

BIGMUN 2025

ECOSOC 3: Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)

Research Report

Topic 2: The question of ensuring the availability of female sanitary products in refugee camps.



DENIZ TARHAN & FRIDA KIRK

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Introduction

On any given day, some 800 million women and girls aged 15-49 around the world are menstruating. On average, a woman spends about 7 years of her life menstruating. Despite this, period poverty remains a very prevalent issue today, especially in low-income areas, during humanitarian crises, and in refugee camps.

This research report will touch upon the issue of period poverty in and outside of refugee camps, as well as the general sanitation conditions in said camps, and the mental and physical toll of being a menstruating person without access to the proper resources (supplies and education.)

Definition of Key Terms

Period poverty: A lack of access to sufficient menstrual sanitary products or insufficient education surrounding the menstrual cycle.

Menstrual hygiene products: Products menstruating people use to maintain hygiene and comfort during their period, such as sanitary pads, tampons, menstrual cups, etc.

Refugee camp: Temporary accommodation for refugees who have been forced to flee their home country due to natural disasters, violence, war, political persecution, etc.

Menarche: The first occurring menstrual period, “first blood,” or the age when a person first starts to menstruate.

Sanitation: The management of clean drinking water and human waste disposal (i.e. toilets).

Background Information

Refugee camps are most often created as a temporary emergency solution to an acute humanitarian or natural crisis. Unfortunately, however, a stay in a refugee camp often ends up being less than temporary, and people end up staying there for years at a time. The World Bank found, in a 2016 close-analysis of data provided by the UNHCR, that the mean duration of exile in a refugee camp stands at 10.3 years¹. In this case, it is imperative for all people, but especially women and girls of reproductive age, to have access to clean and safe sanitary facilities.

Though the UNHCR and other organisations have, in some cases, made important advances in refugee camps, for example in 2019, it was reported that 90% of families living in Syrian refugee camps had access to basic facilities², this is far from the case everywhere. A 2021 article by UNICEF stated that up to 75,000 displaced Kenyan people were living in “hellish conditions” without access to adequate sanitation, among many other issues³.

Other than the psychological impacts of being a menstruating person, without access to privacy and hygiene, which this report will also touch upon, there are a few serious health risks to be assessed. Poor hygiene during menstruation or prolonged use of the same sanitary product (sanitary pads, tampons, menstrual cups, etc.) can lead to the spreading of urinary tract infections, hepatitis B, thrush, and even Toxic Shock Syndrome, which has symptoms as severe as organ damage and failure⁴, and in worst cases – if left untreated – ultimately death.

In a 2023 report⁵ conducted by UNICEF in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region by surveying adolescents and young people, 1 in 10 responding girls reported feeling embarrassed while on their period, as well as 1 in 10 reporting that they felt they needed support facing stigma and taboo during their menstrual period. Another 2023 study⁶ of period poverty in accordance with mental health in Barcelona found that the prevalence of risk of poor mental health is higher among women living with period poverty (62.6%) than those living without.

Furthermore, in the 2023 UNICEF report, 1 in 3 girls reported missing at least one school day while on their periods due to embarrassment and stigma, and 1 in 5 reported not knowing how to properly take care of themselves during their menstrual period.

Also to be considered is the wellbeing of transgender and non-binary individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) and therefore having the capacity to menstruate. Transgender and non-binary people often face the additional mental toll of gender dysphoria (discomfort or

¹ How many years do refugees stay in exile, World Bank Blogs (Xavier Devictor, Quy-Toan Do), 2016

² Shelter and Infrastructure, UNHCR, 2020

³ Up to 75,000 people living in a remote camp in eastern DRC facing ‘hellish conditions’, UNICEF, 2021

⁴ Toxic Shock Syndrome, National Institute of Health (USA) (Adam Ross, Hugh W. Shoff), Last updated 2023

⁵ Period Poverty: Impact of Taboos and Barriers on Information and Resources for Menstrual Health and Hygiene, UNICEF, 2023

⁶ Period poverty and mental health in a representative sample of young women in Barcelona, Spain, NIH, 2023

distress in individuals who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth) during the menstrual period, as well as being equally as susceptible to experience period poverty as women and girls who menstruate.

Menstruation is and has been a highly mythologised topic – many different cultural traditions, practices, and beliefs perpetuate stereotypes (harmful or not) about menstruation. One such harmful tradition is the Nepalese chhaupadi, which promotes banishing menstruating women and girls to sleep outside the house, often in huts or livestock sheds. This has, however, been outlawed since 2005, and formally criminalised since 2017. It is also commonly believed in some religious communities that menarche symbolises a young girl’s readiness for sex and marriage. However, not all traditions and stereotypes negatively affect the menstruating person. In Rajasthan, India, newlywed women may use menstruation as an opportunity to visit their maternal families, or to bond with other menstruating women⁷.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

USA, UK:

Both the US and the UK are among the largest providers of humanitarian and foreign aid, therefore they have influence over which resources are distributed as well as the allocation of money to different forms of aid (food, medicine, clothing, etc.)

Scotland, Finland, New Zealand:

Scotland, Finland, and New Zealand have all made large strides in terms of period development in recent years.

The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act of 2021 requires local authorities and education providers to make period products available according to necessity, free of charge. Scotland is the first country in the world to legally protect free access to period products.

In Helsinki in 2021, a trial was conducted in which the city council handed out free period products at educational institutions

In the same year in New Zealand, schools started offering free period products to students.

Iran, Türkiye, Germany, Colombia, Uganda:

These are the countries hosting the largest amounts of refugees; combined, they host nearly a third of the world’s refugees, meaning they receive large amounts of humanitarian aid and should therefore be interested in making sure that said aid covers all the needs of the refugees they host.

⁷ Menstruation and human rights - Frequently asked questions, UNFPA, 2022

Algeria:

Algeria is the country with the lowest period affordability in the world, meaning that menstrual hygiene products are the least affordable there in the world.

UNICEF:

UNICEF is the United Nations Children’s Fund. They have conducted several studies and investigations into the topic of period poverty, as seen in the references in the “Background Information” section of this report. They advocate for the health of adolescent girls and people going through menarche and the menstrual cycle, educating on hygiene and sexual/reproductive health, and advocating for the importance of access to proper resources.

UNHCR:

The UNHCR is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – the agency mandated to protect and support refugees and displaced people all over the world. Since they are in charge of all UN-mandated refugee camps and humanitarian aid plans, they are the most important organisation in this issue.

Relevant UN Resolutions

[Resolution 47/4 \(2021\)](#) (OHCHR)

Clause 2: *Urges* States to ensure access to infrastructure and public services, (...) menstrual hygiene management for all women and girls, (...), inter alia during humanitarian emergencies, including in rural areas and informal settlements, settlements for internally displaced persons, refugee camps, and migrant shelter;

[Resolution 56/L.26 \(2024\)](#) (OHCHR)

Clause 1

Subclause (a):

Ensure that women and girls, including in particular those in vulnerable situations and those with disabilities, have equitable access to affordable, safe and clean water and adequate sanitation, hygiene and washing facilities with soap, including a choice of menstrual hygiene products, such as sanitary pads that are clean, available, accessible, acceptable, good quality and environmentally friendly;

Subclause (l):

Ensure a more holistic and coordinated approach to the humanitarian development nexus by integrating measures related to menstrual hygiene and health care into humanitarian preparedness and response plans and link them to longer-term investments, with particular attention to the protection needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants and internally displaced women and girls, including by ensuring access to menstrual hygiene products, such

as through the distribution of menstrual kits and products to improve access to products and supplies, including the United Nations Population Fund global programme for the distribution of “dignity kits” in the context of humanitarian crises;

Resolution 51/19 (2022) (OHCHR)

Clause 2

Subclause (d):

To ensure access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all women and girls, including for menstrual health and hygiene, including hygiene facilities and services in public and private spaces, and to address the widespread stigma and shame surrounding menstruation and menstrual health and hygiene by promoting educational and health practices in and out of schools in order to foster a culture in which menstruation is recognised as healthy and natural and by ensuring access to factual information thereon;

Subclause (e):

To take measures to empower all women and girls for preparedness in humanitarian emergencies and crises, notably in times of armed conflict or natural disaster, by ensuring access to water and sanitation services and related information in accessible formats and implementing gender-responsive policies, plans and programmes that address, inter alia, effective menstrual health and hygiene and adequate access to and disposal options for menstrual products, without compromising their rights, safety and dignity;

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Initiatives:

MakaPad, Uganda⁸:

Back in 2013, the UNHCR partnered with the Ugandan reusable sanitary pad providers, MakaPad, to give jobs to refugees living in Uganda at the time. The refugees were hired to work in the MakaPad factory in Kawempe, where they learned to make biodegradable sanitary pads, in exchange for some stable income. UNHCR was the largest buyer of MakaPads products, which were then distributed to refugees who needed them.

⁸ *Papyrus and scrap paper: a monthly blessing for refugee women in Uganda*, UNHCR News, 2013

Reusable Sanitary Pads, Nigeria⁹:

In 2020, the UNHCR continued this line of action by equipping Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria with sewing skills and training to make reusable sanitary pads, which they went on to sell in the community as well as teaching other women how to make them. This, like the MakaPad program in Uganda, both equipped refugees with skills and a small amount of income, but also made affordable sanitary products more available to women and girls in the community.

Menstrual Hygiene Training, Chad¹⁰:

UNICEF and the WHO have launched many educational courses and workshops to inform young women and girls on how to manage their menstrual health and hygiene. One specific example is the UNICEF-led initiative in the Doholo Refugee Camp in Chad, where young girls were educated on general hygiene as well as managing their menstrual periods.

Resolutions

NOTE: These are the same resolutions listed in the [“Relevant UN Resolutions”](#) section of this report.

Resolution [A/HRC/RES/47/4 \(2021\)](#) (OHCHR)

This resolution calls upon all member states to ensure access to safe and sanitary menstrual health management through various initiatives. Clause 2 stresses the need for safe and secure sanitation inter alia in refugee camps and during humanitarian crises.

Resolution [A/HRC/RES/51/19 \(2022\)](#) (OHCHR)

This resolution focuses on the need for women and girls in especially rural/remote areas and vulnerable situations – including refugee women – to have safe and secure access to safe sanitation and menstrual health products.

Possible Solutions

- Enforcing adequate and uncensored sexual health/reproductive learning for all women and girls in refugee camps,
 - Makes sure that all people with the capacity to menstruate, understand how to take care of themselves during their menstrual period, and have somebody to ask if unsure,

⁹ *UNHCR seeks to increase menstrual health and hygiene for Cameroonian refugees, one sanitary pad at a time*, UNHCR News, 2020

¹⁰ *In Doholo refugee camp, young girls trained in menstrual hygiene management*, UNICEF Stories, 2021

- Helps remove stigma and myths surrounding menstruation, breaking the cycle of misunderstanding and shame,
- Creates a network between women and girls in refugee camps.
- Ensuring that all UN-mandated humanitarian aid packages contain menstrual hygiene products,
 - Makes sure women and girls in high-risk situations are able to appropriately manage their menstrual period.
- Continuing to teach women in refugee camps how to make reusable sanitary pads,
 - Can be a source of income,
 - Teaches refugee women new skills,
 - Provides economically and environmentally friendly period products in refugee areas.
- Stressing the importance of private and adequate sanitation in refugee camps,
 - Creates safer, cleaner, and more comfortable environments for menstruating women.

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Source 1: *How many years do refugees stay in exile*, World Bank Blogs (Xavier Devictor, Quy-Toan Do), 2016

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/how-many-years-do-refugees-stay-exile#:~:text=The%20median%20has%20fluctuated%20widely,between%2010%20and%2015%20years.>

Source 2: *Shelter and Infrastructure*, UNHCR, 2020

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/shelter-and-infrastructure-46#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20UNHCR%20has%20worked,tents%20or%20non%20Dupgraded%20shelters.>

Source 3: *Up to 75,000 people living in a remote camp in eastern DRC facing 'hellish conditions'*, UNICEF Press Release, 2021

<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/75000-people-living-remote-camp-eastern-drc-facing-hellish-conditions>

Source 4: *Toxic Shock Syndrome*, National Institute of Health (USA) (Adam Ross, Hugh W. Shoff), Last updated 2023

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK459345/>

Source 5: *Period Poverty: Impact of Taboos and Barriers on Information and Resources for Menstrual Health and Hygiene*, UNICEF, 2023

<https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/24606/file/%20Period%20Poverty.pdf>

Source 6: *Period poverty and mental health in a representative sample of young women in Barcelona, Spain*, National Institute of Health (USA) by Marga Mari-Klose, Albert Julià, Sandra Escapa, Pedro Gallo, 2023

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10144895/>

Source 7: *Menstruation and human rights - Frequently asked questions*, UNFPA, 2022

<https://www.unfpa.org/menstruationfaq#Positives%20about%20menstruation>

Source 8: *Papyrus and scrap paper: a monthly blessing for refugee women in Uganda*, UNHCR News, 2013

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/papyrus-and-scrap-paper-monthly-blessing-refugee-women-uganda>

Source 9: *UNHCR seeks to increase menstrual health and hygiene for Cameroonian refugees, one sanitary pad at a time*, UNHCR News, 2020

<https://www.unhcr.org/ng/news/stories/unhcr-seeks-increase-menstrual-health-and-hygiene-cameroonian-refugees-one-sanitary?>

Source 10: *In Doholo refugee camp, young girls trained in menstrual hygiene management*, UNICEF Stories, 2021

<https://www.unicef.org/chad/stories/doholo-refugee-camp-young-girls-trained-menstrual-hygiene-management-0>