

Resolution 1: Addressing Period Poverty and Menstrual Inequity in Canada

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Resolved Clauses

RESOLVED, That CFUW urge the federal, provincial, territorial, regional, municipal, and Indigenous governments to improve access to menstrual products by:

- Mandating provision of free menstrual products in washrooms in all publicly funded buildings, such as rail stations, incarceration facilities, schools, shelters, libraries, sport facilities and community centres.
- Updating legislation, including, but not limited to, occupational health and safety, building, and labour codes to require all washrooms in commercial/industrial/office buildings and transportation hubs to provide free menstrual supplies and water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities.

RESOLVED, That CFUW urge the federal government to reduce the cost of menstrual products by:

- Removing import duties/tariffs on imported menstrual products.
- Establishing a tax credit for all Canadians who menstruate.

RESOLVED, That CFUW urge the provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments to ensure that all publicly-funded educational institutions:

- Provide comprehensive knowledge of the menstrual process and options available for menstrual hygiene management that is sensitive to culturally and gender-diverse menstruators.
- Encourage open conversation, both within and outside of the classroom, about menstruation to address the stigma and shame felt by menstruating youths.
- Specifically address the needs of Canada's Indigenous and remote communities.

Background

Introduction

Period poverty affects menstruators across Canada, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, including Indigenous communities, low-income individuals,

immigrant communities, students, incarcerated women, and homeless populations. Period poverty results when “menstruating individuals do not have access to affordable, quality sanitary products; safe, hygienic spaces in which to use them; or the ability to manage menstruation without shame or stigma” (World Bank Group, 2021). The inability to afford or access menstrual products leads to educational absenteeism, workplace barriers, and health risks, exacerbating gender inequality.

A 2023 public opinion study (EnviroNics Research, 2023) reports that:

- one in six (17%) Canadians who menstruate have experienced period poverty; this rises to one in four (25%) if their household earns less than \$40,000 a year.
- one in five (20%) menstruators say they may not be able to afford period products at some point in the next 12 months, and 7% say this is very likely. Six in ten of the first group agree that inflation has increased inability to buy period products.
- one in four Canadians agree periods are dirty and unclean, and about one in five agree menstruation should not be publicly discussed (22%) and menstrual products should be kept out of sight (22%).

The period from 2020 to 2024 has seen a heightened focus on menstrual equity in Canada, with academic research, government initiatives, and community actions converging to address period poverty. While progress has been made, continued efforts are essential to ensure all Canadian menstruators live a life free from stigma, shame, and worry.

Period poverty remains prevalent, with 51% of respondents to a United Way survey indicating they had struggled to purchase menstrual products for themselves (United Way British Columbia, 2021). Poor menstrual hygiene, such as using one sanitary product for too long due to limited supply, or not washing regularly, can lead to reproductive and urinary tract infections, and result in infertility and birth complications (World Bank Group, 2021).

This Resolution urges all levels of government to take coordinated action to address menstrual inequity by providing free menstrual products, enhancing menstrual hygiene by improving WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities, and ensuring provision of comprehensive menstrual education.

Recognizing period poverty as a public health and gender equality issue aligns with Canada’s commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Goal 3, (Good Health and Well-Being), Goal 4, (Quality Education), Goal 5, (Gender Equality, and Goal 6, (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Resolved Clause 1: Improve Access

The federal government recognized that making menstrual products available, free of charge, in federally regulated workplaces improves the health and wellbeing of Canadians who menstruate (Government of Canada, 2023b). British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Ontario provide free menstrual

products in schools, while New Brunswick provides free menstrual products in libraries (Library of Parliament, 2023).

This allows individuals who cannot afford menstrual products to attend school and work, and change menstrual products as needed, rather than extending their use beyond the recommended time frame. Supplying period products also provides dignity and safety to those who cannot afford them by preventing them from having to explain why they cannot attend school, work, or participate in other activities (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2023).

The impacts of period poverty could be reduced further by expanding the number of facilities that offer free menstrual products. If provincial, municipal, regional, and Indigenous governments and their agencies mandate that they be made available in all publicly funded buildings, more menstruators will benefit. 82% of women in Canada support access to free period products in public washrooms (Plan International Canada, 2023a).

Ensuring increased access to period products in buildings that are not owned or regulated by governments will require changes to national, provincial, and municipal policies and regulations governing commercial, industrial, and office spaces. Revisions to provincial building codes could require all washrooms to be outfitted with period product dispensers and appropriate WASH facilities: separate, clean toilet facilities, toilet cubicles with doors and interior locks, lighting, clean water and soap and bins for disposing of soiled menstrual materials (World Bank Group, 2021).

Changes to provincial and territorial labour codes, consistent with changes to the Canada Labour Code in 2023 (Government of Canada, 2023a&c), will ensure that all employers—both private and public sector—supply menstrual products in their workplaces, and updates to occupational health and safety regulations will mandate the provision of period products more widely.

A cohesive framework that coordinates resources across the many menstrual health stakeholders in Canada is needed for the long-term success of menstrual health efforts (Days for Girls, 2024b).

Resolved Clause 2: Remove financial barriers to reduce costs

In 2021, Scotland became the first nation to require “local authorities and education providers to make period products obtainable free of charge for anyone who needs to use them” (Scottish Government, 2022). While this may not yet be achievable in Canada, steps can be taken to reduce the financial burden of menstruation.

Canadian consumers do not pay GST or HST on products “marketed exclusively for feminine-hygiene purposes”, but hidden taxes add to the retail cost of menstrual products (Moffatt, 2015), such as federal import tariffs, ranging from 7% to 12%, depending on the material used in production. Canada’s tariff code includes a tampon tax that burdens importers with red tape and generates minimal tax revenue (Moffatt,

2015). This tax should be eliminated.

Canadian menstruators will spend at least \$6,000 in their lifetime on menstrual hygiene products, with those living in rural or Indigenous/remote communities paying up to twice as much (Government of Canada, 2024a). Canada and the provinces currently offer a variety of tax credits for different populations, including the Canada Child Benefit, GST/HST credit, the Canada Carbon rebate, and the Canada's Workers' Benefit (Government of Canada, 2024b). A tax credit for menstruators would acknowledge that menstrual hygiene products are essential.

Resolved Clause 3: Remove stigma/improve education

Little has changed since 2017, when Human Rights Watch reported that “period shame, taboos and misinformation are still prevalent across Canada and have a negative effect on young people’s confidence and self-esteem” (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

This stigma and shame cause women and girls to avoid work, school, sports, and communal activities during menstruation (World Bank Group, 2021).

83% of young people in Canada (aged 13-21) say they have tried to hide the fact they are on their period and 50% have lied about it (Always, n.d.). In fact, Canada ranks in the bottom half of the 27 countries surveyed in a study by Always® with respect to society’s support for talking openly about periods (Always, n.d.).

Currently, there is a lack of comprehensive menstruation education in Canada. In 2023, 65% of Canadian women either did not receive any menstrual-health education – on anatomy, PMS, hygiene, and related topics – or did but it wasn’t comprehensive or inclusive of diverse experiences (Plan International Canada, 2023b).

Canadian educators need training to understand how discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, and stigma associated with menstruation can lead girls to follow unsafe practices. Indigenous, culturally diverse, and gender-diverse menstruators, in particular, are negatively impacted, as today’s mainstream menstruation education, if it exists at all, offers a “one-dimensional and primarily biological overview of menstrual health” (Days for Girls, 2024a)

To break down taboos and normalize menstruation, Canada’s sex education curriculum—at the elementary and secondary levels — must adopt a multi-pronged approach to menstrual health education (WAGE, 2024). Schools that incorporate information on menstruation into the curriculum for both girls and boys can reduce the stigma associated with menstruation, contribute to better education and health outcomes, have better attendance and retention, and promote gender equality (World Bank Group, 2021).

Implementation

Through its Canadian and global networks, CFUW is well-positioned to raise awareness of menstrual inequity. CFUW national, provincial councils, clubs, and individuals are

encouraged to take the actions below.

1. CFUW National could join coalitions advocating to remove import duties/tariffs on period products and to establish a tax credit for all who menstruate.
2. CFUW National, Provincial Councils, clubs, and individuals could:
 - a. urge the federal, provincial, territorial, regional, municipal, and Indigenous governments to improve access to free menstrual products.
 - b. work with community members to educate ourselves and the public about stigmas surrounding menstruation and collaborate with Provincial Ministries of Education to enhance menstruation curricula.
 - c. invite speakers to present on the need for menstrual equity in Canada.
 - d. use social media to generate messaging that normalizes menstruation and encourages conversation.
 - e. partner with organizations to raise awareness.
 - f. write to MPs and MLAs/MHAs/MNAs/MPPs advocating for menstrual equity policies.
 - g. further inform ourselves through research.
 - h. invest in, join, and support groups such as Plan International Canada and The Period Purse.

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