

# LET'S TALK ABOUT PERIODS

A Critical Analysis  
of Menstrual  
Inequities in  
Canada

## WRITTEN SUMMARY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Menstrual equity is the unhindered access to menstrual management products (ex. pads, tampons etc.) and educational materials [1]. It stems from the idea that there should be no disparity in resources and rights when experiencing menstruation versus any other natural bodily function.

It is important to note that menstrual equity is not limited to menstrual management products; it includes access to WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) facilities, access to educational materials on the topic, as well as the ability to discuss issues pertaining to menstruation without any fear or shame [2]. Period poverty is the inability to access these due to financial limitations[2].

Menstrual supplies are essential for managing natural and unavoidable bodily functions, like toilet paper, yet they are not as easily accessible.

**We are a pair of UBC students working to develop an understanding of menstrual equity and period poverty in Canada.** Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, we have mapped the stakeholders implicated in a system that maintains the status quo of menstrual inequity and gaps in the current approach to solving this issue. We believe that this research project is integral to knowledge translation and encouragement of collaboration amongst stakeholders to reduce menstrual inequities in Canada.

# Why Menstrual Equity in Canada?

In the last five years, the movement to promote menstrual equity has gained tremendous momentum. Canada removed federal taxes on period products in 2015, however, the effect of menstrual inequity continues to persist, especially amongst marginalized communities [3, 4]. This is reflected in our survey data, as only 22% participants think that periods are viewed positively in Canada. We are interested in analyzing the gaps in current approaches to advocacy for menstrual equity, as we believe it will provide actionable insights to progress menstrual equity.

## Research Methods

### Methodology

Our research methodology consisted of the following components:

- 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders who have been involved with menstrual equity promotion. More than one person representing each stakeholder group (see bibliography for stakeholder groups) was interviewed, where possible.
- An online survey was distributed using social media platforms. This survey was used to collect data on the perspectives of Canadians on menstrual equity.
- A literature review was conducted, which included an analysis of the academic, governmental and newspaper publications. Our search focused on menstrual equity as it pertains to Canada.
- University of British Columbia behavioural research ethics board standards were upheld through implementing anonymity in our survey and giving anonymity options to our interviewees.

## Limitations

- Selection bias may have occurred as the information gathered through the interviews were limited to those who responded to our email invitation only.
- Selection bias may have ensued as survey participants were recruited online, and therefore did not capture the perspectives of older adults and people who do not use social media platforms.
- Information bias may have ensued as the survey sample size was relatively small (n=102) and 88% of the survey participants reside in BC.

# CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

Key Stakeholders affected by the challenge:  
Why does Menstrual Equity Matter?

## Social Effects

### Marginalized Populations

Lack of access to menstrual supplies places those who menstruate at a disadvantage. The impact of this is higher amongst marginalized groups such as refugees, menstruators who are homeless, sex-workers, trans and non-binary menstruators, Indigenous communities, people living in rural areas, and people without access to WASH [4-6].

*“...ladies that I work with... live in...northern remote communities and so of course the cost of living in these communities...is **double, triple the cost of what it is to live in an urban centre**...food security is on-par with health product insecurity...tampons and pads can be triple the costs...**Indigenous women are impacted not because of their culture but because of the location.**”*

B. Blanchard, Regional Youth Representative, Native Women's Association of Canada

A 2019 survey conducted by Plan International Canada found that “34% of women and girls in Canada are regularly or occasionally forced to regularly or occasionally sacrifice something else within their budget to afford menstrual products” [7].

*“So if someone, for example, needs to go see a social worker or a probation officer and they're menstruating, **but they aren't able to purchase menstrual supplies, they just don't go.** We've heard of a lot of cases from social workers in British Columbia who have basically called and told us the story of not being able to go.”*

N. Adolph, Director, CLC Labour Participation, United Way of the Lower Mainland)

## Student Populations

Our survey shows that 67% of the respondents shared that a lack of access to menstrual products has led them to miss or has negatively affected their ability to fully participate in an academic or extracurricular activity on campus.

*“Others have shared they have not been able to stay on campus for study groups when the campus store and students' union office closes, particularly because **institutions often do not restock even for-profit machines in washrooms in a reliable way.**”*

C. Spicer, Women Students' Representative, British Columbia Federation of Students'

# Menstruators in the Workforce

Most workplaces don't have the facilities to allow menstruators to address their periods without affecting their work efficiency [8]. It is difficult for menstruators who work in isolated communities to obtain menstrual supplies, creating additional barriers for menstruators [9].

***“People may be distracted at work because they have to run around looking for menstrual products.”***

S. Tribe, Co-Director, Menstrual Research Institute & Women's Advisory Committee, City of Vancouver

Further, the inability to openly discuss issues relating to menstruation, as well as acquire menstrual supplies when it's needed, has an impact on the performances of athletes, dancers, and other jobs that require active participation [10].

***“Some athletes experience discomfort due to menstruation, which can affect their performance.”***

Interviewee 002. Athletic Coach at a Canadian educational institute



# Impacts on Health and Wellbeing

Evidence suggests that many menstruators who are homeless adopt unhygienic and unhealthy means of menstruation management, such as using dirty rags, socks, newspapers, toilet paper, using menstrual products for too long, etc. when menstrual supplies are unavailable [5, 6].

Studies have shown that inappropriate menstrual management methods are associated with a decrease in confidence and self-esteem [11].

Furthermore, individuals who are homeless use birth control methods to stop their regular menstrual cycles [12]. DEPO shots are a method of birth control, where hormonal injections are administered every three months. One of the side effects of this is that it stops menstrual bleeding [13]. As DEPO shots are free in certain provinces of Canada for youth populations, adolescents who are homeless are at risk of using this method of birth control to control their menstrual cycles [14].

*'I think a common thing that people that are experiencing homelessness do is turn to the DEPO shot, so you won't get a menstrual cycle, and...**[it] can play havoc on your hormones and your body.**'*

L. Sallai, Urgent Response Manager, Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association

In Canadian federal prisons, menstruators receive a limited number of menstrual supplies and it is difficult to obtain additional supplies [16, 17]. Poor menstruation management practices such as wearing a moist menstrual product for too long may increase risks of irritation, rashes, reproductive tract and urinary tract infections [18-21]. These infections, if uncontrolled, can have a detrimental effect on the rest of the body. In rare cases, overusing tampons may lead to toxic shock syndromes [22].

# Maintaining the Status Quo: Why Does Menstrual Inequity Exist?

## Underlying Drivers of Menstrual Inequity

Mental models such as cultural beliefs position menstruation as something to be ashamed of and concealed, while some religious perpetuates the idea that it is unclean [23,24]. The media contributed to this stigma by using a blue liquid to represent menstrual blood in advertisements for menstrual supplies and avoiding the word 'period' on television until 1985 [27]. Sex education in Canada does not teach non-menstruators what menstrual equity is, hence making it a foreign concept for many [25, 26]. **Without any educational intervention, these ideas are passed down through generations, and creates interpretive frames through which menstruation is viewed.** Current beliefs about menstrual inequity include the idea that is 'not a real problem', having dispensers in the washrooms is sufficient and menstruators are responsible for carrying their own supplies [28].

These perceptions, reinforced by patriarchal, colonialist and capitalist practices, create structural barriers to menstrual equity [2,3]. For decades, positions of power have been occupied by non-menstruators, who never encountered menstrual inequity. In the hypothetical world where men menstruate, as suggested by Gloria Steinem's essay 'If men could menstruate', menstruation would be associated with prestige and power [4]. The perception that menstruation management is an individual's responsibility meant that there was a lack of 'ownership' of this problem at an administrative level [2].

Washroom audits show that over 40% of the dispensers remain empty or broken. We learned that this is due to insufficient funds allocated towards maintenance, as well as a general lack of resources (ex. staff to replace used supplies). Similar patterns of limited resources are seen in other issues pertaining to menstruation as well.

# Lack of Policies and Governing Structures

Currently, there are no policies governing the universal access of menstrual supplies in the majority of Canada. No department governs menstrual health policy and advocacy in the Ministry of Health, making policy development challenging. Changing policy is complex and involving multiple layers of the government at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

Once it is brought into the discussion, the government may raise the issue for public discussion and gather more information on the issue. Economic factors such as taxes, fees and public expenditures have to be thoroughly considered before a policy action can take place, and these decisions will also depend on the elections and budgeting timelines [29]. This makes it challenging for menstrual equity advocates to make tangible changes in a short period.

# Lack of Funding and Resources

There is limited funding and resources available to support the initiatives promoting menstrual equity. NGOs, shelters and food banks are dependent on donations of menstrual supplies, which are not sufficient to meet the demands of the community members [30]. Additionally, those who are involved as activists in the menstrual movement generally participate without pay, restricting the time and resources that can be dedicated towards this due to competing priorities [30].

# Lack of Relevant Research

Menstrual equity advocacy currently lacks research that applies to the current landscape of policies, period poverty and its effect on marginalized populations, sustainable menstrual supplies, and the economic effects of menstrual inequities in Canada [31]. Without sufficient data of the true cost of providing free menstrual supplies, it is difficult for decision-makers to support policy change.

*“...if you have no research, statistics or data to tell you about an issue, you don't really have a sense of the scope. **A recurring theme in current research related menstruation, is that only some aspects have been addressed in existing research.**”*

L. Smith, Co-Director, Menstrual Research Institute & Chair, Anthropology & Sociology, Douglas College.

## Power dynamics between key stakeholders

The two key stakeholders maintaining the status quo of menstrual inequity are **community members and governing bodies**.

- Due to insufficient knowledge and deeply rooted perceptions, the government restricts resources that would allow for menstrual supplies to be accessed reliably.
- Community members also lack proper knowledge of the impact of menstrual inequity, and therefore don't advocate for legislative changes. Marginalized groups that are the most affected by menstrual inequity, don't share their needs publicly due to the stigma, and therefore their needs remain unaddressed.

# Existing Solution Efforts

## Community Education and Awareness

Community events create spaces and opportunities for dialogue, fostering awareness and education. In recent years, the number of such community events has increased in Canada.

Social media has also become an important tool to continue the conversations online and therefore reduce stigma and normalize periods [29].

## New Policies to Support Menstrual Equity

In 2019, The Labour Program of the Department of Employment and Social Development proposed changes to Part II of the Canada Labour Code to require federally governed workplaces to provide free menstrual supplies to their employees [32].

Additionally, provinces like British Columbia, Nova Scotia and cities like Toronto, Ontario have made menstrual supplies free for high-school students [33-35]. Saskatchewan and Newfoundland & Labrador have removed provincial taxes on menstrual supplies [36, 37]. Nova Scotia and cities in Ontario have also adopted policies to provide menstrual products to populations living in poverty. Many other provinces have taken pilot initiatives to provide menstrual supplies for a limited time.

## Advocacy Campaigns

Advocacy groups, including non-governmental organizations, unions, activists have taken initiatives to provide menstrual supplies to those who don't have access to it. Campaigns such as 'Period Promise' have been very successful in building a coalition to promote menstrual equity [38].

Corporate organizations that produce menstrual supplies have taken initiatives to give back to the community by donating menstrual supplies. Additionally, advertisements for these products now show the use of realistic red dyes to demonstrate menstrual blood, which promotes the normalization of periods [39, 40].

## New Research Studies

In 2019, The Period Promise campaign by the United Way of the Lower Mainland received a \$95,000 government grant to conduct research on period poverty [41]. The Menstrual Research Institute is a new organization that conducts research focusing on the impact of menstrual inequities in a Canadian context.

# CASE STUDY: SCOTLAND

The Scottish parliament has become **the first nation to provide free menstrual supplies to all**, on a universal scheme [42]. The Scottish Government provided the funding for these supplies, and local authorities are responsible for implementing the law. **It is estimated that 409 million menstrual products will be used and will benefit 1.3 million menstruators aged between 13 and 50 years annually.** The cost of this has been projected to £37 million [43].

# GAPS AND LEVERS OF CHANGE

## GAP 1

### Lack of Collaboration Between Stakeholders

There is competition between stakeholder groups for funding and resources.

## LEVERS OF CHANGE

1. A central repository containing updated information on menstrual equity advocacy should be developed. This serves as a hub for advocates to share resources and collaborate on campaign strategies [30, 44].

2. We also suggest that a national committee representing advocacy groups from each province is created to help maintain the repository and streamline the advocacy efforts.



# GAP 2

## Lack of Inclusion of Marginalized Populations

Marginalized groups such as refugees, menstruators experiencing homelessness, sex-workers, trans and non-binary menstruators, Indigenous communities, people living in rural and isolated areas, people without access to WASH are often left out of the conversation.

***“If we want to help homeless menstruators in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, for example, we ought to ask homeless menstruators what would be most helpful to them, and then accept what they say.”***

Lowik, A.J. PhD Candidate, Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, University of British Columbia

# LEVERS OF CHANGE

**1.** Develop intervention strategies that target marginalized groups. We suggest that these groups are consulted and included in the development of these interventions to ensure that their menstrual needs are sufficiently met, while preserving cultural and religious beliefs.

**2.** Appropriate language and branding should be used in campaign materials, and by menstrual product developers to ensure inclusivity. Appropriate language includes using terms such as “people who menstruate” as opposed to the traditional, gender-oriented statements that focus on females as the only menstruators [45].

## GAP 3

### Lack of Communication with Non-Menstruators

Many non-menstruators are unaware of the impact of menstrual inequity. Our survey shows that half the non-menstruating participants (53%) don't understand what menstrual equity is, and 77% of the male participants don't understand the term 'period poverty'.

***“Conversations with administrators across the province have shown that there is ingrained stigma about the “theft” of supplies and entitlement to take all of the products made available.”***

C. Spicer, Women Students' Representative, British Columbia Federation of Students'

## LEVERS OF CHANGE

**1.** The distribution of educational materials should include the non-menstruating members of the community. A common misunderstanding is that non-menstruators don't feel comfortable, and are not supportive of menstrual equity [46]. However, we learned that when community members are provided with the right information on the impact of menstrual inequity, they are more often supportive of the movement, although they may not be menstruating [47, 48].

**2.** An extensive teaching on menstrual health should be integrated in the sex-ed programming for schools through policy change. Creating opportunities for students of all genders to engage in this conversation at a younger age will help normalize periods [49].

## GAP 4

### Inappropriate Budget allocation

Insufficient funding is available for research and exploration of new programs.

## LEVERS OF CHANGE

**1.** Funding should be allocated towards research projects that explore a holistic solution to promote menstrual equity.

Menstrual equity advocates often use absenteeism from school and other educational activities to highlight the long-term effects of unavailability of menstrual supplies on gender equity. However, there is a lack of substantial evidence that investigates the context behind the positive correlation between absenteeism and poor menstrual supplies [5, 50].

While providing free menstrual supplies in schools is a step towards achieving menstrual equity, **we believe that a holistic approach is necessary to take effective measures.** There is limited research that includes the experiences and needs of marginalized groups, and we believe that conducting research that is inclusive of these diverse needs is imperative to achieving true menstrual equity [51].

**2.** Subsidy programs to make sustainable menstrual supplies should be explored [52]. Currently, Quebec is the only province that has taken an initiative to provide menstrual cups at a subsidized cost. Similar initiatives should be considered in addition to current approaches [53].

# KEY TAKE-AWAYS and LESSONS LEARNED

**As advocates of menstrual equity**, we have focussed a lot of our work on providing free menstrual supplies. However, we now recognize that this issue is more complex and a concerted effort by stakeholder groups is required. **We learned that interventions must address the needs of marginalized populations, and knowledge and capacity building should involve both menstruators and non-menstruators.** While governing bodies play an imperative role in creating sustainable change as policymakers, community members hold the power to influence these decisions.

The attitudes and beliefs surrounding menstrual equity are deep rooted and can only be transformed through education. In addition to addressing the underlying structures such as inadequate policies, educational interventions should be emphasized as an agent for long-term change.

Our study is limited by our sample size, the available literature, information and selection biases. Additionally, as this landscape is constantly changing, **we believe our research can be used as a model template for future analyses of menstrual equity.**

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