



Women Reproductive Health and Solving Period Poverty in the MENA Region; the Case of Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

Many women are currently suffering from period poverty due to the inflation that has been observed worldwide. The discussion of period poverty and handling this situation seriously is urgently required as it is and will always be an enduring issue if no action is taken. Period poverty can lead to serious problems, including reproductive health problems that arise from infections due to the lack of hygiene caused by the inability to provide simple period products. This issue was discussed previously by several articles and papers. More details, studies, and solutions that could be done will be elaborated in this policy paper. Moreover, the policy paper will also discuss countries that have already started taking action towards ending period poverty, and some NGO's and clubs that are working on that issue. Many studies have shown that period poverty has increased and that the level of reproductive health issues among women has increased as a result of this poverty. The articles only focus on how the economic situation led to period poverty in Lebanon and what it is coming along with it. These gaps will be eliminated by talking specifically on how this can end and how every person can help on an individual level, and how the government can help its citizens.

Keywords: Period poverty; Menstrual; Hygiene products; Reproductive health

Abbreviations: MENA: Middle East and North Africa; WHO: World Health Organization; UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund; LAU: Lebanese American University; NGO: Non-Governmental Organization; MHP: Menstrual Hygiene Product

INTRODUCTION

If gender equality can save lives, then the opposite is true as well; gender inequality can end lives. This applies everywhere; especially in the healthcare sector gender bias in the medical field may be able to cause long-term or lifelong effects and can even be potentially fatal [1]. It may not be thought of much, but gender bias is wildly spread in the healthcare field. These views affect how doctors view a patient and how they

treat the patient and can potentially affect the patient. Throughout time, females have always been treated differently than males, even medically. Fortunately, the MENA region has shown some improvement in this sector over the past couple years. Comparing the 2000's to around the 1970's, life-expectancy for women has increased by almost 20 years [2].

In many MENA states, especially in the Arab countries, women are being poorly resourced with what they need to

Received:	03-July-2023	Manuscript No:	IPJHCC-23-16830
Editor assigned:	05-July-2023	PreQC No:	IPJHCC-23-16830 (PQ)
Reviewed:	18-July-2023	QC No:	IPJHCC-23-16830
Revised:	03-January-2025	Manuscript No:	IPJHCC-23-16830 (R)
Published:	20-January-2025	DOI:	10.36648/2472-1654.10.1.60

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Citation: Tannous G (2025) Women Reproductive Health and Solving Period Poverty in the MENA Region; The Case of Lebanon. J Health Commun. 10:60.

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maintain and improve their health and talking about this poor treatment in many countries is considered inappropriate. This poor resourcing is affecting their health largely, especially their reproductive health. The World Health Organization defined health in 1948 as the “state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease” [3].

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, has severely affected the global economy and financial markets, leading to an increase in price of everything, including menstrual products [4]. The MENA region, and especially Lebanon and the Arab world, have suffered this large economic increase, and this has especially caused period poverty among many women.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) period poverty is defined as “the struggle many low-income women and girls face while trying to afford menstrual products.” The term also refers to the increased economic vulnerability women and girls face due the financial burden posed by menstrual supplies. These include not only menstrual pads and tampons, but also related costs such as pain medication and underwear [5].

According to the local non-governmental organization female, more than half of women in Lebanon have been experiencing the effects of period poverty, as sanitary products have been subjected to a 500% increase in prices [6].

Due to the high increase in prices of menstrual products, many women aren’t able to afford to buy them and are using alternatives such as socks, tissues, paper. Instead of actual pads.

This can cause several physical health issues including infections. Anemia, an eating disorder, may stop menstruation; many girls who can’t afford these products tend to even skip meals and stop eating, in the aim of stopping their menstruation. Not only is period poverty associated with physical health, but it is also associated with mental health problems, including depression. In fact, 68.1% of women who suffer from period poverty also suffer from depression [7].

Many may believe that menstrual supplies are limited to sanitary pads and tampons, but menstrual products also include pain medication and hygienic material, such as clean water. Women in some countries don’t even have access to clean water, increasing risks of infections as well [8].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methodology

The theoretical part of this study will be approached by using pre-existing articles and policies and analyzing them. This includes highlighting possible causes of period poverty and its effects on a woman’s menstrual reproductive health [9]. In the following upcoming section, the assessment and reflection of these policies will be discussed by comparing and contrasting those [10]. They will also be summarized. By using this approach, one could derive all the gaps and limitations

and possible solutions to fill these gaps may be found and suggested.

Various approaches have been done and researched when tackling the issue of period poverty. In fact, the several aspects of this problem has provided us with a clear understanding of the issue; where it stems from, affects what group of people, and solutions to help end this issue. Accordingly, research and papers done by previous researchers will be used to explain this issue.

Reports shown in research done by Hassan M et al., show that girls within marginalized communities did not know what period kits were, and they requested cosmetics instead. This shows and highlights the lack of menstrual knowledge, and this is the core of the issue regarding period poverty. The main cause of period poverty and lack of menstrual health in Lebanon is due to the increase in prices due to the inflation leading the increase in prices by ten times their original price. Due to that many women have decreased their consumption that is by reusing the same pad for a longer time or even using reusable pads [11]. According to this research, 79.2% of women have done that.

The following graph, taken from a study done by period poverty in Lebanon, 2021 shows the percentage of women affected by changes in their menstrual hygiene products access during to the price increase (Figure 1).

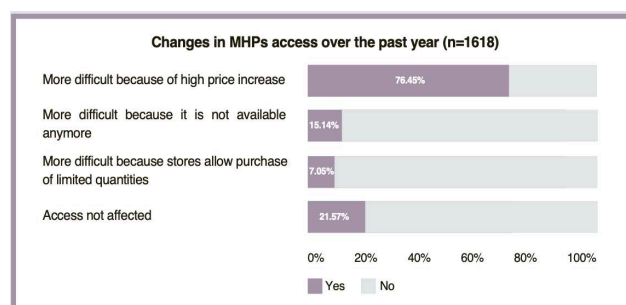


Figure 1: Changes in MHPs access over the past year (n=1618).

As we can see over 75% of the Lebanese population find it more difficult to have access to these menstrual products due to the inflation. More than 57% of women had to change the brand of pads used, and around 40% of women had to decrease the consumption of period products by wearing the same pad for a longer period of time, which as mentioned before, can have serious health problems, such as infections and even infertility.

Many NGO’s have started taking action towards solving this issue. As mentioned in many NGO’s such as Dawrati, days for girls, female and Jeyetik have started taking action by distributing free menstrual kits. Dawrati female and Jeyetik are giving awareness campaigns. Both female and Dawrati are empowering women and are lobbying and advocating to political effort to be done [12].

In 2019 and 2020, at the beginning of the economic crisis, the Lebanese government has set help of the prices of some products such as milk, oil, grains, and food products basically.

No help was set to help provide period products or even razors at a cheaper price.

DISCUSSION

Policy Recommendation

For the purpose of fighting sexually transmitted diseases, the French government has declared that starting 2023, free condoms will be given for free to people aged 18-25 [13]. Moreover, Scotland was the first country whose government aimed to ever provide free sanitary products as part of an effort to put an end to period poverty [14].

The government should help by making menstrual products free for everyone in need. Many countries worldwide have in fact begun this step, and all countries should as well. In November 2020, Scotland was the first country to ever start providing free period products, and then other countries such as New Zealand and Victoria followed by making it a rule that free period products should be provided at school. The government doing this is quite hard; however schools and universities should also work on providing them to their students. That could be done as a first step to prevent period poverty among students.

The secular club at the Lebanese American University (LAU) has begun working towards that. As of November 2022, they started providing free pads around campus. You can find these either at the first responders' office or at the nurse's office. However, there is a small gap and issue regarding this; the club has set a quota per person of 2 packs per month. Every woman's cycle is different, and every woman, depending on her cycle needs a certain pad size and thickness. Some women may require a pack per month, others may require 3. Setting a certain quota and having only 1 pad size is a gap in this solution and it is something that should be worked on. Moreover, the pads are found in the first responders' office whose head is a male. Most women won't feel comfortable going to someone and ask for a pad, let alone asking a male for one. Pads should be placed in places where women can go get one and not feel embarrassed or humiliated to ask.

Moreover, NGO's should work on providing menstrual products for people who menstruate; however, this does require people's donations and contributions. In fact, in May 2020, amidst the rise of the economic and COVID crisis in Lebanon, Lebanese women, Rana Haddad and Line Masri launched their own NGO, "Dawrati" to help menstruating women meet their needs. At the time, this NGO began by simply giving masks, sanitizers, and some menstrual products. Today, Dawrati offers 3 kinds of services for women and girls (Figure 2).

PACKAGE 1: THE MENSTRUATION KIT: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For those impacted by period poverty - Includes monthly menstrual products and offers extra pads and liners if needed 	PACKAGE 2: THE MATERNITY KIT: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For women who recently gave birth - To help in their post-partum journey - Includes monthly menstrual products and wipes 	PACKAGE 3: FIRST TIME PERIOD KIT: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For teens and pre-teens to help them before their first period - Includes pads, liners, girl amenities in a pouch that comes with a leaflet explaining about periods.
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Figure 2: Dawrati offers 3 kinds of services for women and girls.

Since its launch, Dawrati has helped over 5000 Lebanese woman. Local companies that make these products should be supported and should set their price at a lower budget compared to the products made abroad. Not only will one be supporting a local business, such as Sanita for instance, but also local products would be cheaper than name brand products.

Ending period poverty doesn't only require providing the products. If one is unable to provide these products, awareness can and should be raised. A group of girls did a documentary called "Jeyetna". Jeyetna talked about period poverty and in this documentary, 10 women who suffer from this issue talked about the problems they face due to not being able to provide these products. They also talked about periods, and had workshops about periods, sexuality, and several topics. They also provided a "safe space" that had therapists and consultants for these women, and they also offered women all the period products they need, in collaboration with several other NGO's. They also had a festival, and, in this festival, they distributed a "goodie bag" which had period products and a brochure with everything girls need to know about periods. It also contains all the medications one might need, and these women can also take whatever else they need.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it is undeniable that women health in general has never been tackled seriously. Period poverty is the number one cause of reproductive health problems within women. Not having proper period products leads to lack of hygiene, leading to infections. Infections in turn can lead to several problems. Nowadays, women especially women in Lebanon, are facing period poverty due to inflation. By raising awareness on the consequences of not using proper products, this phenomenon would decrease. Another way to contribute to ending this issue is finding ways to provide period products and make them accessible to women who can't afford them.

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