



FReHA

Period Poverty

Poverty in Malaysia

In July 2020, the Malaysian government revised the poverty line income from RM980 to RM2,208; bringing a total of over 400,000 households in the country falling under this category. In announcing the change of the new national poverty line income (PLI), Malaysia's chief statistician stated that the new figure was based on the changes which emphasized on healthy eating and quality basic needs. In comparison to 2019, the new methodology included 146 non-food items from the B20 households spending pattern in the 2019 household expenditure survey. The findings of the report noted that household expenditure in urban and rural areas increased by 3.7% and 3.6% per annum, respectively. In the urban areas, households recorded highest percentage for housing, water, electricity and gas whereas in rural areas, food and non-alcoholic beverages held the highest percentage. There is, however, no indication as to whether items such as sanitary napkins and baby napkins were recorded as "essential household items" when they are in fact crucial and essential in the lives of its users.

Understanding period poverty

Period poverty is the lack of access to hygienic sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, handwashing facilities and or waste management. It is fundamental for anyone who menstruates to have a proper menstrual material, safe and hygienic facilities, and the right to manage menstruation without shame or stigma.

Unfortunately, about more than 800 million people menstruate daily and quite a huge number of them are denied the right to manage their menses in a dignified and healthy way.

The concern of period poverty is not solely about a person's inability to afford menstrual supplies but also the limitation of sanitary products, which could lead to a prolonged use of the same pad or tampon. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), poor menstrual hygiene can lead to urinary tract infections, physical health risks and reproductive diseases.

According to Compassion UK, as of 2018, it was reported that one in 10 girls between the ages of 14 and 21 have been unable to afford menstrual products, while 49% have been absent an entire day of school due to their period. One in 10 girls in Africa missed school because they do not have access to sanitary products, or because there are not safe, private toilets to use at school. In Kenya, approximately 50% of school-age girls do not have access to sanitary products. Meanwhile in India, approximately 12% of its 355 million menstruating women cannot afford period products. In Malaysia, the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry (MWFCD) reported to be in the midst of collecting data regarding this issue in January 2020. However, since then, the country has been through various political changes and the continuous fight against Covid-19 and this data may have been put on hold for now.

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Although no specific data was reported for purchase of sanitary menstrual supplies under “household” expenditure in the 2019 report, the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) head of reproductive health unit, Dr. Hamizah Mohd Hassan said that women from the B40 group definitely struggle with this issue. Some women from poorer communities were said to be using coconut husks and newspapers because they cannot afford to buy sanitary products. This is hazardous to their health and puts them at risk of infection.

The lack of sanitary products also had led to girls from poorer communities missing school for a period of time during their menstrual cycle and creating a feeling of shame due to the social stigma surrounding them. In 2019, Zuraidah Daut, a social activist from Kelantan initiated an investigation into the mystery of a girl’s absence from school and found that the girl was too poor to buy sanitary products. Children who cannot afford to go to school miss out on the menstrual hygiene education altogether. This responsibility is then left to family members, who, in most cases may not be able to equip them with this knowledge due to their own lack of knowledge on the subject matter.

Like most countries in Southeast Asia, period poverty is not a popular issue in Malaysia because the topic of menstruation is very much stigmatised and considered as taboo. Sometimes, women who menstruate are considered as ‘dirty’ in some cultures. For instance, in countries such as Japan, India and Malaysia, women are often excluded from religious rituals and places when they are menstruating. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, some girls will miss around 20% of their school year; some may drop out of school altogether. Girls are more likely to be forced into child marriage once they lose their education and the same applies here in Malaysia. Period poverty, in all its forms, put girls and women at health risks and prevents them from getting the

education they need to create opportunities for themselves and their future.

Period poverty and Covid-19

Although there are many efforts by government and non-government agencies in supporting the needs of the disadvantaged groups in the community, some essential items unfortunately do not make the list. Menstrual hygiene, ironically, is not given its due importance in the practice of proper hygiene to minimize the risk of Covid-19 infection. To make matters worse, the loss of income and the inability to purchase menstrual hygiene products due to poverty is being further exacerbated by Covid-19. The financial pressure and limited access to supplies may further increase period poverty in the country. When the “rakyat” are financially burdened and have no means to even purchase food or pay for rental, menstrual hygiene products, sadly, would have taken a step back.

Initiatives in addressing period poverty in Malaysia

Pink Tax

Last year, Malaysia removed the Pink Tax on products like pantyliners and pads and relieved millions of women of having to pay an extra 6 percent of goods and services (GST) for an essential item.

Bunga Pads

This initiative, supported by the Youth and Sports Ministry, sees eco-friendly reusable pads being distributed to underprivileged women and girls in East Malaysia.

Projek Oh! Bulan

Zuraidah Daut initiated this project where she would set empty boxes at grocery stores and salons for people to donate menstrual supplies for those in need.

AWAM

All Women's Action Society (AWAM) contributed 500 pads which was originally donated to AWAM by KOTEX Malaysia to be given out at their 35 Years' Anniversary Dinner which has since been postponed, due to Covid-19.

SWP FreHA

The Selangor and WP Family Reproductive Health Association (SWP FReHA) through Yayasan Hasanah project and companies like KAO Malaysia and Kotex Malaysia also distributed sanitary pads to 1000 women from the disadvantaged communities. As part of the same project, the association creates awareness and disseminates information on Menstruation and Hygiene to these women and creates a platform for further discussion and Q&A sessions on this topic. Our on-going Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights workshops, particularly for girls (in and out of school) addresses topics of puberty and menstruation as part of its module. This is to contribute towards reaching for the Sustainable Development Goal 1 "to end poverty, in all its forms, everywhere"

Conclusion

Period poverty is a global problem that affects the health, education, productivity and future of girls and women. It also has a telling effect on the socio-economic status of a country. Proper access to menstrual materials, safe and hygienic facilities and the right to manage menstruation without shame or stigma is a fundamental right of every girl and woman.

The importance of incorporating gender sensitive issues and the involvement of women at all levels of decision making, planning and implementation is even more pertinent during this time. Preventing the debilitation of period poverty is of paramount importance for future social development and will help solve other associated issues like education, mobility, health care and ensure the participation of women in the economy and the workforce.

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