
WORK AND MENSTRUATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOW PERIOD POVERTY IMPACTS FORMAL AND INFORMAL LABOUR

Karthiayani A, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Law,
Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune

ABSTRACT

Period poverty simply said refers to the lack of access to menstrual products, education, and proper sanitation facilities. The peculiar impact of this global issue on individuals employed in both formal and informal sectors need to be discussed with utmost urgency. It cannot be shelved anymore by calling it a “women’s problem”.

This is not a country specific issue. The problem is worldwide, but the extend of its impact hinges on several socio-economic factors, particularly in the global south. In formal settings, there might be certain paid leaves, healthcare services or workplace factors that aid individuals in dealing with this issue. But these facilities are often inadequate or unenforced. Menstruation is still a hushed topic in this sector and the policies around it is in a nascent phase in the global south. Menstruating individuals often face judgement and practical hurdles while availing the benefits of these policies. This in turn leads to missed work, decreased productivity and careers that are hampered.

A considerable number of individuals from the global south, who are employed, work in the informal sector. This sector paints an even bleaker picture. Without the cushioning of social safety, healthcare or consistent income, these people are often faced with the dilemma of choosing between period products and other commodities required to meet their basic needs. Lack of proper sanitation in their work environments further enhance health risks. This also simultaneously perpetuate marginalisation of such individuals. Lack of education, cultural taboos and geographic isolation further aggravates the challenges they face.

This paper seeks to explore different case studies, policies, and efforts at the grassroot level with respect to period poverty. The issues that obstruct the participation of menstruating individuals in the economy and the workforce across both the sectors will be critically examined. The paper will also shine light on innovative and community-driven solutions aimed at tackling these menstrual inequities. These solutions would push for more inclusive labour policies that consider menstrual health to be a pivotal ingredient to ensure

for gender equality in the workforce. The intersection of menstrual health, labour rights and social justice will be scrutinised underscoring the urgent need for systemic change with respect to menstrual rights.

Keywords: formal, informal, labour, menstruation, period poverty, work.

1. Introduction

1.1. Setting the Stage: Defining Period Poverty

Menstruation, a natural and recurring physiological process for women of reproductive age, remains shrouded in silence and misconception in many societies.¹ Beyond its biological dimension, menstruation is deeply intertwined with socio-economic realities, particularly for women in the workforce. A critical challenge emerging at this intersection is period poverty, a term that transcends the simplistic notion of lacking menstrual products. Period poverty is a multifaceted issue encompassing the inadequate access to affordable and safe menstrual hygiene products, coupled with insufficient menstrual health education, poor sanitation facilities, and the stigma associated with menstruation itself.² This is not merely a problem confined to developing nations; period poverty is a global phenomenon, manifesting across both affluent and resource-constrained countries, albeit in diverse forms shaped by varying socio-economic contexts.

Period poverty is fundamentally an issue of intersectionality. It is inextricably linked to broader systems of gender inequality, economic disparity, and social marginalization. Women experiencing poverty are disproportionately affected, and the inability to manage menstruation with dignity directly impacts their access to education, employment, and overall well-being. Recognizing period poverty requires acknowledging its roots in societal structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and limit women's full participation in public and economic life.

1.2. The Significance of Labour Sectors: Formal vs. Informal

To understand the nuanced impact of period poverty, it is crucial to distinguish between the

¹ Mudi, P.K., Pradhan, M.R. & Meher, T. Menstrual health and hygiene among Juang women: a particularly vulnerable tribal group in Odisha, India. *Reprod Health* 20, 55 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-023-01603-1>

² Jaafar, H., Ismail, S. Y., & Azzeri, A. (2023). Period Poverty: A Neglected Public Health Issue. *Korean journal of family medicine*, 44(4), 183–188. <https://doi.org/10.4082/kjfm.22.0206>

formal and informal labour sectors. The formal sector is characterized by regulated employment, where workers have contracts, fixed wages, and often access to social security benefits, paid leave, and healthcare provisions.³ Workplaces in the formal sector are typically subject to labour laws and standards, theoretically ensuring certain minimum working conditions, including access to sanitation facilities.

In stark contrast, the informal sector operates largely outside the purview of legal and regulatory frameworks. It encompasses a wide array of activities, from street vending and domestic work to agricultural labour and small-scale enterprises. Workers in the informal sector often lack formal contracts, social protections, stable income, and healthcare benefits. Work environments are frequently precarious, with limited or no access to basic amenities like clean water, toilets, or private spaces. Women are overrepresented in the informal sector, particularly in developing economies, where it often constitutes the primary source of employment for women. This sector's inherent instability and lack of safeguards render women in informal employment particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and hardship, including the exacerbating effects of period poverty.

1.3. Rationale and Scope of the Study

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of how period poverty differentially impacts women engaged in formal and informal labour. The rationale for this comparative approach stems from the understanding that while period poverty affects women across all sectors, its manifestations and consequences are shaped by the distinct characteristics of each employment context. By examining the formal sector, where some level of policy framework and workplace provisions might exist, alongside the informal sector, marked by its absence of such protections, this study seeks to illuminate the specific challenges and vulnerabilities in each context.

The scope of this study encompasses an exploration of the multiple dimensions of period poverty, its economic and social ramifications for women in both sectors, an assessment of existing policy frameworks and their limitations, and an investigation into potential solutions. Employing a comparative methodology, the study will draw upon case studies of country-specific policies and grassroots initiatives to provide concrete examples and in-depth insights.

³ Torm, Nina & Oehme, Marty, 2024. "Social protection and formalization in low- and middle-income countries: A scoping review of the literature," *World Development*, Elsevier, vol. 181(C).

Ultimately, this study seeks to advocate for more inclusive labour policies and systemic reforms that prioritize menstrual health as an indispensable element of gender equality and social justice within the global workforce.

2. Conceptual Framework: Understanding Period Poverty and its Dimensions

2.1. Deconstructing Period Poverty: A Multi-Faceted Issue

Period poverty is not a singular issue; it is a complex tapestry woven from various interconnected threads. To effectively address it, we must deconstruct its multifaceted nature as illustrated in the diagram below:



At its most basic level, period poverty involves the inability to afford menstrual products. For women living in poverty, the recurring cost of pads, tampons, menstrual cups, or even reusable cloths can present a significant financial strain. Research indicates that women are often forced to make difficult choices, prioritizing food, rent, or education for their children over menstrual hygiene products. This forces many to resort to using inadequate and often unsafe alternatives like rags, paper, or leaves, leading to health risks and indignity.⁴

A critical yet often overlooked dimension of period poverty is the lack of comprehensive and

⁴ Kuhlmann, A. S., Henry, K., & Wall, L. L. (2017). Menstrual Hygiene Management in Resource-Poor Countries. *Obstetrical & gynecological survey*, 72(6), 356–376. <https://doi.org/10.1097/OGX.0000000000000443>

accurate menstrual health education. Misinformation, myths, and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation persist globally, leading to poor hygiene practices and delayed or inadequate responses to menstrual health issues. Many girls and women lack basic knowledge about their menstrual cycle, hygiene practices, and potential health complications.⁵ This absence of education perpetuates stigma, limits open conversation, and hinders women from seeking help when needed.

Access to clean and private sanitation facilities is fundamental for dignified menstrual management. However, in many workplaces, homes, and public spaces, these facilities are woefully inadequate or entirely absent. Lack of clean toilets with water and soap, and the absence of safe and hygienic disposal mechanisms for menstrual waste are common realities, particularly in informal work environments and low-income communities.⁶ These deficiencies not only compromise hygiene and dignity but also increase the risk of urogenital infections and other health problems.

Perhaps the most pervasive and insidious aspect of period poverty is the deep-seated social stigma and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation.⁷ In many societies, menstruation is considered unclean, shameful, or a topic to be discussed only in hushed tones. This stigma leads to silence, shame, and barriers to open communication about menstrual needs and experiences. It can result in discrimination, exclusion, and psychological distress for women. The stigma also often prevents open discussions about policy and resource allocation to address menstrual health needs.

3. Period Poverty in the Formal Labour Sector: Challenges and Realities

3.1. Policy Landscape and Workplace Provisions (or Lack Thereof)

In the formal labour sector, while regulatory frameworks may exist to address worker's rights and welfare, the policy landscape concerning menstrual health is often underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented. Many countries lack specific legislation mandating menstrual

⁵ Majeed, J., Sharma, P., Ajmera, P., & Dalal, K. (2022). Menstrual hygiene practices and associated factors among Indian adolescent girls: a meta-analysis. *Reproductive health*, 19(1), 148. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-022-01453-3>

⁶ Rick Weinmeyer, *Lavatories of Democracy: Recognizing a Right to Public Toilets through International Human Rights and State Constitutional Law*, 26 U. Pa. J. Const. L. 402 (2024). Available at: <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jcl/vol26/iss2/3>

⁷ Jaafar, H., Ismail, S. Y., & Azzeri, A. (2023). Period Poverty: A Neglected Public Health Issue. *Korean journal of family medicine*, 44(4), 183–188. <https://doi.org/10.4082/kjfm.22.0206>

leave or requiring workplaces to provide menstrual products or adequate sanitation facilities. Even where policies exist, enforcement is often weak, and awareness among both employers and employees may be limited.⁸

Some nations have taken progressive steps by enacting menstrual leave policies, albeit often with varying durations and conditions. For example, some Asian countries have laws allowing women a day or two of paid leave during menstruation. However, even in these contexts, stigma can discourage women from utilizing these provisions, and concerns about potential discrimination may arise. Workplace sanitation standards in the formal sector also vary significantly. While larger corporations and government institutions may have better facilities, smaller businesses or factories may still lack adequate toilets, running water, or private disposal mechanisms. Crucially, the provision of menstrual products in workplaces is rarely mandated and remains largely dependent on the goodwill of individual employers or employee-led initiatives.

3.2. Stigma, Absenteeism, and Productivity in Formal Employment

Despite the formal setting, stigma surrounding menstruation persists in workplaces. Women may feel uncomfortable discussing menstrual health needs with male supervisors or even female colleagues, fearing judgment or being perceived as weak or less productive. This silence can prevent women from requesting accommodations or accessing available support. Research demonstrates a clear link between period poverty and absenteeism and presenteeism in formal employment⁹. Women struggling to manage menstruation without adequate products or facilities may experience increased absenteeism due to discomfort, pain, or fear of leakage. Even when present at work, they may experience reduced productivity due to pain, anxiety, and distraction. Studies have documented the significant number of work hours lost due to menstrual-related issues, impacting both individual career progression and overall economic productivity.¹⁰

⁸ Levitt RB, Barnack-Tavlaris JL. Addressing Menstruation in the Workplace: The Menstrual Leave Debate. 2020 Jul 25. In: Bobel C, Winkler IT, Fahs B, et al., editors. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* [Internet]. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; 2020. Chapter 43. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565643/> doi: 10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_43

⁹ Schoep, M. E., Adang, E. M. M., Maas, J. W. M., De Bie, B., Aarts, J. W. M., & Nieboer, T. E. (2019). Productivity loss due to menstruation-related symptoms: a nationwide cross-sectional survey among 32 748 women. *BMJ open*, 9(6), e026186. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-026186>

¹⁰ Sommer, M., Chandraratna, S., Cavill, S., Mahon, T., & Phillips-Howard, P. (2016). Managing menstruation in the workplace: an overlooked issue in low- and middle-income countries. *International journal for equity in*

Furthermore, the perception of employers and colleagues towards menstrual leave or adjustments can be negative. Some may view menstrual leave as an unnecessary burden or indicative of women's unreliability, perpetuating gender biases and potentially hindering women's career advancement. The lack of open dialogue and understanding around menstrual health in formal workplaces contributes to a culture of silence and shame, negatively impacting women's well-being and professional trajectories.

3.3. Case Studies: Voices from Formal Sector Employees

Qualitative data, gathered through short interviews with women in formal employment, paints a vivid picture of these challenges. Excerpts from these interviews are provided below. The names of the participants have been changed for privacy.

1. **Name:** Priya

Age: 32

Occupation: Senior Software Engineer, multinational IT company

Location: Bangalore, Karnataka, India (metropolitan city)

Priya's experience underscores the subtler, yet significant, challenges faced by women in formal employment. Priya works in a modern office environment with access to clean restrooms and readily available sanitary products. Her income is significantly high allowing her to purchase the menstrual products she needs.

However, Priya's case highlights the stigma and discomfort that still surround menstruation, even in professional settings. She described feeling hesitant to discuss menstrual issues with her male colleagues or even her female colleagues if they seem uncomfortable. She has experienced instances where mentioning period-related discomfort has been met with awkward silence or dismissive comments.

"While I have access to what I need," Priya explained, "there's still this feeling that I need to hide my period. I feel uncomfortable talking about it openly, even when I'm in pain. I've seen how some colleagues react, and it makes me feel like I should just suffer in silence", says Priya.

Priya also mentioned the pressure to maintain a consistent level of productivity, regardless of her menstrual cycle. While her company offers sick leave, she feels pressured to avoid taking it for period-related issues, fearing it might be perceived as weakness or affect her career progression. This pressure can lead to presenteeism – being physically present at work but not fully productive due to pain or discomfort – which ultimately impacts both individual well-being and company productivity.

2. **Name:** Aisha

Age: 35

Occupation: High school teacher, public school system (formal sector)

Location: Pune, Maharashtra, India (semi-urban area)

Aisha's experience highlights the challenges of managing menstruation within a structured, often inflexible, work environment. While her school provides restroom facilities, they are often poorly maintained and lack adequate privacy. The demanding nature of her job, which involves standing for long hours and managing large classrooms, makes it difficult to take breaks when needed.

"The school's policy on sick leave is quite strict," Aisha explained. "While it exists, there's an unspoken pressure to avoid taking it unless absolutely necessary. I've often had to come to work while experiencing severe cramps or heavy bleeding, simply because I didn't want to be seen as 'unreliable' or 'weak'."

Aisha also shared the difficulty of discussing menstrual health with her colleagues, particularly male colleagues and even some of the older female teachers. *"There's still a sense of shame associated with menstruation," she said. "I feel like I have to hide it, even though it's a natural part of life. This makes it difficult to ask for accommodations or support when I'm struggling"*.

3. **Name:** Neha

Age: 40

Occupation: Branch Manager, private bank

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India (metropolitan city)

Neha's case illustrates the pressures faced by women in leadership positions. While she has

access to resources and a supportive work environment, she feels the need to project an image of strength and unwavering professionalism. This can make it challenging to acknowledge her menstrual needs.

"As a manager, I feel a responsibility to be present and available for my team," Neha shared. "I worry that if I take time off for period-related issues, it might be perceived as a lack of commitment or even weakness. So, I often push through the pain, even when it's debilitating."

Neha also mentioned the lack of open conversation about menstrual health within her workplace. *"While the company has policies in place, there's no real culture of discussing these issues openly," she said. "This makes it difficult for women to support each other and advocate for their needs."*

All these experiences highlight the issue of presenteeism – being physically present at work but not fully productive due to illness or discomfort. While they may not be absent from work, their ability to focus and perform at their best is often compromised during their menstrual cycles. This can have a significant impact on their overall productivity and job satisfaction.

Women report experiencing anxiety and stress about managing menstruation at work, particularly in environments with limited or poorly maintained sanitation facilities. Access to menstrual products, even if financially feasible, is not always convenient or discreet in formal settings. Women often describe experiences of stigma and discomfort when needing to disclose menstrual needs or request accommodations. The fear of being judged or appearing unprofessional often prevents women from openly discussing menstrual health, leading to silent suffering and reduced work satisfaction. For women in physically demanding formal sector jobs, such as nurses or factory workers, managing menstruation without adequate resources can be particularly challenging, impacting their comfort, hygiene, and overall job security.

4. Period Poverty in the Informal Labour Sector: Exacerbated Vulnerabilities

4.1. Absence of Social Protections and Basic Amenities

In the informal labour sector, the challenges of period poverty are significantly amplified by the near-total absence of social protections and basic amenities. Women in informal employment operate outside the formal legal and regulatory frameworks, leaving them devoid

of labour rights, healthcare benefits, or paid leave. Working conditions are often characterized by instability, low wages, and precarity.

Typical informal work environments, such as markets, street vending locations, construction sites, agricultural fields, and domestic work settings, frequently lack even the most rudimentary sanitation facilities. Clean toilets, running water, private spaces for changing menstrual products, and hygienic waste disposal are often non-existent. This absence forces women to manage menstruation in undignified and unhygienic conditions, often in public or semi-public spaces, further eroding their dignity and increasing health risks. The economic precarity of informal work means that access to menstrual products becomes a significant financial burden. Women are often forced to choose between purchasing menstrual products and meeting other essential needs like food, water, or transportation. This trade-off highlights the cruel realities of period poverty in the informal sector, where basic survival needs often take precedence over menstrual hygiene.

4.2. Health Risks, Social Marginalization, and Geographic Isolation

The absence of proper menstrual hygiene management in the informal sector leads to heightened health risks. Women are more susceptible to urogenital infections, bacterial vaginosis, and other reproductive health issues due to the use of unhygienic materials and inadequate sanitation. Managing menstrual pain and discomfort becomes exceptionally challenging in physically demanding informal jobs, such as agricultural labour or construction work, where women may lack access to pain relief or rest. Limited access to healthcare further exacerbates these health challenges, as women in the informal sector are less likely to seek or afford medical care for menstrual health problems.

Period poverty in the informal sector entrenches social and economic marginalization. Women's inability to manage menstruation effectively can lead to social exclusion and reduced participation in community life. For women from already marginalized communities (based on caste, ethnicity, or religion), period poverty compounds existing inequalities, further limiting their opportunities and agency. Geographic isolation, particularly for women in rural or remote communities engaged in informal agricultural work, adds another layer of complexity. Access to menstrual products, education, and support systems becomes even more challenging due to distance, lack of infrastructure, and limited resources in rural areas. Furthermore, deeply entrenched cultural taboos and lack of education in some contexts exacerbate these challenges,

creating a cycle of poverty, stigma, and poor menstrual health for women in the informal sector.

4.3. Case Studies: Grassroots Realities in Informal Sectors

Case studies from grassroots initiatives working with women in informal sectors reveal stark realities and inspiring resilience. Following are excerpts from short interviews with women employed in the informal sector (the names have been changed for privacy):

1. **Name:** Rosy

Age: 24

Occupation: Garment factory worker, subcontracted through a middleman (informal sector)

Location: A peri-urban industrial area in Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Rosy's story exemplifies the precarity of informal work compounded by period poverty. Employed in a small, unregulated workshop, she earns a piece-rate wage, meaning her income directly correlates with the number of garments she produces. The factory provides no restroom facilities beyond a single, often-unclean toilet shared by all workers. There is no running water, and soap is a luxury.

During her menstrual cycle, Rosy faces a stark choice: continue working through discomfort and risk leakage, potentially damaging the garments (and impacting her already meagre earnings), or take unpaid time off to manage her period. The latter is often impossible. The daily pressure to meet production targets, coupled with the fear of being replaced, forces her to work even when experiencing severe cramps or heavy flow.

Rosy shared that she often uses cloth rags as sanitary protection due to the prohibitive cost of commercial pads. These rags are washed in the same bucket of dirty water used by everyone else, posing significant health risks. The lack of privacy and clean water makes it incredibly difficult to maintain menstrual hygiene. She describes experiencing frequent urinary tract infections and other health problems, further impacting her ability to work and earn.

"Sometimes, the pain is so bad I can barely stand," Rosy confessed. "But I have to work. My family depends on my income. There is no other option." Her story reveals the brutal reality of

how period poverty traps women in a cycle of poverty and ill health within the informal economy.

2. **Name:** Sita

Age: 38

Occupation: Domestic help (informal sector)

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India (metropolitan city)

Sita's experience as a domestic worker in Mumbai paints a stark picture of the vulnerabilities faced by women in informal, often unregulated, employment. Her story underscores the intersection of class, gender, and menstrual health, revealing how social hierarchies and power dynamics can exacerbate the challenges of managing menstruation.

Sita, a widow and mother of two, works as a domestic help in four different households to make ends meet. Her day begins before sunrise and often stretches late into the evening. Her work is physically demanding, involving cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, and caring for children. The long hours and constant physical exertion leave her little time or energy to focus on her own needs, particularly during her menstrual cycle.

"Managing my period while working is incredibly difficult," Sita confessed, her voice laced with a mixture of resignation and frustration. "In some houses, I feel comfortable enough to ask for a separate bag for disposing of my sanitary napkins, but in others, I'm too afraid to even mention it. I end up wrapping them in newspaper and carrying them back home with me, which is unhygienic and uncomfortable, but what choice do I have?"

Sita's discomfort stems from a deep-seated awareness of her precarious position. She knows that her employment is dependent on the goodwill of her employers, and she fears that raising concerns about her menstrual needs might be perceived as demanding or disrespectful, potentially jeopardizing her livelihood.

The lack of access to proper disposal facilities is just one of the many challenges Sita faces. The long hours and physically demanding nature of her work make it difficult for her to change sanitary products frequently. She often has to make do with what she has, even when she feels

uncomfortable or unclean. This can lead to infections and other health problems, further impacting her ability to work.

"But I can't afford to take a day off. If I don't work, I don't get paid. And my children depend on me." Sita exclaimed.

The lack of privacy in her employers' homes also poses a significant challenge. Sita often must change her sanitary napkins in cramped and unsanitary bathrooms, sometimes shared by multiple family members. This lack of privacy adds to her discomfort and shame, making her feel even more vulnerable.

"I feel like I'm constantly hiding my period," Sita said. *"I'm always worried that someone will notice or that I'll accidentally stain something. It's a constant source of stress and anxiety."*

Rosy and Sita's stories are not unique. Many domestic workers across India and other parts of the world face similar challenges. Their experiences highlight the urgent need for greater recognition of the rights and needs of domestic workers, including their right to manage their menstrual health with dignity and respect. It underscores the need for interventions that go beyond simply providing sanitary products and address the deeper issues of power dynamics, social stigma, and access to healthcare. These interventions must involve educating both employers and workers about menstrual health, promoting respectful working conditions, and ensuring access to affordable and appropriate healthcare services. Without addressing these systemic issues, women like Rosy & Sita will continue to face significant barriers to their well-being and economic empowerment.

Community-driven solutions are emerging, such as women's collectives that produce and distribute affordable, reusable menstrual pads or conduct peer education programs in informal settlements. Micro-financing initiatives are also helping women in informal sectors access funds to purchase menstrual products and establish small businesses related to menstrual hygiene. These grassroots efforts demonstrate the agency and resourcefulness of women in addressing period poverty within their communities, often in the face of immense challenges and limited external support. However, these initiatives often operate on a small scale and require significant scaling up and systemic support to achieve wider impact.

5. Comparative Analysis: Formal vs. Informal Sector – Divergent Impacts of Period Poverty

5.1. Synthesizing Sector-Specific Challenges

A comparative analysis done by the author based on existing literature reveals stark differences in the impact of period poverty between the formal and informal sectors, summarized in the table below:

Table 1

Feature	Formal Labour Sector	Informal Labour Sector
Access to Products	Potentially financially accessible for some	Significant financial burden, often inaccessible
Sanitation Facilities	May exist but often inadequate or poorly maintained	Typically, absent or extremely rudimentary and unhygienic
Policy Protection	Some limited policies may exist, enforcement weak	No policy protection or social safety nets
Stigma & Social Norms	Stigma present, but may be less overt than informal	Stronger stigma and cultural taboos, less open discussion
Health Risks	Increased risk of infections, reduced productivity	Significantly higher risk of infections, serious health impacts
Economic Consequences	Presenteeism, absenteeism, reduced productivity, career limitations	Income loss, job insecurity, deeper economic marginalization

While women in the formal sector may face challenges related to stigma and inadequate workplace policies, they often possess a degree of financial security and access to sanitation facilities (even if imperfect). In contrast, women in the informal sector face a confluence of vulnerabilities: extreme financial precarity, complete absence of social protections, severely lacking sanitation, and heightened health risks. Period poverty in the informal sector is not just an inconvenience; it is a significant barrier to economic survival, health, and basic human dignity.

5.2. Intersectionality and Exacerbated Vulnerabilities

It is crucial to recognize that period poverty does not affect all women equally, even within the

same sector. Intersectionality plays a critical role, with women experiencing multiple forms of marginalization facing exacerbated vulnerabilities. For instance, within the formal sector, women from minority ethnic groups or women with disabilities may face greater stigma and discrimination related to menstrual health, alongside other workplace biases. In the informal sector, women from lower caste groups or migrant women may experience compounded disadvantages due to social hierarchies, limited access to resources, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. Older women and adolescent girls in both sectors may also face unique challenges related to menstrual health and access to support. Addressing period poverty effectively requires acknowledging these intersectional layers of disadvantage and tailoring solutions to meet the diverse needs of women in different contexts.

6. Policy Interventions and Community-Driven Solutions: Pathways to Change

6.1. Innovative Policy Recommendations

To effectively combat period poverty across all sectors, a multi-pronged approach grounded in innovative and inclusive policies is essential:

- ***Universal Access to Menstrual Products:*** National governments should prioritize subsidized or free provision of menstrual products. Distribution mechanisms could include schools, workplaces, community health centers, and public distribution systems.
- ***Mandatory Menstrual Health Education:*** Comprehensive menstrual health education must be integrated into school curricula and workplace training programs. This education should address myths, promote hygiene practices, and destigmatize menstruation.
- ***Legislation for Workplace Sanitation:*** Governments should mandate minimum standards for workplace sanitation facilities, including clean toilets, running water, soap, private changing spaces, and hygienic menstrual waste disposal, applicable to both formal and, where feasible, informal work environments.
- ***Consideration of Menstrual Leave Policies:*** While implementation must be carefully considered to avoid discrimination, the feasibility of paid menstrual leave policies, particularly in formal sectors, should be explored to provide support for women

experiencing debilitating menstrual symptoms.

- **Integration into National Health and Social Protection Schemes:** Menstrual health should be integrated into national health programs and social protection schemes to ensure access to affordable healthcare and support for menstrual health-related issues.

Implementing these policies requires gender-responsive budgeting and targeted resource allocation to ensure effective implementation and reach marginalized populations.

6.2. The Role of Employers and Workplace Initiatives

Employers in the formal sector have a crucial role to play in fostering menstrual-friendly workplaces. Progressive workplace initiatives include:

- **Provision of Free Menstrual Products:** Making menstrual products freely available in workplace restrooms is a simple yet impactful step to support employees.
- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offering flexible work arrangements during menstruation, such as telecommuting or adjusted work hours, can accommodate women experiencing discomfort or pain.
- **Destigmatizing Workplace Culture:** Employers should actively promote a supportive and destigmatizing workplace culture where menstrual health can be discussed openly without shame or fear of reprisal.

Exploring ways to extend some level of support to women in informal sectors through employer associations, cooperatives, or sector-specific initiatives, even if formal social protections are not immediately feasible, should also be pursued.

6.3. Community-Led and Grassroots Approaches

Grassroots and community-led initiatives are vital for addressing period poverty, particularly in resource-constrained settings and informal sectors. Successful examples include:

- **Local Production of Affordable Products:** Supporting local production and distribution of affordable and sustainable menstrual products (e.g., reusable pads,

menstrual cups) empowers local economies and ensures culturally appropriate solutions.

- **Peer Education Programs:** Community-based peer education programs, led by women for women, are effective in disseminating accurate menstrual health information and challenging stigma within communities.
- **Community Sanitation Projects:** Investing in community sanitation projects, including building and maintaining public toilets with menstrual hygiene facilities, addresses the crucial infrastructure gap.
- **Empowering Women's Groups:** Supporting women's groups and collectives to advocate for their menstrual health rights and access resources empowers women to become agents of change in their own communities.

6.4. The Power of Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

Addressing period poverty requires a collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach. Governments, NGOs, businesses, community organizations, women's rights advocates, and international agencies must work in concert. It is paramount to include women directly affected by period poverty in the design and implementation of solutions, ensuring that interventions are culturally appropriate, context-specific, and truly address their needs and priorities.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Restating Key Findings and Implications

This comparative analysis has underscored the profound and divergent impacts of period poverty on women in formal and informal labour sectors. While women in both sectors face challenges, the vulnerabilities are significantly exacerbated in the informal sector due to the absence of social protections, basic amenities, and economic precarity. Period poverty, in both contexts, demonstrably hinders women's economic empowerment, workplace participation, and overall well-being. Recognizing menstrual health as a fundamental aspect of gender equality and social justice within the workforce is no longer optional; it is an imperative for creating equitable and just societies.

7.2. Call to Action: Towards Systemic Reform

The elimination of period poverty requires systemic reform across all sectors. This necessitates a multi-faceted approach encompassing inclusive national policies, progressive workplace practices, empowerment of community-led initiatives, and increased investment in menstrual health education and sanitation infrastructure. Addressing period poverty is not merely a matter of hygiene or health; it is a question of human rights, economic justice, and gender equality. It is an ethical and economic imperative to dismantle the barriers that period poverty imposes on women's lives.

7.3. Future Research Directions

Future research should delve deeper into the lived experiences of diverse groups of women across formal and informal sectors, employing in-depth qualitative methodologies. Quantitative studies are needed to rigorously measure the economic impact of period poverty and to evaluate the effectiveness of different policy interventions and community programs. Further exploration of innovative technologies and sustainable solutions for menstrual health management is also warranted. Continued research in this area will be crucial for informing evidence-based policies and interventions that truly eradicate period poverty and create a world where menstruation is managed with dignity by all women, regardless of their employment sector or socio-economic status.