

Cosmopolitan SA petitions to end tampon tax

By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Cosmopolitan South Africa has launched a petition to end tampon tax, calling all women to campaign against period poverty in South Africa.

Now ex-deputy editor Sarah Browning de-Villiers together with feminist journalist Jen Thorpe investigated the plight of tampon tax in South Africa. In the report, as published in the magazine's June issue, they argue that sanitary products should not be subject to the same value added tax (VAT) as other luxury, non-essential items, and instead categorised as zero-rated basic items.



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"It seems illogical and sexist that women are forced to pay VAT to look after their menstrual hygiene," says editor Holly Meadows. "It begs the question: Why are we being taxed for sanitary care that is a basic biological necessity? Not only has the recent VAT increase made these products even more expensive, it has also highlighted the thousands of girls who cannot afford them and are forced to use old rags and leaves – compromising their health, dignity and school attendance.

"It begs another question: If we can afford to give boys free condoms, why can't we afford to give girls free tampons?"

Here, Browning de-Villiers tells us why *Cosmo* is taking a stand on the global trend to end tampon tax in SA, and why it must fall...

How did the idea come about?

As a team, *Cosmopolitan* is constantly discussing new ideas, issues and current affairs that we believe are relevant to women in South Africa. It became overwhelmingly clear, the more we discussed it, how expensive sanitary products are for everyone – especially given the involuntary nature of periods.

"You'll likely, as someone who menstruates, spend up to R40,000 in your lifetime on sanitary products."

This expense – coupled with limited to no access for many South Africans – was only heightened when VAT increased earlier this year. There is something deeply unjust about being taxed for a bodily function that is unavoidable and so clearly skewed so that women bear the brunt of this penalty. There is something even more troubling and wrong about the reality that millions of people who have periods in South Africa have no access – or cannot afford at all – the sanitary products that they need to do everyday things like go to school or to work, and to live with dignity. This is what period poverty is, and it needs to end.

Campaigning against tampon tax isn't new – it's been highlighted recently in the UK and US, and similar campaigns have seen tampon tax scrapped in countries like Kenya, Canada and Mauritius. In other countries like the UK, tampon tax has been reduced to a



much smaller portion of the usual VAT percentage amount. South Africa has a long way to go – tampons here are still taxed as a 'luxury item', incurring 15% VAT.



■ ***In Africa, Kenya became the first country to scrap tampon tax in 2004, followed by Nigeria and Mauritius. Why do you think SA is lagging behind in this regard? And why is it time to do something about this?***

In countries like Mauritius, the scrapping of tampon tax only happened after campaigning by activists. Sadly, we all know that most progress in laws and government have to be fought for – they don't tend to happen organically. I think countries like Kenya have recognised how important it is to prioritise the wellbeing of women, especially when it affects their access to education. It is never in a country's interest to allow anything to restrict a girl's access to education – the ongoing effects of this are disastrous, both socially and economically.

Pontsho Pilane has done some extraordinary work campaigning against tampon tax locally in 2016 and 2017, but government simply hasn't prioritised this. Change rarely happens quickly, but that doesn't mean it won't happen or that we should stop fighting for it.



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■ ***What are some of the most noteworthy findings from your investigation into the plight of tampon tax in SA?***

In your lifetime, a menstruating person will likely spend up to R40,000 on sanitary products – similar to the cost of an undergraduate degree.

It's estimated that up to three-million schoolgirls will find sanitary products unaffordable (based on Stats SA's 2017 report on

the number of girls in no-fee schools in 2016).

“ Unesco estimated in 2016 that 1 in 10 girls in sub-Saharan Africa misses school during her menstrual cycle, largely due to lack of access to sanitary products that are safe and effective. ”

■ **The government provides things like free condoms, why not also free sanitary products?**

There is a plethora of affordable, reusable and even eco-friendly sanitary products available in South Africa. Many, like the MPower or Princess D cups, Subz washable period panties, Mina cup, Bakgat panties, or Dignity Dreams washable pads are spearheaded by women locally in South Africa. In short, there are options for a sustainable future when it comes to sanitary products – the government needs to step up and commit to providing affordable (and for those who need, free) sanitary product options.



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In 2017, Treasury recommended providing free pads to those in need, funded by national and provincial governments. The Department of Women allocated funds in their 2018 budget to develop a framework for the Sanitary Dignity Policy – but nothing has been actioned or rolled out as yet. It's unclear what the delays are.

In the 2016/17 financial year, there was an estimated R45-billion in irregular government expenditure – so any arguments that the government cannot afford to reduce tax on sanitary products and provide free products to those who need are difficult to swallow.



■ What has the response to the petition been so far, and what is the goal?

The response has been overwhelming – a reflection of how critical an issue this is in South Africa. In about three weeks since *Cosmo* launched the campaign, the petition has garnered over 46,000 votes, which is phenomenal!

“ The truth is, this is resonating with people across the country: period poverty is real and dangerous, and it needs to end now ”

■ What's next?

The petition will be open for a week or so longer, after which *Cosmo* will lodge it with Parliament and with the Department of Women. From there, *Cosmo* hopes to see government seriously debate how period poverty can be ended before the close of 2018.



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■ So, where do we sign up and how can we get involved?

You can sign our petition [here](#). You can also help women in need now by donating eco-friendly pads. Just R40 provides a pack of pads to someone in need. Donate [here](#).

So, if you haven't yet, [sign now](#) and be part of the change!

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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