entrenched is this stigma, even among women? How can change be made if there is this much opposition from the very group of people who would benefit?

With progress to end Period Poverty already well underway, we wanted to look at the topic of period hygiene from a wider, everyday angle. To talk with both women and men to find out what experience and knowledge they have, and what insights we could gain from them. What we learnt from this wasn’t really surprising: many young women in our own age group didn’t receive adequate education, while the few men who participated in our surveys knew even less. Even in our personal experience, any classes we had at school around the topic were for “girls only, boys don’t need to know about this”. Maybe then this could be a way forward, to explore ways in which we could break down the stigma, while providing more men with more information on the topic of periods as a way to include them, as many within our age group are, or soon could be fathers. What if we could equip them to educate their daughters about periods? Could this be done through a game perhaps, or maybe an educational pack would be better? At this point there were so many directions to go, and we were unsure which was the best. We considered designing a new product, but there are so many already on the market - cups, underwear, tampons, pads, organic, reusable, even a reusable tampon applicator - that we quickly ruled this out.

At the same time, we couldn’t stop thinking about some of the stories we heard from women about getting their period without their product of choice on them, or the struggles they faced changing pads, tampons or cups in public bathrooms. We heard it all, from holding new tampons in your mouth to sticking pads to legs, or even the walls of the cubicles. It really made us reflect on our own experiences and realise how many women face these issues, but simply view it as the norm. A walk around our university campus, illustrated just how ill equipped public bathrooms are in regards to period hygiene. In a place where there are 10,000 students, there is only one place on campus where you can get products: a R-kiosk that carries a minimal selection of pads and tampons.

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Inspired by this, we came up with the idea to create a box for bathrooms that would contain pads and tampons, and to encourage students at the university to leave ones if they had spare, or to take them if they were needed. So, we developed a simple prototype - a poster with a small box made from card attached to it, and placed our first one

in the unisex bathroom at Academy of Arts. Excited to see what results we would get, we eagerly waited for a few days to pass so we could check on it. In the meantime, we went further and began contacting bars and cafes in one of the creative neighbourhoods in Tallinn about the possibility of placing our prototypes in their bathrooms. However, our enthusiasm was short lived, as we heard back from pitifully few, and among the places we did hear back from, there was hesitation due to the current Covid-19 situation. Eventually, we got a positive reply: there was a place interested in allowing us to test our prototype, and they were interested in our project. Great, we thought! So we arranged a meeting and took one of the prototypes with us. Here though, we faced another set back. The female representative we met with stated

they'd be happy to take the prototype, BUT, could we change it? In her words:

"We have unisex bathrooms, so the products shouldn't be straight in your face. Could you make a cover? It would make it a bit more delicate."

Delicate. Over the course of this project we've seen and heard that word so many times that now it frustrates us.

Why is that word related to periods?  
Why is this considered a delicate topic?  
Why can't pads and tampons be visible?

It was beginning to feel like a constant why-why exercise. Added to this, we were seeing minimal interaction with the prototype we had placed in EKA.

So, in the words of Pocahontas: "Where do I (we) go from here?" We had been so sure that the concept of sharing between women would yield better results. But maybe we weren't looking at it from the right angle. As part of our research we had been keeping track of a proposed bill in Scotland - where period products were already free for students - that would make them free for all women. This bill was passed in early December, and was perhaps our Aha! moment. Here was a country paving the way, and not relying on solidarity between women, but providing for them. What we had attempted was more campaign-like, and too narrow in scope, we had to think of something more permanent.

While it remains to be seen just how Scotland plans to roll this out, we can examine the systems that universities there have introduced. It seems to be a university-by-university case, with each one offering a different solution. Some have stations across their campus where not just pads and tampons, but also cups, are stored. These vary from stocked cupboards, to acrylic boxes on tables. Others have basic dispensers, a few even allow students to order online through the students union.

Often universities worked in collaboration with UK-based manufacturers of period products.

Here, we thought, is a proven, working system. But how do we build on this, turn it into something that could be implemented to achieve a wider reach?

After some discussion we decided to broaden our testing locations. In the end, cafes and universities aren't only for visitors or students, they're also "offices" in a way. We once again reached out, this time to a few offices and co-working spaces across the city. One co-working space, Lift99, replied to inform us that they have already implemented this concept, with a stocked cabinet in a larger bathroom on the premises. It goes to follow that if one place already provides period products, there could be more that either do, or would do the same. After all, companies and schools already provide necessities like toilet paper, some companies even offer coffee and snacks. So why not period products, which are an essential hygiene category?

So we put our heads together, and spent time developing our final project concept: Peridot. We envision a service that can be ordered via a web platform, and would provide dispensers for pads and tampons - which, based on results from surveys we conducted, were the most popular choice among women - to place in the bathrooms of offices, cafes, universities, anywhere really.

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These dispensers would be tailored to the size and traffic of a location. With the initial purchase, tampons and pads would be provided along with the unit, however each location could decide whether they would like to be supplied with products, or fill the units themselves. In this way Peridot could act as a connecting link between producers, wholesalers, businesses, schools and women.



Prototype journey - from the first prototype to the recent proposal.

We developed one model in particular with the intention of placing it in individual cubicles, basing it on the insights we gained from earlier interviews and our own experiences. Containing both pads and tampons, it also features hand sanitiser and a place where you can put the new products while changing. Stress free, hygienic changing.

tampons and pads are bleached? And there are chemicals in them to make them more absorbent too that could actually be harmful to you!" - honestly it's surprising people aren't sick of talking to us yet. Though our team comes from a variety of backgrounds, product and service design are not our forte, and it would be untrue to say this was

## If we could bring awareness to even a few people, we've already succeeded.

But what would any project be without another roadblock?

When researching Estonian wholesalers we found many who carry a range of hygiene products - from toilet paper to shampoo and conditioner - but no period hygiene products. Neither are there any Estonian producers of pads and tampons. The nearest one we found is in fact the Finnish company Vuokkosset.

So here we are, at the end of our project, and in the last 5 months we've talked about periods more than we ever had before. Every conversation we have, we spew out more facts we've learnt - "Hey, did you know most



Example of a product placement.



## Be part of this new wave of showing care for employees, students, women.

not a challenge. And while there have been times where we felt lost, and that our ideas wouldn't make a difference, or were already being done, one thing kept us going: the belief that this is important, this was worth the challenging moments. If we could bring awareness to even a few people, we've already succeeded. We've also been both surprised by and thankful for how much interest and interaction our male classmates have had with the project, something we didn't anticipate.

So what next? Well, with a new semester comes a new project, as much as we wish to carry on with this. We don't want this to just be a project, but a reality. The new norm of period hygiene in public bathrooms. A society in which women no longer have to worry or stress about having pads and tampons on them, but can be confident that if they do get

their period unexpectedly, or just leave the house in a rush and forget their tampons, that they can easily access them; whether at work, school or even at the mall. So we say that if anything in here interests you, the reader, or if you see the same value in Peridot as we do, please take, develop and implement it. Break down the stigma and be part of this new wave of showing care for employees, students, women.

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