

WEBINAR REPORT



Periods Are Everyone's Business

Canada's Journey to Accelerate
Gender and Menstrual Equity

MARCH 7, 2024

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 International Women's Day theme, "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress," highlights the growing gender inequalities that leave women and girls behind. This theme underscores the urgent need for action and was a perfect lens for this webinar, hosted by [Days for Girls](#), the [Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition's \(RHSC\) Menstrual Health Supplies Workstream](#), and [Bfree Cup](#). It brought together Canadian menstrual health (MH) experts and advocates to discuss Canada's journey to accelerate gender and menstrual equality both domestically and globally.

It focused on key actions the Canadian government is taking to advance menstrual equity, the importance of data in accelerating MH education and supplies access, and the importance of MH market development.

RECAP

The webinar explored menstrual health efforts in Canada through three key areas. First, it examined Canada's domestic and global initiatives to advance MH. This was followed by a panel discussion offering valuable insights on how to accelerate access to menstrual products and the need for research to help achieve gender equity. Finally, the webinar concluded with a focus on actionable steps that MH and other SRHR advocates can take to advance menstrual and gender equity.


HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT'S DOMESTIC AND GLOBAL INITIATIVES

Global Initiative: [Fund for Innovation and Transformation \(FIT\)](#)

Christina MacIsaac, the Director of FIT, discussed how this government-funded initiative (Global Affairs Canada), which focuses on supporting small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) testing innovative solutions that advance gender equality in the Global South, is helping to advance MH. FIT has funded projects focused on addressing MH challenges and related stigmas while testing possible sustainable solutions for MH education and product accessibility.

In the webinar, Christina highlighted three examples of MH-focused projects supported by FIT in Uganda and Malawi. In Uganda, the funded project led by the [Girls of Tomorrow Foundation](#) tested permaculture gardens as a unique way to address menstrual stigma, by teaching participants about permaculture through a female lens oriented to address MH needs. In Malawi, the [Canadian Physicians for Aid & Relief](#) project funded by FIT examined the comparative effectiveness of Bfree menstrual cups and reusable menstrual pads in empowering girls and women in schools to manage their menstrual health and thereby reduce absenteeism which contributes to poor educational outcomes. Finally, in Uganda, FIT supported [Women's Global Health Innovations](#) to test an MH with a Livelihood Model in a dual Menstrual Health and Hygiene trainer of Trainers and Micro-Entrepreneurial Training program using the sustainable Bfree Cup.

Through these testing projects, FIT-funded organizations are yielding meaningful findings and results about best practices to advance gender equality and menstrual equity in the Global South and building global cooperation around this shared goal.



“Each [project] prioritizes sustainable solutions and emphasizes the importance of knowledge sharing to encourage community-led advocacy.”

- *Christina MacIsaac*

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT'S DOMESTIC AND GLOBAL INITIATIVES

Domestic Initiative: [Menstrual Equity Fund Pilot \(MEF\)](#)


Joanna Baker is the Director General responsible for the Programs Branch at [Women and Gender Equality Canada \(WAGE\)](#). WAGE is the federal ministry overseeing the implementation of the Menstrual Equity Fund (MEF) pilot. Joanna shared the actions that Canada is taking to work towards menstrual equity domestically. In the past few years, WAGE has focused on developing and launching the MEF national pilot program to address the barriers related to menstrual equity, such as product accessibility, particularly for underserved communities.

After conducting extensive field research to understand the menstrual equity landscape in Canada, the MEF was designed to reach those most in need. WAGE worked with Food Banks Canada to organize the distribution of free menstrual products to community organizations serving diverse, low-income populations. Additionally, Food Banks Canada partnered with grassroots organizations to scale up menstrual equity education and awareness activities to inform Canadians about period poverty and reduce stigma around menstruation. The MEF pilot launched in September 2023 and has yielded significant success thus far, impacting millions of Canadians.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A COHESIVE FRAMEWORK IS REQUIRED FOR LARGE-SCALE MH SUPPORT

Currently, numerous MH stakeholders are providing MH product support and educational resources across Canada, including nonprofit organizations, MH advocates, and government agencies. However, the approach lacks a cohesive framework that synthesizes the support and involvement of different actors most efficiently and effectively. Creating a framework that broadens the distribution of products and the availability of education would allow for larger-scale MH support and the long-term success of MH efforts in Canada.



“We strive toward a future in which women and gender-diverse people who menstruate can easily access the period products of their choice in an environment free of shame and stigma.”

-Joanna Baker

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PANEL DISCUSSION

Panel Discussion | The panel discussion featured Nikki Hill (Government for BC Period Poverty Task Force; [United Way British Columbia Period Promise](#)), Veronica Brown ([Moon Time Connections](#)), and Lisa Smith (Department of Sociology & Menstrual Cycle Research Group, Douglas College). The panel discussion focused on the role of provincial-level advocacy in Canada, barriers to menstrual equity, and current gaps in menstrual health research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

DATA PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN ADVANCING MENSTRUAL EQUITY - MORE, AND BETTER, DATA ARE NEEDED

One of the central themes of the webinar was the crucial role that data play in MH efforts. The availability of in-depth, comprehensive, and reliable MH data can supplement and enhance the efforts of MH stakeholders, and greatly improve the efficacy of such efforts. The absence of reliable data, conversely, acts as a significant barrier to understanding the breadth and depth of MH issues, creating a research gap in the field. Investing in MH data, especially inclusive and intersectional data, is crucial for advancing menstrual equity.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS & TRUST WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITIES PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ADVANCING MENSTRUAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Indigenous menstruators, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and other diverse communities across Canada often face additional, unique barriers to MH access. Additionally, due to a lack of relationship and trust between these communities and MH stakeholders, there is a lack of information and understanding about their MH needs. Moving forward, investing in relationship development and trust-building with diverse and often underserved communities is essential for realizing menstrual equity. This is also imperative so that communities feel valued as partners, rather than subjects of a study. Central to relationship and trust-building is establishing a two-way communications channel with participants, and sharing the analysis of research findings back with communities.



With a robust MH advocacy space in Canada, there were many other panelists we would have loved to include in this conversation! Linda Biggs, Co-Founder of [Joni](#) and member of the [Sustainable Menstrual Equity Coalition](#) (SMEC), kindly offered to share an additional perspective [by video](#)!

AN ACTIONABLE PATH FORWARD

The webinar outlined actionable steps MH advocates and stakeholders can take to continue advancing menstrual equity and gender equality:

1

CATALYZE PRIVATE SECTOR SUPPORT

A key strategy to propel MH advocacy to the next level is activating private-sector support for menstrual equity. One way the private sector can help lead the MH movement is through the [Period Positive Workplace \(PPW\)](#), a global initiative to improve MH conditions in workplaces by certifying businesses that meet [WASH standards](#) and provide access to period products for their employees. In less than a year, businesses from every continent except Antarctica have become PPW certified and 144,000+ employees have been positively impacted.

2

MAINTAIN POSITIVITY IN MH ADVOCACY

In any field of advocacy or movement toward social change, burnout, and emotional fatigue can arise. This is true of the MH field, for both new and well-seasoned advocates. As such, it is imperative that MH leaders, stakeholders, and organizations ensure advocacy messages and approaches are positive and inspiring. Maintaining positivity is crucial for sustaining a sense of community amongst MH advocates, as well as creating the social buy-in necessary to propel MH efforts.

3

EXPAND PRODUCT CHOICE THROUGH A MARKET-ORIENTED APPROACH

In the closing remarks, Adrian Dongus, the Menstrual Hygiene Markets Specialist at The Sanitation and Hygiene Fund, emphasized the need for improved markets and a pivot to providing access to a wide range of menstrual products, not just in Canada, but also in low-middle income countries (LMICs), through a market-oriented approach. This can be done by prioritizing and strengthening regulatory environments for product standards and facilitating private sector involvement. Several key strategies can be employed to achieve this, including targeted public funding, strategic tax policies, and support for the development of cost-effective business models for reaching the "last mile."

4

ADVOCATE FOR BETTER PRIMARY DATA

The current data ecosystem for MH is fragmented, often drawing upon several different data sources to approximate menstrual product usage and access, cost, and acceptability across different communities. Data also play a critical role in demonstrating a strong business case for menstrual health, in turn galvanizing increased investment, product innovation, and market development. To better advocate for menstrual equity, more data - and better data - will be critical.

LESSONS LEARNED

Improving the MH landscape in a high-income country requires the involvement of numerous MH stakeholders and their long-term commitment to the objective. Understanding the barriers facing menstrual equity - as well as the individual needs of diverse communities - is crucial for informing domestic and global MH investments and ensuring their success.

Building supportive frameworks, emphasizing the importance of data, providing comprehensive MH education, and increasing the range of choices of MH products are all necessary steps toward achieving menstrual and gender equity in Canada and around the world.

CONCLUSION

This webinar sought to highlight the significant strides Canada is making to improve MH conditions, including investment and innovations in the field. With the involvement of the federal government, local organizations, and international initiatives, Canada's journey to menstrual equity is helping lead the way for MH investment both domestically and globally.

RESOURCE LIBRARY

- ❖ [Canada's Menstrual Health Country Snapshot](#)
- ❖ [RHSC's Menstrual Health Supplies Workstream](#)
- ❖ [Fund for Innovation & Transformation, January 2024 Newsletter](#)
- ❖ [United Way Period Promise Research Project Final Report, January 2021](#)
- ❖ [Let's Talk About It, Period: Achieving Menstrual Equity in Canada - Report on the Standing Committee on the Status of Women](#)
- ❖ [Menstrual Hygiene Day](#)
- ❖ [Period Positive Workplace](#)
- ❖ [Period Promise Policy Agreement](#)

APPENDIX. WEBINAR SPEAKERS & PANELISTS

- ❖ **TANYA MAHAJAN**, Co-founder of Menstrual Health Action for Impact (MHAi); Co-Chair of the [RHSC Menstrual Health Supplies Workstream](#); International Programs Director of [The Pad Project](#)
- ❖ **CHRISTINA MACISAAC**, Director of Innovation for the [Fund for Innovation and Transformation \(FIT\)](#)
- ❖ **HAYLEY NEWMAN-PETRYSHEN**, Co-Director of [Monthly Dignity](#) & Project Coordinator for [Free Periods Canada](#)
- ❖ **JOANNA BAKER**, Senior Director General for Programs & Regional Operations at [Women and Gender Equality Canada \(WAGE\)](#)
- ❖ **NIKKI HILL**, Founder of [United Way British Columbia Period Promise](#) & the 2023 Chair for the government of British Columbia's Period Poverty Task Force
- ❖ **VERONICA BROWN**, Ontario Chapter Lead & Education Co-Director for [Moon Time Connections](#)
- ❖ **DR. LISA SMITH**, Faculty Member & Coordinator of the [Menstrual Cycle Research Group at Douglas College](#)
- ❖ **JESS STRAIT**, Advocacy Specialist & Data Systems Manager at [Days for Girls](#)
- ❖ **MEGHAN WHITE**, Digital Marketing Manager at Women's Global Health Innovations/[Bfree Cup](#) & Founder of [Period Packs](#)
- ❖ **ADRIAN DONGUS**, Menstrual Hygiene Markets Specialist at [The Sanitation and Hygiene Fund](#)
- ❖ **DIANA NELSON**, Global Advocacy Director, [Days for Girls](#)