



# HMUN 2025

Combating period poverty and its impact on girls' education

UNICEF

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**Forum:** United Nation International Children’s Emergency Fund

**Issue:** Combating period poverty and its impact on girls’ education

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## Introduction

From as early as the age of eight, girls experience menstruation, a natural biological process that marks an important stage in their lives but also brings significant challenges. The menstrual cycle, while routine for many, is often accompanied by responsibilities, physical discomfort, and emotional strain. Beyond these natural difficulties, societal and systemic obstacles further complicate a girl’s daily life. Issues such as inadequate or unaffordable period products, limited access to hygienic facilities, and the pervasive fear of stigma or shame create unnecessary barriers for menstruating individuals.

These challenges are not merely inconveniences; they have profound consequences. For many girls, particularly in underserved communities, these barriers disrupt their education, hinder their participation in daily activities, and exacerbate gender inequality. The inability to access proper menstrual care leads to missed school days, poor academic performance, and, in some cases, dropping out of school altogether. This creates a ripple effect, limiting opportunities for personal growth, future employment, and overall empowerment.

Period poverty and stigma are not insurmountable challenges. They are solvable problems that demand immediate attention and collective action.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Absenteeism

Absenteeism refers to the habitual or frequent absence from work, school, or other obligations without valid reasons. It can result from various factors such as illness, personal issues, lack of motivation, or external barriers like inadequate resources or support systems. Persistent absenteeism often affects productivity, performance, and long-term outcomes.

### **Free Provision Acts**

Free Provision Acts mandate the free distribution of essential goods or services to reduce inequality. For menstrual hygiene, these acts ensure free access to period products in schools, public spaces, or workplaces, combating period poverty and promoting equality.

### **Less Economically Developed Country (LEDC)**

LEDC stands for a Less Economically Developed Country. These are countries that are still developing and relatively poor.

### **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)**

MHM is the ability to manage menstruation safely and hygienically, with access to clean products, private facilities, and proper disposal methods, while addressing stigma through education and awareness.

### **Period poverty**

The lack of access to safe and hygienic products needed for menstruation and the inaccessibility to basic sanitation and facilities regarding menstruation, such as education on the matter.

### **Stigma**

Stigma refers to a mark of disgrace, shame, or social disapproval associated with a particular condition, behavior, or characteristic. It often leads to negative stereotypes, discrimination, and exclusion of individuals or groups.

## **General Overview**

The menstrual cycle presents numerous physical and emotional challenges, making it essential to provide consistent and proper care for the body during this time. This natural biological process involves hormonal changes that can significantly affect overall well-being. Without adequate attention and appropriate hygiene measures, various health complications can arise, including urinary tract infections (UTIs), reproductive tract infections (RTIs), skin rashes, skin infections, mental health deterioration, and potential harm to the reproductive system, all of which can have a lasting impact.

These health issues can lead to both short- and long-term physical and mental discomfort, causing disruptions to daily activities and impacting other aspects of life, such as education and personal development. For example, the persistent discomfort or pain associated with these conditions can make it difficult to focus in school or participate actively in learning. Insufficient care for both mental and physical health during menstruation can lead to negative consequences, such as reduced school attendance and lower academic performance. Over time, these challenges can hinder personal growth and opportunities, ultimately diminishing the overall quality of life and well-being.



## Health Risks Associated with Period Poverty

### ~ Searching for Dangerous Alternatives

When access to safe and hygienic products needed for the menstruation cycle is inaccessible, individuals often resort to alternatives such as leaves, old clothes, newspapers, and other improvised items. These alternatives are not only unhygienic but also create an environment that fosters harmful bacteria, which can enter the body, leading to infections. It is important that menstruation products are accessible to all to prevent the use of dangerous alternatives. Moreover, broader accessibility to these products helps prevent the overuse of items like tampons, which can lead to conditions like Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).



### ~ Maintaining Hygiene

Access to hygienic products is not the only necessity; spaces that are hygienic, which provide clean water, which are closed off, are equally as important. Maintaining hygiene is important, as it cleans up blood residue, prevents infections, prevents bacteria from entering the body, prevents unpleasant odor, and helps women feel more confident, not having to worry about leaks or bad odor.

It is also important to keep in mind what products are being used during the menstruation period, as harmful soaps with a high pH level can interfere with the body's natural processes. It is important to keep in mind which products are being used. Not all products are safe, so it is critical that hygiene products are properly regulated and free from false advertising claims. Ensuring transparency and accuracy in product labeling is key to safeguarding women's health during menstruation.

## Mental Health Impact

### ~ Stress and Anxiety

Beyond physical discomfort, the lack of access to menstrual products contributes to chronic stress and anxiety. Worrying about leaks, odors, or being stigmatized can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and a diminished sense of dignity.

### ~ Depression and Social Isolation

Persistent challenges related to menstruation, such as absenteeism, isolation, and shame, can lead to long-term mental health consequences, including depression. Without mental health support, this can hinder emotional development and well-being.

## Period Poverty Steals Focus from Education

### ~ Odor and Leaks

Women should be able to feel comfortable and confident in their own skin. Stains, odors, and stigma on menstruation prevent women from being able to feel at their best. Many women experience anxiety over potential stains or odors, which can be a significant source of stress. These

concerns are unnecessary distractions that can be easily avoided with access to proper menstrual products. Constantly worrying about such inconveniences during school hours diverts attention away from academic tasks, hindering the ability to focus and perform to the best of one's ability.

#### ~ Discomfort

Furthermore, improper period products can lead to physical discomfort. Skin rashes, itchiness, uncomfortable products, and cheap materials all contribute to the feeling of discomfort during school hours. Cheap materials and ill-fitting products contribute to this physical distress, which can make it difficult for women to concentrate during school hours. Once again, these issues create unnecessary distractions that impede a student's ability to engage fully with their education. Over time, these factors can result in setbacks in academic performance and long-term educational achievements.

### Social and Cultural Stigma

#### ~ Taboos and Misconceptions

Menstruation remains a taboo topic in many societies, leading to silence and shame surrounding the issue. Cultural misconceptions label menstruating individuals as "impure" or "dirty," further isolating them during their cycle. This stigma discourages open conversations about menstruation, preventing women from seeking support or proper education on menstrual hygiene.

#### ~ Restricted Participation in Activities

In certain communities, cultural beliefs restrict women from engaging in daily activities during their period, such as attending religious gatherings, cooking, or social events. These limitations reinforce feelings of shame and exclusion, compounding emotional stress and perpetuating gender inequalities.

### Impact on Workforce Participation

#### ~ Disruptions to Employment

Period poverty does not just affect students; it also impacts working women. Without access to menstrual products or safe facilities, women may miss work during their cycle, leading to financial instability, reduced productivity, and professional setbacks.

### ~ Economic Inequality

Period poverty exacerbates gender-based economic inequalities. Inadequate menstrual care can force women to drop out of education or leave the workforce, limiting their opportunities for career advancement and financial independence.

### Impact on Education

When all the factors above are considered, it is arguable that the health hazards and discomfort of inadequate period products negatively impact women's mental state, thereby also negatively impacting women's education.

### ~ Missed school days

Statistics indicate that nations (often classified as LEDCs) experience higher rates of school absenteeism, which raises concerns about educational equity. Further studies show that this absenteeism is due to the insufficient support and resources available to manage menstruation. By not receiving adequate period products, some girls make the hasty decision to miss school. Over time, these missed days accumulate, leading to a decline in academic performance. According to UNESCO, approximately 1 in 10 girls in sub-Saharan Africa misses school during menstruation, translating to 20% of the school year lost due to lack of access to menstrual products and facilities.

### ~ Drop Out Rates

After reaching the blooming age, many face the added challenge of managing their menstrual cycle, which can be overwhelming. Due to these challenges, many of them choose to drop out. Statistics highlight the impact of period-related challenges on girls' education; girls are 2.5 times more likely to drop out of school due to period-related challenges when compared to boys of the same age group; in India, 23% of girls drop out of school completely after reaching puberty (according to Dasra, 2014).

All in all, the impact of inadequate access to period products and menstrual hygiene facilities on education is profound. The health hazards, discomfort, and mental strain caused by menstruation-related challenges significantly affect women's academic performance, with many missing school or even dropping out entirely. The statistics highlight the disproportionate toll on girls in lower-income countries, where the lack of resources exacerbates gender inequality in education.

Beyond absenteeism and drop-out rates, the long-term effects on women's educational attainment can be devastating. The loss of school days and the emotional distress from managing menstruation without proper support can erode self-esteem and hinder academic progress. The compounded effect of missing out on education limits career opportunities perpetuates the cycle of poverty, and reinforces societal gender disparities.

### **The Progression in Period Poverty**

Until recently, little action had been taken to address period poverty. It wasn't until 2018 that a nation first implemented the provision of free menstrual products in schools, colleges, and universities. While there has been notable progress in recent years, it remains insufficient to fully address the issue.

### **Timeline of Key Events**

**Date**

**Event**



- 2010** Launch of UNESCO's global campaign highlighting menstrual hygiene and education as a critical issue.
- 2014** Establishment of Menstrual Hygiene Day (28 May) to raise global awareness about period poverty and its effects.
- 2018** Scotland becomes the first country to provide free period products in schools, colleges, and universities.
- 2019** Launch of the "Periods in Schools" program in Kenya, offering free sanitary products to all schoolgirls.
- 2020** The UK government introduces free sanitary products in all English schools and colleges.
- 2020** Scotland passes the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, making period products universally free.
- 2021** UNICEF begins targeted campaigns in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to address stigma and improve access to menstrual products in schools.
- 2023** India increases subsidies on menstrual hygiene products for rural areas, significantly improving access for schoolgirls.

## Major Parties Involved

### Scotland

Scotland has been at the forefront of combatting period poverty globally. As shown in the timeline, Scotland became the first country to offer free menstrual products in schools, colleges, and universities. Thanks to their first step, other states and nations soon followed: New Zealand,

Australia, the state of New York, the province of Ontario, and more. This step put combatting period poverty into action, bringing attention to it globally.

Scotland took this even further by passing the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, making period products universally free. These bold moves have inspired other nations to do the same. They worked closely with NGOs and local councils, further ensuring the smooth implementation of the Free Provision Act.

### **Countries with High Drop-Out Rates**

Period poverty is a critical barrier to education in many countries, particularly in low- and middle-income regions. The lack of access to menstrual hygiene products and facilities often forces girls to miss school during their menstrual cycles, leading to higher dropout rates over time.

#### **~ Uganda**

In Uganda, menstrual hygiene challenges are a significant factor contributing to the dropout rate of schoolgirls. Nearly 28% of girls leave school before completing primary education due to stigma, limited resources, and inadequate facilities to manage menstruation. Many schools lack private restrooms, clean water, and proper disposal methods, making it difficult for girls to attend classes during their menstrual cycles. The scarcity of affordable menstrual products further exacerbates this issue, forcing girls to rely on unsafe alternatives like old rags or leaves, which can lead to infections and discomfort.

#### **~ Nepal**

Similarly, in Nepal, the practice of "chhaupadi," a traditional custom that isolates menstruating women from their homes and communities, has a profound impact on girls' education. During menstruation, girls are often prohibited from attending school and are sent to sleep in isolated, unsanitary sheds, which leaves them vulnerable to physical and emotional distress. As a result, many girls miss up to five days of school each month, disrupting their education and causing them to fall behind academically. The cumulative effect of frequent absences not only lowers their academic performance but also contributes to increased dropout rates, with some girls leaving school entirely due to the stigma and the challenges they face during their menstrual cycles.

#### **~ India**

In India, cultural taboos surrounding menstruation remain deeply ingrained, significantly impacting girls' access to education. Approximately 23% of girls drop out of school after reaching puberty, with menstruation-related challenges being a major contributing factor. In rural areas, where poverty is widespread, the challenges are even more severe. Many schools lack basic menstrual hygiene facilities, such as private toilets or access to clean water, forcing girls to stay home during their menstrual cycles. Without consistent attendance, these students often fall behind academically, ultimately leading them to leave school altogether.

These dropout rates underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions, including better infrastructure, affordable products, and widespread education to support menstruating students and keep them in school.

### **UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)**

UNESCO has been a leading advocate for gender equality in education, addressing period poverty as a critical barrier through its "Her Education, Our Future" initiative. This program ensures girls remain in school by promoting access to menstrual hygiene products, teacher training, and stigma reduction campaigns. UNESCO works with governments and communities to integrate menstrual health management into educational policies and improve WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities in schools, such as private restrooms equipped with essential supplies. By fostering open dialogue and challenging taboos, UNESCO creates inclusive environments where girls feel supported. These efforts not only reduce absenteeism but also empower girls to continue their education and achieve their potential.

### **UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)**

UNICEF has played a critical role in the global fight against period poverty. The organization focuses on improving menstrual hygiene management (MHM), particularly in regions like South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where period poverty has a profound impact on education. Through collaboration with governments and local communities, UNICEF has introduced programs to reduce stigma, provide menstrual education, and enhance access to WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities in schools.

By addressing misinformation about menstruation and training both teachers and students, UNICEF fosters open dialogue around a traditionally “taboo” topic. Its initiatives directly tackle barriers such as poor infrastructure, stigma, and a lack of affordable products, empowering young girls to stay in school and participate fully in their education.

### **Plan International**

Plan International focuses on raising awareness about the impact of period poverty and menstrual stigma, particularly on girls’ education. By running campaigns that normalize conversations about menstruation and distributing free or affordable menstrual products in low-income communities, Plan International ensures that girls can continue their education without interruption.

In addition to providing menstrual products, Plan International partners with schools to deliver education programs that teach menstrual hygiene and provide support for girls. By addressing these issues, Plan International empowers girls to overcome barriers, promoting gender equality and ensuring they can reach their full potential.

### **Possible Solutions**

The goal is to make menstrual products more affordable and accessible for those in need. Governments, schools, and organizations can work to provide free or subsidized products to those in need. Partnerships with NGOs or allocating government funding for menstrual health programs can ensure sustainable access. For example, schools and community centers can install dispensers that offer free menstrual products in bathrooms or public spaces. Removing taxes on period products, often referred to as the “tampon tax,” can further reduce financial barriers. Promoting affordable and sustainable alternatives such as reusable cloth pads, menstrual cups, or period underwear provides long-term solutions while reducing financial strain on individuals.

While access is important, it is equally critical that menstrual products are safe, comfortable, and of high quality. Governments and health organizations must enforce minimum safety and quality standards to ensure products are skin-friendly and non-toxic. Products made from safe materials prevent rashes, irritation, or discomfort that low-quality options may cause. Providing a variety of menstrual products, such as pads, tampons, and reusable options, gives individuals the

ability to choose what works best for their needs. Alongside this, educational efforts can ensure individuals understand how to use products safely and dispose of them properly.

A supportive and inclusive community plays a crucial role in combating period poverty. Schools could integrate menstrual health education into their curricula to normalize conversations and reduce the stigma around periods. Creating peer-support groups in schools and communities provides a safe space where individuals can share experiences, ask questions, and seek help when needed. Beyond schools, trusted community members and local leaders can serve as advocates for menstrual health awareness, creating a culture where individuals feel comfortable discussing menstruation and accessing support.

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