



Report

Period Poverty in Canada

March 2022

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 400,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is situated on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

We recognize and acknowledge the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done.

And, we dedicate ourselves, as a union, to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous Peoples in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

Women in Canada continue to suffer the consequences of pay inequity. They continue to pay more than men for basic items such as clothing, dry cleaning, and haircuts, etc. They also continue to be the primary care givers for children, elders, and people with disabilities. These responsibilities come at a cost, both emotional and financially.

Added to this list is the cost associated with having a menstrual cycle.¹ People who menstruate spend a great deal of money on the products they need, like tampons, pads, liners, and menstrual cups. And the cost of those products continues to increase.

Some people simply can't afford to buy these products or in sufficient quantities. This is referred to as *period poverty*. For women, girls, gender-diverse people, and Indigenous people who are living in poverty, in domestic violence shelters, living with disabilities, or experiencing homelessness, the cost of these products can mean that they are forced to choose food over their health.

Effects of Period Poverty

Toxic shock syndrome is a serious risk if tampons are left in for an extended amount of time. As well, a pad that is used for several days can cause urinary tract infections, fungal infections, and even infertility.

A survey conducted in 2019 by [Plan International Canada](#) showed 63% of women and girls have regularly or occasionally missed an activity because of their period and their concerns about not being able to access menstrual hygiene products or washrooms. The report also noted that 34% of women and girls have had to regularly or occasionally sacrifice something else within their budget to afford menstrual products.

Costs

It is estimated that the average person who menstruates will spend up to \$6,000 in their lifetime on menstrual hygiene (*CBC News*) products. Those living in rural or Indigenous communities can pay double the price for the same products found in larger cities such as Toronto. For those living in the territories, the cost is even higher. For example, in 2018, a woman living in [Nunavut](#) paid \$15 to \$18 per box of tampons or pads, whereas in Vancouver the same items cost between \$3 to \$11. Not only are the products' costs prohibitive, in these communities, they may be unavailable if cargo doesn't arrive.

¹ It is important to note that it is not just cisgender women and girls (i.e., those who were assigned the sex female at birth and identify as a women/girls) who menstruate. Non-binary people and Two-Spirit people may also menstruate. Transgender people who have female sex organs and were assigned the sex female at birth may also menstruate. Essentially, any person who had female reproductive organs at birth may menstruate. For this reason, this document uses the term *people who menstruate*. In places, this document refers to women and girls, specifically, because much of the research out there uses this language. This speaks to the need for improvements to the way studies are conducted.

Reusable products such as menstrual cups avoid an ongoing monthly cost, but for many they are cost prohibitive to purchase. For those that are experiencing homelessness, there are huge difficulties in finding a safe, respectful place to clean the cups.

Certain groups of women and gender-diverse people are more likely to experience period poverty. Women who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour (BIPOC), women living with disabilities, and immigrants or refugees, and LGBTQI2S people, are more likely to experience economic insecurity. In other words, they are more likely to have lower incomes and to be precariously employed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. A report done by the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) in March 2021, showed that the largest employment losses since the start of the pandemic have been in jobs that are low-wage and precarious and are staffed mostly by females. Many of the women are from racialized communities; there is also a high rate of individuals with disabilities. Women who had already been struggling to afford basic needs such as food have now been placed under more extreme financial stress, which leads to making choices between food, rent, and menstrual products.

Actions to Offset Period Poverty in Canada

In recognition of this issue, and in response to public pressure, governments have begun to take steps to mitigate period poverty in Canada.

Federal

The federal government removed the GST tax from menstrual products in 2015.

In May 2019, the government solicited feedback through its Labour Program on the possibility of requiring federally regulated employers to provide free menstrual products in the workplace. Feedback provided no consensus; more than one-third raised concerns about the financial burden of this proposal.

As part of its 2021 election platform, the Liberal government promised to provide free menstrual products in the same way they must provide toilet paper, soap, and warm water, etc. in federally regulated workplaces.

Included in the December 2021 mandate letter to the Minister of Labour was direction to lead the efforts to provide free menstrual products in federally regulated workplaces to help ensure women's participation in work. And in the mandate letter to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, the minister was directed to create a Menstrual Equity Fund for women's shelters, not-for-profits, charities, community-based organizations and youth-led organizations. This equity fund was to make menstrual products available to vulnerable women (in their 2021 election platform, the Liberals promised \$25 million for this fund).

The government does recognize that the provision of menstrual products in the workplace is an important health and safety issue.

British Columbia

In July 2019, BC became the first province to offer period products free of charge to students and to several non-profit organizations serving low-income clients. At the same time, the government provided a one-time grant of \$95,000 to support the United Way Period Promise Research Project to fund menstrual products for up to 10 non-profit agencies.

Alberta

In May 2021, the Alberta government donated \$260,000 to the United Way's Period Promise campaign. Through the campaign, free menstrual products will be available in over 100 schools.

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has no policies in place to offset period poverty.

Manitoba

Manitoba has no policies in place to offset period poverty.

Ontario

In October 2021, the Ontario government announced that it will distribute 6 million free menstrual products per year to school boards. This will be done in a 3-year partnership with Shoppers Drug Mart. However, Ontario's approximately 12 First Nations schools will not receive the products, as these schools are funded by the federal government.

The city of Sarnia did a 6-month project to provide free period products at several non-profit organizations in 2019.

Quebec

In December 2020, the National Assembly of Quebec unanimously adopted a motion to study the possibility of making menstrual products available free of charge in public institutions, including schools. Several Montreal boroughs and some municipalities in Quebec subsidize reusable menstrual products such as menstrual cups and reusable pads.

New Brunswick

In January 2022, the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development announced it will give more than \$115,000 to school districts to provide free menstrual hygiene products to students through the Never Be Caught Off Guard program. The hygiene products will be available in female and gender-neutral washrooms, and in locker rooms in schools with grades 6–12 students, eliminating the need for students to request these products from school administration.

Prior to this announcement, some New Brunswick schools had been providing products through fundraisers, or through donations, and some local pharmacies had been providing the products at cost. In some schools, teachers have been paying for menstrual products so they are available to students who need them.

Nova Scotia

In September 2019, Nova Scotia became the second province in Canada to offer free menstrual products in schools. The province has 367 schools that have grades 4 to 12. The Halifax Regional Municipality libraries have free menstrual products in their washrooms. One of the province's universities and the Halifax Airport have free products as well.

Prince Edward Island

In November 2020, the Prince Edward Island government announced that it will be providing free period products for students in a bid to reduce stigma and promote equity. The government is also providing tampons and pads to the PEI Food Bank Association and the 3 shelters in the province. Period products are offered to women free of charge at correctional facilities. The government is considering offering period products at post-secondary institutions.

Newfoundland and Labrador

The Newfoundland and Labrador government pledged \$30,000 in October 2021 to ensure schools with students in Grades 4 and up in the province will have free menstrual products in at least 1 of their washrooms by January 2022.

Yukon

A Whitehorse high school has been providing free menstrual products to students since 2016. The Yukon Period Pantry is a non-profit organization that aims to provide free, clean, and safe menstrual products to Yukoners.

Northwest Territories

The Northwest Territories has no policies in place to offset period poverty.

Nunavut

Nunavut has no policies in place to offset period poverty.

Conclusion

Government action to end period poverty is possible. In January 2021, Scotland enacted the *Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021*, making it the first country in the world to provide free menstrual products to all persons who need them.

Canadian governments must realize that what is needed is access to free menstrual products. This would go a long way to provide dignity to women, girls, and gender-diverse people rather than furthering the taboos that have plagued this issue for centuries. Canada needs a 21st century response to an age-old issue.

Actions

NUPGE's Advisory Committee on Women's Issues has been raising awareness on this issue for a number of years. NUPGE Components have been holding fundraising and product drives, raising awareness, and lobbying government officials.

Below are actions that we all can take to end period poverty in Canada:

- Lobby federal/provincial/territorial governments to
 - create poverty reduction strategies to ensure that Canadians have their basic needs met;
 - subsidize reusable menstrual products, such as menstrual cups and reusable pads, which are environmentally friendly;
 - provide free menstrual products in schools, shelters, community centres, and other public buildings, making them available in bathrooms of both sexes, allowing transgender and non-binary people to have access.
- Participate in actions taken on [Menstrual Hygiene Day](#). Established in 2013, this day aims to raise awareness and change negative social norms surrounding menstruation and to ensure that individuals have adequate access to products for good menstrual hygiene management.
- Donate to organizations such as [Moon Time Sisters](#), [Period Promise](#) and [Tampon Tuesdays](#) that are providing products to shelters and food banks.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. General Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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