

Dealing With Period Poverty in Israel: Legislation and Public Action Proposals

Summary

The term "period poverty" refers to the economic inability to procure hygiene products used by girls and women during their menstrual periods. Given the cost of these products, which is higher in Israel than in other Western countries, this results in discrimination and distress for girls who depend on their family's financial resources and adds yet another burden on women living in poverty, whose number exceeds that of men among poor adults.

Period poverty disrupts the lives of girls and women and further exacerbates economic, social, and educational gaps. It leads to the use of hazardous stopgap substitutes instead of standard safe products, results in frequent absences from school and work, upsets other day-to-day activities, and impacts on their dignity and well-being.

The problem, which is rooted in gender discrimination, is hardly discussed despite its importance and possible long-term consequences and is absent from the Israeli legislature's agenda due to, among other things, cultural and religious taboos about discussing the female menstrual cycle in public.

Therefore, in this paper, Zulat presents operational proposals for the rectification of the situation through legislation: to compel local authorities to provide free menstrual hygiene products in every state-recognized educational institution teaching grades 6 to 12, to require public bodies to make these products available in toilets in their buildings, and to fully exempt menstrual sanitary products from VAT. At the same time, a public discussion should be stimulated on this hushed-up issue in order to remove the stigma surrounding it, raise awareness to the toll it exacts on the lives of girls and women, and enhance their knowledge about their rights.

Similar steps are already being taken in a growing number of countries around the world. They are relatively easy to implement, and their benefits for redressing injustice are significantly evident.

Background

The issue of women's rights and the attempt to promote gender equality have been a constant issue in the State of Israel since its inception: The Declaration of Independence established that all citizens are entitled to equal rights regardless of their sex, while the Women's Equal Rights Law (1951) stipulated the equal right of women to education, training, health services, and more.¹

Israel's population is young compared to other developed countries. At the end of 2020, 33% of its residents were children aged up to 17. Of these, close to 400,000 (or 13% of the total population in this age bracket) required assistance from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security.² About half of them were girls and female adolescents.

That the state needs to provide education to children is perceived as a basic requirement in Israeli society, and it is agreed by all that education supplies the tools that will enable boys and girls to succeed in adulthood. Based on this view, it is also agreed that action is needed to narrow the gaps and inequalities in the sphere of education for all children.³

This policy paper will focus on period poverty, an issue that is beginning to gain traction in the world and thereby to shed light on a concealed but significant phenomenon of inequality for girls and women of childbearing age, whose rights to an education and an active life are violated as a result of their inability to procure sanitary products during menstruation. The root of this specific problem, which has dire long-term consequences, lies in gender discrimination. In Israel, its neglect is so vast that not even the most basic data about it exists. However, awareness has been growing, as exemplified in the activities of Luna-Period Movement in Israel, an organization established in early 2021 to eradicate period poverty and the stigma surrounding menstruation that, among other activities, raises donations for the free distribution of hygiene products.⁴

The solutions presented by Zulat in this paper are based on data collected and researched around the world, in order to enable the Israeli legislature to rectify the current situation

¹ Wikipedia, [Women's Equal Rights Law of Israel \(1951\)](#).

² Central Bureau of Statistics, [Selected Data for World Children's Day 2021](#), 17 November 2021.

³ Nachum Blass, Hanna Ayalon, Yariv Feniger, and Yossi Shavit, [Educational Inequality in Israel: From Research to Policy](#), *Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel*, December 2019.

⁴ Luna, [post on Facebook page](#), 12 June 2022 (Hebrew).

with relatively easy measures that can be implemented within a short period of time and produce substantial benefits.

What is Period Poverty?

Period poverty means the economic inability to procure hygiene products used by girls and women during their menstrual periods. The World Bank estimates that at least 500 million women and girls globally cannot afford to buy these products,⁵ a situation that can sometimes have severe consequences and raise major obstacles on their path. Nevertheless, for cultural and religious reasons, discussion of the subject remains negligible.

Gender inequality has received wider attention in connection with another health issue: access to clean water. In 2000, the United Nations recognized women as the prime users of "domestic water" around the world, as they are responsible for procuring it for their families.⁶ This role has several other gender implications in places where there is no immediate access to clean water: the time spent collecting water means women do not have time for economic, educational, or social activities and heightens the danger to their personal safety (mainly due to terrain conditions and the fear of assault and rape).⁷ Therefore, installing water pipes in rural communities augments the benefits to public health by safeguarding women's personal safety and promoting gender equality.⁸

Although period poverty has not yet received a similar degree of attention, the gender discrimination resulting from limited access to menstrual hygiene products and its implications for the future of women, in particular adolescents, are no less dramatic.⁹ Studies show a link between students' inability to purchase or use standard hygiene products and absences from school during menstrual days, as well as an impact on the

⁵ World Bank, [Menstrual Hygiene Management Enables Women and Girls To Reach Their Full Potential](#), 25 May 2018.

⁶ Climate Resilient Infrastructure Development Facility, [Equitable Access to Water for Women](#), March 2018.

⁷ Molly Allen, Mir Ashfaquzzaman, et al, [Women and Water in the Developing World: Linking Water Insecurity and Gender Disparities](#), *CSIS Journalism Bootcamp*, 30 September 2020.

⁸ Michelle Horton, [How Water Piped to Homes Promotes Gender Equality in Rural Zambia](#), *Stanford Engineering*, 20 January 2021.

⁹ Alexandra Greetz, Lakshmi Iyer, et al, [An Opportunity to Address Menstrual Health and Gender Equity](#), *FSG: Reimagining Social Change*, 18 May 2016.

mental well-being of women due to the loss of work days and income.¹⁰ Although these problems are more acute in developing countries, available data indicate that they are significant even in countries considered developed, especially among underprivileged sectors of society.¹¹

By its very nature, the use of feminine hygiene products is intended for girls and women within a very wide range of ages (approximately from age 10 to 55). In addition to the high cost of these products and the fact that their use is monthly, regular, and essential, thought must also be given to the rate of women in poverty within the population. According to National Security Institute data for 2021, women in Israel are poorer than men ((23.1% versus 18.2%). In addition, 95% of poor single-parent households who receive income support (22,000) are headed by women.¹²

With a number of exceptions, the debate on the subject and its attendant solutions is not yet at an advanced stage either in Israel or worldwide. There are countries, international organizations, and non-profit foundations (as detailed in the recommendations below) engaged in activities and legislative moves regarding the supply of hygiene products for girls and women through funding, changes in taxation, or subsidies.

Scotland is currently leading this expanding trend: in early, 2021 its Parliament passed a law providing for access free of charge to menstrual hygiene products for women in need through local authorities and in all schools. The law, most of whose components are already being applied, is slated to reach full implementation by January 2023.¹³

The absence of this issue from the public debate and from Israel's law books does not detract from its importance, but quite the opposite. The time has come to abandon the reluctance to deal publicly with the subject of menstrual periods, a daily occurrence in the life of half the population, and to offer solutions to period poverty. Only in this way will it be possible to address the injustice and dangers arising from this problem, and to reduce the inequality between women and men in society.

¹⁰ Lauren F. Cardoso, Anna M. Scolese, et al, [Period Poverty and Mental Health Implications Among College-Aged Women in the United States](#), *BMC Women's Health*, 6 January 2021.

¹¹ Rami Schwartz, [Tools for Accessibility to Feminine Hygiene Products: Comparative View](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 17 February 2022 (Hebrew).

¹² National Insurance Institute, [On Eve of International Woman's Day: 23.1% of Women Are Poor as Opposed to 18.2% of Men](#), 7 March 2022 (Hebrew).

¹³ Scottish Government, [New App To Access Free Period Products](#), 12 January 2022.

Mapping the Affected Rights

The Right to Health: Health promotion and menstrual hygiene programs exist in many countries around the world. It is known today that the availability of hygiene products for girls and women during their menstrual periods is an essential component in preserving their health, because their unavailability might impact on their physical condition and well-being.¹⁴ Thus, when unable to afford standard hygiene products, such as disposable bandages and tampons, many girls and women resort to improvised alternatives, such as used bandages, unsterilized pieces of cloth, etc., or avoid changing them every few hours as they should. All of these have been shown to pose health risks to women, with preliminary data (empirical evidence is still insufficient) indicating that they might subsequently impact on their fertility.¹⁵

Human Dignity and Liberty: Lack of financial resources to buy and use standard hygiene products not only harm the right to health of girls and women, but also the right enshrined in Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty; that is, their right to dignity and equal opportunity for self-realization and economic fulfillment.

The price of these products in Israel is particularly high. A Ministry of Economy and Industry study on the cost of living conducted in 2017 showed that feminine hygiene products are 9% to 30% more expensive in Israel compared to their price in 15 Western countries.¹⁶ Lowering prices, as we suggest below, is expected to make it easier for women and households in general to bear the financial burden of buying menstrual hygiene products every month.

The fact that menstrual periods remain a taboo subject in large parts of the world and in Israeli society may have adversely affected the legislature's willingness to promote the moves required in this area. Thus, in the absence of systemic solutions, it is up to girls and women to bear the burden on their own. Furthermore, these biased social perceptions deter girls and women from seeking help on this vital issue. Clearly, the first (though not the only ones) requiring assistance with access to hygiene products are girls from

¹⁴ UNICEF, [Guidance for Monitoring Menstrual Health and Hygiene](#), June 2020.

¹⁵ Zachary Burt, Kara Nelson, Isha Ray, [Towards Gender Equality Through Sanitation Access](#), *UN Women Discussion Paper No. 12*, March 2016.

¹⁶ Ministry of Economy and Industry, [Lowering Cost of Living in Israel: Global Comparison – Feminine Hygiene Products](#), September 2017 (Hebrew).

disadvantaged backgrounds, who are likely to be apprehensive about further burdening their families with the purchase of these products despite the dire need for them.

The lack of proper conditions in the workplace, including the availability of hygiene products in toilets, and their high cost lead to the violation of equal opportunities for women in the activities labor market, and in practice harm their wages as they absent themselves from work during menstruation. This might further harm their chances of advancing to higher paying jobs that lead to more self-fulfillment, a situation that calls for adequate legislative rectification. Moreover, scarce resources and redoubled feelings of anxiety and shame also risk harming women's self-confidence and their right to protect their personal dignity. This might interfere with the realization of their personal potential and with a variety of life and work activities, and impede a peaceful and secure environment for education, which is cardinal to all of the above.

The Right to Education: Studies around the world have for years indicated that academic achievements and environmental conditions impact economic prosperity. In this context, it is known that children from weaker socio-economic strata have lower prospects of upward social mobility and chances of realizing their potential than children from stronger sections of society.¹⁷

Israel's Health Ministry supervises educational institutions and the Education Ministry's plans for the construction and operation of schools require its approval to ensure the physical well-being of students and that the "adequate conditions for successful education and learning" are met.¹⁸ The right to education is enshrined in various laws, and applies equally to all, without gender or other differences. The basic conditions that the state must provide for the realization of this right are constantly discussed and change with the zeitgeist, and are reflected not only in school curriculums but also in the physical and sanitary conditions accorded to the student body.

The requirements to ensure hygiene in toilets in schools include the obligation to supply soap, toilet paper, and paper towels. Absent from the list are menstrual hygiene products (disposable sanitary napkins and tampons), despite the fact that these are basic products used by all girl students and that they are essential to their ability to attend class during

¹⁷ Miles Corak, [Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Integrational Mobility](#), *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Summer 2013.

¹⁸ Ministry of Health, [Educational Institutions and Daycare Centers](#) (Hebrew).

menstruation and to assure them a proper sanitary environment (just as the option of being excused to go home during the school day is essential for the same reasons). Therefore, these products are no different from other hygiene aids that, as stated, schools are required to supply.

The Right to Freedom of Occupation: The right to freedom of occupation, which is enshrined in a Basic Law, is intended to ensure that every Israeli citizen or resident is free to engage in any occupation, profession, or trade. That this right is being violated is clearly evident in worrisome data about layoffs of pregnant women or women undergoing fertility treatments, as well as statistics about part-time employment and lower income.¹⁹ According to data from the Ministry of Economy, the gap in the remuneration of women compared to men in the Israeli labor market exceeds the average in OECD countries, with the degree of gender equality in pay for the same work estimated at a mere 55% in the former versus 62% in the latter.²⁰

The lack of basic data about period poverty in Israel stands out even more so against this background, which is why it is imperative to build one. If employers still seek permits (or resort to other roundabout methods) to fire pregnant workers, cut their wages, or refrain from promoting them to higher and better paid positions despite the awareness and legislation about gender disparities in the labor market, it is not inconceivable that the situation is even worse when it comes to the consequences of period poverty, an issue that is not enshrined in any legislation whatsoever and is not on the public agenda.

Since many women are employed in traditionally "female occupations" where career and wage horizons are limited, it is highly probable that period poverty exacerbates the danger to their employment and economic future. This predicament generally affects women from disadvantaged backgrounds, and therefore requires special attention to situations where the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products not only impacts work attendance, but poses yet another obstacle for women living in poverty to earn a living, realize their potential, and access better and more diverse jobs.

¹⁹ Shelly Mizrahi-Simon, [Women in Israel: Key Issues, Submitted to Committee on Status of Women and Gender Equality](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 31 May 2015 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Reut Harari-Kamar, [Gender Inequalities in Israel's Labor Market 2012 Compared to Developed Countries Worldwide](#), *Ministry of Economy and Industry*, March 2013 (Hebrew).

In conclusion, the discrimination inherent in period poverty is economic and gender-based, and its violation of the rights of girls and women is unfair and injurious. It is therefore imperative to promote legislation to rectify this situation and to raise the issue on the public agenda.

Operational Recommendations

To address the issue of period poverty in Israel, Zulat has formulated a number of legislative proposals about access to menstrual hygiene products, as well as recommendations for action in the public arena in order to raise awareness to the issue and eradicate the stigma attached to it. The proposed legislation, which aims to reduce gender discrimination resulting from period poverty and its consequences on the lives of girls and women, is based on studies and legislative measures taken in various countries around the world, which are easy to implement and have significant benefits.

The following are Zulat's legislative proposals:

1. Draft law on accessibility of menstrual hygiene products in public places: We propose to compel public bodies to make these products available in the toilets they operate.
2. Draft law on VAT exemption on period hygiene products: A study conducted by the Knesset Research and Information Center found that it is common practice in various countries to use fiscal tools to lower the cost of menstrual hygiene products, primarily by imposing a lower VAT rate or exempting these products from VAT.²¹ Consequently, we propose a similar VAT exemption in Israel as well.
3. Draft law on free supply of period hygiene products in schools: We propose to compel local authorities to supply menstrual hygiene products free of charge in all state-recognized schools teaching grades 6 to 12.

In addition, in order to ensure the promotion of the issue of period poverty and to increase the chances of success of the aforementioned legislative proposals, Zulat also seeks to advance a series of measures in the public sphere.

As we have shown, progress toward more equality for girls and women requires a reform concerning menstrual hygiene products. Such a reform hinges, among other things, on

²¹ Rami Schwartz, [Tools for Accessibility to Feminine Hygiene Products: Comparative View](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 17 February 2022 (Hebrew).

raising public awareness, changing attitudes, and bringing up the issue in diverse forums to stir a public debate, as many countries around the world have done, in order to stimulate understanding of the question of period poverty and its repercussions on the lives of girls and women and to remove the barriers described in this document.

Steps to encourage a public debate on the subject of menstruation, a regular occurrence in the life of half the population, will help undo the silencing of the issue and alleviate its attendant feelings of shame and social stigma. They may also encourage the empowerment of adolescent girls and women, and strengthen awareness about their rights to greater equality in health, education, and occupation.

To this end, Zulat recommends:

- To allocate resources to the Ministry of Social Equality (and/or other relevant government ministries) for research on the issue of period poverty in order to collect reliable and in-depth empirical data regarding the extent of the problem in all sectors of the Israeli population, to characterize and analyze the data, and to build a database, which is needed in order to formulate more specific and effective recommendations about solutions.
- To encourage the introduction of the issue at seminars held by the Ministries of Health, Education, Social Equality, Labor, Welfare and Social Services, and Economy and Industry in order to encourage the formulation of additional reforms in each of these bodies in accordance with their specific spheres of activity.
- To encourage the promotion of multidisciplinary seminars on period poverty with the participation of academics, healthcare workers, education, gender equality, and labor experts, representatives of social NPOs and the media, to enhance understanding of all facets of the subject, present the deficiencies and needs to the bodies in charge of advancing solutions, and improve basic attitudes and awareness among the general public.

- To call on social NPOs to open dedicated forums for girls and women on social media to enable an open and animated discussion about the hardships, worries, and feelings of shame or loneliness they may harbor regarding this aspect of their life and to learn about their rights. This is done in various places around the world, and the creation of such venues should be encouraged in Israel as well.

Author: Dr. Michal Evron-Yaniv

Legal Advice: Attorney Eitay Mack

Editor: Noa Tal