



**PERIODS DO NOT  
WAIT FOR POVERTY:  
UNDERSTANDING  
MENSTRUAL JUSTICE**





## Periods Do Not Stop for Poverty: Understanding Menstrual Justice

ALEJANDRA HASBUN

Period poverty is a critical issue that affects many people who menstruate worldwide. The compounding factors of financial challenges and the high prices of menstrual products impact the issue that many individuals do not have access to them. It is distressing to think that some people cannot afford basic menstrual products like pads, tampons, or cups, forcing them to resort to unhygienic measures such as utilizing rags or toilet paper during their periods. The high cost of these products makes it even harder for people who are already struggling to afford other necessities such as food or shelter.

Menstrual justice aims to address and eliminate inequities and ensure that every person who menstruates has access to safe, affordable, and sustainable menstrual products. In most public bathrooms, menstruation products are not available, and those that are come at a cost. If toilet paper is free for everyone in public bathrooms, why not tampons or pads as well? Menstruation is a natural bodily process, if all individuals experienced a menstrual cycle, would products be more accessible? The average profit on feminine hygiene products can be as high as 70%. (3) Why are companies profiting so much from an essential product? This article will explore the root causes of period poverty, the economic and societal impact of this issue, the available aids, as well as suggestions on how to contribute to menstrual justice.

## ROOTS AND STIGMA OF PERIOD POVERTY

Stigma surrounding menstruation is deeply ingrained in many societies around the world and is the result of centuries of misinformation and oppression. The idea that menstruation is something shameful, dirty, or impure has been present in human history for a long time and has contributed to the marginalization of those who menstruate.

In the 20th century, menstruation was viewed by western society as a biological weakness that made women unfit for certain activities or professions. This attitude was based on the false belief that women were more emotional or irrational during this time. (1) Such ideas perpetuated the stigma around periods and reinforced the notion that menstruation was something to be ashamed of or to hide.

According to a 2022 study done in Canada on period perceptions, 66% of those who identify as women or girls have heard an insult regarding their period or premenstrual symptoms (PMS), and 44% have received an insult specifically related to their period. (2) These experiences reinforce the silencing attitudes and beliefs that periods should not be talked about, creating shame and stigma making it challenging for people to advocate for menstrual justice.

**66% of those who identify as women or girls have heard an insult regarding their period.**



# MYTHS

&

# FACTS

## MYTH

Companies do not profit much from menstruation products.



## FACT

Menstruation products have a high-profit margin of around 70%. (3)

## MYTH

Feminine Hygiene products are sufficiently donated.



## FACT

Feminine Hygiene products are the least donated item in food banks in Canada. (4)

## MYTH

Feminine hygiene products are cheap.



## FACT

Feminine hygiene products are not cheap. One box of 20+ pads or tampons can cost \$8-\$12 at Walmart. (5)

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PERIOD POVERTY

Menstruation products are costly, which affects all menstruating persons, especially those from low-income backgrounds compromising their menstrual health and hygiene. On average, menstruating individuals use approximately 5 pads or tampons per day during a five-day period, not including the smaller or different-sized pads used before or after menstruation occurs. This results in a lifetime cost of approximately \$6,000 per person for menstrual products in Canada, and up to \$12,000 for those living in rural communities. (6)

Period poverty has a particularly significant impact on gender-diverse persons, who may face additional challenges and discrimination in accessing menstrual products and healthcare. By addressing the financial barriers to menstrual products and promoting menstrual justice, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive society.



## CHALLENGES OF PERIOD POVERTY

One in three women in Canada struggles to afford to buy menstrual products. (7) Some people use whatever is available for their periods including toilet paper, rags, and even their own socks. This is often unhygienic for their menstrual health as well as takes away their dignity. Using these extreme measures can cause urogenital infections which can not only be uncomfortable but potentially life-threatening. (15) This becomes an issue of menstrual injustice, expecting menstruators to bear sole responsibility for their menstruation without recognizing it as a necessary part of the reproductive life cycle. (16)

Around 70% of women stated in a study that their periods prevented them from going to school or work at some point in their lives. (9) Not being able to go to class, work, or just walk outside because one cannot afford to have a pad, tampon or menstrual cup is socially isolating and contributes to negative mental effects and shame. (8) Also, it contributes to the further issue of discriminatory social narratives that menstruators are exaggerating for having to resort to these actions when in reality they do not have the support to deal with their menstruation. Period poverty costs more than just money, not being able to have access to menstrual products affects individuals' health as well as education, employment, and overall quality of life.

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## IS THERE ANY AID AVAILABLE?

Currently in Canada, there is no universal access to free or low-cost menstrual products, as there is no government-funded program or policy that provides these essential items. However, a few universities/colleges have implemented free menstrual products for their students like University of Toronto, Centennial College, Brock University, Concordia University of Edmonton, (10) and the University of Alberta. (11)

Concordia University of Edmonton's Campus Wellness Manager, Nicole Houghtaling mentioned that their Menstruation Equity Project had a lot of positive feedback from their students after the provision of these menstrual products in school. When asked why this project is important, Houghtaling stated,

*A lot of students can't afford the necessities because they have to pay their rent and tuition and there is not a lot leftover for food or other necessities. We looked at how we can help students relieve that financial burden (N. Houghtaling, personal communication, February 15th, 2023).*

Without funding, universities cannot do much to provide their students with free menstrual products without increasing tuition. The United Way partnered with the Government of Alberta to provide free menstrual products in 50 elementary and junior/senior high-schools in Alberta, which assists in overcoming barriers related to menstruation. (12)

Another source of aid for Albertans is Pop-Up pantries in Edmonton, one of which is located in Remedy Café on 109th Street. This project aims to combat period poverty by providing free period products to those in need. The initiative operates through pop-up pantries where individuals can access a range of menstrual products, including tampons, pads, and menstrual cups. The program is run by volunteers and relies on donations to keep the pantries stocked. (13) Pop-Up pantries and many other non-profit organizations or movements help alleviate the financial burden that some people have when needing to buy menstrual items, while also raising awareness about period poverty. However, a donation model can be difficult to sustain over the long term, particularly as needs rise.

## WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

Free menstrual products can help people be prepared to experience their periods as well as feel more comfortable talking about them, leading to more open conversations and education about menstruation, reducing stigma. In rural areas, where access to menstrual products may be limited and more expensive, efforts should be made to increase access and affordability.

While non-profit organizations have made significant efforts in addressing this issue, the government should be ultimately responsible that its citizens have access to essential menstrual items. The government has the resources to implement sustainable policies that will provide access to free menstrual products, while non-profits have to rely on funding and uncertainty.

Several countries have already implemented policies to provide free menstrual products, including Scotland, France, and New Zealand. The policies started after implementing free products in schools and later implementing free menstrual products nationwide. (14) If these countries can provide free menstrual products, Canada can do the same. Implementing policies to provide free menstrual products would not only benefit individuals who menstruate but also promote gender equity and reproductive health. (17)

## SOME COUNTRIES WITH FREE PERIOD PRODUCTS



NEW ZEALAND



SCOTLAND



FRANCE

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Providing free menstrual products is an important step toward reducing the stigma surrounding menstruation. The shame and stigma associated with periods can cause people to keep their concerns hidden, which can make the issue of period poverty worse.

Period poverty is a serious issue/problem in Alberta, Canada, and Edmonton. It is largely invisible and experienced in silence by menstruating individuals who cannot afford to access these products.

Period poverty not only affects individuals' ability to manage their cycle but also has a significant impact on their mental health and well-being. It takes away from a person's dignity by denying them the basic right to experience their menstruation with the necessary resources and forces them to resort to inadequate alternatives. By addressing this issue and promoting menstrual justice, we can support menstruating individual's well-being, allowing them access to a basic need.



## ABOUT ALEJANDRA HASBUN



Alejandra Hasbun (she/her), an international student from El Salvador, possesses a strong interest in the field of human behavior, mental health advocacy, and data analytics. In her spare time, her passion lies in traveling and exploring the world, immersing herself in new cultures, and gaining a different understanding of the world through meeting new people.

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