

Issues and Challenges of Period Poverty During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

Kemiskinan Haid di Malaysia: Isu dan Cabaran Semasa Pandemik Covid-19

NORHAFIZAH AHMAD^{1,2*} & LATIFAH ABDUL MAJID¹

¹Research Centre for Quran and Sunnah, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

²Department of Islamic Studies, Centre for General Studies and Co-Curricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: nrhafizah@uthm.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is the blood that comes out of a woman's cervix through the vagina at a certain time, and is not the cause of childbirth. The onset of menstruation is one of the signs of a woman's puberty. In fact, puberty is a new challenge, especially for women, because it requires careful personal hygiene, whether before, during, or after menstruation. In Malaysia, women still suffer from period poverty and cannot afford sanitary pads due to financial constraints. This causes greater harm to women. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to identify the issues and challenges faced by women due to period poverty, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this qualitative study, a document analysis from journal articles, books, and related materials was conducted. Findings suggest that women face significant challenges when it comes to period poverty. These include lack of affordable menstrual products, disadvantages in menstrual hygiene infrastructure, and negative stigma in the community. The implication of this study is to help women cope with the challenges of period poverty and to prepare for the onset of menstruation with sufficient knowledge and needs.

Keywords: Period poverty; hygiene; issues; challenges; Covid-19

ABSTRAK

Haid merupakan darah yang keluar daripada pangkal rahim wanita dalam tempoh yang tertentu secara tabi'i melalui faraj dalam keadaan yang sihat dan bukan sebab melahirkan anak. Kedatangan haid adalah salah satu tanda baligh bagi seorang wanita. Malah, akil baligh merupakan cabaran baharu terutama bagi wanita kerana ia memerlukan penjagaan kebersihan diri yang rapi, sama ada penjagaan sebelum, semasa atau selepas haid. Di Malaysia, masih ramai wanita yang menghadapi masalah kemiskinan haid iaitu tidak mampu memiliki tuala wanita akibat faktor kewangan. Hal ini menimbulkan kemudaratan yang lebih besar dalam diri wanita. Justeru, objektif utama artikel ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti isu dan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh wanita dalam mendepani kemiskinan haid terutamanya semasa pandemik Covid-19. Kajian ini merupakan kajian kualitatif dengan menggunakan metode analisis dokumen yang terdiri daripada artikel jurnal, buku dan bahan-bahan berkaitan. Hasil kajian mendapati wanita menghadapi cabaran yang besar dalam menghadapi kemiskinan haid, antaranya kekurangan akses kepada produk haid mampu milik, kelemahan infrastruktur kebersihan haid dan stigma negatif dalam kalangan masyarakat. Implikasi kajian ini ialah untuk membantu wanita mendepani cabaran kemiskinan haid dan seterusnya bersedia dengan ilmu pengetahuan dan keperluan yang mencukupi sebelum kedatangan haid.

Kata kunci: Kemiskinan haid; kebersihan; isu; cabaran; Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a biological process in the female phase of life. The Medical Dictionary (2013) defines

menstruation as the periodic discharge of blood and tissue from the vagina of a non-pregnant uterus. Menstruation occurs approximately every 28 days between puberty and menopause, except during

pregnancy, and the discharge lasts approximately 5 days, with times varying from woman to woman. According to Ferenczy (2003), the blood emerges from the upper part of the endometrium. Menstrual blood discharges when a woman is healthy and is not the cause of childbirth (al-Sharbini 1994; al-Zuhayli 2004).

In Islam, the onset of menstruation as early as age nine is one of the signs for a woman's puberty (Andek Masnah 1992). Women also face a new challenge during puberty because, when a girl menstruates, careful personal hygiene is required, whether before, during, or after menstruation (Nor Kartina & Basri 2016). Moreover, in Islam, one of the aspects emphasized in the discussion of *fiqh taharah* is the concern for women's hygiene, the regulation of sanctification, the limits of the *awrah*, circumcision for women, the division of *hadas* and *junub* and the problem of women's blood, i.e., menstruation, *nifas* and *wiladah* (Nor Kartina & Basri 2015; Khairul Hamimah & Nurul Husna 2019). Dealing with menstrual hygiene is also closely related to women's *fiqh*. Through the learning of *fiqh al-mar'ah*, various topics related to worship are studied intensively, such as femininity in *fiqh*, *fiqh* of judgment, the sources of Islamic *fiqh* and various concepts in the knowledge of *fiqh* (Khairul Hamimah & Nurul Husna 2019). Thus, prioritizing cleanliness and purity during menstruation is also a matter that each individual must implement and maintain at all times. Moreover, sanctification is closely related to Islamic worship, such as prayer, fasting, *tawaf*, reciting the Qur'an, and others (Nor Kartina 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact worldwide. The outbreak of the Corona virus, which infected and killed millions of people, has affected global community. The Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted human health and the global economic downturn (Khairulnazrin et al. 2022). Unemployment due to economic problems in the community causes affected households to lose their income base and makes this group vulnerable to multidimensional poverty problems (Nik Mohd Azim et al. 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented by the United Nations (UN), list eradication of poverty, good health and well-being, clean water and sanitation, quality education, and reduction of inequalities, among others, as goals for development and human well-being to be achieved by 2030 (WHO 2015). However, the issue of period poverty in most countries highlights the

challenges that must be overcome to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (S.Cousins 2020).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Period poverty is a global problem that affects most countries, whether they are of low, middle, or high-income countries (Holmes et al. 2021). In Malaysia, this issue has persisted for a long time, but it has received insufficient attention due to the community's perception that menstruation is a sensitive subject to discuss in the public (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021a).

Typically, women wear special products to absorb menstrual blood during their periods, such as disposable or reusable sanitary pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and panty liners (myHealth 2020; UNICEF 2019). However, financial constraints prevent women from having access to menstrual hygiene products like sanitary pads. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck Malaysia in 2020, some women were forced to use unsafe materials as substitute to replace sanitary pads, such as cloth, old towels, and coconut husk (Nur Hasliza 2021; Anja Juliah et al. 2021).

Despite the fact that period poverty persists, the Malaysian government has not comprehensively addressed the issue, nor has it been tabled in parliament (Norsyuhaidah 2020). Menstruation, on the other hand, coincides with the *maqasid syariah* in order to preserve the soul, health, and offspring, as well as to demonstrate the wisdom that Islam grants rest periods to menstruating women who typically experience symptoms of premenstrual prevalence (Siti Haliza 2022; Asmadayana et al. 2016). The lack of detailed data (Anja Juliah et al. 2021; Rohaiza 2021) and accurate statistics for this issue also impedes efforts to eliminate period poverty in Malaysia (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra et al. 2021). Although the Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara (LPPKN) does not provide specific data on menstrual poverty, the ministry acknowledges that it is most common for B40 women in Malaysia. The lack of data indicates that the problem of period poverty is often marginalized in Malaysia (Rohaiza et al. 2021). Former Deputy Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM) Hannah Yeoh (2019) explained that there is no detailed data available on teenagers who have to skip school due to poverty, making them unable to purchase menstrual products such as sanitary pads or tampons.

Therefore, Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar (2021) proposed that the issue of period poverty be led by KPWKM in collaboration with certain parties to provide data and identify community's need for menstrual products. As a result, the KPWKM should collaborate with the Ministry of Education, the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs), and other parties to identify the seriousness of the issue of period poverty in Malaysia and take appropriate action in response to media reports on the subject. In addition, Anja Juliah et al. (2021) stated that the approach used by other countries to overcome period poverty is not suitable as a benchmark due to differences in context and needs in each country.

Period poverty awareness campaigns and free sanitary pad distribution projects are being organised by Malaysian community activists through the Oh Bulan Project! Bunga Pads, Project Opol, and All Women's Action Society (AWAM) in collaboration with KOTEX Malaysia. In addition, the distribution of 1000 packs of sanitary pads, as well as women's health and menstrual modules, by the Selangor and Federal Territory of KL Family Reproductive Health Association (SWP FreHa) is extremely beneficial to women experiencing period poverty. On the other hand, despite various initiatives, particularly directed at the urban poor, the situation of period poverty persists because studies that can lead to a resolution of this issue are scarce, and there is a lack of understanding and public awareness about period poverty (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021a). The awareness campaigns have not been widely publicized and received no media coverage, such as Gerak Malaysia's 'Peduli Merah' Campaign, which received only 700 responses from the public after a month of operation (Norsyuhaidah 2020).

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this article is to identify the issues and challenges faced by women in dealing with period poverty, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODS

A qualitative methodology is used in this article. A document analysis is used to gather information on the study of period poverty that is taking place around the world and specifically in Malaysia. Materials consulted include journals, dissertations, books, policy documents, websites, newspaper and others.

All the material will be analyzed descriptively and thematically according to the issues and challenges associated with period poverty. Content analysis techniques will be used to interpret the data and determine the presence of themes in the text. The data are then categorized according to a theme or pattern determined by the researcher. We identified themes related to challenges faced by women during the Covid-19 pandemic, including lack of access to affordable menstrual products, disadvantages in menstrual hygiene infrastructure, and negative stigma in the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

People understand period poverty as the inability to get sanitary pads, while this covers only a quarter of the real problem. Period poverty also includes a lack of educational aspects such as knowledge about menstruation, management aspects such as access to cleaning facilities such as clean water, soap, and sanitary pads, and privacy, i.e., the ability to change or manage menstruation in a safe environment. This shows that society is still in the dark about the problem of period poverty, which includes various aspects, including material, economic, social, educational, health, and emotional (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021a). According to Nor Faiza (2021), factors influencing period poverty in Malaysia include constraints in obtaining sanitary pads, hygiene or opportunities for women to change sanitary pads, social support in practicing menstrual hygiene, and reproductive health education.

Today's challenges to women's well-being and health require concerted efforts from various quarters. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic that has plagued Malaysia since 2020 has made this issue even more complex. Period poverty issues and challenges faced by women during the Covid-19 pandemic include lack of access to affordable menstrual products, disadvantages in menstrual hygiene infrastructure, and negative stigma in the community.

INACCESSIBILITY OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

Menstrual products are hygiene items used by women during menstruation, such as reusable or disposable pads, menstrual cups, and tampons (Gibson et al. 2019). There are several types of menstrual products on the market, with disposable pads being the most commonly used. These menstrual products vary in quality and price. Commercially produced reusable

sanitary pads are also becoming more common and have a wide range of qualities. Disposable tampons and menstrual cups are two other menstrual products that are rarely available in low and middle-income countries (UNICEF 2019). The types of products used, the methods used to obtain them, and the methods used to clean and dispose of menstrual products vary depending on whether they can be reused, such as cloth pads, menstrual cups, and tampons. While menstrual products such as disposable pads can only be used once (UNICEF 2019).

Access to affordable menstrual products, especially sanitary pads, is a challenge for women. In Malaysia, there are 3.2 million teenagers aged 12 to 17 years, while the B40 group is estimated to be 1.28 million teenagers from families with annual incomes of less than RM4,849 each. The results show that of the 30 countries in the world, 73 percent of respondents have limited access to menstrual hygiene products, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Malaysia, many women still face the problem of period poverty because they cannot afford to buy sanitary pads due to financial constraints (Dewan Negara 2021). This leads to women having to choose between two necessities of life: Food or menstrual products (Rohaiza 2021). This causes greater harm to women.

The inability to have sanitary pads also has a significant impact on the educational aspect. Menstrual products become a problem for those who suffer from economic hardship and for poor women when they get their periods. Every month, embarrassing things happen when the blood flows incessantly and leaks if not handled properly. This has drawn the attention of some people in Malaysia, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community activists, when a handful of schoolgirls do not attend school during their menstrual period, delaying their studies. Nur Aizati Athirah Daud, Veronica GK Williams, Zuraidah Daut, and Zaharah Sulaiman reported that at one school in Kelantan, 41.8% of female students were absent during menstruation, or 40 out of 172 students. It is possible that the number of female students who were absent from school because they did not have sanitary pads to wear was also high, but this was never mentioned. Among the consequences of this absences is the risk of missing classes. Children who do not attend school are also more likely to be married off by their parents or to become pregnant

(Norsyuhaidah 2020). In most cases, teenage girls do not attend school. In other situations, some decide to drop out of school, especially if their parents think that being able to read and do math is enough for them (Rohaiza et al. 2021).

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM) implemented a pilot program on period poverty at the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur Cafe Youth Centre, involving 13 People's Housing Project (PPR) communities and two Department of Social Welfare (JKM) agencies around Kuala Lumpur. A total of 350 youth, aged 13 to 24, from the B40 group benefited from the implementation of this pilot project. The results of the survey found that 13.1 percent of teens said the price of menstrual products in the market was unaffordable, and 16.4 percent said they had difficulty obtaining menstrual products (Dewan Negara 2021).

The health and hygiene aspects of female youth are critical to reducing health risks and school dropout rates. An estimated 130,000 women from B40 families in Malaysia do not have access to hygiene items such as sanitary pads due to financial constraints. Therefore, Tengku Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz (2022), in his 2022 budget speech, stated that the Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara (LPPKN), in collaboration with the Department of Prisons Malaysia, will distribute free basic hygiene kits to 130 thousand female adolescents from the B40 group every month. In addition, reproductive health and education campaigns will continue to be conducted in schools in collaboration with non-governmental organizations.

Although sanitary pads are a basic need, a study by LPPKN in the Kuala Lumpur region found that there are still cases of period poverty and basic needs that cannot be met. Even a handful of teenage girls are forced to borrow sanitary pads from friends (Latifah 2021). There are even women who choose to get pregnant to avoid menstruation for 9 months (Nur Hasliza 2020). A girl from Sabah also tore an old cloth every month during her period after running out of supplies. Due to her poverty, the girl shared 20 sanitary pads with her mother and sister and used a cloth as a substitute. The situation has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of job losses, and the economic downturn that has led to poverty among families. In fact, one of the things families usually ask for help with is sanitary pads, as these people are unable to buy the necessities.

DISADVANTAGES IN MENSTRUAL HYGIENE INFRASTRUCTURE

Period poverty also includes a lack of infrastructure, i.e., cleansing facilities such as clean water, soap, and sanitary pads, as well as privacy, i.e., the ability to change or manage menstruation in safe conditions, sanitary facilities to manage menstruation (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021b). The problem of poverty, which still plagues a section of society, results in a person living in an environment that is not conducive, where there is no clean water supply, no waste disposal, and no toilets suitable for self-management. The ability to provide a complete infrastructure to manage menstrual hygiene is a shared responsibility involving various parties, including family institutions, educational institutions, media, the government, researchers, society, and industry (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021b). In Malaysia, the procurement of clean and safe hygiene items is hampered by several factors, particularly geographic location, socioeconomic background, and lifestyle (Fitriyati 2022).

The importance of a complete menstrual hygiene infrastructure also includes the health aspect, especially for women intimate area, which is the most sensitive area and requires intensive care. Neglecting intimate hygiene by not changing sanitary pads on time can lead to bacterial infections of the vagina, discomfort during sexual intercourse, and many other consequences (Nor Kartina & Basri 2016). Also, use clean water daily and avoid using fragrances, bath oils, bubble baths, and sanitary pads with fragrances in the vagina. This is because these substances can cause severe inflammation as well as infections in the bladder and vaginal tract (myHealth 2020).

Furthermore, a good selection of sanitary pads has a significant impact on the health of women experiencing period pain. The selection should meet standards that demonstrate hygienic features and are safe to use in the short or long term. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Uterine Cancer Study, 80% of women worldwide suffer from gynecological diseases at various stages. Meanwhile, improper care of sanitary pad during menstruation is responsible for 75% of gynecological diseases. According to a WHO report from 2012, there were 528,000 new cases of cervical cancer worldwide that resulted in death. Cervical cancer accounts for 10.5% of all cancers in women (Nor Kartina & Basri 2016). Lack of access to clean water and toilets can lead to urogenital infections such as Bacterial

Vaginosis (BV), Urinary Tract Infections (UTI), and poor reproductive system health. According to Padma Mas et al. (2015), women who used reusable absorbent pads were more likely than women who used disposable pads to have urogenital infection symptoms or to be diagnosed with at least one urogenital infection (BV or UTI).

Because the solution to period poverty varies by location and circumstances, different infrastructures must also be adapted to local conditions. For example, women in rural areas involving indigenous people, as well as residents in Sabah and Sarawak, often have difficulty obtaining sanitary pads and clean water sources because the settlements are far from necessary facilities. While poor communities in urban or urban - poor settings, such as PPR areas, face financial challenges, they do not face challenges in terms of water resources or other basic facilities. The same is true for homeless, refugee, and disabled women who face both short- and long-term difficulties. Girls are also affected by period poverty, which causes school absences (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra 2021b).

NEGATIVE STIGMATISATION OF MENSTRUATION IN SOCIETY

Stigma is defined as a demeaning, reproachful, and shaming trait (Kamus Dewan 2016). Discussions about period poverty should not become polemical, be considered taboo or forbidden, or create a negative stigma in society because the fundamental rights of girls and women are at stake. In fact, there are still some people who consider menstruation a personal problem that should not be talked about openly, while from a health and medical perspective, the menstrual cycle is also accepted as a method of family planning. While the proper management of menstruation is extremely important and closely related to the formation of self-confidence and the preservation of women's dignity. However, the topic of period poverty is a taboo one and is not given enough attention in society (Nor Faiza et al. 2021). Stigma and misconceptions about menstruation are very strong and deeply ingrained in society. They occur everywhere and leave a lasting impression, although circumstances and perspectives vary from place to place (Latifah et al. 2022). Some in the global community or in Malaysia consider menstruation a personal issue that should not be discussed because there are still groups that are trapped in the issue of period poverty (Siti Haliza 2022; Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra et al. 2021; Norhafizah 2022).

Allah SWT mentions menstruation in two verses, which are Surah at-Talaq verse 4 with the phrase *al-mahidh* and *yahidhna* related to *iddah* and Surah al-Baqarah verse 222 with the recitation of *al-mahidh* twice as His statement:

“They ask you concerning women’s courses. Say: They are a hurt and a pollution: so keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, you may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.”

In this verse, Allah SWT uses the phrase *أذى*, which means disgusting. This phrase is interpreted as something dirty and the place of dirt (al-Zuhaily 2009; al-Mahalli & al-Suyuthi 2003). According to al-Zuhayli (2009), this displeasing term refers to menstruation, which is harmful and hated by women and other people because of the smell of menstrual blood. This shows that what is considered taboo by most people has also been ordered in the Quran (Rizqi 2019) with the use of disgusting expressions that make women to feel dirty, unholy, and inferior. In fact, Saidatina Aishah RA also experienced the feeling of being unholy, hesitant, and dirty when she carried out the commandment of the Prophet PBUH during menstruation to take the clothes of the Prophet PBUH, as stated in the hadith:

Abu Huraira reported: While the Prophet PBUH was in the mosque, he said: “O ‘A’isha, get me that garment. She said: I am menstruating. Upon this he remarked: Your menstruation is not in your hand, and she, therefore, got him that.” (Sahih Muslim, The book of menstruation, Chapter It is permissible for a menstruating woman to wash her husband’s head, and comb his hair; her leftovers are pure (*tahir*); and regarding reclining in her lap and reciting qur’an, No 298)

Thus, the feeling of unholiness in menstruating women has existed since the time of the Prophet PBUH. However, the Prophet PBUH gave guidance for dealing with women during menstruation to avoid negative stigmatization of women. There are many hadiths in the books of Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim that explain menstruation such as the purification of menstrual blood, the interaction of the Prophet PBUH with his wife during menstruation, or rules related to menstruation such as prayer, *iktikaf*, *tawaf*, and others (Muslim 2006; al-Bukhari 2001). However, menstruation still carries a negative stigma or taboo in today’s society (Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra et al. 2021), whereas women’s blood, whether menstruating, *nifas*, or *istihadah*, is a gift Allah SWT

has decreed for all women, as the Prophet PBUH states in a hadith:

Narrated Al-Qasim: ‘Aisha said, “We set out with the sole intention of performing Hajj and when we reached Sarif, (a place six miles from Mecca) I got my menses. Prophet PBUH came to me while I was weeping. He said ‘What is the matter with you? Have you got your menses?’ I replied, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘This is a thing which Allah has ordained for the daughters of Adam. So do what all the pilgrims do with the exception of the *Tawaf* (Circumambulation) round the Ka’ba.” ‘Aisha added, “Prophet PBUH sacrificed cows on behalf of his wives.” (Sahih Bukhari, The book of menstruation, Chapter: Menses (a thing) ordained (by Allah and instructions) for women when they get their menses, No 293)

Although menstruation is an important event in a woman’s life, studies have shown that the onset of menstruation is not a joyful event, but also causes negative emotional reactions such as restlessness, shock, anxiety, nervousness, and discomfort (Maznah 1997). This is due to the inadequate preparation of girls, especially those who are having their periods for the first time. Especially when the topic of period poverty is considered trivial and used as a joke by some (Anja Juliah et al. 2021). Of course, children who are menstruating for the first time should not be ashamed to talk or discuss menstruation, whether with family members, older women in the community, teachers, or friends, because menstruation is normal and natural in life.

On the other hand, a girl should be proud because menstruation indicates that a girl’s body is now beginning to develop into that of an adult woman (Nafsah 2022). Therefore, negative stigmatization of women should be avoided because menstrual deprivation not only negatively affects women’s emotions but can also have an impact on psychological well-being (Lauren et al. 2021).

PERIOD POVERTY DURING MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

The Malaysia Government Movement Control Order, commonly referred to as MCO or PKP, was a set of national quarantine and cordon sanitaire measures implemented by the Malaysian federal government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the country beginning March 18th 2020. The orders were commonly referred to as lockdowns in the local and international media. The MCO measures included movement, assembly, and international travel restrictions and ordered the closure of businesses, industries, government, and educational institutions to contain the spread of

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19. The MCO was expanded and relaxed to include several phases in 2020 and 2021, including the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO/ PKPB) and the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO/ PKPP). Several phases were enacted nationwide, while other measures were limited to individual states and federal territories or smaller areas. The MCO was included in the National Recovery Plan issued in June 2021. In October 2021, the Malaysian government lifted movement restrictions on vaccinated individuals and announced its intention to treat Covid-19 as an endemic disease.

The issue of period poverty in Malaysia was first raised through online writing by some community activists on the Peduli Merah blog and picked up by Free Malaysia Today (FMT) in early 2020. Norsyuhaidah (2020) notes that most studies on period poverty are from abroad, while the problem also exists in Malaysia. According to the observations and studies of Syarifah Fatimah Al Zahra (2021a), there was no sudden demand for hygiene kits by the public in urban areas in the past, such as in the People's Housing Project (PPR), but after the MCO, there is a high demand for hygiene products for women. However, due to the situation during the MCO period when all people have to stay in their houses, it is difficult to identify the conditions and difficulties of some of these women. Poverty during the period affects not only the urban poor, but also rural women and the homeless (Anja Juliah et al. 2021).

CONCLUSION

The problem of women's period poverty in Malaysia requires long-term advocacy. Although many people have advocated for women, the system can still be improved so that no women are excluded. Women are so privileged that their privilege must be appreciated, and they must be given the opportunity to be the main driving force behind the country's productivity and economy. Therefore, women's needs must be met, and women's potential should be polished to contribute to the common good, according to the initiatives for women's development in the 2022 budget speech.

As the focus of the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12) is on alleviation of poverty and building an inclusive society, the efforts to empower specific

target groups, particularly women, need to be strengthened, particularly with regards to improving women's access to basic services. Period poverty, which includes lack of affordable menstrual products, lack of menstrual hygiene infrastructure, and negative stigma in the community, should be adequately addressed by all stakeholders, including the government, private sector, non-governmental organizations, family members, and local communities. The researcher's literature review revealed the following suggestions to educate society, reduce stigma, and prepare for a future pandemic:

1. Create a comfortable environment so that women can talk more openly about their menstruation and not ashamed to ask when there is confusion about menstruation. All members of the community need to be sensitive to and caring about their family members' situation.
2. Employer sensitivity and empathy toward female employees who experience pain during menstruation by allowing them to take sick leave or work from home. This can help women work comfortably and improve their job performance.
3. Conduct reproductive health education programs in schools to normalize menstruation in children and teenage girls. The information disseminated can help these individuals avoid negative experiences such as discrimination, shame, ridicule, and lack of self-confidence which can affect their concentration in school.
4. Inform not only women but also men about menstruation, how to deal with it, and the effects of menstruation on physical and mental health so that men can better understand the situation of women and support women who have problems during menstruation.

Consequently, efforts must be made to address the problem of period poverty and help women to be better prepared with the appropriate knowledge and needs during menstruation before the problem worsens. In fact, the spread of Covid-19 pandemic and the implementation of the MCO have put people in great financial difficulty. In addition, the rising cost of essentials has forced the community to prioritize nutrition over menstrual needs. Ironically, society cannot afford basic items such as food, let alone women's menstrual needs such as sanitary pads.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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