



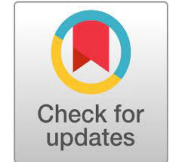
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# Navigating Menstrual Health Challenges: An Exploration of University Students' Experiences amid Financial Constraints



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## ABSTRACT

For women, menstrual hygiene is an essential component of overall health. Achieving menstrual health means giving women and girls the resources and support they need to confidently take care of their bodies. The challenges of menstrual health are exacerbated due to period poverty and it is a problem with long-standing worldwide implications for community health. Period poverty is characterized by limited access to sanitary facilities, education, and menstrual supplies. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore unique challenges that university students experience concerning menstrual health, particularly in the context of financial constraints. This research aims to shed light on the intersection of period poverty, academic life, and the ability to manage menstrual health challenges effectively. Thirteen women participated in the interviews. Findings indicate that different experiences of menstrual health challenges faced by female university students could be grouped into four main themes including financial struggles, product choice and cultural sensitivities, physical and psychological challenges, and adapting to financial constraints. Many important economic and social problems are brought about by the rising cost of personal hygiene products and the ensuing impact on the financial standing of female university students. To promote menstrual health, it is imperative to address societal taboos surrounding certain hygiene items. Our findings show how important it is to acknowledge and address the financial aspects of menstrual health, increase awareness of less expensive options, and advocate for freely available and economically feasible menstrual hygiene products for female university students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Menstrual health is a condition of total physical, mental, and social well-being related to the menstrual cycle, not just the lack of illness or disability. Encouraging women and girls to take charge of their health and make informed decisions about self-care throughout their menstrual cycle requires providing them with the tools and support they need, as well as creating a respectful and positive atmosphere that

is free from stigma and psychological distress (Hennegan et al., 2021). Poor menstrual hygiene management is a serious issue, particularly in low-income countries. The challenges of maintaining menstrual health are also exacerbated due to period poverty. As a result, women have been forced to improvise with materials or wear things longer than they would have liked. It is a problem with long-standing worldwide implications for the health and well-being of women. The absence of WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) services is also a major problem, particularly in public areas like schools, colleges, and universities. Menstrual hygiene management systems need to address the fundamental causes of insufficient WASH infrastructure (Mumtaz et al., 2019). An increasing amount of data indicates that girls' incapacity to maintain proper menstrual hygiene leads to substantial societal, financial, and healthcare expenditures as well as absenteeism from school, subpar academic performance, and episodes of anxiety and sadness during or close to the menstrual cycle. This emphasizes how crucial it is to recognize and deal with

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the financial elements of menstrual health, raise knowledge of alternatives that are less expensive, and fight for easily accessible and reasonably priced menstrual hygiene products for female university students. Furthermore, by evaluating menstruation-related issues, healthcare professionals will be more aware to check for the existence of risky behaviors and affective disturbances. This approach has the potential to positively impact the quality of life for women who have menstruation-related issues (Strine et al., 2005).

## Research Questions

- What specific challenges do female university students face in accessing menstrual health products due to financial constraints?
- In what ways do financial constraints impact the overall well-being of female university students in relation to their menstrual health?
- What coping mechanisms do female university students employ to address financial constraints in relation to their menstrual health?

## Significance of Study

Women often lack the resources needed to properly manage their periods, which has a detrimental impact on their health. Health awareness campaigns in schools and colleges have been more prevalent recently, and the government has taken steps to raise public understanding, de-stigmatize the menstrual cycle, and enhance the lives of Pakistani women in general. This study adds to the corpus of knowledge by bringing awareness to the issue of period poverty by studying the lived experiences of female university students. It also identifies the gaps in the existing policies and programs aimed to improve the well-being of Pakistani women.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Health" is defined as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" by the World Health Organization. Menstrual hygiene has a critical role in women's general health (Critchley et al., 2020). Between the ages of 13 and 51, the average woman menstruates (Usman et al., 2020). Menstruation regularly and frequently impairs the physical, emotional, and social well-being of tens of millions of women worldwide. Menstruation-related symptoms have been linked to breast soreness, fatigue, cramps, backaches, and swollen abdomens in women. In addition, emotional problems including depression, restlessness, and hopelessness are common among young women. If there is no cycle or if the bleeding is unusual or light, these are indicators of an irregular menstrual cycle (Maqbool et al., 2021). The quality of a woman's life, both physically and socially, is greatly impacted by heavy bleeding, discomfort, exhaustion, and mood fluctuations (Matteson & Zaluski, 2019). But, in general, women's health issues receive less attention in basic and translational research (Critchley et al., 2020).

The socio-cultural dimension of menstruation demonstrates the impact of cultural and societal norms that govern how menstruating women should be treated (Bitzer et al., 2005). The stigma attached to menstruation is strong in our society, and community discussions about it are rare, which makes it difficult for women in Pakistan to improve their knowledge, understanding, and management of menstrual hygiene (Usman et al., 2020). They carry misconceptions and preconceptions that are mirrored in their unhealthy menstruation practices since there is a lack of knowledge being shared with them. This can cause significant emotional stress in addition to having health effects like an increased incidence of UTIs and reproductive tract infections (Arshad et al., 2020). This may also be related to the fact that adolescents in many countries, including Pakistan, do not receive thorough education on sexual and reproductive health since it is socially taboo to address such topics (Mansoor et al., 2020). The social lives of women in Pakistan are also restricted by a number of traditional and religious factors. The inability of menstruating females to seek treatment is a result of cultural taboos, misconceptions, isolation, and restrictions surrounding menstruation and hygiene (Mansoori et al., 2020). Speaking about menstruation-related difficulties, such as pad availability and the cost of these products, is also hindered by shame (Michel et al., 2022).

Menstruation-related conditions can have major health consequences for young women. Teenage girls with monthly problems miss work and school, which negatively impacts their mental and behavioral development. Research has demonstrated that menstrual distress negatively impacts women's everyday activities, reproductive, and psychological health (Maqbool et al., 2021). A previous study conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, found that school-age girls had unsanitary menstrual practices and misunderstandings that called for health professionals to take action (Mansoor et al., 2020). According to data from the World Bank, females miss four days of school each month because of their periods. According to statistics from a number of developing and underdeveloped nations; the primary obstacles to school attendance are thought to be cultural taboos and poor menstrual hygiene practices (Mansoori et al., 2020). Teenage girls in low- and middle-income countries do not manage their menstrual hygiene adequately and pose a serious threat to public health (Majeed et al., 2022). There are several problems with managing menstrual hygiene, such as inadequate access to emergency absorbents during menstruation, lack of appropriate WASH facilities, lack of painkillers for backaches and uterine cramps (dysmenorrhea), and lack of a dust bin for disposing of absorbents (Ghimire, 2020). In Pakistan, during the June–August 2022 floods, more than 33 million people were impacted, and more than 6.4 million of them needed humanitarian aid. Sixty-three thousand individuals were forced to live in camps. There were restrictions on access to medical professionals, facilities, and supplies, including necessary medications. Over eight million women who are fertile and devastated by floods resorted to drastic means to control their menstruation. One such woman told of having to utilize leaves from trees (Thaver & Ashraf, 2023).

The challenges of menstrual health are also exacerbated due to period poverty. It is a problem with long-standing

worldwide implications for community health. It is characterized by limited access to sanitary facilities, education, and menstruation supplies. In a nutshell, period poverty is the injustice and inequality that millions of women experience as a result of their menstruation (Jaafar et al., 2023). Rapidly rising inflation affects every aspect of society in developing economies. In Pakistan, inflation has emerged as the most contentious issue. Rising inflation and rising poverty are mutually reinforcing. In April 2021, Pakistan's CPI inflation rate was reported to be 11.0% annually (Iqbal et al., 2022). Inflation combined with gender-based pricing discrimination, results in a "pink tax" in which goods promoted to women are more costly than those marketed to men (Moshary et al., 2023). Between the two genders, the biggest percentage difference is found in personal care goods. Personal care goods include things like body wash, deodorant, lotion, shampoo, conditioner, pads, and razors. Because personal care goods are regularly purchased, they add up over time to be very expensive (Abdou, 2019). A comprehensive analysis of the literature reveals that women face significant obstacles in maintaining acceptable sanitary practices due to inadequate socioeconomic conditions (Usman et al., 2020). Women are forced to reuse the same cloth since sanitary pads and tampons are considered a "luxury" rather than a basic requirement. This means that women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have to make compromises when it comes to cleanliness and are especially susceptible to the negative effects of bad habits (Arshad et al., 2020).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was utilized to conduct this study as the research questions were aimed at finding out in detail about the daily experiences of female university students. The study design best suited to our research was qualitative phenomenological design as it has allowed us to explore women's 'lived experiences' adequately and develop insightful descriptions of the experience of menstrual health challenges. Participants were selected from the University of Sargodha through convenience sampling technique. The final number of participants was determined to be thirteen, when the informational redundancy was achieved, also known as data saturation. For data collection, we have used in-depth interviews. Open-ended questions have been used throughout the interviews. Thematic analysis was used in our study. It was an iterative process in which the patterns/themes within the data were identified, analyzed, and reported. The main aim was to search for the common patterns extracted from the specific experiences.

### 4. RESULTS

Thirteen women participated in the interviews. The women were between the ages of 19-29. The demographic details are summarized in the table given below. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names to ensure confidentiality.

**Table 1.**

Demographic details of the participants

Sr #	Pseudonym	Age	Field of Study
1	FT	19	Social Sciences
2	MM	19	Social Sciences
3	IM	22	Social Sciences
4	MP	21	Earth Sciences
5	IN	21	Natural Sciences
6	IM	20	Natural Sciences
7	FN	21	Social Sciences
8	RB	29	Social Sciences
9	MA	22	Arts and Humanities
10	SK	25	Earth Sciences
11	AS	23	Earth Sciences
12	HN	20	Earth Sciences
13	FN	20	Arts and Humanities

Different experiences of menstrual challenges faced by female university students due to financial constraints could be broadly grouped into four main themes including financial struggles, product choice and cultural sensitivities, physical and psychological challenges, and adapting to financial constraints.

#### Theme 1: Financial Struggles

This theme is based on the ability of female university students to purchase sanitary pads amid rising prices of personal healthcare products in the market. Almost all of the participants reported that the prices have gone through the roof during the past few years making it almost impossible for them to buy any other personal care product other than the sanitary pads. One of the participants reported that she now buys a smaller pack of sanitary pads half the amount of the original product she used to buy.

*'Last year I used to buy a pack of 16 sanitary pads every month, in just a few months the prices have doubled. Now the pack costs around 700 or more, I used to buy it for 350-400 Rupees before. Now I buy a pack of 8 sanitary pads and manage it somehow during the days of heavy bleeding; Participant 4'*

*'I am somehow managing everything. I can afford sanitary products but I am no longer able to buy anything other than that. I remember I used to buy two or three personal hygiene products for the price of one pack of sanitary pads now; Participant 8'*

Another participant reported that she switched to a local brand because it was less amount of money than the ones she used before.

*'It has become really hard to manage monthly spending because I live in a hostel. I can no longer afford the sanitary pads which I used before. I have switched to a local brand now, and although I am not satisfied with the new product I have to manage things; Participant 6'*

#### Theme 2: Product Choice and Cultural Sensitivities

This theme highlights the holistic approach to menstrual health management that not only considers

affordability and accessibility but also cultural sensitivities. Many participants reported that they only use sanitary pads while some of them reported that they often use cloth or cotton. When asked about the usage of other products such as tampons or menstrual cups, participants expressed that they are hesitant to use these products due to several cultural and personal reasons. The usage of alternatives like tampons and menstrual cups was associated with feelings of shame and stigma.

*'I mostly use sanitary pads but I have also used cloth if I do not have access to sanitary pads. But, I have never used tampons or a menstrual cup; Participant 8'*

*'I believe sanitary pads are a better option. To be honest I have never thought about using alternatives like tampons etc. I have heard that menstrual cups are reusable but I do not know if that is safe. I am also not sure if there is any difference in the prices of these products; Participant 10'*

*'I have wanted to try the alternative products but I am scared. I have heard that it is not okay to use these products; Participant 1'*

### Theme 3: Physical and Psychological Challenges

This theme explores the health struggles female university students face during menstruation. These challenges encompass both physical and psychological problems they face. The most commonly reported symptoms during the monthly cycle were period cramps, bloating, weakness, mood swings, frustration, and feelings of sadness. One of the participants reported about the impact of weather on menstrual hygiene management.

*'Sometimes it becomes very frustrating to manage things on campus. It is manageable during winters but during hot weather when the temperature reaches, above 40 degrees it becomes unbearable. At the end of the day, you have to go through this because you have no other option; Participant 2'*

*'I really feel nauseous and frustrated sometimes during those days. Going to university seems like a big task. Sometimes I wish I could take off and rest at home during that time; Participant 9'*

One of the participants highlighted an important issue which is the unavailability of proper disposal methods for students on campus. It led to a difficult situation for her.

*'There is a consistent lack of dustbins in washrooms, especially for female hygiene products. I am often forced to use sanitary pads for longer periods of time due to a lack of proper disposal methods. This one time I got a severe infection due to it; Participant 7'*

When asked about the impact of financial struggles and product choice on the wellbeing most of the participants reported that product choice impacts the overall experience during the monthly cycle. One of the participants reported that due to switching to a local brand of sanitary pads, she did not feel comfortable.

*'I was happy when I purchased this local brand of sanitary pads at a low price but when I used them I realized that I had made a mistake. It gave me very bad rashes and made that time of the month awful for me; Participant 6'*

### Theme 4: Adapting to Financial Constraints

This theme reports the coping strategies that female university students employ to cope with menstrual health challenges due to financial struggles. Some of the participants reported that they overall managed the situation well. A few of them reported that although there are financial constraints they are able to manage the situation by using cloth and sanitary pads together. Around half of the participants reported that it is a huge task for them to manage the menstrual health challenges due to expensive products and rising inflation.

*'So what I do is use cloth and sanitary pads together. During the first two or three days, I use sanitary pads. And during the remaining days I use cloth. This really helps me manage things in a convenient way; Participant; 7'*

One of the participants who had sisters reported that three of them bought one pack of 16 sanitary pads and then divided them among themselves.

*'When you have to manage things for yourself it is easier but when you add up the hygiene products for three people, it adds up and it costs more money. None of us siblings work or earn money. It has become really hard to manage things. It's not like we can directly ask someone to give us money so that we can buy sanitary pads; Participant 13'*

### Discussion

The increase in the cost of personal hygiene products and the consequent effect on the financial capacity of female college students give rise to a number of significant economic and social issues. The testimonies brought attention to the financial burden faced by female college students. This may have an effect on the students' monthly spending plan and push them to make tough decisions about the management of their menstrual hygiene. Relevant to our findings a study reveals the maintenance of menstrual hygiene is an unfulfilled aspect of sexual and reproductive health (Soeiro et al., 2021). The switch to less costly brands or smaller packs of sanitary pads may have an adverse effect on customer satisfaction and provide health risks. Financially strapped students also have to make compromises, such as forgoing the purchase of additional personal hygiene supplies. Consistent with prior research that reveals that not only does developed countries face period poverty, but middle- and low-income countries as well. In the UK, 10% of girls have not been able to afford period products, 15% have had difficulty finding them, and 19% have changed to less suitable products due to the high price. (Jaafar et al., 2023).

For personal and cultural reasons, the participants also indicated reluctance to use tampons and menstruation cups. The significance of tackling societal taboos related to specific hygiene products is highlighted by this. A person can be empowered to make decisions based on their own requirements by raising an understanding of different items and how to use them properly. In line with earlier research, study participants discussed a number of physical and psychological symptoms they encountered throughout

their monthly cycles, including light cramps and exhaustion, which are frequently associated with menstruation (Maqbool et al., 2021) The impact of external factors, such as the weather, was one noteworthy feature that was highlighted. This highlights the external factors that exacerbate the challenges encountered by female students attending universities. The menstrual health issues that participants disclosed were addressed in a variety of ways. When several people in a family require menstrual hygiene products, the issue gets more serious. Consistent with a study, our results suggest that differences in menstruation-related problems are associated with differences in social and occupational performance and that these differences may exist in more domains than is commonly recognized. (Strine et al., 2005)

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research delved into specific challenges female university students face in accessing menstrual health products due to financial constraints and its impact on their well-being. Our findings revealed that financial constraints during periods make it more difficult to sustain menstrual wellness. Women have thus been compelled to do with less material or wear items longer than they would have preferred. The overarching themes of our study have also revealed the complexities of how intersecting sociocultural realities affect the preference for period products during the menstrual cycle. The physical and psychological well-being is greatly impacted by the availability and affordability of menstrual hygiene products, proper disposal methods, and external factors such as weather conditions. In order to lessen the negative effects of period poverty on the well-being of female students, future studies should investigate possible interventions and solutions.

### Conflict interests

The authors has declared that no competing interests exist.

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