



Mitigating Period Poverty Amongst Refugee Women in Lebanon

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Abstract: Period poverty remains a major challenge in Lebanon, especially for refugees. With the country on the verge of economic collapse, the government is not prioritising gender equality but local and international organisations are working to help vulnerable women and girls.

The challenge of period poverty in refugee camps remains layered and complex. As confirmed by the [UNHCR](#), menstrual health is not just about having or being able to purchase sanitary protection. Long distances to a private toilet, little to no electricity across camps, no locks on toilet doors, sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), unhygienic standards and irregular access to period products [are just some](#) of the difficulties encountered by women residing in refugee camps across Lebanon and the globe.

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Since 2019, the Lebanese pound has lost more than [90 per cent of its value](#) against the US dollar on the black market. To ease the blow on the general public, Lebanon's government has subsidised essential goods, including medicine, fuel and flour, but has repeatedly ignored gender challenges exacerbated by economic and social inequalities. Women's rights and human rights activists were quick to point out that the government [failed to include sanitary pads](#) on its list of subsidised items but made sure men's razors made the final cut. The price of sanitary pads, the vast majority of which are imported, has drastically increased by more than [500 per cent](#) since the beginning of the country's financial crisis—dubbed by the World Bank as one of the [world's worst since the 1850s](#).

With [more than half](#) the Lebanese population living below poverty lines, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and minority women struggle to find an affordable alternative. [Dawrati](#), a local NGO which helps provide women and girls with menstrual products, a safe space to discuss women's health issues and education on menstrual hygiene, says half of women [suffering from period poverty](#) are using newspaper, toilet paper or old rags instead of pads. Dawrati also reports that [two-thirds of adolescent girls](#) in Lebanon have no means of purchasing sanitary products.

Refugee women and girls most negatively impacted

International development and humanitarian organisation for advancement of children's rights and equality for girls, Plan International, depicted [the dire situation](#) of refugee women as a result of COVID-19 and the economic crisis which began in 2019. The charity highlighted how women and girls from refugee communities in Lebanon have been left struggling [for food and basic necessities](#) such as sanitary pads, as the pandemic swept the country intensifying economic constraints. Of the teenage girls in Lebanon who cannot afford to buy sanitary pads, [more than half](#) are Syrian refugees. Syrian refugee girls reported that they [do not have access](#) to menstrual supplies or hygiene pads due to lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions, nor can their families afford them.

For refugees, things are simply more complicated. When they can, refugee women purchase cheap pads due to their financial constraints but the pads' [poor quality](#) causes irritation, foul odours and, at times, painful rashes and infections. For young, vulnerable refugee girls living an unstable home life because their communities have been forcibly displaced, these natural biological and hormonal changes are not always a healthy experience. [Research](#) by Girl Effect, a non-profit organisation tackling global poverty, found that one in 10 girls in many parts of the world either skip part of their schooling or drop out completely due to their inability (through no fault of their own) to healthily and hygienically manage their periods. Of the escalating challenges that refugees face in cases of involuntary migration, access to

menstrual healthcare constitutes [one of the most crucial and intimate](#); lack of it puts them in '[excruciating pain and embarrassment](#)' as well as [jeopardising their futures](#). An unstable and unhealthy environment both at home and school means refugee girls and women not only suffer [menstrual inequity](#) but additional protracted psychological trauma, constraints and period shame that intensifies the problem further.

Mitigating Challenges and Barriers to Access

Several initiatives across Lebanon have worked closely and diligently to resolve the issue of period poverty among refugee communities. [Days for Girls](#) (DFG) Lebanon increases access to menstrual care and attempts to shatter stigma around periods by encouraging girls and women to speak freely about menstruation without shame. Their offices in Lebanon cater for the Syrian refugee population and provide Syrian women and young girls with adequate access to sanitary menstrual products and a means of generating income by teaching these women how to make their own pads in an [enterprise programme](#). This allows DFG to tackle the economic, social and health issues facing this community simultaneously and intersectionally. In the Chatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, DFG works closely with its local partner [WingWoman Lebanon](#) to equip Palestinian refugee women with the [skills necessary](#) to stitch and sew reusable sanitary pads made from colourful cloth. Each of these reusable pads is made with a protective shield and absorbent liner so they can be washed and reused for as long as three years. As well as working with the Palestinian refugee community, WingWoman Lebanon also distributes reusable pads to Lebanon's [most vulnerable groups](#), including Syrian refugees. They conduct week-long training sessions with vulnerable women, distribute menstrual pad kits to girls and their mothers in refugee camps and hold open sessions where these women can discuss all aspects of menstruation, sex, hygiene, reproduction and physical anatomy.

Government must introduce subsidy plan

The fundamental issue surrounding period poverty remains the fact that, aside from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and NGOs working on the ground, no one seems to care about this aspect of women's lives at the level of government—particularly when it comes to women who are most vulnerable and in need. Women's physical and mental health will continue to be fragile as a result of the challenges they encounter in obtaining vital menstrual products while also facing barriers in accessing necessary information about their menstrual cycle. Lebanon's government, in close collaboration with its Ministry of Health, must set

forth a national subsidy plan to ensure that period poverty and its implications are reduced both inside and outside refugee camps.

Negative coping mechanisms for navigating and confronting these challenges will result in women living with physical symptoms, mental health constraints, psychological distress and social anxiety. These challenges are perilous enough in any setting, let alone in refugee camps and among refugee women specifically.

When period poverty intersects with displacement, shame and insecurity in situations of trauma and strife, women are unable to manage their menstrual cycle on a personal level while navigating this reality among their conservative and misinformed families. Reusable pads address many of the issues that trouble refugee women and vulnerable Lebanese women across the country; access to them not only reduces period shame but also helps dispel wider stigma surrounding sexual and reproductive health in the Arab region at large.