

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 5, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write to urge you to take executive action to affirm America's commitment to eliminating period poverty, by supporting a whole-of-government strategy to the provisions set forth in the Menstrual Equity for All Act. As we recognize and celebrate March as Women's History Month, and the International Women's Day on March 8th, we ask you to address the human rights issue of menstrual equity, because no one should be inhibited from participating fully in daily life due to a lack of access to menstrual products.

Menstrual equity is the issue of ensuring equitable access to menstrual products.¹ One's ability to access and afford these products is a basic need and a health care right; it is a human right. It is an issue that impacts more than half of the population across our country. For too long, it has remained one of our nation's hidden inequities. And during this public health and economic crises, the pandemic exacerbated already existing disparities and injustices.

Period poverty refers to the lack of access to menstrual products. From criminal justice to access to education; from health care to economic justice; and from housing justice to immigration – period poverty permeates and cuts across issues of dignity and equity. One might believe that menstrual products are ubiquitous and cheap, but for too many girls and women – anyone who menstruates – affording and accessing these items can be challenging.

The reports are stark. A 2019 study found that among low-income women in St. Louis, MO, nearly half had to choose between buying food and spending money on menstrual products.² Additionally, 1 in 5 teens have struggled to afford period products or were not able to purchase them at all, and as a consequence, 84 percent say they have missed school or know someone else who has.³ A recent study revealed further that 1 in 10 college students were unable to afford menstrual products in the past year, and those who experienced period poverty on a monthly basis, were more likely to experience moderate to severe depression.⁴

Period poverty places unnecessary strain on women and girls, disproportionately affects communities of color, and adversely affects an individual's physical and mental health and well-being. Individuals experiencing period poverty are more likely to forego educational opportunities, employment opportunities, or risk infection and other adverse health outcomes due to wearing menstrual products for longer than recommended, or by having to improvise menstrual products with household items such as rags, toilet paper, or newspapers. We have also heard where students used the fillings of their stuffed animals as makeshift pads. This is simply wrong.

Additionally, individuals who are incarcerated or detained reported dehumanizing and degrading conditions while being deprived of these basic care items. In 2019, a lawsuit filed by 19 states and the District of Columbia regarding the Department of Homeland Security's monstrous treatment of migrant children in its custody found that girls with periods were left to bleed through their clothes and denied showers for days on end.⁵ And incarcerated women and advocates reported menstrual products were bargaining chips or used to maintain control by correction officers.⁶

¹ Weiss-Wolf, Jennifer, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (Arcade, 2017), <https://www.periodequity.org/book-1>

² <https://www.slu.edu/news/2019/january/menstrual-products-access-research.php>

³ https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0795/1599/files/State-of-the-Period-white-paper_Thinx_PERIOD.pdf?455788

⁴ <https://chhs.sitemasonry.gmu.edu/news/2021-02/1-10-college-women-experience-period-poverty-more-likely-experience-depression>

⁵ https://agportal-s3bucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploadedfiles/Another/News/Press_Releases/2019-08-23%20Poletti_Declaration_FloresCDCA_Washington_FINAL.pdf

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/nyregion/pads-tampons-new-york-womens-prisons.html>

While the Federal Bureau of Prisons subsequently issued a 2017 guidance to provide these items free of charge, a policy that was later codified in 2018 under the First Step Act, further guidance is needed ensure accessibility and accountability.⁷

Lastly, with an estimated 2.1 million federal civilian workers, the U.S. government is the largest employer. As we heard during the longest government shutdown, countless federal employees and their families were in desperate need of menstrual products, in addition to other basic needs items. As such, free menstrual products should be available in all federal buildings.

Ultimately, one's dignity cannot ever be comprised or deprived because they are menstruating or are unable to access and afford menstrual products.

Recently, other countries have undertaken major reforms to ensure their citizens have access to menstrual products. In November, Scotland became the first country to mandate free menstrual products to anyone in need. New Zealand announced that all schools would provide free menstrual products to students. Additionally, the United Kingdom launched a National Period Poverty Taskforce to address period poverty and stigma around menstruation, and subsequently announced that it would abolish the so-called "tampon tax" that was placed on menstrual products.

To date, five states have mandated that menstrual products be provided in schools, and 13 states passed laws to require them in prisons, jails, and shelters. It is long overdue for the United States to implement a national, whole-of-government strategy to address menstrual equity, and ensure that everyone who requires menstrual products have access to this basic health care right.

As such, we urge you to implement a national strategy by:

- 1) Affirming menstrual equity as a fundamental health and human right, and to ensuring menstrual equity as a priority in any gender policy;
- 2) Ensuring U.S. foreign assistance incorporates principals of menstrual equity, including in the 2022 Global Water Strategy, and in development assistance efforts focused on keeping girls in school and addressing the needs of women and girls who have been displaced. In Africa, 1 in 10 girls miss school because of their periods each year, and in India, 1 in 5 girls drop out of school after they get their periods.⁸
- 3) Supporting the provisions set forth in the Menstrual Equity for All Act by directing all relevant federal agencies to address menstrual product affordability and availability for all, including but not limited to: students in elementary and secondary schools, and higher education; individuals experiencing homelessness; incarcerated individuals and those who are detained or in custody; low-income families; federal employees; and employees at workplaces. Reforms should also include menstrual equity for veterans and Peace Corps volunteers.
- 4) Establishing the first-ever national Menstrual Equity Task Force under the White House Gender Policy Council, to report on findings and issue recommendations for combating period poverty across all areas of public life, as well as destigmatizing menstruation.

These actions would be meaningful steps to end period poverty once and for all. Throughout your time in public service, you have long fought for women's rights and their empowerment. As President, we urge you to create a safer, healthier, and more equitable future for women and girls in America through recognizing and addressing menstrual equity as a human right. We look forward to working with you and your Administration on these critical issues.

Sincerely



Grace Meng
Member of Congress

⁷ <https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-department-of-justice-to-provide-female-inmates-with-tampons-pads>

⁸ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/menstrual-hygiene-day-education/>

/s/ Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress

/s/ Julia Brownley
Member of Congress

/s/ Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

/s/ Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress

/s/ Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

/s/ Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

/s/ Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

/s/ Dina Titus
Member of Congress

/s/ Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

/s/ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

/s/ Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/ Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

/s/ Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ André Carson
Member of Congress

/s/ Suzan DelBene
Member of Congress

/s/ Daniel T. Kildee
Member of Congress

/s/ Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/ Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

/s/ Kathleen M. Rice
Member of Congress

/s/ Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

/s/ Paul Tonko
Member of Congress

/s/ Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress

/s/ Darren Soto
Member of Congress

/s/ Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress