

# Period Poverty's Impact on the Futures of its Most Marginalized Groups

Karuna Damle<sup>1</sup> and Jaz Riley<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Riverwood International Charter School

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

## Abstract

The main objective in this paper was to conceptualize how period poverty impacts the upward mobility of women and girls in the United States. With the topic of period poverty gaining awareness and the idea of menstruation becoming more mainstream, the impacts of menstruation on a menstruator's future must be acknowledged also. One of the main ways to identify these impacts, specifically from a financial perspective, is through socioeconomic growth as it demonstrates an intersection between a person's economic stability and the opportunities they have been given from a younger age. In this paper, period poverty and its influence on upward mobility is broken into demographic groups of girls in middle and high school, women in college, low-income women, and incarcerated women. This research connects the areas of period poverty and upward mobility to identify how financial precarity and menstruation limit the futures of its most struggling groups.

## **Introduction**

Crystal Jackson was excited when she first got her period. In an interview with Nicole Audrey Spector, she explains that at thirteen years old, even though she had never talked about it with her mom before, Crystal knew it was a big deal and felt ready for this step. But her excitement soon dissolved as she recognized her financial situation kept her from acquiring the menstrual products she needed, and these products were not offered in her school's bathroom. In reading this, I wondered how Crystal was able to compromise for her family circumstance being such that she cannot afford products. Growing up, Crystal continued to struggle with affording period products. As Crystal became a college student, she continued to struggle to afford the cost of menstrual products and would often spend class periods agonizing over her period rather than focus on school. Her life revolved around her period; she would often skip events so she would not have to waste a tampon or use a pad without it being absolutely necessary. Crystal struggled with this alone, never opening up to her friends about her difficult situation even though many other college students struggle with affording menstrual products just like her. In reading this article, I also wondered if Crystal ever had friends around her, in either high school or college, to offer some reprieve through collective conversation or occasionally sharing products. The embarrassment, shame, and isolation around periods forced Crystal into silence as she had been taught her period was something to hide, even if she needed help with satisfying her body's regular, monthly function ([Jackson, 2023](#)).

Crystal's extended isolated experience with her cycle demonstrates the multiple ways that ignorance around dynamics that inform how our society engages menstruation impacts menstruating people. One, Crystal's financial precarity follows her from high school to college, exemplifies the strain of period poverty, or the lack of access to menstrual products, sanitized facilities, education, and proper resources for people menstruating, often due to a lack of financial resources to access these products ([Michel](#)). Her social status appears impacted by her menstruation poverty. Her circumstance demonstrates the depths of upward mobility as it is tied to concerns menstruation. By this I mean, her inability to manage her menstruation more effectively alongside an internalized silence directly impacts

how she navigates institutions intended to offer her upward mobility. Crystal carries some stigma through high school and college, such that she cannot fully commit herself to the growth opportunities these experiences engender.

Crystal's struggle with period poverty is not a unique experience in that 42% of menstruators in the US endure this issue ([Krumperman](#)). While this is a widespread issue, much of the research is concentrated around individual physical health at the expense of mental, emotional, and financial implications. Public health studies emphasize the medicalization of period poverty ([Holst](#)). Researchers are concerned with how inaccessibility to menstrual products impacts the individual's physical health, such as causing vaginal tract infections. Physical health concerns limit the issue of period poverty to questions about diseases or illnesses rather than a preoccupation with the lack of awareness and general ignorance surrounding menstruation. By privileging the individual, the medical lens obscures the sociological perspective that I am attempting to articulate in this paper. The social and cultural dynamics highlight the systemic nature of period poverty and how it informs the futures of its most marginalized groups.

In this essay, I address how period poverty is pursued as a contemporary social issue. In other words, I explore period poverty in terms of the way it has an impact on upward mobility and the socioeconomic status of menstruators. To investigate the effect of period poverty on upward mobility, I first outline concepts such as the tampon tax, where studies of period poverty are currently centered, and how improvements can be made based on the consensus of the literature. Then, I explore how period poverty impacts individual menstruators, from a mental, physical, and financial perspective, and explore how period poverty limits upward mobility for some of its most marginalized yet understudied groups.

I continue to explore the upward mobility and period poverty areas of research by first examining what upward mobility means for high school, college, low income, and incarcerated women in the US. I then establish key topics that link upward mobility and period poverty to explore how the identified navigate stigmas, physical barriers, and financial struggles associated with period poverty. Finally, after looking at these areas and identifying the key elements that influence these groups for both period poverty and upward mobility, I do an analysis of the effect of period poverty on upward mobility on the particular menstruator demographics using topics that highlight the conjecture of these two areas. To be clear, I use the term "menstruators" when discussing period poverty as a way to highlight that menstruation is not exclusive to women-identified persons or gender. Although this essay will not parse the specific nuances of this contentious matter and instead focus on women and girls in the US, menstruation as a gendered issue is a critical note in this developing discourse.

By doing this research, I hope to fill the gap of the influence of period poverty on the trajectory of a menstruator's future. Period poverty has been identified as a crucial issue and there have been some steps taken to attempt to combat it, but I hope to convey the serious power it has over how a menstruator's life will turn out, like how period poverty deeply impacted Crystal's life while she was at college.

## Literature Review

### Period Poverty

People struggling with period poverty are often forced to endure their periods with unsafe products and facilities. This danger means they do not have access to clean running water or other menstrual hygiene resources. While individuals struggle to find facilities that are safe and allow them to go through their periods comfortably, period poverty forces menstruators to go through their cycles without dignity. The condition of having to go through one's period without dignity refers to individuals not having access to safe and effective facilities and ways to manage their menstrual hygiene. For example, many are forced to use rags, leaves, or cardboard in place of pads or tampons. Or, if an individual does not have access to a sanitized facility for bathing and dealing with their period in private, they may be subject to intense shaming and even physical health concerns. Unsanitized conditions like these can result in serious health issues like skin irritation and vaginal itching that simply add more to the burden for these menstruators who

cannot afford to endure their periods comfortably already (Rapp). In addition, the safety and level of comfort that individuals must endure while menstruating is no longer present. On the other hand, a safe environment for menstruators may include having access to clean running water, sanitation facilities, proper menstrual products (such as tampons, pads, menstrual cups, period underwear, etc.), pain relief medications, and an environment that doesn't shame or embarrass a person while on their period.

Beyond having access to the right resources, as the term "period poverty" indicates, this issue entails financial precarity. The country's most marginalized groups endure this unconscionable deprivation to basic necessities often due to a lack of financial resources. This includes the 11.3 million people who live in poverty in the US and struggle to afford menstrual products (Reeve-Parker) and the 80% of incarcerated women who cannot pay for or access period products (Jeong). A likely cause for such distress is the "tampon tax," which increases the burden on those who struggle with affording period products. This tax labels menstrual products as something that is not a necessity like food is and requires menstruators to pay this extra tax when purchasing these items. With this tax that commercializes period products and deems them "luxuries" instead of basic requirements, these products become more difficult to acquire for those already struggling financially. Not being able to afford these products force people to make impossible decisions between essentials such as food and menstrual products because they cannot afford both.

Compounded by cultural and religious dynamics that shape stigmas around menstruating bodies, negative conditions insinuate a social and cultural taint surrounding periods. This negative lens makes those going through it feel alone and isolated due to societal expectations to keep their concerns to themselves. Although the menstruation process is a regular biological function that many go through each month, there is a certain aspect of shame around this topic that attempts to keep individuals out of sacred religious places and far from cultural celebrations while on their cycle. For example, if a girl is on her period while a Hindu wedding is occurring, she may be asked not to attend or set foot there as to not impact the other attendees. These types of customs, in turn, set a precedent of embarrassment and shame around one's period. In fact, 58% of US women admit to being embarrassed of being on their period, but more than that, 42% have experienced period shaming firsthand (Barrett). This shame is also what keeps the topic of period poverty from gaining the awareness it needs as those who begin to speak out about period poverty are often shamed for bringing up a "gross" conversation that is supposed to be "private."

## Upward Mobility

Upward mobility is the experience of rising to a higher status in society, whether that be social or economic. Within the scope of women and girls in the United States, the demographic of people experiencing period poverty includes those who are in high school and college, homeless and of low-income, and who are incarcerated; groups who are often of a lower social class. For these women, period poverty is a more pressing issue as they struggle from the financial burden of poverty and lack of access to menstrual hygiene products to a greater degree than others. For example, imprisoned women are often forced to trade phone calls with loved ones or need to beg for period products as an inadequate supply is not provided from the beginning, and most states have no law requiring menstrual products for prisoners (Haven). In addition, women who are in college and on their period also often struggle with having proper access to period products, as the struggle of US to afford menstrual hygiene products largely impacts their well-being and mental health (Wood).

Along with the demographic of women and girls facing period poverty, it is important to consider how the United States (US) plays a role in these demographics. The US is considered one of the world's wealthiest countries, but it still struggles with various forms of poverty. In addition, ideas around the US being a wealthy country end up clouding the awareness and blatant examples of period poverty around us. Many aspects of discrimination against those facing period poverty, including having to skip school for not having access to or the ability to afford period products, are thought of as occurring far away. But in actuality, these same issues occur in the US and as menstruators are continuously asked to make impossible decisions such as choosing between food and menstrual products. These impossible decisions result in people not leading a dignified life that promotes their physical, mental, and/or emotional

health. Being forced to make decisions like these is extremely difficult, and although most don't realize it, these scenarios continue to occur in the United States.

United States based women and girls face tremendous barriers that inhibit upward mobility. Various instances occur where women have more education and experience yet are continuously paid less than their male counterparts. And beyond income, women in the US are 38% more likely to live in poverty than men, partly due to women not being able to buy products like pads and tampons with public benefits like food stamps (Yamaguchi). These circumstances contribute to a cycle of inequality that doesn't allow all members of society to contribute to pressing global issues, and in turn, decreases the opportunity for progress to occur.

For middle and high school girls in the US, upward mobility is associated with establishing a secure foundation for preparation for the future. This time frame includes the intellectually formative years of a person's life where people are learning about social groups and making decisions that ultimately impact their lives in the long term. The future for these individuals is dictated by their grades and if they make it to college or not, which is impacted by middle and high school specific circumstances of being able to focus during class and not missing school due to a period. In the long term, educational attainment will improve the prospect of upward mobility for this group. Because middle and high school girls may not be a part of the workforce or do not yet have a steady source of income, the opportunities that come with finishing high school become much more critical. Finishing high school is a foundational step that can orient college or technical skills which push individuals closer to financial stability and a steady income. For low-income high school girls like Crystal, high school graduation is key to upward mobility.

College aged women are concerned with similar foundational elements to high schoolers around mobility into the workforce, except they are considered adults carrying heavy responsibilities. In the US, 14.2% of college menstruating people experienced period poverty in the last year ([Think and PERIOD](#)). Period poverty signals absences from school and lower grades, which becomes more crucial for college students coming from low-income or impoverished backgrounds. 90% of college graduates will achieve upward mobility out of poverty as opposed to the 47% that will remain in the poor circumstances that they were born in if they don't go to college ([Petrilli](#)). Apart from an increase in socioeconomic status at an individual level, these women are the expectant leaders for their families. Their families are counting on their linear trajectory through college and into an economically viable workforce to sustain their entire family unit. There is little concern for aspects of being a woman or first-generation college going student, which place a huge weight on these individuals. A college education is becoming increasingly important in today's economy for getting a job and being able to compete in the workplace, so for women from poor families, graduating can make the difference between upward mobility and a lifetime of poverty ([Semuels](#)).

Indeed, for working women who are economically disadvantaged, upward mobility appears like traditional ladder climbing. In fact, 64% of women in Missouri are unable to afford menstrual products ([Pycroft](#)). As contributing members of the workforce, these women are expected to have financial stability, but this is not always the case. On the other hand, if a woman is a mother or is responsible for individuals other than herself, she will need to provide for them through financial support that stretches the income of one individual across multiple people. Career progression is impacted by family dynamics and motherhood for women in this demographic. In an economy where devoting more time to work contributes to one's socioeconomic status, displayed by a [Pew report](#) that found that increased work hours resulted in an 11% increase in upward mobility for women born at the bottom, this standard puts mothers at a continues disadvantage. Working mothers are forced to choose between economic increase and family.

Incarcerated women are restricted from period products while in jail and continue to face repercussions of having a criminal record as they regain their places in the workforce. One's gender status when incarcerated often becomes negligible. Menstruating people in women's jails and prisons navigate extreme scarcity of menstruation products. Prisons supply completely inadequate rations such as providing 10 pads per day for groups of 25 to 30 people, provoking menstruators to fight for access that is not guaranteed ([Jarvis](#)). An environment with scarcity of period products such as this one insinuates a more difficult sentence that is plagued by a significant lack of dignity. Once out of prison, more barriers arise as individuals are often excluded from the workforce while likely accruing a debt by occupying a private property (prisons are increasingly privatized at the expense of incarcerated people's lives

and labor). This creates another limitation to improving one's socioeconomic status by limiting the ability to access banking, gain credit, pay court fines and fees, and find employment opportunities ([Hellmann](#)). These women are many times denied interviews and job opportunities due to their criminal record, which makes upward mobility increasingly difficult. In other words, financial stability and a consistent income are always be out of reach.

Conclusively, upward mobility may mean different things for varied demographics, but having better opportunities at school and work can be the key for moving upwards.

## Discussion

The intersection of period poverty and upward mobility highlights "changing the cycle" as a crucial junction point (Michel). This concept explains how repetitive negative responses around menstruation perpetuate period poverty by starting from low access at school and ending with a cycle lacking dignity into adult years. Crystal's high school experience exemplifies the cycle at work. As her cycle approaches, so do anxious self-protective behaviors like missing school. These types of mentalities lead to poor grades and school dropouts, steering towards low level jobs and a continuation in the lack of access to menstrual products. In fact, 1 in 5 girls in the US miss school due to a lack of menstrual products (Rapp). But these numbers only scratch the surface. As the concept of "changing the cycle" suggests, absences don't stop in high school; they gradually progress and eventually lead to a decrease in grades and eventual disinterest for girls who struggle with attending school comfortably.

Increased access to menstruation products can subvert the negative cycle ([Rapp](#)). If products are made available free of charge, it could alleviate the stress developed around the cycle; these young people can bleed with dignity and sustain good standing in high school. For instance, one school in New York City saw a 2.4% improvement in attendance after they began to stock free period products in their bathrooms ([Pennell](#)). These types of programs promote dignity and self-esteem in these girls who would otherwise miss class time for not being able to afford or have access to menstrual products. Accessible programs increase the chance of students' upward mobility by providing access and allowing students to focus more on their education and school rather than having to struggle to find period products. As discussed, high school graduation could mean higher level jobs and menstrual products can make a difference in the opportunities available to women. "Changing the cycle" emphasizes how access to necessary resources can eventually lead to upward mobility for women and girls in society, but how might an increase in education result in period poverty becoming a more widespread and informed topic?

As opposed to access to resources that promotes upward mobility for an individual, more awareness and education around the menstrual cycle could mean impactful de-stigmatization ([Moon](#)). Proper education can change perspectives around periods such that we could normalize discussions around this bodily function. This includes knowledge about cycles, but also recognition of menstrual symptoms and the ability for menstruators and non-menstruators to be conscious of how to help one another. With this type of education and de-stigmatization, we are able to create a more empowering and supportive environment that is informed of the obstacles facing those who menstruate. This increased knowledge on periods could also encourage a different culture that positively impacts women's upward mobility by changing attitudes towards menstruation ([Lancet](#)). This education will not only push towards steps to gender equality, but it also allows for society to fully benefit from the contributions of people who menstruate, ultimately leading towards a more progressive and collaborative society. In other words, instead of limiting opportunities for people who menstruate to add to society by not providing adequate resources for them to go through their periods, these people will be able to contribute to discussions more frequently which creates a more progressive and inclusive society.

It appears that people often assume that by the time a person reaches the college-going age that they are educated on the menstrual cycle, but this is not always the case. Although most menstruators may be comfortable with their cycles by this time, many non-menstruators still do not understand the process of menstruation and education around this topic is very much needed. Through education for both menstruators and non-menstruators, aspects of shame and embarrassment that arise from periods being unknown decrease allowing college menstruators to be able



to go through their cycles with less social discomfort. So, providing access to period products through university programs has a similar effect as these programs in middle and high schools with the increase in attendance leading to better grades and upward mobility. But this sort of attendance increase may have a more direct influence on upward mobility as it can propel these women to be able to finish their 4-year degree and enter the workforce in higher level positions.

As the intersection of period poverty and upward mobility highlight possible solutions including access and education, the groups impacted by period poverty continue to be negatively affected socioeconomically by this issue. For working women, period poverty increases the financial burden placed on them through menstruation products. Accumulating costs give way to a rise in financial precarity as income is stretched thin with menstruation, a problem that is magnified for women who are mothers and must support more than just themselves.

For incarcerated women, the influence of period poverty on top of pre-existing difficulties with a criminal record and acquired debts makes upward mobility a colossal challenge. Financial pressure continues to build with surmounting costs of going through one's period every month. This is exceedingly difficult to pay unless the woman has financial stability that comes with a job but is virtually impossible to attain with a criminal record. The impact of a criminal record coupled with financial precarity magnified by period poverty significantly limit upward mobility for women who were once incarcerated.

Overall, from high school to college to working to incarcerated women, period poverty has a significant effect on upward mobility. Whether this impact is due to the extra financial strain collected with demands for period products or a lack of access to menstrual products that inhibit individuals from attending school and work, period poverty-- especially when faced by the individual as a problem of the individual --creates countless barriers to socio-economic growth.

## Conclusion

Period poverty is a pressing issue with expansive implications for menstruators' educations, careers, health, and overall well-being. A lack of regular access to menstrual products can affect one's physical and mental health, insinuating a cycle that lacks dignity and creates lasting self-esteem and comfort issues. School and/or work life success hangs in the balance for menstruators who adopt shame around their cycles as education is necessary for those in lower income classes to rise socioeconomically.

In terms of evaluating steps towards upward mobility for those experiencing period poverty and steps towards gender equality, the concept of "changing the cycle" incorporates the subtopics of mental health, access, and economics as they link behind the shared front of period poverty and a lack of resources as the barrier to menstruators as access leads to upward mobility for women which leads to more access. And the challenges to this concept highlight how more awareness and education around period poverty has the ability to change the playing fields of this issue by incorporating a community of informed individuals to help combat period poverty alongside menstruators who are impacted by these issues at a personal level. Possible steps towards solutions of period poverty may lean towards working to provide more access to menstrual products or bringing awareness about period poverty to a larger audience, but the true root causes of stigma surrounding this issue must be addressed through educating groups about menstruation if any real gains are to be made.

While the work in this essay only begins to touch on some important dynamics stemming from period poverty, there is still much more work to be done. One key limitation to my research was the lack of previous articles and studies done on the more marginalized groups of my demographic. It was extremely difficult to find content on period poverty for incarcerated women, which resulted in a lack of knowledge and content on incarcerated individuals in comparison to the other demographic groups. I anticipate future research to dive deeper into incarcerated menstruators experiences, along with more specific information on societal impacts on the marginalized groups of period poverty. Additionally, a nuanced approach to access, specifically as it relates to education, could help us find resolution to period poverty.

There is a certain societal standard of placing the blame on the individual when this is actually a structural issue of not providing adequate support to those struggling with period poverty or people forced to endure shaming around their periods. But this is a structural issue that cannot be resolved by an individual. It is a broad social issue that affects people who know menstruators and the workforce that relies on them. Thus, resolving period poverty should be taken seriously by society writ large. (Michel). As half the population undergoes this process of menstruation, including more than just women and girls who experience this process, period poverty and the stigmas and shame that surround the topic should not be the only ones fighting to fix this issue. Beyond whom period poverty impacts, this population of people contribute to the world's functionality through forms of labor including domestic, public, international, and otherwise. As menstruating people occupy and work in every corner of our world, their health should be of great concern, and everyone will benefit from period poverty being addressed. It is important to recognize the value that the demographic of people who menstruate bring to society, making the issue of period poverty not just their responsibility, but the responsibility of all of society to make the world a more inclusive place.

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