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# Period Poverty and Equity, on Campus and Beyond

## Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

Approximately every four weeks, many women and girls, and some trans men and gender diverse individuals experience menstruation. On any given day, menstruation is a regularly occurring experience for many students, staff, and faculty on a university campus, including the University of Manitoba, attended by more than 30,000 students and 9,400 faculty and staff in 2023-2024.

Menstrual management is costly. Research shows that in Canada, urban menstruators spend as much as \$6,000 on menstrual supplies, while in rural or remote areas, that amount may double (Brown 2019). While period poverty is most often used in the public sphere to denote a lack of access (financial or otherwise) to period supplies, we embrace a more comprehensive understanding from scholars and activists that includes access to sexual and reproductive health education, to safe waste management, and adequate and safe facilities (Lee, Toory, and Harrison 2024). Other barriers including access to preferred supplies, geography, safer washroom spaces and facilities, and clean water, and/or a combination of these, should also be considered.

## *The University of Manitoba's Menstrual Product Pilot Project*

The Menstrual Product Pilot project, implemented by the University of Manitoba Students' Union (UMSU) and the UM's Vice-Provost (Students) and Associate Vice-President (Administration), is working to make UM campuses a more equitable space for menstruating community members. The pilot project supplies menstrual products to ten washrooms across UM campuses. These products, available via dispenser, are only in female and gender-neutral washrooms.

## *Period Poverty and Equity, On Campus & Beyond*

In April 2023, a group of researchers affiliated with the Centre for Human Rights Research came together with an application to the University of Manitoba's Strategic Initiatives Support Fund, with the goals of working to towards menstrual justice. The team is committed to an intersectional feminist lens that asserts that various forms and structures of inequality work together and are exacerbated by others (Crenshaw 1989).

## *Our Method*

Our project looked at menstrual equity on the University of Manitoba campuses using a multi-faceted approach:

- In the Fall of 2023, we conducted an audit of washrooms on UM campuses. Over the course of two weeks, we surveyed 503 washrooms in 86 buildings counting more than 1,074 bathroom stalls (including women's, gender-inclusive, and men's). To our knowledge, this is one of the largest audits of period supplies on a Canadian university campus
- Between February and March 2024, we shared a survey to all UM students, faculty, and staff to capture experiences of menstruation on campus. After the data was cleaned, we received a total of 1,732 responses.
- We hosted several events and lectures on campus reaching more than 250 people.

## *Our Findings*

- Of the more than 503 washrooms we were able to access as part of our project, period supplies were freely available in only 15 (2.98%) washrooms.
  - Only 60 (11.93%) bathrooms had baby change tables; 8 (1.59%) had condoms; and 6 (1.19%) had sharps disposal boxes.



- Of the 503 washrooms audited, 43 had coin-operated dispensers for menstrual supplies. However, 27 (62.8%) dispensers were empty of supplies or malfunctioning.
- Notably, at the time of the audit, of the 138 washrooms audited that were designated for men, there were no period products available on any campus.
- 1,304 (77.9%) respondents reported that they had experienced starting their periods unexpectedly while on campus.
- 1,102 (66.23%) respondents shared that they had experienced a spill, leak, stain, or overflow of menstrual blood while on campus.
- Of the 1,732 responses to the survey, only 278 (17.23%) respondents had used supplies from the UM pilot project. 930 (57.59%) respondents did not know about the pilot project.
- More than 850 respondents shared having to miss work or class to manage menstruation, with impacts on assignments, meetings, labs, study time, as well as social activities.

## Key Recommendations

1. We advocate for the permanent implementation of free menstrual supplies in all washrooms on campus.

2. We urge the University of Manitoba to reconsider its decision to offer menstrual supplies through a dispenser model. We recommend that period supplies be available in university washrooms in a basket or freestanding container on the counter by the sink, or in a portable trolley/cart. This model has been implemented by a variety of universities globally.

3. We recommend the University offer a range of menstrual supplies including both reusable and disposable supplies.

4. We must ensure disposal facilities in all washrooms and considerations of the built environment. All buildings on campus must have gender neutral washrooms on each floor.

5. We recommend a more efficient system for managing and tracking available period supplies on campus. We encourage the development of an app to provide maps of: washrooms with available menstrual products, gender inclusive and accessible washrooms, and a refill request option for washrooms that are low on period supplies.

6. We encourage addressing menstrual justice as part of efforts towards Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

## Conclusions

Working towards period equity is not as a charitable endeavour to be ameliorated by donations of period supplies; rather menstrual equity is an issue of justice. Shifting the conversation from period poverty to menstrual justice means asking that all people who menstruate be provided with the resources, tools, and infrastructure to do so with safety and dignity.

## References

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