



Addressing Period Poverty

Challenges and Solutions in Lebanon, Gaza and Beyond



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A GLOBAL LOOK AT PERIOD POVERTY

Period poverty — the lack of access to menstrual products, hygiene facilities, waste management, and education — affects millions of women globally, causing significant physical, mental, and emotional challenges. This issue is exacerbated by social stigma, insufficient data and research, and numerous social, cultural, economic, and political barriers.¹

The World Bank estimates that at least 500 million women and girls globally lack the facilities they need to manage their periods. Additionally, 1.25 billion lack access to a safe and private toilet, and 526 million do not have any toilet facilities at all. Women and girls can experience alienation, mental illness, and loneliness due to these challenges. Period poverty disproportionately affects women and girls with disabilities and those in developing regions. UNESCO reports that one in ten girls in Sub-Saharan Africa misses up to 20% of the school year due to their period. In Kenya, 65% of women and girls cannot afford menstrual products. Even in a rich country like the United Kingdom, some 137,700 girls missed school because of their period, and more than a third of girls aged 14-21 struggled to afford or access products during the pandemic. In Missouri, a 2019 study found that 64% of low-income women in St. Louis could not afford menstrual products in the previous year.²

Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and (for Palestinians) the war on Gaza have further worsened the situation due to border closures and supply disruptions.



Sanitary pad distribution to young women and families at Nahr El Bared Palestinian camp in Lebanon, 2022.

In the absence of proper resources, many women and girls resort to using old blankets, chicken feathers, rags, newspapers, mud, and even cow dung as menstrual products, posing significant health risks.³ In Gaza, some women use hormonal medication to halt menstruation, which can have adverse side effects. The risk of infection is particularly high for women who have undergone female genital mutilation, a common practice in many African countries.⁴ Consequently, girls often miss school or drop out, disrupting their education and future employment prospects.

Cultural practices also pose challenges. For example, Chhaupadi, an ancient tradition in rural Nepal, banishes menstruating girls to mud huts or sheds, risking their health and well-being.⁵

Water, sanitation, and hygiene access is a pressing global issue, with 1.7 billion people lacking basic sanitation services, according to the World Health Organization.⁶ Sustainability is crucial in addressing period poverty. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to ensure the "availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all."⁷ Sustainable and reusable menstrual products are necessary to address the global plastic problem and water scarcity.

Addressing global period poverty requires concerted efforts from institutions and organizations to achieve menstrual equity. This involves ensuring access to sanitary products, proper toilets, hand-washing facilities, waste management and hygiene education. Providing resources alone is insufficient. Education on menstrual hygiene for both young girls and boys is crucial to prevent child marriages, early pregnancies, malnourishment, domestic violence, and pregnancy complications.

The Repercussions of Period Poverty on Women's Lives



Physical Health Risks

When sanitary menstrual products are not available, menstruators use dangerous alternatives like old blankets, rags, newspapers – whatever is available. Some also resort to hormonal medications to stop periods. Both coping strategies can have serious side effects.



Poor Mental Health

Not having the products, privacy and access to the water and medicines needed, on top of lack of information and taboos against talking about menstruation, can cause shame, social alienation, loneliness and despondence.



Missed Education

Girls often regularly miss school or drop out, affecting their future job prospects and stunting their social development and ability to participate fully in society.



Lower Societal Status

School absenteeism and lack of education often translate into low-paying or no job prospects, thus creating a cycle of period poverty.

IRAQ

In Iraq, period poverty is an issue often overlooked. Women and girls experience feelings of shame, unpreparedness, fear and embarrassment due to the taboo around menstruation, which is worse for those with lower incomes and less access to information and resources.

The economic recession and supply chain crisis after COVID-19 made accessibility to menstrual and hygiene products difficult, leading to more infections. Lockdowns and closings also blocked off access to menstrual education and resources, especially for people in refugee camps.

[Source: Period Poverty in Iraq | The Borgen Project]

SYRIA

Syrians living under siege face dire challenges in accessing basic necessities, including clean water and menstrual products. In these conditions, obtaining menstrual products is a luxury for women and girls, who sometimes have to choose between pads and food due to their exorbitant prices. Moreover, essential items like painkillers and heating pads are scarce, exacerbating the discomfort of menstruation. Resorting to makeshift solutions like old rags, women risk serious gynecological infections, which are particularly dangerous given the limited access to medical treatment in Syria.

Crises like the earthquakes in Syria and Turkey in early February 2023 have only worsened the situation, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless and villages destroyed, further limiting access to resources and products. In refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria, many Syrian families lack access even to underwear, highlighting the pervasive nature of period poverty in the region.

Despite the severity of the issue, the emergency and policy-making responses have been gender-blind, with most of them overlooking period poverty and treating it as an individual and private issue.

[Source: Lack of Menstrual Products in Syria Threatens Women's Health | The Borgen Project]

PERIOD POVERTY IN THE MENA REGION

Period poverty is a problem in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, primarily due to its status as the world's most water-scarce area. **Safe water supplies are lacking for 100 million children, and basic hand-washing facilities are absent in three out of ten households.** While the scarcity of resources and facilities is a major concern, education and social factors also play a crucial role in exacerbating period poverty.⁸

For the past decade, there has been an increased effort from governments, non-governmental organizations, and UN agencies to provide menstruation education. These initiatives aim to tackle the educational and social barriers that contribute significantly to period poverty, recognizing the importance of both resource provision and social change in addressing this pressing issue.⁹

For instance, UNICEF, a major global actor in development (and a long-time Anera partner in Lebanon), has worked to address these issues by "ending period stigma through changing social norms and behaviors and by ensuring every child's access to knowledge and information about menstruation." The organization emphasizes that every child should receive education on the topic, feeling normal and secure in their body. UNICEF recognizes period poverty as a human rights issue, as hygiene is integral to dignity and prosperity, and humans have the right to health, dignity, and bodily autonomy.¹⁰

Period Poverty in Gaza

During humanitarian crises women and children are disproportionately impacted by the lack of health and sanitation services. **Since October 7, 2023, the war in Gaza has created extreme physical and mental health issues for women and girls.** Approximately 1.7 million people have been displaced, including at least 700,000 menstruating girls and women.¹¹

Overcrowded living conditions and the lack of access to water have made personal hygiene a daily battle for displaced women and girls.¹² Waits in lines to use toilets can take hours and menstruators often are not able to bathe properly for weeks due to lack of water. Sanitary pads are no longer consistently available to purchase and they are prohibitively expensive when they can be found. Without water, soap, or menstrual supplies, women and girls have **turned to rags, pieces of diaper, clothing and strips of tents to manage their periods.**

Bisan Owda, a young journalist in Gaza who has been documenting the crisis on Instagram, posted a video in December in an effort to break the silence on period poverty. “We’re suffering from being hungry, from being thirsty, from being bombed. We’re suffering from being displaced. Now, we’re suffering also because there’s no pads,” Owda says, “It’s just a new suffering.” In the video, Owda shows the bathroom in a Khan Younis tent encampment that consists of a garbage basket on the ground.¹³

Wafa Abu-Hasheish, a health worker at the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association in Gaza, highlights how the shortage of clean water has directly led to diseases affecting reproductive wellness. She reports an increase in the incidence of illnesses such as influenza,

Menstration doesn't stop while war rages, but the need for services is often subsumed by other issues.

Period Poverty in Gaza: In a Nutshell

700,000 menstruating women and girls displaced

10 million (disposable) pads required every month to cover needs

Lack of access to bathrooms and running water

400 people to one toilet in some UN shelters



Sources:

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

"Scarcity and Fear," a UN Women report

UNRWA

“Each day we encounter numerous instances of fever, directly linked to vaginal yeast infections arising from inadequate hygiene and the absence of feminine hygiene products. Sanitary pads can't be found anywhere.”

– A local doctor interviewed in an Instagram video on Bisan Owda's Instagram page (@wizard_bisan1).
Owda is a young journalist in Gaza

chest infections, skin ulcers, scabies, lice, diarrheal diseases, menstrual disturbances, sexually transmitted infections, and urinary tract infections.¹⁴

In these conditions of extreme stress, women and girls also face exacerbated physical symptoms of menstruation, including **heavier and more frequent periods, as well as increased insomnia, anxiety, and tension.**

Abu-Hasheish, who has been providing public health services in shelters, has herself developed new psychological problems, stress, fear, flu, and excessive breathing difficulties.¹⁵

30,332 PADS

menstrual pads Anera has distributed in Gaza during the war

35,759 KITS

hygiene kits Anera has delivered during the war

In Gaza's makeshift shelters, there is no access to privacy or resources for personal hygiene, leading to profound shame and humiliation for women and girls in addition to physical stress. Gaza's extreme conditions have generated some of the most severe cases of period poverty in the world. Despite this, period stigma and shame continue to silence the conversation about period poverty in Gaza. As Ruba Akkila, a gender and child protection expert in Gaza, says: **"It's messy. It's terrible. And nobody speaks about it."**¹⁶

“The hygiene kits provide a sense of dignity and reduce the risk of infection, which we are seeing on the ground. In addition to responding to the overwhelming need for food, we are doing our very best to prevent the spread of infection and disease.”

- Anera Country Director for Palestine Sandra Rasheed describing the impact of Anera distributions of kits to women in Gaza

Period Poverty in Lebanon

Vulnerable communities in Lebanon, such as refugees and those impacted by the country's economic crisis, also face period poverty. The economy and the operation of public and private institutions have failed due to various factors such as the Beirut port explosion, the COVID-19 pandemic, the worsening economic crisis, and political instability. Inflation is high, unemployment is increasing, and poverty rates are soaring. The World Health Organization reports that in 2023, 2.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and 1.3 million required health assistance.¹⁷ Almost four million families have been affected by poverty since 2019, and 82% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty in terms of income, access to education, services, and health.¹⁸

التحدث مع ابنتك عن الحيض:

التحدث مع ابنتك عن الحيض:

الحديث عن الحيض في وقت مبكر موضوع هام جداً!
الفتاة التي تعرف عن الدورة و أنها أمر عادي، طبيعي،
غير موزي، غير معيب قبل حصولها، تكون واثقة من نفسها
و على علم بما يحدث لجسدها دون خوف أو خجل



Anera created a brochure to distribute to girls and young women in refugee camps in Lebanon as a means to raise awareness about menstrual health and hygiene.

This page from the brochures says it's crucial to discuss menstruation with your daughter early on. Understanding that it is normal, natural, and harmless helps her feel confident and aware of her body without fear or shame.

الاستعداد والتجهيز للدورة الشهرية:

قد تبدأ فترة الحيض في أي وقت خلال النهار، كوني مستعدة :

- ضعي فوطية صحية في الجزدان في كل الأوقات

- مسكّن آلام اذا كنت تتألمين كثيراً

- **الأكل الصحي:** فكرة أنّ بعض الأطعمة لا ينبغي أن تؤكل في هذا الوقت هي معتقد خاطئ من الضروري جداً تناول الأطعمة الغنية بالحديد للتعويض عن فقدان الدم ومنع فقر الدم يوصى بتناول الفواكه والخضروات ومحاولة تجنب استهلاك الكثير من الكافيين والملح



This page from the brochure cautions that your period may start at any time during the day, so it's important to always have a pad and pain relievers on hand. Eating healthily and exercising also help.

You can find the brochure here:
anera.org/health-materials

From Beddawi Refugee Camp in Lebanon: Helping Girls Take Better Control of Their Own Health Needs

Souad Suleiman, director of Al-Mazar Intermediate School for Girls in Beddawi Palestinian Refugee Camp, on the importance of awareness sessions for mothers who cannot provide their daughters with comprehensive health and scientific knowledge: **"Before [Anera's] sessions, girls did not learn to track their menstruation cycle to predict their periods,"** she explains. The lack of menstrual awareness and preparation often left young girls shocked or fearful when they began menstruating.

Souad, along with other teachers, highlights the significant impact of the menstrual kits, particularly given the high cost of supplies during Lebanon's economic crisis. **"Many students resorted to using the same pad for extended periods or other unhealthy practices due to financial constraints,"** she notes. The kits, which include sanitary pads, soap, socks, underwear, and even a solar lamp for power outages, are accompanied by informational literature.

Sarah Saad, a 13-year-old from Beddawi camp, was thrilled to receive a kit and learn about menstrual health. **"I haven't gotten my period yet, but the session taught me about the menstrual cycle and how to manage my period. The main thing is I learned not to be ashamed or afraid. Every girl should be informed about this."**

Lina Al-Omari, an 11-year-old, expressed relief after attending the sessions. **"I heard rumors that you need to stop eating pickles and citrus fruits and even avoid showers during your period. Now, I know that's absurd!"**

Sima Abed Al Kader, a 12-year-old, recently started her period. **"The sessions clarified the difference between menstruation and the menstrual cycle. I learned the importance of tracking my cycle and preparing ahead, which is crucial in our tough economic situation."** Sima was particularly pleased with her kit, especially enjoying the fragrant soaps and the useful set of pads.

Anera's Impact on Menstrual Health in Lebanon **2021-present**

Community Outreach

Engaged 294,165 people through outreach events and awareness sessions on solid waste and menstrual hygiene management.

Awareness Raised

Educated 25,523 community members on menstrual hygiene.

Health Improvement

Mobilized 8,000 households (40,000 individuals) to adopt better menstrual health practices.

Improved menstrual health behaviors among 35% of individuals reached.

Hygiene Campaigns

Distributed 1,828 reusable pads, 12,202 disposable pads, and 6,239 hygiene kits.

School Impact

Among 5,500 students, 38% reported improved personal hygiene, and 75% reported better menstrual health behaviors.



Personal care and access to menstrual supplies and health information are a basic right for all the women of the world.

The lack of resources and the increase in prices have led to a skyrocketing number of women and girls suffering from period poverty. **In Lebanon, menstrual product prices have increased 500%**, with prices increasing from \$2 to \$21 between 2019 and 2021. According to the local non-governmental organization Fe-Male, more than half of women in Lebanon are experiencing the effects of period poverty and **66% of young girls cannot afford the menstrual products they need**. Dawrati, another local organization, discusses the use of humiliating and unhygienic replacements such as tissue papers, nylon and cotton sheets, newspapers, old cloth, and even half of their own children's diapers.¹⁹ Reusable pads are available as an alternative that can last for five years and save 60-76% of costs per year. However, their initial costs are expensive, they require resources for regular washing in hot water. They are also often socially unacceptable. Therefore, these proposed and promoted eco-friendly products are currently unable to solve the period poverty crisis.

In a recent study, women in Lebanon were surveyed about menstrual health. The results showed that 77% of women face difficulty accessing menstrual products. Some 58% report using the same pad for a long period of time, and 57% opt for cheaper alternatives. Additionally, 43% of women report anxiety and stress about menstrual health. And 36% suffer from physical symptoms, and 36% avoid daily activities due to poor period management. Further, 47% of women felt ashamed of their periods, and 47% feared that others would know that they are menstruating. While these statistics only reflect women who participated in the survey, it is evident that proper education and addressing stigma and taboos about menstruation need to be prioritized.²⁰

Lebanese decision-makers have failed to prioritize women's rights and health. In 2020, the Lebanese Cabinet, composed of seven men, compiled 300 items to be subsidized in the market.²¹ The cabinet failed to recognize the pressing issue of period poverty, and prioritized men's razors to be included over sanitary pads. At the same time, there have been small victories in the local context. Jeyetna was a two-month period poverty festival that was successfully adopted in 2021. The festival distributed reusable pads and offered information sessions, medical consultations, and education and awareness sessions.²² Despite the economic situation in Lebanon not improving, it is essential for organizations and institutions to continue discussing ways to address the issue and advocate for cost-effective and eco-friendly solutions.

Anera's Period/Reusable Pads Project in Lebanon

Anera remains committed to addressing period poverty, especially in Lebanon where the economic crisis has exacerbated the issue. Anera and its partners have distributed washable pads, underwear, and other hygiene products. In early 2021, Anera began promoting menstrual hygiene and health through the UNHCR-funded waste and recycling program in a remote Syrian refugee camp in Arsal, Lebanon.

Similar programs have been held in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, where Anera has hosted awareness and education sessions and distributed menstrual hygiene supplies. Despite period poverty often being ignored as a significant issue during crises, Anera now includes menstrual hygiene kits and supplies in all of its hygiene distributions whenever appropriate. To address the cultural taboo

surrounding this topic, Anera conducts education sessions to try to break the cycle of silence.

As part of the Empowered Communities in Action project funded by UNICEF, Anera's public health team organized a series of menstrual hygiene activities. Awareness sessions were held in schools located in five major Palestinian refugee camps across Lebanon, including Nahr El Bared, Beddawi, Burj El Barajneh, Shatila, and Ein El Hilweh. Girls aged 12-16 were provided with information and awareness sessions, and 3,000 girls received My Body-My Health information kits donated by the German Development Bank, KfW. These kits and sessions provided instructions on time management, good hygiene practices, pain management, healthy diets, and general well-being.

Numerous organizations in Lebanon are working together to create access to menstrual hygiene supplies for women and girls. Local NGOs like Roof and Roots, WingWoman Lebanon and Dawrati (My Period) are gathering donations, hiring women to produce period supplies, and selling those products back to NGOs to distribute. UNFPA Lebanon has hosted educational workshops for women on menstruation that provided a cash award for attending. These projects reach thousands, in some cases tens of thousands of people. While initiatives like these and Anera's are essential, they are only a start to addressing the full scope of the issue. **Over 2 million women and girls in Lebanon have difficulty accessing menstrual hygiene products.** This widespread period poverty **requires a vastly scaled up response** to adequately address the issue and provide dignified solutions to the populations affected.²³

A CALL TO ACTION

Addressing global period poverty requires concerted efforts from institutions and organizations to ensure access to sanitary products, proper toilets, hand-washing facilities, sanitation, hygiene education, and waste management. Providing resources alone is not enough though. Education on menstrual hygiene for both young girls and boys is crucial to prevent child marriages, early pregnancies, malnourishment, domestic violence, and pregnancy complications.

Actions we can take to tackle this pressing issue:

Increase funding and resources: Allocate more funds to provide free or affordable menstrual products and improve water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in vulnerable regions.

Promote education and awareness: Implement comprehensive menstrual hygiene education programs to break down stigma and taboos, ensuring both girls and boys understand menstrual health.

Support sustainable solutions: Encourage the use of eco-friendly menstrual products and invest in sustainable solutions that are accessible and culturally acceptable.

Policy advocacy: Push for policies that prioritize menstrual health in public health agendas, ensuring that governments recognize and address period poverty as a significant issue.

Collaboration and partnerships: Foster collaborations between governments, NGOs, and private sectors to create a united front against period poverty.

By taking these steps, the international community can help alleviate period poverty, ensuring that all women and girls have the dignity, health, and opportunities they deserve.

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ABOUT ANERA'S ON-THE-GROUND SERIES

The Anera on-the-ground series is designed to add a humanitarian voice to the story of life in the Middle East. With data from Anera's professional staff, people who live and work in the communities they serve, and with over 50 years of experience in the region, Anera has a unique opportunity to build a fuller understanding of what life is like for families struggling to survive within an atmosphere of severe political strife and daily turmoil.