

This is an explainer article done as my *Professional Writing* class project. All the work here, including pitching, searching for and organizing information, writing, and designing visuals, was done by myself.

A WORLDWIDE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT: WHY PERIOD POVERTY IS A HUMAN RIGHT ISSUE?



Ending period poverty is an urgent global issue.

Image: The Economist

By Haoning Zhu
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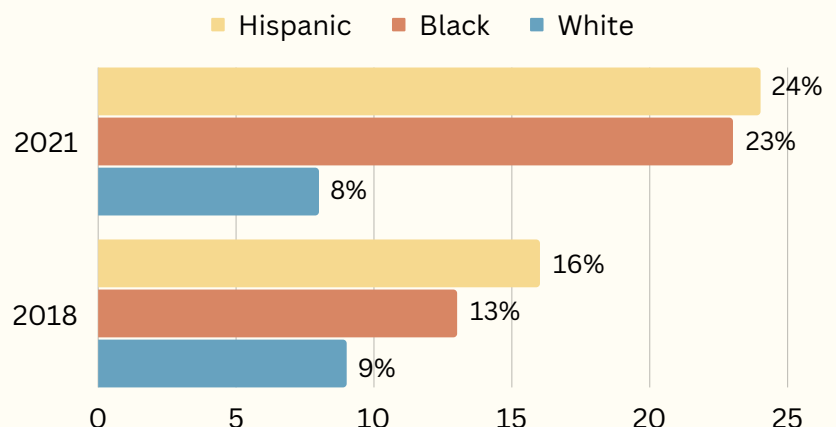
In the Indian movie *Pad Man*, the doctor says that every month, 10 to 12 local women would fall ill and lose their fertility because they can't afford sanitary products. Instead, they use stove ashes or dirty cloth to treat menstrual blood during their periods. Many women eventually died from it.

This is not just entertainment but a reality that can be even worse. According to [Days for Girls](#), over 500 million people worldwide, nearly 25% of all menstruators, are suffering from period poverty. Period poverty is defined as a lack of access to menstrual products, education, hygiene facilities, waste management, or a combination of these. Period poverty may prevent menstruators from attending school, working, or participating in daily

activities. A [study](#) published in May 2021 found that in the U.S., **2 in 5 people** struggled with access to period supplies like pads and tampons, and that number has increased by 35% since 2018. Nearly half of the victims have to choose between buying food or menstrual products.

U by Kotex Period Poverty Awareness Week – Survey Results in the U.S.

I have struggled to purchase period products due to lack of income/funds at some point in the last year - Strongly Agree



Period poverty can also lead to physical, mental, and emotional challenges. Many people feel ashamed and guilty for menstruating. Stigmas regarding periods as impure and dirty have always been very powerful, pushing menstruators to be more vulnerable. Some girls even have to engage in transactional sex to afford sanitary products.

Because of period poverty, people cannot access safe bathing facilities for personal hygiene. They are teased, excluded, and shamed in daily life. They are also likely disadvantaged by discrimination, gender inequality, extreme poverty, and other humanitarian crises. All of these problematic situations can severely damage their fundamental human dignity and basic human rights to be safe, healthy, educated, and be treated equally and respectfully. This problem is not only for women and girls, but even tougher for transgender women and nonbinary persons who menstruate.

Given all these harsh truths, period poverty should be considered a human rights problem. Menstruation is intrinsically related to human dignity.

I. Period poverty leads to untreated health complications.

Being unable to manage menstruation with appropriate sanitary products, many girls and women have to resort to leaves, newspapers, or other makeshift items to absorb or collect menstrual blood. For example, in Uganda, low-income women used banana peels, old newspapers, and leaves. In South Sudan, a 20-year-old girl named Nyanjuma Galoth who lived in a civilian protection camp used rags to absorb the blood flow, as did many other girls there. Women may also use old T-shirts, toilet paper, socks, and even plastic bags to manage menstruation.

Lack of access to the right menstrual products can lead to a greater risk of infection. One study



Nyanjuma can't access sanitary products in a civilian protection camp.

Image: UNFPA

suggested an increased risk of urogenital infections, such as yeast infection, vaginosis, or urinary tract infection, when women cannot use bathing facilities and change or clean their menstrual supplies regularly. The unhygienic products can also push women and girls into illnesses such as skin irritation, vaginal itching, and abnormal vaginal discharge. According to a report published by WaterAid, illnesses related to a lack of water, basic sanitation and hygiene kill almost 800,000 women around the world in a single year, making it the fifth-biggest killer of women.

Other than the physical threats, there is a direct connection found between period poverty, poor quality of life, and poor mental health. Menstruators in period poverty feel anxious, distressed, and depressed when they have to steal toilet paper and use it as pads. Young girls can't concentrate in class if they can't stop the bleeding until dyeing their pants red at school. Women feel concerned and humiliated when bleeding on the streets with a tampon inside their vagina that hasn't been changed for days. A study of college-attending women found that as much as **68.1%** of participants who suffered from period poverty had symptoms of moderate-to-severe depression. They also had higher rates of depression than the participants who did not experience period poverty.



Zainab, a girl from Yemen, said, "I always used cotton cloths, folded them and placed them in my underwear. I came from an uneducated family so I did not know that there were menstrual pads used for this purpose."

Image: UNFPA

II. Period poverty prevents many girls from attending school.

Lack of a safe place to manage menstrual hygiene and lack of medication to treat menstruation-related pain can all contribute to higher rates of school absenteeism and poor educational outcomes. According to the [State of the Period](#) study, many female students would rather miss class than go to school while menstruating if they can't access to hygiene products. In 2014, **1 out of every ten** menstruating youth missed school during their menstrual cycle due to a lack of access to menstrual products and resources, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [report](#). The rate has increased to **1 out of four** teens in the following years.



more than 4 in 5 students (84%)
in the US have either missed class time or know someone who missed class time because they did not have access to period products.

(Source: [State of the Period](#))

Schools, which should be considered all students' needs, often lack the supplies and sanitation facilities for female menstruation. Girls without adequate health care are very likely to feel discomfort or pain. Many girls in period poverty don't have pain relievers because they cannot afford it, but the unbearable pain makes them hard to concentrate on study. Additionally, some male teachers and male peers in low-developed regions may bully young women who are on their period. In some cases, they don't allow these girls to use the restroom, which would severely damage the girls' self-esteem and implicitly facilitate them to drop out of school.

The taboo of menstruation in many cultures is also detrimental to girls' school attendance. Since some countries and regions think menstruation is shameful and dirty, many girls have to isolate themselves for days during their period, let alone attend school. Girls who stay home four days out of every month for their period miss over a month of school each year, which puts girls, who are already less likely to have education opportunities, further behind. In the long term, poor school attendance can negatively affect girls' potential earnings, self-esteem, abilities to make a living, health conditions, and their sense of control. This can also deteriorate the situation that females are underrepresented in higher education and disadvantaged in the workplace.

III. Period poverty leads to workplace discrimination.

In many cases, women suffered from workplace discrimination related to menstruation taboos. One common misconception is that women and girls have diminished physical or emotional capacities due to their menstrual cycles. These ideas create barriers to women's developments

while reinforcing gender inequality. Employers and colleagues may not believe in women's working ability and regard women as inferior to men at work. Thus, men may be more likely to be recruited and assigned competent tasks than their female counterparts. This can prevent women from participating in the workforce, being promoted in their careers and getting pay raises, which leads to an economic loss for women and their families.

A study in Bangladesh showed that 73% of women missed work for an average of 6 days a month, making them to be much less competent at work than their male colleagues. However, absenteeism has dropped when the HERproject delivered enough sanitary pads to females and implemented a behavior-change intervention in the workplace, which illustrates that efforts can be made to perfectly solve the problem.

IV. Period stigma encourages discriminatory practices.

Stigmas and norms related to menstruation can reinforce discriminatory practices. Menstruation-related barriers to school, work, health services and public activities also perpetuate gender inequalities.

Stigma #1: Menstruation is dirty and dangerous.

Scientifically, menstrual blood is composed of regular blood and tissue with no special or dangerous properties. Yet throughout history, many communities have thought the mere presence of menstruating women could cause harm to plants, food, and livestock. In the 1930s, Western scientists wrongly hypothesized that menstruating women's bodies would produce a poison called "menotoxins."



An Indian girl sleeps outside her home, in a space cordoned off by a sari, when she has her periods.

Image: UNFPA

Even nowadays, some communities continue to believe women can spread misfortune or impurity during menstruation. As a result, these women may face inhumane restrictions on their day-to-day behavior, including prohibitions on attending religious ceremonies, visiting religious spaces, handling food or even sleeping at home. Thus, women have to live in a hut or livestock shed. They are also exposed to animal attacks or even sexual violence. Women are not treated as humans in this case and may lose their lives anytime.

Menstrual stigmas also affect if women and girls are able to manage their health and hygiene, even with access to cleaning facilities. Some cultures prohibit women and girls from touching or washing their genitals during menstruation, so they have to bear with blood and wetness in their vaginas and are very likely to be infected. In some parts of Afghanistan, it is believed that washing the body during menstruation can lead to infertility. In other places, women and girls are fearful that their bodies could pollute water sources or toilets. They believe they should be sorry about menstruation, and should sacrifice their health and comfort to not "pollute" the public water supplies for people who are actually oppressing them with the menstruation myth



In Rajasthan, India, 15-year-old Priyanka Meena sleeps outside her home during her period. She wears the same clothes and uses the same utensils when she menstruates; these are believed to be unclean and cannot be taken into the home, even after her period is over.

Image: UNFPA

(although these people may not mean to as they believe the myth as a truth). In this way, women's human right to keep themselves clean and live with dignity has been undermined during periods.

Women in some places would also burn menstrual pads to avoid cursing animals or nature. Some communities superstitiously believe menstrual products should be buried to avoid attracting evil spirits.

Stigma #2: Real women menstruate.

Women may also face stigmas and mistreatment for not having periods. Women who do not menstruate are sometimes disparaged as "not real women." Thus, some of them may be reluctant to use contraceptive methods that may affect their menstrual cycles. Yet at the same time, they can't protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy. In this way, their basic right to plan pregnancy is destroyed.

These beliefs can also adversely affect women who do not experience regular monthly menstruation, such as women who have irregular cycles and transgender women. The group of transgender people always face discrimination and are in the dilemma of

On the last day of her period, a woman in India, Poonam, burns her used pads to prevent animals from feeding on them, which is considered inauspicious.

Image: UNFPA

accessing a safe, private toilet. "There are very few sanitary-ware options for the trans community," said Tinashe Sande, from Transgender Intersex Rising, Zimbabwe. "In Zimbabwe, you can't find a gender-neutral toilet. You get told you're in the wrong bathroom. And if you enter the male bathroom, there are no cubicles or sanitary bins." All these difficulties trap transgender people into a sense of exclusion from society and our world, which may perpetuate their self-doubts about the public acceptance of their transgender identity as real women, since there are even no toilets available to them. Thus, transgender people's human rights are harmed by both the lack of access to toilets and the marginalization from society.

Stigma #3: Menstruation should not be discussed publicly and it is a women's issue only.

Silence about menstruation can lead to ignorance and neglect at the policy level. Former President Barack Obama talked about this problem in a 2016 interview: "I think it's because most of the people in charge of the tax system are biological males, and they don't fully understand the issues that



women face in their lives." Given the prevalent but unconscious stigma regarding menstruation as shameful, politicians normally don't set the public agenda to discuss period-shaming-related issues. Without officials' impact and power, the victims are less like to get help. The politicians and law-makers not only didn't take the lead to advocate for menstruators' rights, but they taxed the necessity as a "luxury" in over 30 states in the U.S. Tax on sanitary products thus became a discriminatory system on products based on gender, which costs menstruators over \$1,300 a year. If the necessity is inaccessible and unaffordable for women's basic needs, it is far from developing the country established on human rights.

Hiding menstruation from public discussions leaves women and girls vulnerable to access to healthcare and can perpetuate period shaming. During elementary school, young girls (including me) often hide sanitary pads on their way to the restroom as they don't want boys or other males to see the sanitary products. This shows a lack of general education on periods for all students. Many girls today still don't want to talk about menstruation with their male friends or male family members (such as their father or grandfather), as the image that periods are "girls' secret" is still prevalent and powerful.

While it is true that menstruation is experienced in the bodies of women and girls, including non-binary and transgenders, menstrual health issues are worldwide human rights issues. Talking about period-related problems is of significant importance to society as a whole. This means that men and boys must be involved in conversations about gender equality and promoting positive masculinities to help eliminate menstruation-associated stigma and discrimination. In this way, they can protect their mothers, wives, friends, and all menstruators. Open and inclusive discussions are always the first step to seriously facing a problem and leading on the right track to solve it.

As human rights abuse, period poverty needs worldwide attention.

To combat period poverty, here are some ways to save millions of menstruators at different institutional levels. As each role does its duty, our society will be more inclusive and friendly to menstruators and protect their basic human rights to be treated equally and live with dignity.



National advocacy: Governments should provide adequate infrastructure and access to affordable (or free) menstrual products to support menstruators. Sanitary products should always be provided in public restrooms, including those in schools and on the streets. It is good to see public schools and colleges in California are doing this.



The private sector: Businesses can support menstruators' access to facilities and products, contribute to destigmatizing menstruation at the workplace, and integrate menstruation management into their policies.



Improving levels of education and knowledge sharing: Knowledge sharing between organizations, communities, and schools should include all menstruators in the conversation and provide scientific education to the public to understand periods. People should be more comfortable to openly talk about menstruation as a normal topic. You can be the first one to start the discussion in public and correct people who believe menstruation is a "secret."



Further research: More research is needed on the effects of period poverty and how to defeat it.

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