



Period Poverty in Canada

Report

Updated October 2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 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 on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, 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 cycle¹. 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.

The Statistics Canada's Consumer Price Index indicates that the cost of personal hygiene products such as menstrual supplies has increased 6.2% over the last year. A Plan International Canada survey, [The Hidden Cost of Periods: A Canadian Perspective](#), conducted in April 2023, revealed that one-quarter of menstruating Canadians have had to choose between purchasing menstrual products or other essentials such as food or paying rent in the past year. Of the 1,000 survey participants, 82% believe that period products are too expensive. And this increases to 88% among menstruators aged 18 to 24 years old. 20% of participants reported feeling judged or treated unfairly at work, or in their relationships, due to their period.

Effects of Period Poverty

According to the [Canadian Public Health Association](#) 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. In India, approximately [23 million girls](#) drop out of school each year due to the lack of safe and sanitary menstrual hygiene management.

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.

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. According to the [World Bank](#), as many as 500 million people worldwide lack access to menstrual products and adequate facilities for menstrual hygiene management.

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. A single box of tampons can cost from \$16 to \$45 on rural First Nations reserves. 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.

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 the December 2021 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).

In November 2021, the federal government announced that menstrual products will be provided for free to all schools operated by First Nations on reserves and in federal

schools. It also committed that Canada would work with partners across the territories and Inuit Nunangat to ensure access. The government has so far committed \$2.5 million to increase access to menstrual products for First Nations and Inuit students across the territories and in Inuit Nunangat.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) has been undertaking research to better understand the menstrual equity landscape in Canada.

As of December 15, 2023, [federally regulated employers](#) will be required to make menstrual products available at no cost within the workplace in the same way they must provide toilet paper, soap, and warm water, etc. The initiative is inclusive of all workers who menstruate, including cisgender women, non-binary individuals, transgender men and intersex individuals.

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. In 2020, BC provided \$107,000 to United Way's Period Promise Research Project to fund menstrual products for up to 10 non-profit agencies. In May 2022, the BC government launched a Period Poverty Task Force with United Way with funding of \$750,000 and has distributed more than one million period products across the province.

The BC Health Sciences Association has a campaign called Stomp Out Period Poverty that is aimed at distributing free menstrual products to washrooms across the province.

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

In May 2023, the Saskatchewan government formed a partnership with The Shoppers Foundation for Women's Health to provide free menstrual products to women and girls across the province. 12 million menstrual products (worth \$5 million) will be donated over the next 3 years, with the government arranging the distribution to schools, women's shelters, and food banks.

Manitoba

In September 2022, the Manitoba government partnered with Shoppers Drug Mart to provide free menstrual products to schools, domestic violence shelters, resource centres, and second-stage and specialized programs. More than 3.3 million menstrual products will be donated to the initiative for 3 years, with the government arranging the distribution.

Ontario

In October 2021, the Ontario government announced that it will distribute 6 million free menstrual pads (not tampons or other products) to school boards. This will be done in a 3-year partnership with Shoppers Drug Mart.

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 would 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.

In July 2023, the New Brunswick government announced that its 63 public libraries will now have free menstrual products available in their washrooms.

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.

A [survey](#) was conducted in 2021 of 420 adolescents that found that 65% of the respondents did not always have sufficient money to purchase menstrual products. 40% reported that this lack of affordability is a cause of school absenteeism and lack of participation in sports or social activities.

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

As part of the federal government's commitment to provide free menstrual products in schools operated by First Nations, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) has partnered with the [Council of Yukon First Nations](#) to ensure that menstrual products such as pads, tampons, and menstrual cups are distributed to Yukon First Nation Communities and NGOs. ISC has provided \$525,000 for 2022–23, and the Yukon government provided \$100,000 in 2021–22.

Northwest Territories

The Northwest Territories is included in the initiative by the federal government to provide free menstrual products to all schools operated by First Nations on reserves and in federal schools, but to date it appears that no actions have been taken.

Nunavut

Menstrual products are now available in many Nunavut schools and health centres. [Indigenous Services Canada and Inuit Health Branch](#) have provided \$821,489 to Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. to purchase, store, and distribute supplies to schools and organizations that run youth programming in Nunavut communities.

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 providing dignity to women, girls, and gender-diverse people rather than furthering the taboos that have plagued this issue for centuries. This is not a privilege or a luxury; it is a human right! Canada needs a twenty-first 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;
 - include the expense of menstrual products as an eligible expense (similar to food and rent) in the calculation of amounts in public assistance programs;
 - create recognized menstrual-leave policies in workplaces wherein women are allowed to take paid leave during their period. [70% of Canadian women](#) have missed work or school because of their period. Countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and Zambia have these policies in place. Spain has a menstrual leave policy of 3 to 5 days.
- 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.

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COMPONENTS



B.C. GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



CANADIAN UNION OF BREWERY AND GENERAL WORKERS



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF SASKATCHEWAN



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MANITOBA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



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