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### Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

#### **Statement submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### Period Poverty Beyond the Products

Period Poverty is usually discussed solely focussing on providing menstrual products. However, Period Poverty has a much wider set of issues; and, international bodies, governments, and organisations need to address it and recognise that it extends far beyond access to products. Period poverty encompasses the fundamental right to education, dignity, and an environment that allows for dignified menstruation as a natural phenomenon. Unfortunately, initiatives related to menstrual education are often undervalued due to their lack of immediate economic returns. This narrow perspective not only fails to grasp the true essence of the issue but also perpetuates a cycle of neglect.

Menstruation generally became commercialised in the 20th century. This led to stigma around menstruation and transformed menstruation into a problem that could only be resolved through store-bought products. Suddenly, menstruation was no longer regarded as respectable, individuals were prompted to visit stores and purchase menstrual products to maintain a sense of dignity. From a product of convenience, it was promoted as a necessity. These products, from their inception, were designed to be disposable, diverging from the natural ecological process. By creating a market that necessitates disposable products, we have, over the last century, manufactured a problem out of menstruation that need not exist, thereby ensuring a continuous consumer base compelled to buy products – often burdened with taxation – to avoid feelings of ostracism.

The commodification of menstruation has profoundly shaped the discourse around it to the point where period poverty is narrowly perceived as just a lack of access to products, obscuring the underlying issues of education, dignity, and medical recognition and understanding.

This mindset has also been reiterated with the use of the term menstrual hygiene rather than menstrual health. Once we create a space that allows us to discuss menstruation as much more than a person having to manage their bleeding, it creates the opportunity for us to broaden the discussion on menstruation and allows us to tackle gendered-based tax discrimination, health, ethical and environmental impacts of menstrual products; the right to education; the rights of the child and the prevention of child marriage; the right to dignity; the right to health, both physical and mental; the right to work as well as access to adequate water and sanitation, all of which are linked to menstruation.

Period poverty transcends mere access to menstrual products. It encompasses an intricate web of challenges menstruating individuals face, particularly those in marginalised or vulnerable communities. Beyond the physical products, period poverty includes lack of education, dignity and mental health, healthcare and accurate diagnosis, Educational Barriers, economic impact, environmental concerns, and intersectionality of menstruators.

Here are some of the proposals the Sikh Human Rights Group has put together to tackle the full scale of period poverty beyond the products:

- **Broaden the Discourse:** Recognise that period poverty extends beyond access to menstrual products. Encourage international bodies, governments, and organisations to expand the conversation to encompass menstrual health, dignity, education, and medical recognition.

- **Challenge Gender-Based Tax Discrimination:** Advocate for eliminating taxes on menstrual products, addressing the gendered-based taxation that exacerbates period poverty.
- **Menstrual Health Education Curriculum:** Advocate for the integration of menstrual health education into national school curricula. Encourage governments to develop comprehensive, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive educational materials to reduce stigma, improve awareness, and empower young individuals with accurate information.
- **National Period Poverty Action Plans:** Encourage member states to develop and implement national action plans to address period poverty. These plans should encompass a wide range of strategies, including product distribution, menstrual education programs, and initiatives to ensure access to healthcare and diagnosis for menstrual health issues.
- **Digital Accessibility:** Promote digital platforms and mobile applications that provide information, support, and resources related to menstrual health. Ensure that these tools are accessible to individuals in remote or underserved areas, particularly in developing countries.
- **Community Menstrual Health Hubs:** Create community-based menstrual health centres or hubs where individuals can access free or subsidised products, receive education, and seek medical advice for menstrual health issues. These hubs can also provide a safe and supportive environment to break taboos and promote open discussions.
- **Period Product Tax Exemptions:** Advocate for the removal of taxes on menstrual products and classify them as essential items. Encourage member states to implement policies that ensure these products are affordable and accessible to all, regardless of income.
- **Telemedicine for Menstrual Health:** Promote telemedicine services specialising in menstrual health. This would make it easier for individuals, especially in remote areas, to seek medical advice, consultation, and diagnosis for menstrual disorders and conditions.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Support research initiatives to gather data on the impact of period poverty and menstrual health. Encourage governments to allocate funding for research that informs evidence-based policies and programs.
- **Promote Menstrual Health Education:** Emphasise the importance of comprehensive menstrual health education, especially in low-income regions, to overcome taboos, reduce stigma, and ensure individuals have accurate information about menstruation.
- **Ensure Healthcare Access:** Work to improve healthcare access for menstruating individuals, especially in underserved areas, to provide proper medical care for menstrual disorders and conditions such as endometriosis and PCOS.
- **Support Marginalised Communities:** Recognise the intersectionality of period poverty and the disproportionate impact on marginalised communities, including those with disabilities, refugees, transgender individuals, and people of from minority groups. Tailor support to address their specific challenges.
- **Dismantle Taboos and Stigmas:** Promote open dialogues about menstruation to negotiate cultural taboos and social stigmas that perpetuate misconceptions and hinder accurate information dissemination with the help of community and faith leaders.

- Address Educational Barriers: Advocate for initiatives that prevent school absenteeism due to period poverty and promote educational opportunities for all, breaking the cycle of poverty.
- Promote Sustainable Menstrual Products: Encourage the use of sustainable menstrual products and provide proper disposal facilities to reduce environmental pollution caused by disposable products.
- Advance the Right to Dignity: Work to eliminate stigmatisation, bullying, and discrimination resulting from period poverty, with a focus on supporting mental health and self-esteem.
- Eliminate Economic Barriers: Campaign for economic support and affordability of menstrual products, reducing the economic burden on low-income individuals and ensuring their access to essentials like food and housing.
- Comprehensive Government and Organisational Action: Encourage governments and organisations to adopt a holistic approach to address the multifaceted nature of period poverty, including education, healthcare, and the overall well-being of menstruating individuals.
- Capacity Building: Invest in training healthcare providers to ensure accurate diagnosis and treatment of menstrual health issues. This includes specialised training for medical professionals in recognising and addressing conditions like endometriosis and PCOS.
- Global Advocacy and Awareness: The CSW can lead a global advocacy campaign to raise awareness about the multifaceted nature of period poverty, including its impact on education, dignity, and health. This campaign should leverage international platforms and influencers to eliminate stigma and promote open conversations.
- Gender Equality and Empowerment: Stress that addressing period poverty is an integral component of the mission to accelerate gender equality and empower all women and girls, as it affects their fundamental rights and dignity.

Addressing period poverty necessitates a holistic approach that goes beyond the mere provision of free menstrual products. It involves overcoming and negotiating taboos, promoting menstrual health education, ensuring healthcare access, challenging the quality of the products provided and challenging discriminatory practices. Organisations and governments are increasingly recognising the multifaceted nature of period poverty. They are working collaboratively to address its root causes, restoring dignity, advancing education, and enhancing the overall well-being of menstruating individuals.

As we gather to deliberate strategies for accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, let us recognise that addressing period poverty is a crucial component of this mission. By taking comprehensive action that transcends the tangible products, we can truly empower individuals to live dignified, healthy lives free from the shackles of period poverty.