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# Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio





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• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)):** I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 71 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely by using the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute it when you're not speaking.

With regard to interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of the screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use your earpiece and select the desired channel.

I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. Members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests, I'm informing the committee that all witnesses appearing virtually have completed the required connection tests.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Thursday, April 27, 2023, the committee will commence its study of menstrual equity in Canada. That's what we'll be doing for the first hour today.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have witnesses here for the first hour, as I've indicated, and for the second hour, we'll be going in camera.

For this portion, I would like to welcome Madeleine Shaw from Sustainable Menstrual Equity Coalition. She's the spokesperson. She is on with us via video conference.

From The Period Purse, we have Jana Girdauskas and Danielle Kaftarian. From United Way British Columbia, we have Sussanne

Skidmore, who is the co-chair of the Period Promise campaign. She too is with us by video conference.

We'll be providing each group five minutes to speak, and we'll be starting off with the Sustainable Menstrual Equity Coalition.

Madeleine, you will have the floor for five minutes. When you see me moving my arm, that means you're down to about 10 to 15 seconds. Let's try to wrap it up during that time.

I'll pass it over to Madeleine.

You have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw (Spokesperson, Sustainable Menstrual Equity Coalition):** Good morning, everybody.

My name is Madeleine Shaw. I'm joining you today from Vancouver and the unceded traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

I'd like to thank the committee for this study on menstrual equality and recognizing the need to address period poverty.

The Sustainable Menstrual Equity in Canada Coalition, SMEC—

**The Chair:** Can you hold for one moment, please?

The volume is very low. We're going to turn the volume up in the room so that we can hear you a bit better.

Go for it.

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** The Sustainable Menstrual Equity in Canada Coalition, SMEC, is composed of three women-led Canadian companies—Aisle, joni and Bfree—that specialize in sustainable menstrual care products, many of which are Canadian-made. As a coalition, we cover the range of sustainable products, including eco-friendly disposable pads and tampons, reusable cups, cloth pads and leak-proof underwear, providing a greater choice for users.

We've been working for decades to address period poverty in Canada and have been advocating policy changes, raising awareness and establishing initiatives to provide sustainable menstrual products to those in need domestically and internationally.

“Period poverty” refers to the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, education and facilities, often due to financial constraints. Other barriers, such as access to preferred products, geography, clean water, safe washroom space and personal trauma, also make it difficult for some Canadians to fully access products and participate in day-to-day routine activities.

Sadly, this issue is on the rise, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to period poverty. It demands our leadership, empathy and action.

[Translation]

Access to menstrual products is a basic human right, not a luxury.

[English]

According to a Plan Canada study, 26% of respondents indicated that they had gone through a period without having menstrual products available to them. This study also found that 68% of Canadians felt that their period prevented them from full participation in an activity.

[Translation]

Imagine being a teenager having to miss school every month because you can't afford menstrual products.

• (1105)

[English]

No person should be held back from achieving their full potential simply because they menstruate.

Achieving universal menstrual equity will take more than just placing an endless supply of traditional, largely plastic-based disposable products in bathrooms; achieving true menstrual equity means universal access to quality products of choice, education and a stigma-free social climate. It means we need to diversify not just product offerings but also access methods for people living in remote and rural areas and on reserves, access for those living with disabilities or without access to transportation; and access for those whose periods simply arrive at an inconvenient time or who have needs that do not fit into the model of bathroom access only. In those moments when you are finally able to access a pad or tampon, it's worth asking what happens three or four hours later, when the hunt for the next product begins again.

SMEC and our products are critical to this success. Our products provide a range of benefits beyond those of mainstream disposables, including financial savings, greenhouse gas reduction, waste management, innovative solutions and job creation in Canada. SMEC's long-time experience in supporting Canadians with access to safe, effective, eco-friendly menstrual care products has shown us that offering diverse solutions, both disposable and reusable, is the most effective, equitable and inclusive way to counter period poverty.

We are encouraged by the federal government's creation of the menstrual equity fund and the changes made to the Canada Labour Code. It's a critical first step, but we can and need to do better. This is an opportunity for Canada to take the lead on a global level. Al-

ready, countries like Scotland are providing free, disposable, sustainable and reusable products to all its citizens.

Our opportunity is to deploy a team Canada approach by leveraging the innovation of our own homegrown women entrepreneurs to set a new sustainable standard. This is also a pivotal moment to ensure that Canadian women-led small and medium-sized businesses are included in the procurement of products in the government's programs and that sustainable, disposable and reusable products are also offered according to each individual's needs.

Let's work together to ensure that every person in Canada who menstruates has access to the necessary resources and support, empowering them to live their lives to the fullest without fear or shame.

[Translation]

Thank you again for inviting me.

[English]

We look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Perfect. Thank you so much.

The Period Purse will be next.

Danielle and Jana, you have five minutes to share. You can just mix it up between the two of you. The time is yours.

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian (Operations Manager, The Period Purse):** Thank you for having me. I'm Danielle Kaftarian, operations manager at The Period Purse.

The Period Purse started in 2017 when our founder was driving to work one day. While she was at a red light, someone was panhandling at her car window and she had nothing to give them. That's when she had an “aha” moment: What does someone who is unhoused do while on their period? She had never thought of it, and when I heard about this “aha” moment, I had one of my own.

As we explored the answer to that question, we started to learn more about the broader picture of period poverty in Canada and to unpack many of the issues surrounding it and how it impacts one in seven people, from unhoused to employed folks.

As the menstrual movement has spread across Canada, with so many like-minded organizations supporting those who need it, we sit in front of you today as experts in menstrual equity to help advocate for those who are not here today.

We know from a Plan Canada study in 2022 that 22% of menstruating Canadians are using period products longer than they should because they can't afford more. That number rises to 33% in households earning \$50,000 or less, and it increases even further to 48% for indigenous people.

The Period Purse is the first national charity to help alleviate period poverty. We have donated almost 4.8 million period products across Canada through our outreach program and we have educated over 5,000 people with period-positive presentations.

Our mission is to create menstrual equity by ensuring sustainable access to period products for all and, through education and advocacy, to end the stigma associated with periods.

When we have spoken to those in the communities we support, we have heard many stories of people choosing food over tampons; missing work and school; stealing products; and making makeshift tampons and pads out of things like old rags, toilet paper and sponges, which can lead to infections. I think we would all agree that this is not okay.

I want everyone to take a moment and reflect: Did anyone pack toilet paper in case they needed the washroom while they were here today, or did we just come knowing that it would be available if we required it? Using the washroom is something we can't control. It's biological, and the same thing goes for periods, so why are period products not in washrooms like toilet paper and soap are?

As we begin to examine the barriers to accessing period products, we see that affordability is a big one. It's estimated that in her lifetime, a Canadian woman will spend up to \$6,000 on menstrual products. That's an extra expense that menstruators need to budget for.

We hear stories like those of Asha, who lives in a northern first nations territory and who tells us that a box of tampons can cost four to five times as much as one purchased in large urban cities. Even in rural cities, the prices are drastically more than they are for the same products here in Ottawa. Where you live in Canada should not be a barrier to the availability and cost of period products.

The Period Purse provides education on various subjects around periods, from what they are to why menstrual equity is important. Many are unaware of the options beyond disposable pads and tampons, so we teach them about reusable products and how to use them and clean them—products like menstrual cups, cloth pads and period underwear—to empower folks to choose products that are best for them.

We know that many lack access to clean water, and that this prevents people from choosing reusable products as their preferred option. Boil water advisories are just another barrier to consider while working towards menstrual equity.

Providing choice of products ensures that we're considering things like cultural and religious beliefs as well as sexual trauma, all things that can impact one's preferred choice of product.

I have heard countless stories from students who are missing out on class time to track down products from friends, guidance counsellors or teachers' desk drawers, all because products are not in the washroom. Saying that students should carry products with them at all times is not taking into account that this could be their first period or it could be unexpected as they learn how their bodies work.

I have also heard stories about products being in boys' washrooms so that male students are able to take them home for their mother or sister who need them. It's such a simple step to reduce stigma around periods.

As we work alongside community partners that support 2SLGBTQ+ people, we know that having safe washrooms is critical to menstrual equity. All people who menstruate deserve to have access to free products. Without access to washrooms, transgender and non-binary people may have to choose between a washroom that matches their gender identity and one that has the period products and amenities they need. Entering a washroom that doesn't align with one's gender identity and expression can be dangerous, both mentally and physically.

In closing, as you can see, there are many layers and things to unpack around this topic, and we have only scratched the surface today. As more people become comfortable, there will be more stories told and more things to learn. Menstrual equity isn't just about handing out pads and tampons; it needs to coincide with education and advocacy to make impactful changes.

I'm pleased to see that the Government of Canada as well as other levels of government are striving towards taking steps forward to support the goal of menstrual equity. I would love to continue this conversation with anyone who would like to learn more after today.

I hope everyone walks away having learned something new and perhaps having had their own "aha" moment.

Thank you.

● (1110)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

We will now turn to Sussanne Skidmore from United Way British Columbia. She is online .

Sussanne, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore (Co-Chair, Period Promise Campaign, United Way British Columbia):** Thank you.

Thanks for having me at the committee and for the invitation to present on this really important issue.

My name is Sussanne Skidmore. My pronouns are she and her. I'm calling in from the unceded and traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

For the past five years I've been a volunteer co-chair for the United Way's Period Promise campaign with the United Way here in British Columbia. I'm also the president of the BC Federation of Labour.

United Way British Columbia began working on menstrual equity and period poverty in 2016 and launched the first of its annual campaigns to collect and distribute products to non-profits and charities in 2017. Since then, we have been able to distribute more than 2.5 million menstrual products to hundreds of community organizations.

In our first collection, we managed to gather and distribute 30,000 menstrual products. We were convinced that this mountain of tampons, pads, cups, liners and underwear was going to provide meaningful long-term support to our community. We donated 15,000 products to an organization providing crucial supports in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. We were thanked by the organization's leadership, who told us, "This will last for three months." We learned very quickly that this is a bigger issue than we thought.

Since then, our collection campaign has grown substantially. In 2023, we hope to gather and distribute as many as 700,000 products to more than 100 community organizations across British Columbia. To accomplish this, we are leaning on key partners like Tampax and Always, Pacific Blue Cross, Aisle, joni and countless others, but we've learned that a campaign of any size won't provide people living in precarity with the reliable access they deserve. As a result, we've also been doing important work in three other areas.

First, we developed a policy agreement that organizations of any shape can sign on to. By joining the commitment, employers, unions, community organizations, grassroots collectives, school districts, post-secondary institutions and municipalities have committed to providing no-cost, stigma-free access to people who menstruate. We've shared this with the United Ways across the country, and more than 65 organizations have signed on.

Second, we've built collectives to help people with lived and living experience, grassroots activists, academics and community organizations work together to build awareness and shape solutions. We have one that is focused on work being done in British Columbia and another one that coordinates efforts to advocate to the federal government. We're excited to see that many of these partners have been invited to participate in these hearings.

Third, we've done a lot of research into the issue of period poverty in British Columbia. It has shown us that around 90% of the

community organizations that we provide products to are asked for free products more than once a week, and more than 90% are reliant on public donations of physical product to support their needs.

The largest portion of our data is from research we conducted with the Government of British Columbia, and it was published in 2021 as the "Period Promise Research Project Final Report". We found that nearly 51% of people who menstruate in British Columbia have struggled to purchase product for themselves at some point, that those who struggled to purchase product for their dependents had a 98% likelihood of struggling to purchase products for themselves as well, and that just over 30% of the respondents said they didn't know where to purchase products they could afford.

We also saw how common missing out on some aspect of community is for those who don't have access to products. Accessing menstrual products is therefore a gateway for accessing community. More than 18% of respondents had missed school, 22% had missed work, 29% had missed out on community events, and 27% had missed out on social activities. All of those numbers increased for people with lower family incomes, indigenous folks, people living with disabilities and immigrants or refugees.

We also found that having access to free products in community helped 75% of respondents be more engaged in their community and improved overall wellness. Here's one testimony we collected during our research that proves it:

By having a workplace that supports menstrual hygiene and provides access to free menstrual products, I find myself more at ease when it comes to having my period. As someone with a heavy flow and abnormal cycle, I'd always be anxious about whether I remembered to bring enough menstrual products with me. For the unlucky days where I didn't have any [or] enough on me, I'd have to resort to folding enough toilet paper to create a makeshift pad. I'd spend the rest of the day worrying with thoughts running through my head like, "Am I leaking? Did it seep through?"... Free and accessible menstrual products provide me with the freedom to continue with my day and the confidence in knowing that I have one less thing to worry about.

• (1115)

Today, due to the cost of living and an inflation crisis that we are all experiencing across this country, more people are struggling to afford basic needs. Work on increasing access to free menstrual products and reducing menstrual stigma is urgently needed. This means providing good-quality products; providing a variety of options; providing easy, regular and reliable access; and building supports for the most vulnerable in our community.

Thank you for inviting us to be a part of today's conversation, and I'm happy to take any questions, should you have any.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We've had our presentations. We're on to the round of questioning. We will begin with six minutes each from each party.

We'll be starting online with Dominique Vien for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, ladies. Thank you for making time in your busy schedules to take part in our study today. I have a general question for you.

The minister told us in May that the government had released \$25 million over two years to set up the menstrual equity fund, which some of you mentioned. The framework for the pilot project hasn't been clearly laid out yet. The national organization charged with administering the fund hasn't been chosen yet.

What would you recommend to ensure that the pilot project makes a difference and really helps to fix the problem? In other words, what are you expecting from the pilot project, and which national organization should that responsibility go to?

• (1120)

[*English*]

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore:** Sure. That's a great question. I'll do my best to answer it.

The reality is that a pilot project is awesome and I'm excited that it's happening, but I expect to see the pilot project turn into something permanent and sustainable.

The government has a responsibility to provide these services to folks across the country, realistically starting with those who need it the most. The reality is that those who menstruate in this country are paying the period tax we all talk about. We need to help relieve and alleviate some of the financial stress this is causing folks. The Government of Canada and the provincial governments as well need to step up and support this.

You heard from several of the other speakers about the products that are available to us in washrooms when we need to wash our hands or use toilet paper. These are available at no cost to us. We don't travel around with them in our purses in the same way that we do with period products. My expectation is that period products should be treated just like that as well.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Dominique Vien:** Ms. Shaw, do you have a view on what the pilot project should look like and who should be in charge? We haven't gotten much information so far.

[*English*]

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** That's a wonderful question. We're excited about this initiative.

The things we would love to see, as SMEC, would include, in part, a commitment to sustainability as well as, as I mentioned, some directive around procurement, ideally inclusive of Canadian women-led small and medium-sized businesses.

It's one thing to say that our period poverty is a problem and that we need products, but without support for the agencies that are going to be delivering those products and programs, there's a bit of a missing piece there in terms of knowing what those products are and where they could come from. A commitment to understanding how diverse solutions affect different populations is also really important.

As for the administration, I agree that a national charity, something like the United Way, would be an ideal partner. I'm sure there are others, and I do know the government is considering those options.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Dominique Vien:** Ms. Kaftarian, what you said really made me think. It's true that it can't be easy for unhoused women to access menstrual products. Montréal's Chez Doris and other shelters for homeless women come to mind. These women are already stigmatized. They are already struggling. What is it like for these women on the streets?

[*English*]

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** There are so many different stories that we hear when it comes to needing to get access to products. That's why we need to work with shelters, libraries and food banks, and even with different community partners out there on the streets, such as the vans going around or whatnot.

It's really about ensuring that when we're accessing those folks, we provide them choice and education about where you can access different types of products out there. We will sometimes go in and educate different locations to teach folks about different things.

Going back to your original question of where we should go with the pilot program, it's really seeing that who is selected has an ability to provide that education, to do choice, and to work with so many of the organizations that are out there doing work, specializing in the community partners they work with to get supplies out to folks. We already know how to do it. So many groups like us know how to do it, so let's just continue that on and give funding to those groups to provide that support.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Dominique Vien:** I have one last question, but I think I'm out of time.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds. You have time to say thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Dominique Vien:** In that case, thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

We're going to stay online now. It's going to be Emmanuella Lambropoulos.

Emmanuella, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking all our witnesses for being here to enlighten us on this issue. I think it's something that we don't often think about and it's not super-obvious, but once you do think about it, it becomes really obvious. You guys have shed light on that situation.

As a past teacher, I hear about how many kids are possibly missing school because of this. That, in particular, really touches me very much, and it makes it really hard to hear and to come to the reality that this is as big a situation as it is.

Part of the community I represent has a lot of needs financially, and I can only imagine that buying these products is not at the top of their lists when they can barely feed their families in some weeks and some months.

I also think there's a lot of stigma attached to this issue, as you guys have mentioned, and because of that, I'm sure we have no idea of the real number of people who need these products and can't afford them. There are a whole bunch of issues that we need to dive into.

You guys have all given some potential solutions, and also the problems that are associated with each one. Obviously a huge number are required, because people menstruate for a week every month. That means they need to change these products often enough, and it's not enough to just have products that are not reusable.

Madeleine Shaw, you spoke about using Canadian innovation and about using Canadian businesses and women-led businesses—in many instances, it's often women-led businesses that would create these kinds of products—in order to fill that gap and perhaps come up with a solution or work with government on one.

Can you elaborate a little bit on what that would look like, and how the Government of Canada can help in that regard?

• (1125)

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** Thank you so much for this question.

Funding to support women entrepreneurs is always necessary in order to drive innovation in the country. In SMEC, we have some incredible examples. I've been active on this issue and have been developing reusable products since 1993.

Aisle was one of the first companies in the entire world, not just in Canada, to truly pioneer reusable products in a general sense. We also have the Bfree Cup, which is one of the most important innovations in menstrual cup technology in the world, in that it doesn't require boiling to be cleaned. This is super-relevant for remote and first nations communities, where access to potable water is an issue. As well, joni provides dispensers that can be used in bathrooms to provide all kinds of different sustainable disposable products.

Really, we're looking at diverse solutions to address multiple different types of needs. Whether somebody is a student, whether somebody is working, or whether somebody is insecurely housed, we're looking at diverse solutions to meet the needs of those diverse populations, because we have the lived experience of living in bod-

ies that menstruate and of being out in the world trying to make a living, trying to learn, trying to parent, and trying to do all of these different things.

Being given a voice, being invited right here today to have a voice and for our opinion to matter and for our experience to matter, we're not just being seen as, "Well, they're businesses, and they're just looking to make money." We are not just some of the most knowledgeable, dedicated leaders in this country when it comes to menstrual equity and to period poverty; we're also small businesses, and as you said, we bring innovation. We're here to help and to join team Canada, to address period poverty and to make menstrual equity a solution that's something we can achieve in our lifetimes.

Thank you.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Thank you very much.

I guess you would be supportive if the government had a fund specifically for companies to use or to provide innovation money in order to create these kinds of products.

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** Yes, I would, but I would also argue that we already have the products. We are already doing this. I think the innovation that's required is around distribution and access. We have fantastic products, but a lot of people...

On this bathroom-only solution, we need to think beyond that and diversify accessibility for people for whom that is just not a reality. That's a place that I would look, and I would welcome the government's support in doing that.

As I said, we have the products. We just need to figure out new ways.... It's education too. With regard to what they're offering at the Period Purse, how do we make that national? How do we find more partners for that?

It's understanding that this is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It's a wraparound solution. We need to meet people who menstruate where they are, as opposed to saying you have to go to a bathroom to find a product.

• (1130)

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Thank you very much.

Danielle Kaftarian, you spoke about the importance of having these products accessible in bathrooms. Many people are irregular and may not know when their period is coming. It's something that affects more than just those experiencing period poverty, but people who menstruate in general.

In what way do you think the federal government can play a role in making these products, even disposable ones, more accessible in general, in places where people can go to the washroom?



**The Chair:** You have about 15 seconds maximum, because we're over time. We need a short response.

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** Absolutely.

I think it's considering where people who menstruate go. The washrooms are perfect as a touchpoint and that first step; they're already there. They need the products, so let's get them there.

As Madeleine was saying, it's thinking outside of the box to other places like food banks and community centres, different places where people will need products.

I'm getting the signal, so I'll wrap up there.

**The Chair:** Awesome. Thank you so much.

We're now going to pass it over for the next six minutes to Andréanne Larouche.

Andréanne, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Kaftarian, it's a fact that more and more jurisdictions around the world are paying attention to menstrual inequity. The discussion so far has focused on young girls in school and women experiencing homelessness, but I'd like you to follow up on something you said in your opening remarks. You spoke about how period poverty impacts one in seven women. Would you mind elaborating on that?

[*English*]

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** One out of seven women will struggle with their periods and getting products.

It can be anything, like what we talked about with schools. When a student needs a product, whether they have challenges of their family affording it or not, it's about discovering that they need the product while they're in the washroom, locating wherever it is in the school, going back to use the washroom, and then going back to their classroom where they've missed out on class time.

We know that families are struggling to afford day-to-day tasks due to inflation increases—there are all sorts of different things there—and they're choosing between putting food on the table or spending \$15 on a box of tampons. These are all decisions that are causing people to struggle to afford period products. It's not just about people who are unhoused; it's also about people who are living on the cusp. We're seeing that in food banks. I work very closely with many of them. People are requesting these products, now that it's becoming more open in the food banks and they're needing these products.

It is starting to expand, and as we were saying—I think Madeleine said it—we're seeing that as more people become more comfortable, more people are asking for this help. We don't know what those true numbers are.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you for that answer, Ms. Kaftarian.

Ms. Skidmore, in response to another member's question, you mentioned the period tax. In the past, I've proposed that the committee conduct a study on the fact that pink products for women are already more expensive than they should be, not to mention the other products women have to buy. Women are at a financial disadvantage for a variety of reasons and they have to spend more than men on daily hygiene products.

I would like to hear your views on that. Don't you think we should broaden the discussion on the period tax to include the pink tax, which really changes how much a product costs, depending on whether it's for men or women?

[*English*]

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore:** Whether you call it a pink tax, a gender tax or whatever, I think it's really important to acknowledge that it's not just women who menstruate: There are people of all genders who menstruate. We need to make sure that they are talked about as we have these conversations. I think that's really important as well.

There is no doubt that for everyone on this call on Zoom and everyone in the room—most of the people in the room—the lived experiences for a lot of us is that we do pay a lot more for a lot of different things. I think it's important right now that we focus on talking about this issue, particularly because it impacts so many people in our communities, and the issue of period poverty is only getting worse.

We need to make sure that we're working, as Madeleine said, with the companies and the organizations that are doing this work. They are experts in this field and they continue to push the bar to make sure that we're breaking down the stigma around period poverty and periods in general, that we talk about it more openly and break down that stigma. It's a huge issue for a lot of people.

I have to say that if you'd asked me about 10 years ago whether I would spend a couple days a week talking about period poverty, periods in general and period products, I probably would have said that I would never picture myself doing this work. Now we live and breathe it over here in British Columbia.

That's a huge issue, but I really think it's important that we stay focused on moving this issue forward.

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you, Ms. Skidmore.

As the gender equality critic for my party, I wholeheartedly support broadening that definition because people of different genders can menstruate as well.

Ms. Kaftarian, thank you for addressing this issue as it relates to food banks. It's something we've heard about. Having taken part in many food drives, I know that the inclusion of period products in Christmas hampers is coming up more and more. This issue is connected to food poverty. People are looking for the products because they are struggling financially and having to make tough choices.

Ms. Girduaska, like other witnesses, you talked about education. Here's my question, though: How can the federal government mount an education campaign without interfering in an area of provincial jurisdiction, health?

In my next turn, I can talk about some initiatives under way in Quebec.

[English]

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds to respond.

**Ms. Jana Girduiskas (Founder and Education Manager, The Period Purse):** That's a good question.

In Canada there are only a handful of provinces that have moved forward and put money into period poverty. A lot of have started with schools and putting free period products into schools. It's looking to where the federal government has the jurisdiction, but it's also about helping roll out the money to the people who are on the ground doing the work and getting those folks paid. A lot of the organizations are volunteer people who are trying to get donations to come in. Whether it's reducing the stigma, getting the education or rolling out that outreach, that's where the federal government needs to help.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much..

We're now going to go back online with Leah Gazan.

Leah, you have six minutes.

**Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP):** Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming.

I wanted to ask my first question of Madeleine Shaw.

You indicated that access to menstrual health products is, in fact, a human right. I agree with you that these are human rights. As Jana Girduiskas indicated, we don't have to ask for toilet paper when we go to the washroom, but we still have to do that for menstrual health products.

You said that this is a human right. Would you agree that the failure of the federal government—of all levels of government, in fact—is a very clear violation of this right?

I know you spoke about how the federal government has implemented the equity project, but I know that you indicated that they must do better. Do you feel that if they fail to do better, they continue to violate this human right?

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** These are amazing times that we're living in. I've been working on this issue for 30 years. I come from a place where nobody wanted to talk about it, and there was no question that you would have to pay for a menstrual product in a bathroom, if you were lucky enough to find one there. There were just women-coded bathrooms at that time.

We have seen activity and leadership provincially, from the federal government and from NGO activists, from the United Way and from The Period Purse. There is this incredible groundswell that's happening. It's not just across Canada, but Canada is leading this. Canada has an incredible opportunity—

• (1140)

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Just in saying that, though... I have a limited amount of time. Is a failure to provide menstrual health products a violation of a human right, yes or no?

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** I do see it that way, personally. Yes, I do.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Okay, thank you so much.

I'll move on to The Period Purse.

Jana, you spoke about the issue around access to clean drinking water. Again, having access to clean drinking water is a human right. A failure to have access to clean drinking water... We talk about water just to drink, but it also intersects with the human rights violation in terms of the failure to ensure menstrual equity. How critical is it for the federal government to get rid of all boil water advisories to ensure it can truly support menstrual equity in Canada?

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** This is Danielle speaking.

Yes, we need to take into consideration the boil water advisories in so many communities. Often we think that they just affect drinking water and cooking, but they do intersect with menstrual equity. A lot of the reusable pads, period underwear, and cups need to be boiled and cleaned correctly in order to keep them sterile and working properly. We also need access to clean water to clean ourselves, to wash our hands, etc. Having boil water advisories and having people without access to clean water affects so many layers. It is something that needs to be dealt with.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you so much, Danielle. I apologize for calling you Jana to begin with. In any case, thank you so much for your excellent testimony.

I want to move on to Sussanne Skidmore with United Way.

You said something... I mean, we're celebrating pride month right now as we speak. You said that people of all genders menstruate. I will go back to this whole issue around human rights: the ability to access menstrual health products as a human right, the ability to access clean drinking water as a human right, and how inability to access is a violation of human rights with regard to menstrual equity. In terms of what you said—that all genders menstruate—can you expand on that? Through a human rights lens, what would that look like in terms of providing equal access to menstrual health products?

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore:** Thanks, Leah. That's a great question.

As an out queer person, I'm pretty familiar with this conversation. The reality is that trans men menstruate; trans people and people who are non-binary are also people who are menstruating. Not having access to products creates an additional barrier to those folks and an additional violation of their human rights. It adds that extra layer that potentially, for some folks, can put them in very dangerous situations.

Yes, it's pride month. It's a great reminder that folks who are trans and non-binary are facing additional violence and fear. To put somebody in a situation of having to out themselves in the community because they're asking for product when they're in a bit of a critical need because they're menstruating is 100% a violation of a human right. We really need to make sure that we are being inclusive when we do this work.

**The Chair:** That's awesome.

Leah, I can see your mouth. You're so ready to ask your next question. I love that about you, but we'll come to you again.

I'm going to turn it over to Anna Roberts now. We'll be starting our second round.

Go ahead, Anna. You have five minutes.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses.

I have a few concerns and some questions.

As of January 2023, 70% of people miss school or work due to their period. In May of this year, the minister announced \$25 million over two years. In December 2022, the minister announced access to free menstrual products in all federally regulated workplaces. Last October, the Ontario government made a three-year deal with Shoppers Drug Mart to offer free feminine hygiene products in schools.

I have a couple of questions. These plans are in place, yet 70% of people are missing either school or work. We have all of these plans and all of these funds being delivered to help, yet the number's quite high. Do you have any stats on why that is? I'm a little confused, because we're investing \$25 million and giving free products, and yet we still have 70%. The numbers don't jibe for me. Maybe you could help me understand that better.

• (1145)

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** Absolutely. That's a great question.

I think, first, it signals how big the gap is and how big the need is here. Let's do the school situation, in the interest of time.

Yes, the Ontario government put money toward putting products in schools. It was an incredible first step forward. That product has worked out to be about seven pads per student, I believe, for the entire school year. We think that on average a menstruator can use up 25 to 35 pieces of product per cycle. They don't even have enough pads donated for a student for one cycle of menstruation.

Also, it was only for high school students and above, when we know that menstruation starts as early as grade 5. The elementary schools and middle schools were left out. Some of the school

boards stepped forward and reallocated some products, but there still weren't enough products for all of the communities.

This is where we need other parts of the government and organizations like ours to step in and fill in those gaps and give menstruators products for the entire school cycle, as opposed to just one period. We need to be giving them for home and for work. There are so many different areas.

Really, it's a step in the right direction, but there are still a lot of gaps that we need to fill in.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Thank you for that.

What you're saying, then, is that even though in May they announced \$25 million invested over two years, that's not going to make a difference. That's what you're telling me.

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** No, I disagree. It will make a substantial difference. Will it be enough to completely solve the problem? I can't answer that.

This is where we're going to see what that threshold is, but we need to come together and help people. If people can go to work, it means they're going to earn more income and potentially be able to afford their own products down the road if they save money.

We don't know what the threshold is for capping it, but we know we need to meet people where they are right now, and there's a huge gap that needs to be filled, which we need to step in and fill.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** With a lot of people working from home these days and these products being offered at work, they still don't have access to them. Is that correct?

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** That's correct. This is where we need to have creative answers. If people are working from home, where can they access those products? Can they get them from a different location?

What we need to remember is that people can afford their products. They're going to buy what they want, and they choose. We need to support those who are out and about and get their periods when they don't expect it, as well as those who can afford them. That's where we need to work with community partners so that they can have those touchpoints to get that product.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** I spoke to a company recently because I was interested and I knew that this study was coming up. Maybe you could help me with my next question.

I asked why the price has increased for these products that all women need. One of the things they said was that it was due to inflation and due to the carbon tax. Shipping the products and getting them to the locations has impacted the increase in cost. Although there's no tax when you purchase these products, the cost is still going to be much higher.

What solution would you have for us, as the government, to make those products more affordable?

**The Chair:** Give about a 15-second response, as you are over time.

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** Yes.

I really don't know the economics behind how to make it affordable, but I know we need to take that into consideration. The prices are increasing. I'm seeing them increase substantially, as you said.

If there is a step forward we can take, that would be a great thing for this government to explore.

• (1150)

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Maybe we should cut out the carbon tax.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thanks so much.

We now going to pass it over to Sonia Sidhu, who is online. Sonia, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing today on this important issue.

My questions will be directed to Ms. Shaw from the Sustainable Menstrual Equity Coalition.

Ms. Shaw, how do you envision ensuring access to free menstrual equity products in all public spaces, such as schools, libraries, malls, workplaces and other community facilities? We know that by December 15 this year, all federally regulated workplaces and buildings will require free pads and tampons in every washroom.

We also heard of the barriers and which groups are typically harder to reach. How do you work to overcome these barriers?

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** Thank you very much for that question.

This is an issue that we've given a great deal of thought to at Aisle in particular, but I know we're not alone in this. It's an approach we call "user-centred" access: As a first step, we first consider where the people are who need menstrual products, as opposed to this model of bathroom access only—which, of course, we acknowledge is essential. One thing we do, for example, is issue gift cards that can be redeemed electronically. It allows someone to shop and choose their own products, get exactly what they want, and get those products sent to their homes. The question is no longer about how you get to a bathroom and about where to find that product, but rather how to make these solutions work for you.

We've had huge success with this approach. We've been working with employers like Canada's largest credit union, Vancity, which issued thousands of dollars' worth of these gift cards to their em-

ployees. In this day and age, when so many people, as you've pointed out, are working from home, travelling to a bathroom is an inconvenience for them. This approach allows them to shop online to choose exactly the products they want and need.

It's that type of thinking that I would call outside the bathroom—not just outside the box—access points. An example is McGill University, which has recently handed out tons of joni and Aisle products to their students in the middle of student thoroughfares, offering education and peer support. They're basically taking the products to the students in this case, as opposed to making the student go to a bathroom and ask someone and that type of thing.

This free public discourse not only encourages product access but also takes away the stigma and the shame and encourages positive conversations. There are real opportunities here beyond just product access.

Those are a couple of examples for you.

**Ms. Sonia Sidhu:** Thank you.

In your experience, what have been the most effective ways to raise awareness, especially in diverse and rural communities?

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** Social media has been a wonderful tool. I would commend the United Way and I would commend The Period Purse for really conveying the message that menstrual products are about so much more than just cleaning up a mess or solving a problem: This is about jobs, about education, about a future in which youth will be able to fully participate in life.

We see the campaigns that have been created around the Period Promise, and I think The Period Purse is another great example. We co-created with them and Aisle some educational materials for indigenous youth living in the Mohawk nation. We collaborated with elders to understand the traditional Mohawk language for terms related to menstruation and created educational materials that were culturally specific and respectful to them.

I think there's a lot of room for creativity. I guess I would caution against a "one size fits all". We really want to think about the needs of diverse populations, whether they are transgender or non-binary people, whether they are new Canadians or youth, and really pay a lot of attention to their lifestyles, their educational needs and their cultural considerations.

**Ms. Sonia Sidhu:** Ms. Skidmore, would you like to speak to the best practices for raising awareness as well?

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore:** For sure. We've done some creative things, as Madeleine was talking about, here in British Columbia. We've gone to some definitely non-traditional folks to talk about this. We've gone to men in leadership positions and leaders in what would be sort of non-traditional places to see women. The president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union is kind of a gruff and burly guy, but he's super-outspoken and one of our biggest advocates.

I think it's being creative and making sure we're getting it out there far and wide.

I see you, Chair.

• (1155)

**The Chair:** You're awesome. Thanks so much. Thanks for watching me.

I'll pass it for the next two and a half minutes to Andréanne Larouche.

Go ahead, Andréanne.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Girdauska, Ms. Kaftarian and Ms. Skidmore, thank you again for taking part in the committee's study. Your input will be especially useful.

Ms. Shaw, as I was saying earlier, initiatives are under way in cities, in Quebec and the provinces. To improve period equity, the City of Montreal launched a program on June 1 to make menstrual products available in municipal buildings under its jurisdiction. Pad and tampon dispensers will be installed in the public buildings of the city's boroughs, making menstrual products available to anyone who needs them free of charge. On May 10, the federal government announced that federally regulated employers would have to provide menstrual products to staff in the workplace as of December 15.

We are seeing more and more initiatives like that all over the country. That's good news for menstrual equity. I wonder what more the federal government can do since it's already planning to provide free access to menstrual products in its own workplaces as of this year. I think the ball is now in the court of Quebec and the provinces, because they have the jurisdiction to legislate on health matters. What else can the federal government do without going outside its jurisdiction?

[*English*]

**Ms. Madeleine Shaw:** Thank you for that wonderful question.

Quebec in many ways has led the country in innovative ways of dealing with menstrual equity and period poverty. For example, offering vouchers that can be redeemed by citizens in multiple cities and municipalities is one idea.

One of my main asks coming out of today's meeting is calling on each of you as members of Parliament to pass a resolution to find inclusive and sustainable solutions to period poverty. We have some of the answers; I don't think we have all the answers. This is an opportunity for the government to use the ingenuity and leader-

ship in this space right now to come up with new solutions. Those can include things like the voucher idea, the electronic gift card idea and diverse distribution points. It's looking at all of it and divorcing ourselves from a mindset of looking for the holy grail of menstrual equity—that there is one way to do this. There is not one way to do this.

I need to wrap it up. Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Madeleine. You're fantastic.

We'll now go to the last set of questions. I'll pass it over to Leah Gazan.

Leah, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you so much.

My question is for Sussanne Skidmore.

We know not-for-profits are struggling to provide menstrual health products. I would argue that we've taken a charity model to this human right when it needs to be a government-funded model, because it is a human right. It shouldn't be left outside of government's responsibility to provide this kind of health care for people who menstruate.

Would you agree with that? What do you think needs to change to support that human right in, for example, not-for-profits?

**Ms. Sussanne Skidmore:** Thank you.

I 100% agree with that. The charity model is a band-aid solution to a problem that is astronomically larger than we even think it is. The data we have collected here in British Columbia only provides us with so much. I think government needs to work with community organizations and non-profits on the ground to make sure they have funding for these products, because those organizations are where people go. It shouldn't be on the backs of those organizations. They shouldn't be drawing out of the funds they use for other things. This should be a government solution, and there should be access to these products for everyone who needs them.

Thanks for the question, Leah.

• (1200)

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you so much.

Could you please expand on that, Danielle, from The Period Purse? I know you spoke about it.

**Ms. Danielle Kaftarian:** Yes.

We should be considering the broader spectrum of where we place the products. It's not just charities; it's using all the touch-points we've talked about.

It's also providing education to ensure people know where to access a product so that people know how to find them. How do you set up free products in your school? How do you set up free products in your workplace? That should be part of the consideration of what we're doing when we're putting those products out into places.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you so much.

Do I have any more time? I'm sorry; I just kept rolling.

**The Chair:** Time is up, lady.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** That's what I thought.

**The Chair:** That's okay. I try to work with you. Thank you so much.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you all for the superb kickoff to this study. Thank you very much for all the superb testimony you brought forward today. It's a very important study that we're beginning, and we really appreciate your time.

Is everybody good?

Okay, we will suspend.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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