

Government Response to the Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT, PERIOD: ACHIEVING MENSTRUAL EQUITY IN CANADA

Menstrual equity is essential to upholding Canadians' sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is the unhindered access to menstrual products, including water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, access to education, and the ability to discuss issues pertaining to menstruation without any fear or shame. Period poverty, defined as the inability to afford or access menstrual products, as well as period stigma and shame can have negative economic, as well as physical and mental health impacts. Menstruation can already limit people's ability to fully participate in school, work, and other aspects of their economic and public life in a variety of ways, and often due to stigma, shame, or a society that does not accommodate people who are menstruating. Period poverty further exacerbates barriers to participation, and it can force people who menstruate into unhygienic and dangerous practices such as using products for too long.

Many Canadians are concerned about higher costs of living and the amplified impacts on personal and household finances for low-income individuals. That is why the Government of Canada is continuing to make significant investments through targeted social programs and income supplements to reduce poverty and increase well-being. These programs and benefits include: the newly enhanced Canada Workers Benefit, the Canada Child Benefit, the new Canada-wide early learning and childcare system, the new Canada Dental Benefit, and the one-time Canada Housing Benefit and grocery rebate are helping to make life more affordable for Canadians today.

Menstrual equity extends beyond access to and affordability of adequate supplies of menstrual products, to issues of education to increase knowledge and reduce stigma, and of infrastructure, such as access to appropriate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities (WASH). These broader systemic elements are necessary and essential for full participation in social and economic life. Menstrual equity is an intrinsically multi-faceted and complex issue that requires cross-sectoral approaches, with responses from education, health, and economic sectors (e.g., procurement and employment).

Research and engagement conducted by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) in 2022, resulted in very similar data and evidence to the findings stated in the report. As noted by the Committee, "Menstrual poverty can have negative consequences for individuals who are affected, such as having to miss school or work because of a lack of menstrual products." WAGE funded research notes that 31% of people who menstruate miss sports, 25% miss school and 24% miss a social event due to menstruation (Environics).

Single-use disposable products currently tend to be in highest demand, but reusable products are becoming more common and tend to be appealing to youth, trans and nonbinary people, and certain cultures. Youth are more interested in reusable products due to their reduced environmental impact. Youth also demonstrate greater adaptability and willingness to experiment with reusable products, such as cups and discs, which may require an initial learning curve to understand how to use and clean them. The Government agrees that attaining menstrual equity in Canada requires implementing a multitude of initiatives that are inclusive of the needs of women, girls, and gender-diverse people who menstruate, responsive to distinct cultural experiences related to menstruation and provide choice or diversity of product to support autonomy and dignity.

Since 2021, the Government of Canada, has taken significant steps to addressing period poverty and its various intersectional barriers including:

- November 2021 – The Minister of Indigenous Services announced that Indigenous Services Canada will make access to menstrual products free for all students at First Nations operated schools on reserves across Canada.
- April 2022 – Budget 2022 committed to establish a national pilot for a Menstrual Equity Fund to assist in making menstrual products available to those in need.
- May 2023 – The Minister of Labour announced changes to the Regulations under the *Canada Labour Code*, effective December 15, 2023, to ensure access to menstrual products in all federally regulated workplaces.
- September 2023- The Menstrual Equity Fund pilot to address barriers to menstrual equity is launched and the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth announces that Food Banks Canada is selected to run the Menstrual Equity Fund pilot.
- December 2023 – The amendments to the *Canada Labour Code* come into effect and menstrual products are required to be available in all federally regulated workplaces.

As outlined in this response, the Government agrees with the Committee’s recommendations and is continuing to engage key partners at the federal level, and in provinces, territories, municipalities, and community organizations to further improve the measures and services for people who menstruate. The recommendations have been grouped under three themes in alignment with the significant efforts that have already been made, and that continue to be made, by the Government to address period poverty.

Theme 1: Access to Products (Recommendations 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10)

Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada consult with Indigenous peoples to address period poverty and accessibility, particularly in northern communities where limited access to menstrual health products is common.

Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada ensure funding for First Nations and First Nations-designated education organizations to procure the quantity needed as well as the desired type of free menstrual health products, including reusable and sustainable products, for students both on and off reserve.

Recommendation 4: That the Government of Canada, respecting the jurisdiction of, and in consultation and collaboration with, municipalities, provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples, support community-based and non-profit organizations, and grassroots initiatives that work towards menstrual equity.

Recommendation 6: That the Government of Canada make available menstrual products to organizations which provide outreach to vulnerable individuals, individuals who are in precarious situations or unhoused individuals.

Recommendation 7: That the Government of Canada, respecting the jurisdiction of, and in consultation and collaboration with, municipalities, provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples, and

other stakeholders, promote menstrual equity by encouraging employers to provide free or subsidized menstrual products in workplaces, particularly in low-wage industries where menstrual poverty may be prevalent, and by working to establish menstrual-friendly facilities in public spaces with well-equipped restrooms featuring sanitary disposal bins, sufficient menstrual product supplies, and hygiene essentials.

Recommendation 10: That the Government of Canada take all efforts, including through federal menstrual equity programs such as the Menstrual Equity Fund, and the provision of free menstrual products to federal government employees starting on 15 December 2023, to prioritize the procurement of menstrual products from suppliers that use environmentally friendly and sustainable materials in their production including supporting products made from organic, biodegradable, or reusable materials to minimize environmental impact.

Government Response

The Government agrees that menstrual inequity remains a key contributing factor to gender-based discrimination and inequality of opportunity in Canada, and that ensuring access to menstrual products is essential to bridging gaps towards achieving menstrual equity. For instance, 20% of people who menstruate say they may not afford period products at some point in the next 12 months, and 7% say this is very likely (Environics). Inflation has increased the likelihood of not affording menstrual products (Environics).

The absence of menstrual products can translate into physical and psychological health and safety risks for people who menstruate. When person who menstruates does not have access to appropriate and sufficient menstrual products, improvised solutions can be utilized instead, increasing risks to physical health. For example, a person may use a product for too long or use toilet paper to absorb or collect menstrual blood, which can cause infections such as Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) or other medical problems. Psychological health may also be at an increased risk as people who menstruate may avoid social spaces such as school or the workplace due to lack of access to products, menstrual pain or the shame and stigma that often surround menstruation, having a particular impact on inclusion, performance and productivity.

Current Landscape

The lack of access to menstrual products is closely linked to poverty and disproportionately impacts Indigenous peoples, Black and other racialized communities, youth, single mothers, immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, people living with a disability, gender-diverse people, and those who live in remote and northern areas. The federal government is committed to addressing the barriers related to affordability that some Canadians face when accessing menstrual products.

The federal, provincial and territorial governments, municipalities, and community organizations all have a role to play in efforts to tackle period poverty, and the Government recognizes the efforts deployed across services and jurisdictions. At the municipal level, there are a growing number of programs providing free access in public spaces such as libraries, community centres, recreational facilities, and in some instances, all municipally owned buildings. While the provinces and territories are advancing menstrual equity, progress is unequal across jurisdictions. Many of the existing programs and initiatives implemented by provinces and territories largely focus on providing access in schools and

youth spaces, leaving a gap for menstruating Canadians outside of the school system, and for youth during school breaks. As a result, the Government is committed to creating more equitable access to menstrual products and addressing gaps across the country.

Engagement

Since menstrual equity is a relatively new area of policy focus for the Government, extensive engagement was conducted by numerous federal departments to better understand the current landscape and community needs. Engagement to inform the different initiatives implemented included several types of community organizations (friendship centres, food banks, menstrual equity organizations), federal departments, provinces and territories, Indigenous partners, Education Councils, WAGE's Indigenous Women's Circle, and subject matter experts. Menstrual Equity was also raised by National Indigenous Women's organizations through their participation on ISC's Indigenous Women's Well Being Advisory Committee (IWAC). The Labour Program, at Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) published their engagement and survey findings as well as the proposed Regulations which were both open for public comment and feedback.

The engagement process, spanning from spring to fall of 2022, underscored that initiatives to increase access to menstrual products must take geographic location and personal choice considerations into account. For example, for people who menstruate who reside in the North, a significant barrier to access relates to the challenges of procurement and shipment of products, along with high costs. The risk of scarcity and concern that the products are not predictably available in rural, remote and northern communities impacts the psychological health of the people who menstruate in those areas. Choice in menstrual products and easy access are critical to respect cultural considerations and personal preference.

Access to Reusable and Sustainable Products

The environmental impact of reusable products was raised during engagement. There is modest interest in reusable products where only 30% of current and future individuals who menstruate identify as very likely to use them in the future (Environics). From engagement sessions, stakeholders from 2SLGBTQI+ communities reported that gender neutral period underwear can often be gender affirming for gender diverse people as it can help lessen gender dysphoria. However, reusable products are a privilege that many marginalized people cannot access, not only because of the initial investment to purchase products, but a lack of access to private bathrooms, clean water, and laundry services for certain populations; and barriers to education on how to properly use and care for products, such as cups and discs. For those who are not as interested in reusable products, the main barriers are hygiene concerns and the effort involved in cleaning reusable products (i.e., inconvenience) (Environics).

Therefore, where appropriate, as part of the MEF pilot, Food Banks Canada will test the uptake of reusable products in a select number of communities, including in the North. In regard to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation amendments in the *Canada Labour Code*, guidelines are provided for basic specifications of authorized menstrual products. For example, tampons have been specified to have cardboard applicators where feasible and all products are to be scent free, but ultimately, the choice of menstrual products is at the discretion of employers. While tampons and pads

are the menstrual products required by the regulations, employers may also consider reusable products as they create less waste and have a positive environmental impact. Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) is working closely with product suppliers to purchase the most sustainable products available.

Access for Community-Based Organizations

Understanding the complex and structural nature of period poverty, the Government has prioritized a number of new initiatives aimed at making menstrual products available to those who menstruate. The Department of Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) is piloting a national Menstrual Equity Fund to provide access to free menstrual products to individuals in need, specifically to low-income Canadians in women's shelters, and those who access services of not-for-profits, charities, community-based organizations, and youth-led organizations. The Menstrual Equity Fund pilot design was informed by engagement activities to ensure those who need these products the most will have access to them. On September 21, 2023, Food Banks Canada was announced as the national organization that will receive \$17.9 million to run the pilot. With its extensive network of local food bank sites and partner community-based organizations across the country, as well as its capacity to mobilize the private sector, Food Banks Canada is dedicating over \$15 million of the pilot funding to the purchase and distribution of menstrual products reaching individuals in need in communities located across Canada. The remaining funds are dedicated to scaling up education and awareness activities.

Access on First Nations Reserves and in the North

Access to products varies across Canadian cities and regions, particularly in rural, remote and northern areas where there is limited supply and prices are much higher. Due to the procurement and transportation realities of remote and northern regions, there is no cohesive approach to distributing menstrual products. However, with funding from the Government of Canada, First Nations living on reserve and Indigenous communities in the North, are developing their own menstrual product initiatives as they are best placed to make decisions on how best to serve the needs of their communities.

Since 2021, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) has provided \$11.4 million in funding to support access to menstrual products for First Nations students on reserve. Also, \$5.7 million has been funded to partners across the North. Funding recipients have flexibility on how to best direct ISC's allocation in support of the availability of menstrual products in schools and to determine how best to purchase and distribute products to their students.

In Nunavut, the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) is collaborating with the Government of Nunavut's Department of Education to distribute menstrual products to schools in all Nunavut communities. NTI is also working to identify community organizations in Nunavut that offer youth programming to provide menstrual products and dispensers, and it is working with an Inuit-owned business to facilitate the purchase and shipping of menstrual products.

In the Northwest Territories (NWT), the Gwich'in Tribal Council and the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation partnered to provide free tampons, pads and menstrual cups to schools through the Beaufort Delta District Education Council (BDDEC), as well as free menstrual products to young women and girls across the region through community centres. With the support of BDDEC, education and supportive

information regarding health and well-being was also provided. Additionally, funding was provided to NWT's other education bodies to ensure free menstrual products are made available through their schools.

The Council of Yukon First Nations is working with Yukon First Nations to distribute a variety of free menstrual products (pads, tampons, and menstrual cups). The Council is implementing a phased approach to install menstrual product dispensers in schools and other public facilities frequented by young persons across the Yukon. A long-term vision of providing ongoing access to free menstrual products in addition to continuing to educate and raise awareness on issues impacting the health of Yukon First Nations women and girls is currently being pursued.

For remote communities in Quebec and Labrador, ISC is providing funding to reach those in need. For Inuit communities in Nunavik, ISC is funding the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services to manage and implement the procurement and distribution of menstrual products. In Nunatsiavut, ISC has provided funding to manage and implement the distribution of menstrual products to Inuit communities. These products were distributed by the schools, youth staff and Inuit Child First Initiative services workers.

Another northern initiative, led by Nutrition North Canada, is a food security program that provides support to 125 isolated, northern communities through its subsidy program, the Harvesters Support Grant, and the Community Food Programs Fund. In 2019, following the recommendations of Program partners, Nutrition North Canada added menstrual products to the eligibility list to ensure these products remain accessible and affordable. Additionally, Nutrition North Canada is actively partnering with local food banks and Indigenous organizations to expand the food banking network in isolated communities. Items shipped by local food banks, such as menstrual products, to eligible communities are subsidized by the Program and distributed to community members at no cost.

Access in the Workplace

An Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) led project will ensure the provision of menstrual products in federally regulated workplaces, recognizing they are a basic necessity. It is estimated that approximately 35% of federally regulated employees require menstrual products on a regular basis. The Regulations also ensure that a covered container for the disposal of menstrual products is provided in each toilet compartment. The absence of proper waste and sanitation may result in people who menstruate not changing their menstrual product as recommended, contributing to poor health and sanitation practices.

Federally regulated workplaces span various industries and working conditions. For example, in some circumstances, it is challenging to access the necessary products due to location of the workplace such as remote work sites, rail, air and road transportation. As a result, amendments have been made to *the Aviation Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (AOHSR)*, *the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (COHSR)*, *the Maritime Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (MOHSR)*, *the On-Board Trains Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (OTOHSR)*, and *the Oil and Gas Occupational Safety and Health Regulations (OGOSHR)* which will require employers to provide menstrual products for the use of employees in each washroom in workplaces they control.

Employers must make sure menstrual products are clean and hygienic and readily available for employees. Although the Regulations will not require employers to purchase and install menstrual product dispensers, it is expected that large business employers will choose to install these dispensers in order to maintain the products in a sanitary condition. Small business employers are expected to provide the products directly out of the box, rather than purchasing dispensers. The Regulations will also require one covered container for the disposal of menstrual products to be installed in every toilet compartment (stall) across the federal jurisdiction, in women's, men's, and all-access washrooms.

Theme 2: Access to WASH (Recommendations 3, 5)

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada ensure all First Nations communities have reliable access to clean water and safely lift, as soon as possible, all long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves in Canada.

Recommendation 5: That the Government of Canada ensure access to menstrual products for transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse individuals by increasing the number of safe spaces and gender-neutral washrooms and ensure menstrual equity programs and services are inclusive in a manner that treats individuals with dignity and addresses barriers in accessing menstrual products.

Government Response

The Government agrees that addressing menstrual equity goes beyond access to products and must include reliable and safe access to clean water, hygiene facilities, and waste management. Having limited or no access to sanitation and waste facilities makes it challenging for people who menstruate to manage their periods safely, particularly impacting those who are unhoused, or living on a low-income. The lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities inhibits dignity, autonomy and choice for people who menstruate. For example, the majority of reusable menstrual products require access to clean water and, in some cases, laundering facilities, highlighting the importance of addressing underlying structural inequities alongside distribution initiatives.

Access to Clean Water

Since 2015, the Government of Canada has committed to ending all long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on-reserve as it works with First Nations partners to ensure all communities have reliable access to safe, clean water. First Nations manage and operate their water and wastewater systems, while Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) provides funding for water services and infrastructure, including the construction, upgrade, operation and maintenance of water and wastewater treatment facilities on First Nations lands.

Since 2016, and as of September 30, 2023, more than \$3.6 billion of targeted funding has been invested to support water and wastewater projects in 591 First Nations communities serving approximately 471,000 people. In Budget 2019, the Government invested \$605.6 million over four years, starting in 2020-21, with \$184.9 million each year thereafter, to support the operations and maintenance of First Nations' community water and wastewater assets. In addition, the 2020 Fall Economic Statement committed to an additional \$616.3 million over six years, starting in 2020-21, and \$114.1 million each

year thereafter, to increase support for operations and maintenance of water and wastewater infrastructure on reserves, including training and certification of water system operators.

With support from the Government of Canada, First Nations have lifted 143 long-term drinking water advisories and prevented 267 short-term advisories from becoming long-term. Action plans are in place in 26 communities to resolve the remaining 28 long-term advisories. Government funding has also been used to launch 1,244 water and wastewater projects, including 124 new water and wastewater treatment plants and lagoons, and 851 projects to renovate or upgrade existing infrastructure.

Access to Inclusive Facilities

Trans, non-binary and gender diverse people who menstruate are among those at greater risk for experiencing period poverty. The availability of inclusive washrooms and facilities is one area of concern that the Government is beginning to address. Under the Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan, Priority 6 - “Embed 2SLGBTQI+ issues in the work of the Government of Canada,” the Government of Canada will lead by example, as the largest employer in Canada, to continue building and maintaining 2SLGBTQI+ inclusive federal workplaces.

The Government recognizes that the provision of gender inclusive washrooms is essential for the safety and dignity of transgender, non-binary or gender diverse employees and the public who use Government of Canada facilities. PSPC, for example, manages one of the country’s largest and most diverse portfolios of real estate. PSPC facilities provide physical workplaces for 105 Government of Canada departments and agencies and more than 300,000 employees in crown-owned buildings and leased facilities. PSPC has been and continues to be proactive in providing access to inclusive washrooms through three key actions. First, PSPC is focused on ensuring that there are individual universal or all-access washrooms available in federal office buildings that are intended to be used by anyone, giving choices to people in those facilities. Currently, 75% of PSPC assets have at least one universal or all access washroom and implementation is planned or under review for the remainder.

PSPC is taking a comprehensive approach to adopting inclusive washrooms in its existing infrastructures as well as new constructions and major renovations. The Department is implementing an action plan, that includes short, medium, and long-term activities, such as a stakeholder engagement plan and the creation of a comprehensive *PSPC Inclusive Washroom Design Directive*. Furthermore, PSPC is initiating pilot projects for multi-stall inclusive washrooms that are leveraging the experiences and results of other federal departments and agencies that have completed similar projects.

Additionally, gender-neutral self-contained washrooms are the new standard for washroom facilities in Canada’s Parliamentary Precinct. For example, all washrooms in the restored and modernized Centre Block and new Parliament Welcome Centre (approximately 230 in total) will be open for use by all persons, rather than being designated for men and women. Similarly, the Department of National Defense (DND) is continuing efforts to increase the number of safe spaces and gender-neutral washrooms. The new class of Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships will have toilets and wash places built to be gender-neutral with individual shower and toilet stalls.

Currently, the *Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations* include requirements for the number of toilets that must be provided in the workplace per number of employees of each sex; no reference is

made to count toilets that are not specific to sex. Proposed amendments to Regulations in the *Canada Labour Code* would include the recognition of all toilets. The Regulations specify that menstrual products must be provided in all washrooms, regardless of gender. This means that every female-identified, male-identified and all gender washrooms will need to have menstrual products and a covered container for disposal.

Given the range of workplaces falling under federal jurisdiction, the Regulations allow employers to provide menstrual products in another location in the same workplace when it is not feasible to provide them in a washroom, as long as the location allows for discreet, easy access and employee privacy is maintained. Unrestricted access to menstrual products better protects employees who menstruate and makes sure that they feel safe to use the washroom that best reflects their gender.

Theme 3: Research, Analysis, and Awareness (Recommendations 8, 9, 11)

Recommendation 8: That the Government of Canada, when the Menstrual Equity Fund pilot project ends in March 2024, review it to:

- ***evaluate whether the funding provided helped reduce menstrual poverty in Canada and break down barriers to accessing menstrual products, including financial and geographical barriers;***
- ***determine whether the funding provided made available a variety of menstrual products (reusable, disposable and sustainable products); and***
- ***consider making it a permanent initiative if the fund is successful in reducing menstrual poverty.***

Recommendation 9: That the Government of Canada develop and implement a public awareness campaign with the goal to increase menstrual health literacy, including about reusable and sustainable menstrual products, and eliminate stigma and negative stereotypes surrounding menstruation.

Recommendation 11: That the Government of Canada fund research projects on menstrual poverty, menstrual equity and menstrual health literacy.

Government Response

The Government agrees that to improve upon federal initiatives and address menstrual equity more holistically, further research and public awareness on period poverty and menstrual equity in Canada is required as well as an analysis of the MEF pilot following its conclusion in 2024. More research is needed in the Canadian context as it is a key component to defining the issue parameters and understanding the implications. Research can identify where the needs are most acute and the kinds of supports and initiatives that are currently being taken in response, which shapes policy perspectives and can transform how information is circulated to inform public opinion.

Research

Existing Canadian scholarly and grey publications reflect the emerging nature of menstrual equity knowledge in Canada, as the differential impact of period poverty on equity seeking groups, as well as a range of systemic factors that shape menstrual inequities are starting to be understood. However,

reports from the not-for-profit sector have begun to fill the knowledge gaps related to the prevalence and extent of period poverty, the challenges faced and insights into the path forward for programming and policy in Canada.

Due to the emerging and unsystematic nature of menstrual equity research in Canada, it was necessary that WAGE contributed extensive time and resources in 2022-23 to commissioning research and data as well as conducting several engagement activities to better understand the menstrual equity landscape in Canada, which informed the design of the Menstrual Equity Fund pilot.

The Government, through WAGE, worked with the Privy Council Office to ask public opinion research questions in the June 2022 omnibus survey to establish a baseline grounded in current data on Canadians' perspectives about menstrual equity and the ongoing stigma related to menstruation. The Department also launched a survey in early July 2022 to over 200 non-governmental organizations across the country to collect information on the demand for menstrual products from the people they serve and organizations' capacity to respond to that demand.

The Douglas College Menstrual Cycle Research Group was funded by WAGE in 2022 to provide an overview of the prevalence and impact of period poverty in Canada, identify the intersectional impacts of period poverty in the Canadian context, and better understand research gaps and future directions to advancing menstrual equity in Canada. Three publicly available reports were released based on this research, which included the results from a literature review, qualitative research, and a national and international environmental program and policy scan.

Research findings highlight that addressing period poverty and destigmatizing menstruation demand an intersectional framework attuned to the Canadian context. While there are a growing number of programs and initiatives across sectors in Canada to address period poverty and increase menstrual equity, more work is required to build sustainable and lasting programming to address period poverty.

In early 2023, WAGE provided funding to Environics Research to carry out public opinion research on menstrual equity. The intent of the research was to inform WAGE's efforts to raise awareness about period poverty and shift attitudes within Canada that contribute to gendered inequalities surrounding menstruation, and provide a measure of awareness, attitudes, and behaviours to monitor the impact of change over time.

The final report from this research is [available online](#) and the results reveal that Canadians believe our society is generally open on the topic of menstruation. However, reported attitudes, comfort levels, and experiences and behaviours of people who menstruate, demonstrate this is not necessarily the case. There continue to be misperceptions of, and negative perceptions towards, menstruation among Canadians, and this stigma continues to influence the general preferences that people who menstruate express for keeping their periods private.

Complementing the research from WAGE, from 2017-18 to 2021-22 the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) invested \$333 million in reproductive health research, which includes menstruation and menstrual health. Currently, for example, CIHR is investing in research, out of the University of Saskatchewan, with the objective to develop and evaluate digital interventions for adolescents with dysmenorrhea (period pain) and pain complaints in female youth from pre-to post-menarche.

In addition, CIHR has contributed to building capacity in the next generation of researchers in the field of menstrual health. This includes awards to graduate students to support them as they carry out research in this area, such as studying the effects of chemical compounds in menstrual products on pain and bleeding during the menstrual cycle, as well as exploring a school-based menstrual health education program for adolescent girls.

At Statistics Canada (StatCan), Budget 2021 designated \$7.6 million over five years, starting in 2021-22, to develop and implement a national survey on sexual and reproductive health with a focus on supporting women's health. In fall 2024, StatCan will launch Canada's first survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health to address a lack of nationally comparable data on sexual and reproductive health topics. This survey will contribute to filling national data gaps related to menstruation, with survey results planned to be released in fall of 2025. During engagement activities, StatCan was made aware of a number of other important information needs related to menstruation, which included the topics of menstrual poverty, menstrual equity and menstrual health literacy. These informational gaps will assist the Government in determining future opportunities for data collection initiatives on menstruation.

Awareness

As part of its commitment to transparency and an opportunity to contribute to awareness raising, WAGE has shared all the information collected during the research and engagement phases of the MEF pilot design on its website. Additionally, Food Banks Canada has provided MEF pilot locations with communication products made available in 15 languages to assist in menstrual equity knowledge sharing. The final report from Environics Research, noted above, iterates that the Canadian general public has a limited familiarity with and understanding about the term 'period poverty'. While six in ten (63%) have heard of the term, fewer than four in ten (38%) are familiar with what it means. Thus, identifying that the term needs to be clearly explained if being used in public-facing communications. Moreover, there is a moderate but not overwhelming sense that period poverty is a problem in Canada today, and a limited understanding about who stands to be the most affected. Without recognition and open discussion about the issue, shame and stigma will continue to be perpetuated.

Awareness related to period poverty and menstrual health is a key component in advancing menstrual equity as engagement and research activities have confirmed that menstruation remains highly stigmatized in Canada. Stigma stifles communication on menstruation and inhibits people from building their knowledge of menstrual and reproductive health. This is particularly important for youth who may feel embarrassed about menstruation, be unprepared for their first period, or experience bullying in school.

Through the education and awareness component of the Menstrual Equity Fund, six grassroots organizations across Canada will be funded with approximately \$2 million to scale up their education and awareness activities to inform Canadians about period poverty and reduce stigma around menstruation. The six organizations include: The Period Purse, Moon Time Connections (formerly Moon Times Sisters), Free Periods Canada, Monthly Dignity, Project AIM, and Help a Girl Out. The organizations received their first allotment of funding and activities are currently underway.

Research and engagement, conducted by WAGE, highlighted that there is a lack of comprehensive menstruation education, inclusive of intersectional and culturally attuned factors. Menstrual health literacy should include not only information about the menstrual cycle and menstrual product use, but build comprehensive knowledge on associated health conditions, such as endometriosis.

As stated in the Committee Report, it is important for menstrual health literacy to be included within the larger sexual and reproductive health educational umbrella. In Canada, sexual and reproductive health curriculum delivered in the public education system is under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments, which may be sensitive to political perspectives and, in turn, may result in variability of access across the country. However, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information, education, resources and supports can also be provided in community settings. The Government of Canada firmly believes that all Canadians should have access to sexual and reproductive health resources, no matter where they live. To advance this goal, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Fund (SRHF), at Health Canada, supports community-based organizations that help make sexual and reproductive health information and services more accessible for underserved populations.

Through the initial Budget 2021 investment of \$45 million over three years, starting in 2021-22, the SRHF has provided approximately \$1.7 million for two projects on endometriosis. The Endometriosis Network Canada is supporting the development of endometriosis patient focused educational resources for people living with endometriosis and youth, as well as partnering with health professional organizations to reduce the delay to endometriosis diagnosis. The project will also help raise public awareness of endometriosis through a marketing campaign intended for people at risk of developing the disease, health care providers, schools, and employers. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is raising awareness on endometriosis care through the development and distribution of educational resources for health care providers and patients. As endometriosis affects and impacts periods, these awareness campaigns will also help address menstrual health literacy. The project will specifically include a comprehensive program in SRH for underserved populations, including Indigenous, racialized, and 2SLGBTQI+ and other marginalized groups that face additional barriers and worse health outcomes.

Menstrual Equity Fund Pilot

The main goal of the MEF pilot is to increase the accessibility of menstrual products for low-income populations living in diverse locations of the country as an initial step in exploring options for closing long-term menstrual equity gaps across Canada. A variety of menstrual products will be distributed through a diverse range of community organizations to reach those most in need. The pilot also seeks to increase awareness of period poverty and reduce the stigma of menstruation.

Food Banks Canada has launched their Menstrual Equity Fund [website](#), which outlines the details of the costing, procurement, distribution and education portions of the Fund. Food Banks Canada will be working with community organizations (e.g., women's shelters, local food banks, community centres, and friendship centres) from every province and territory to deliver the pilot. They are working directly with 392 pilot locations, but through further reach of these locations within the communities, the product is expected to reach an additional 600 small community organizations reaching 570,000 low-income individuals each month. Product shipment began in November 2023, and as of December 2023, approximately 17.5 million disposable products have been distributed with an estimated 60 million

disposable products to be distributed by March 31, 2024. Reusable menstrual products will also be procured and distributed to select pilot locations with shipments anticipated to begin in January 2024.

The outcomes of the pilot, along with continued analysis of the menstrual equity landscape, will be examined to determine next steps for addressing period poverty in Canada. Success will be determined by the information collected throughout the duration of the pilot and will help ensure a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges in addressing period poverty. Women and Gender Equality Canada will continue to share information regarding the implementation of the pilot as it becomes available, including through [WAGE's website](#).

Conclusion

Since 2021, the Government of Canada has been invested in delivering initiatives to progress towards menstrual equity. The Government recognizes the systemic and intersectional nature of the issue. Period poverty not only affects each individual differently based on a variety of identity factors, but the issue itself is complex and requires a range of responses from reliable, safe, affordable and inclusive access to products, clean water and sanitation facilities, as well as research and awareness.

There have been strong, innovative responses by the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments (PTs), municipalities and communities across the country to address period poverty. The initiatives underway at WAGE, ISC, and ESDC are important steps towards achieving menstrual equity. The Government will continue to work with federal partners, PTs, Indigenous partners, community organizations, and experts to ensure menstrual equity is a part of promoting Canadians' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Shifting social norms to reduce stigma and shame around menstruation will assist in improving the social and economic outcomes for people who menstruate and support Canadians in living healthy lives. A more equal society where everyone can fully participate has benefits for all people in Canada.