



A SUHAKAM REPORT

Towards Dignified Menstruation For All: A Human Rights Imperative



**TOWARDS DIGNIFIED
MENSTRUATION FOR ALL:
A HUMAN RIGHTS IMPERATIVE**

by

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Disclaimer: This report does not claim to be exhaustive in its coverage of the subject matter. The findings and discussions presented are based on the information gathered during the course of this study and are intended to provide an overview of key issues relating to period poverty in Malaysia. They are not meant to serve as a substitute for expert opinion or in-depth academic analysis. Readers are encouraged to consider this report as a foundational reference to further explore and engage with the complexities of the topic.

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Synopsis

Towards Dignified Menstruation for All: A Human Rights Imperative is the first national-level human rights report in Malaysia addressing period poverty and menstrual equity. Produced by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), the report explores how menstruation intersects with fundamental rights, including education, health, equality, and dignity. It sheds light on the lived experiences of marginalized communities: rural, Indigenous, incarcerated, migrant, disabled, and homeless women and girls who continue to face barriers in managing menstruation safely and with dignity.

Using qualitative research methods, including a roundtable discussion, stakeholder interviews, and desk review, the report identifies six key dimensions of period poverty: lack of financial means, poor sanitation, limited privacy, inadequate information, insufficient healthcare, and lack of emotional support. It further critiques the absence of legal recognition for menstrual health and proposes an expanded interpretation of Article 5(1) of the Federal Constitution to include the right to dignified menstruation.

Drawing inspiration from best practices in countries like Scotland, Kenya, and Sweden, the report makes recommendations covering legislative reform, policy integration, data collection, education, healthcare training, and gender-sensitive infrastructure. Ultimately, it calls for menstrual health to be treated not as a niche issue, but as a matter of justice, equality, and constitutional rights urging Malaysia to build a future where no one is left behind because of their period.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the current Secretary of SUHAKAM, Altaf Deviyati, and the former Deputy Secretary for the Policy and Law Group, Dato' Ann Jennifer Victor Isaacs, for their encouragement and support. Special thanks to the former Head of the Law and International Treaties Division (LITD), Muhammad Afiq Mohamad Noor, whose suggestion led to the initiation of this report.

While the authors assume full responsibility for the content of this research, we acknowledge the many individuals whose contributions were instrumental to its development. We are especially thankful to Dr. Amjad Rabi, Dr. Hannah Nazri, Dato' Dr. Amar Singh, Dr. Jemaima Wee, Dr. Noralina Omar, Ms. Anja Juliah, Ms. Mary Ulok, Ms. Glorene Das, Dr. Zufar Yadi, Ms. Ita Bah Nan, Ms. Syahirah Hamdan, Ms. Nasrikah, Cikgu Mohd Huzaire, and Ms. Arissa Jemaima for generously sharing their time and expertise.

A special note of appreciation goes to the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) for sharing their study on period poverty, which enriched the report's findings. The authors also wish to thank all participants of the RTD held in February 2024 for their meaningful engagement.

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Chairman's Message

The awareness of period poverty is itself a privilege. Many Malaysians remain unfamiliar with the term or its far-reaching implications. To some, it simply refers to the absence of menstrual products. However, period poverty extends beyond that; it is a form of deprivation and a reflection of systemic inequality that impedes health, education, dignity, and the participation of women and girls in all spheres of life.

As Malaysia continues to honor its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other international frameworks, it is imperative to acknowledge menstrual health as a fundamental human right. Correspondingly, SUHAKAM recognizes and commends the collective efforts of government bodies, the private sector, and civil society organizations who have worked tirelessly to address this issue. Your continued commitment is essential.

This report by SUHAKAM is timely. It breaks new ground by highlighting the multifaceted nature of period poverty and its impact on marginalized communities, whose voices are often overshadowed by structural barriers and systemic neglect. We are proud to present this pioneering study, which brings together data, expert perspectives, and lived experiences. The findings serve as a call to action and also as a roadmap for meaningful reform.

As we work towards a Malaysia where everyone can menstruate with dignity, let this report serve as both a catalyst and a commitment to progress. SUHAKAM believes that dignified menstruation extends beyond a social need; it is a constitutional right. As such, this report proposes a dynamic interpretation of Article 5(1) of the Federal Constitution to include the right to dignified menstruation as an essential component of the right to life.

On behalf of the Commission, I extend our deepest appreciation to all contributors and reaffirm our unwavering commitment to ensure that menstrual dignity is recognized, protected, and fulfilled for all.

“HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL”

Dato' Seri Mohd Hishamudin Bin Md Yunus

Chairman

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia

1 July 2025

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List of Abbreviations

AWAM	All Women's Action Society
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
fMRI	Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging
FRHAM	Federation of Reproductive Health Associations, Malaysia
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IUD	Intrauterine Device
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (Department of Social Welfare)
LPPKN	Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara (National Population and Family Development Board)
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
MOE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OCC	Office of the Children's Commissioner
O&G	Obstetrics and Gynaecology
PMS	Premenstrual Syndrome
PTG	Pusat Transit Gelandangan
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
RTD	Roundtable Discussion
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SHUT	Stop Human Trafficking
SRH/SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health / Rights
SUHAKAM	Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia)
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UMS	Universiti Malaysia Sabah
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VP(TE)	Visit Pass (Temporary Employment)
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization
YKN	Yayasan Kebajikan Negara

Glossary

Below are the terms used to describe menstrual products in this report:

	Description	Visual
1	<p>Disposable sanitary pads</p> <p>Disposable sanitary pads are absorbent sheets worn in the underwear to absorb menstrual blood. They are for single use only and must be discarded after a few hours. While widely used due to convenience, their frequent disposal contributes significantly to environmental waste.</p>	
2	<p>Cloth Napkins (Reusable Pads)</p> <p>Cloth napkins or reusable pads are washable and reusable fabric pads that absorb menstrual blood. They are often made from cotton and can last several years with proper care. Reusable pads are more sustainable and cost-effective over time compared to disposable pads.</p>	
3	<p>Menstrual cup</p> <p>A menstrual cup is a flexible, bell-shaped device inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual fluid and can be reused for several years, making it an environmentally friendly and cost-effective option.</p>	
4	<p>Menstrual disc</p> <p>A menstrual disc is a flexible, disc-shaped device inserted into the vaginal canal to collect menstrual blood. It sits higher than a menstrual cup, near the cervix, and can be worn for up to 12 hours. Like menstrual cups, some discs are reusable while others are disposable.</p>	

A photograph showing the backs of four women wearing hijabs as they wait on a train platform. A train with a red and white stripe is blurred in the background, suggesting motion. The scene is lit with warm, low-key lighting.

Executive Summary

Photo by <https://unsplash.com/@hilmialwan>

Executive Summary

In Malaysia, many women and girls continue to face period poverty. This is defined by the inability to manage menstruation and menstrual health due to the lack of access to menstrual products, clean water and sanitation, private and safe spaces, adequate information, and psychosocial support. This report by SUHAKAM is the **first national-level human rights analysis on period poverty and dignified menstruation in Malaysia**.

Drawing on data from the RTD, stakeholder interviews, and desk review, the study highlights how menstrual inequality intersects with structural poverty, discrimination, and the failure to integrate menstrual health into law and policy. Key findings reveal that while positive initiatives exist, efforts remain fragmented and lack long-term strategy and legal protection. Accordingly, a working definition of period poverty was proposed, which encapsulated both material and non-material dimensions:

Lack of financial means to afford menstrual products
Lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities
Lack of privacy or safe, hygienic spaces to manage menstruation
Lack of knowledge on menstruation and sexual reproductive health
Inadequacy in access to menstrual health diagnosis and treatment
Lack of emotional support when facing menstruation-related challenges

Impacts on vulnerable groups

The report highlights the intersecting challenges experienced by various vulnerable groups, including rural, Indigenous, incarcerated, migrant, disabled, and homeless women and girls. An analysis of existing laws reveals significant gaps in addressing menstrual health and dignity. For instance, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 [Act 685] does not explicitly affirm the right to bodily autonomy, informed consent, or protection from coercion, provisions essential for safeguarding women and girls with disabilities from forced medical interventions such as hysterectomies and ensuring their menstrual health needs are met.

Similarly, the Destitute Persons Act 1977 [Act 183], often cited in matters of homelessness, has been criticised for its punitive rather than rehabilitative approach and lacks guarantees to essential rights such as shelter, healthcare, and access to basic hygiene products. Migrant workers holding the Visit Pass (Temporary

Employment) [VP(TE)] face multiple restrictions. This includes prohibitions on family reunification, marriage, and access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), with limited or no access to gender-sensitive facilities in the workplace.

Refugee girls are particularly vulnerable, often dropping out of school upon reaching menarche due to social stigma and remain unprotected due to the absence of a legal framework. Similarly, Indigenous women and girls, many of whom live in remote areas, face chronic water insecurity and lack access to affordable menstrual products. Notably, women in detention are subjected to inadequate provisions and rely heavily on external donations, highlighting systemic gaps in institutional care. Meanwhile, in educational settings, period-related bullying continues to be reported, creating an unsafe and undignified environment for school-going girls.

Best Practices

This report highlighted the best practices from the United Kingdom (UK), Kenya, Sweden, and Thailand. While the list is not exhaustive, the implementation in Malaysia must be adapted to suit the local cultural and societal contexts.

United Kingdom
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Women’s Health Strategy for England (2022–2032), a ten-year plan which aims to improve the affordability and accessibility to menstrual products, promote health literacy, introduce practical measures to support women’s health at work, and increase research in areas such as endometriosis, menopause, maternity disparities.
Kenya
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Teacher’s Handbook.• PWD Act was amended to include stronger protections on legal capacity, informed consent, and bodily integrity.• The Constitution of Kenya affirms the right to dignity.
Sweden
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Menstrual Certification (“Menscertifiering”) programme, which focuses on educating workplaces about menstrual health and creating an inclusive, empathetic work environment for employees who menstruate.
Thailand
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enactment of the Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Act (2016) to reduce adolescent pregnancy in Thailand.

Recommendations

In response, SUHAKAM proposes the following recommendations in the areas of policy advocacy, legislative reform, public awareness, education, and healthcare:

1. Adopt a dynamic and liberal interpretation of Article 5(1) inspired by the jurisprudence of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution to explicitly encompass menstrual health as a right.
2. Advocate for gender responsive budgeting to prioritize SRH needs within national plans and for the inclusion of period poverty-related issues in the Government's next budget.
3. Advocate for the inclusion of menstrual products as a critical item of national emergency preparedness and response plans for pandemics, conflicts, and climate-related disasters.
4. Implement legislation to distribute free sanitary pads to all individuals, regardless of their economic background, recognizing menstruation as a fundamental right.
5. Amend the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 [Act 658] to explicitly include protections for bodily integrity, informed consent, and freedom from coercion, especially for women, girls, and those with high support needs.
6. Examine the best practices of countries that have introduced menstrual leave on the first day of menstruation as a workplace policy to ensure a sustainable implementation.
7. Strengthen data collection efforts to inform evidence-based policymaking by gathering data from relevant ministries to formulate a comprehensive framework on SRHR. This includes initiating national data collection on period poverty to enable targeted interventions.
8. Develop Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) and integrate menstrual health education into school curricula to provide timely and age-appropriate information for children, teenage girls, and adults.
9. Equip teachers and religious educators with adequate training to effectively impart menstruation-related knowledge to students. Additionally, equip teachers with the necessary training to act as protectors and trusted adults within the school environment. Suppose in situations where a student discloses incidents of abuse, particularly within the home. In that case, it is imperative

that teachers understand the appropriate Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to respond effectively and sensitively.

10. Initiate discussions with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to encourage a comprehensive address of period poverty, including within religious contexts.
11. Introduce compulsory postgraduate training for medical practitioners in women's health or require the completion of a certified module on women's health prior to the establishment of private clinics.
12. Offer proper training for doctors to diagnose and treat menstruation-related health issues.
13. Involving men in conversations and initiatives regarding menstruation and encouraging understanding, support, and amplification of women's needs, particularly in areas such as menstrual health.
14. Ensure that marginalized communities are not overlooked in period poverty interventions.



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**PELANTIKAN SEBAGAI PENASIHAT UNTUK MENGHASILKAN LAPORAN SUHAKAM
BERHUBUNG KEMISKINAN HAID**

Dengan segala hormatnya perkara di atas adalah dirujuk. Rujukan adalah juga dibuat kepada komunikasi terdahulu antara YBrs. Dr. dan pegawai-pegawai SUHAKAM.

2. Di dalam usaha untuk memastikan hak asasi manusia di Malaysia dilindungi dan dimajukan, SUHAKAM secara aktifnya menjalankan kajian dan penyelidikan melibatkan isu hak asasi manusia. Dalam usaha memperjuangkan hak asasi manusia terutamanya yang melibatkan hak asasi wanita dan soal kesaksamaan gender, SUHAKAM telah memulakan kajian berhubung kemiskinan haid sejajar dengan komitmen Kerajaan menghapuskan diskriminasi terhadap wanita di bawah Perkara 8(2) Perlembagaan Persekutuan.

3. Sukacita dimaklumkan bahawa kami ingin melantik YBrs. Dr. sebagai penasihat dalam menjalankan kajian ini. SUHAKAM berharap dapat bermanfaat daripada sumbangan kepakaran dan pengalaman YBrs. Dr. dalam penghasilan laporan ini. Objektif penghasilan laporan ini adalah seperti yang berikut:

- i. Membincangkan realiti sebenar kehidupan yang dialami oleh wanita dan remaja perempuan di Malaysia, menyoroti kelompangan-kelompangan yang sedia ada dan mencadangkan syor untuk menangani isu kemiskinan haid di Malaysia;
- ii. Rujukan untuk penambahbaikan undang-undang, polisi dan amalan yang boleh diakses oleh penggubal dasar, pemegang taruh, dan orang awam;
- iii. Meningkatkan kesedaran orang awam tentang isu kemiskinan haid dan kesihatan seksual dan reproduktif; dan
- iv. Menyumbang kepada pengetahuan yang lebih menyeluruh berkaitan isu kemiskinan haid.

4. Sebagai penasihat, tugas utama YBrs. Dr. adalah untuk memberi ulasan/pandangan/nasihat mengenai apa-apa perkara berhubung topik penyelidikan sepanjang tempoh penyempurnaan laporan ini. Penulisan kajian ini dijangka akan dijalankan bagi tempoh enam bulan iaitu dari bulan September 2024 sehingga bulan Februari 2025.

“HAK ASASI UNTUK SEMUA”

“Human Rights For All”

Bayaran sebanyak RM10,000.00 akan dilakukan kepada YBrs. Dr. setelah kajian tamat dilaksanakan. Bersama-sama surat ini dilampirkan terma rujukan untuk perhatian dan penelitian YBrs. Dr.

5. Kami mengucapkan sekalung penghargaan kepada YBrs. Dr. atas komitmen untuk bersama-sama memartabatkan hak asasi manusia di Malaysia. Bagi sebarang komunikasi lanjut berhubung pelantikan ini, YBrs. Dr. boleh menghubungi pegawai Suruhanjaya, Cik K. Sahanah di talian nombor telefon 014-2774662 atau email: sahanah@suhakam.org.my. Kerjasama YBrs. Dr. amatlah dihargai dan didahului dengan ucapan terima kasih.

Sekian.

“HAK ASASI UNTUK SEMUA”



(ALTAF DEVIYATI)

Setiausaha

Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (SUHAKAM)