

Girls deserve access to the knowledge and support necessary to take ownership of their sexual health and make decisions to help them lead fulfilling, safe, and healthy lives. Their bodily autonomy is critical to their dignity as human beings and their right to be safe in the world. Girls Inc. advocates for policies that advance menstrual equity.<sup>1</sup>

## GLOSSARY

The following glossary is provided to ensure that readers understand what is meant by the issue-specific terminology and phrases used throughout this fact sheet.

### Period Poverty:

The lack of access to menstrual products, menstrual hygiene education, hygiene facilities, and waste management.<sup>2</sup>

### Menstrual Equity:

The affordability, accessibility, and safety of menstrual products, education, and reproductive care.<sup>3</sup>

### Menstrual Stigma:

A broad term for the discrimination faced by people who menstruate.<sup>4</sup>

### Tampon Tax:

A charge on menstrual products meaning they have a value-added tax or sales tax from which other essential items such as prescriptions, groceries, toilet paper, are exempt.<sup>5</sup>

### Menstruators:

People who have periods, or menstruate. This term is inclusive of transgender men and non-binary people who experience a menstrual cycle.<sup>6</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING PERIOD POVERTY

Period poverty is the struggle many women and girls face in affording menstrual products and increased economic vulnerability due to 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.<sup>7</sup> **There are different types of period poverty including: (1) access, (2) affordability, (3) cultural alienation, (4) environmental (lack of sanitary facilities), and (5) embarrassment and fear of embarrassment.**<sup>8</sup>

Access to menstrual products is a basic necessity, but current barriers to this access make it difficult for some menstruators to fully participate in school, work, and society. Globally, an estimated 500 million people lack access to menstrual products and hygiene facilities.<sup>9</sup> **In the United States<sup>10</sup>:**

- 16.9 million people who menstruate are living in poverty.
- Two-thirds of the 16.9 million low-income women could not afford menstrual products from 2021-2022, with half needing to choose between menstrual products and food.
- One-in-five teens have struggled to afford period products or have not been able to purchase them at all.<sup>11</sup>
- One-in-four teens have missed class due to the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products.<sup>12</sup>
- 14.2% of menstruating college students had experienced period poverty in the past year.
- 10% of menstruating college students experience this monthly.
- Tax on menstrual products ranged from 4.7% to 10% in 2019.

In addition to menstrual hygiene products being taxed as luxury goods in many states, period products also may not be covered by food stamps or Medicaid.<sup>13</sup>

### Plan Canada's 2019 Gender Study found that<sup>14</sup>:

- 68% of women in Canada felt that their period prevented them from full participation in an activity. More than half have missed school, work or social activities. Women under 25 were more likely to refrain from participating, with 70 percent.
- Nearly a quarter of Canadian women and a third of women under 25 have reportedly struggled to afford menstrual products for themselves or their dependents.
- It is estimated that Canadians who menstruate typically spend up to \$6,000 in their lifetime on menstrual hygiene products. And those who live in more remote, rural and northern communities can expect to pay double the price for the same products found in larger urban communities.

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3. What does menstrual equity mean to you? Women's Voices for the Earth. (2022, April 4). Retrieved from <https://www.womensvoices.org/what-does-menstrual-equity-mean-to-you/#:~:text=What%20is%20Menstrual%20Equity%3F,about%20education%20and%20reproductive%20care>

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## Why Does Menstrual Equity Matter?

Period poverty disproportionately affects Black, Latina, immigrant, and first-generation students at higher rates than other cohorts.<sup>15</sup> Individuals who are homeless or incarcerated are also at particularly high risk of not having access to adequate menstrual hygiene products, menstrual hygiene education, hygiene facilities, and waste management.<sup>16</sup> Period poverty has been associated with mental, physical and emotional health challenges including depression and infections (e.g. urinary tract infections and [toxic shock syndrome](#)).<sup>17</sup>

Menstrual stigma – feelings of indignity and shame as a result of being unable to access menstrual products and/or participate in day-to-day activities without menstrual hygiene products – further prevents discussion of menstrual issues including access to pads, the taxing of menstrual products, and even the ingredients used in these products that can be harmful to health.<sup>18</sup>

Menstruation is a natural biological process that affects half of the world’s population at reproductive age. Period products are not luxury items—they are essential. Everyone who does get a period has the right to affordable, accessible, and safe period products, no matter where they live or what products they use. Menstrual equity is about making sure that people have the knowledge, support, and choices to decide how they want to take care of their menstrual health.

## Governments Supporting Menstrual Equity

From 2012 to 2022, U.S. states passed nearly 70 [menstrual equity laws](#), representing real progress for the menstrual equity movement. These included eliminating the menstrual tax, expanding access to menstrual products by requiring them in schools, prisons, correctional facilities and shelters, and covering them in public benefit programs.

### At the State Level: New York, Illinois and California are Leading the Way

New York has passed laws eliminating the tampon tax and requiring free menstrual products in public schools, homeless shelters, and correctional facilities. Illinois’s laws include allowing SNAP (food stamps) benefits to be used to purchase menstrual products, providing free menstrual products in public schools, universities, and community colleges, eliminating the tax on menstrual products, and declaring an annual Menstrual Hygiene Day. California’s laws require all grade 6-12 public schools, community colleges and California State University campuses to provide free and adequate menstrual products in all women’s bathrooms, gender-neutral bathrooms, and in at least one men’s bathroom by the start of the 2022–23 school year.

### At the Local Level: Washington, D.C.’s Expanding Student Access to Period Products Act

In 2021, the District of Columbia’s City Council voted unanimously to pass the Expanding Access to Period Products Act of 2021.<sup>19</sup> The legislation requires free period products be provided in women’s and gender-neutral bathrooms in all D.C. public and private schools, universities, and vocational schools, effective in 2022. The bill also mandates the Office of the State Superintendent of Education to develop and implement comprehensive health education standards on menstruation to be taught to students of all genders starting from 4th grade.<sup>20</sup>

### What Needs to Happen at the Federal Level: Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2021

While several states and local municipalities have been stepping up to address the rights of menstruators, more action on the federal level is needed. Congress has passed just two bills allowing menstrual products to be paid with pre-tax dollars using a Health Savings or Flexible Spending Account and requiring federal prisons to provide menstrual products free of charge. Congress needs to pass the Menstrual Equity for All Act, introduced by Congresswoman Grace Meng (D-NY), which contains a number of components aimed at targeting accessibility related period poverty.



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16. Farid, H. (2021, June 1). Period equity: What it is and why it matters. Harvard Health. Retrieved from <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/period-equity-what-is-it-why-does-it-matter-202106012473>

17. See footnote 2.

18. See footnote 2.

19. Councilmember Brooke Pinto Introduces Bill to Require Free Period Products in All Public Facilities. Ward 2 Councilmember Brooke Pinto. (2022, February 2). Retrieved from <https://www.brookepintodc.com/newsroom/periodproducts#:~:text=Earlier%20this%20year%2C%20the%20DC,schools%20and%20post%2Dsecondary%20institutions>

20. D.C. Act 24-302. Expanding Student Access to Period Products Emergency Act of 2022. D.C. Law Library. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/acts/24-302>

## The Menstrual Equity for All Act, contains a number of components aimed at targeting accessibility related period poverty, which include:

- Requiring that free menstrual products be available in all public federal buildings and all federal, state and local correctional facilities (including immigration detention facilities).
- Incentivizing higher education institutions to provide free menstrual products to students and similarly expanding existing grant programs for elementary and secondary schools to do the same.
- Requiring Medicaid to cover menstrual products.
- Mandating employers with at least 100 employees to provide free menstrual products in their workplace.
- Allowing homeless assistance providers to use grant funds that cover shelter necessities to also extend to menstrual products.<sup>21</sup>

## Internationally: Canada's Menstrual Equity Fund

In Canada, close to 25% of Canadian citizens who have periods face financial difficulties in gaining access to menstrual hygiene products for themselves or their dependents.<sup>22</sup> However, Canada has made great strides to increase menstrual equity both nationally and in particular provinces. In 2015, Canada lifted sales tax placed on menstrual hygiene products.<sup>23</sup> While this was a significant step forward, the price of menstrual hygiene products still can be a considerable barrier for those facing economic challenges. At the province level, the Ontario government began a three-year partnership with Shoppers Drug Mart to increase access to menstrual hygiene products in schools in 2021.<sup>24</sup> In an effort to alleviate the barriers related to stigma and accessibility to menstrual products in Canada, the 2022 budget allocated \$25 million over two years to establish a national pilot for the Menstrual Equity Fund, which will help make menstrual products available to historically marginalized populations and people who struggle to afford them.<sup>25</sup>

## STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO ADVANCE MENSTRUAL EQUITY:

### Legislative Advocacy

- Advocate for federal, state and local laws to ensure all students have access to free period products.
- Contact your [federal representative](#) and urge them to cosponsor the *Menstrual Equity for All Act*, if they haven't already.
- Read up on common anti-menstrual equity arguments and helpful responses found in section III of this [ACLU Menstrual Equity Legislative Toolkit](#).
- Lawmakers must also prioritize funding for medically accurate, [comprehensive sex education](#) at the state level to ensure period education is accessible and available for all students.
- More research must be done to better understand period poverty in teens specifically. Congress should fund comprehensive impact studies on period poverty's effects on students and their access to education.
- Currently 23 states view menstrual products as luxury goods and impose sales tax on menstrual hygiene products.<sup>26</sup> Call your [state representative](#) and urge them to repeal the sales tax on period products, i.e. the "tampon tax".
- Find your city councilmember (typically listed on your city website) and ask them about the ways your city is supporting those experiencing period poverty. Advocate for free period products in schools, shelters, and community centers. It may also be helpful to share the menstrual equity legislation recently passed in DC, and even share some statistics on period poverty in your area (if available).

### Community Advocacy

- Advocate for school policies that ensure all students have access to medically accurate sex education which includes learning about the menstrual cycle.
- Advocate for school policies that ensure all students have access to free period products.
- Connect and volunteer with local homeless shelters, food banks, and any organizations that provide services to homeless people in need of free period products.<sup>27</sup>
- Consider hosting a period product drive for people to donate unused pads and tampons to those in need in your school and community.
- Engage in public education to raise awareness and reduce the stigma. By having open conversations about the importance of menstrual equity, you can reduce shame and build support for programs and laws that will expand period product access.

21. Meng Introduce Bold Plan to Improve Access to Menstrual Products. Congresswoman Grace Meng, (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2021, from <https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-introduces-bold-plan-to-improve-access-to-menstrual-products>

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24. See footnote 14.

25. Women and Gender Equality Canada. (2022, May 26). Statement by Minister Marci Ien and Parliamentary Secretary Jenna Sudds on Menstrual Hygiene Day. Canada.ca. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/news/2022/05/statement-by-minister-marci-ien-and-parliamentary-secretary-jenna-sudds-on-menstrual-hygiene-day.html>

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