University of Manitoba | Centre for Human Rights Research

A Report on

Period Poverty and Equity, on Campus and Beyond

May 2024

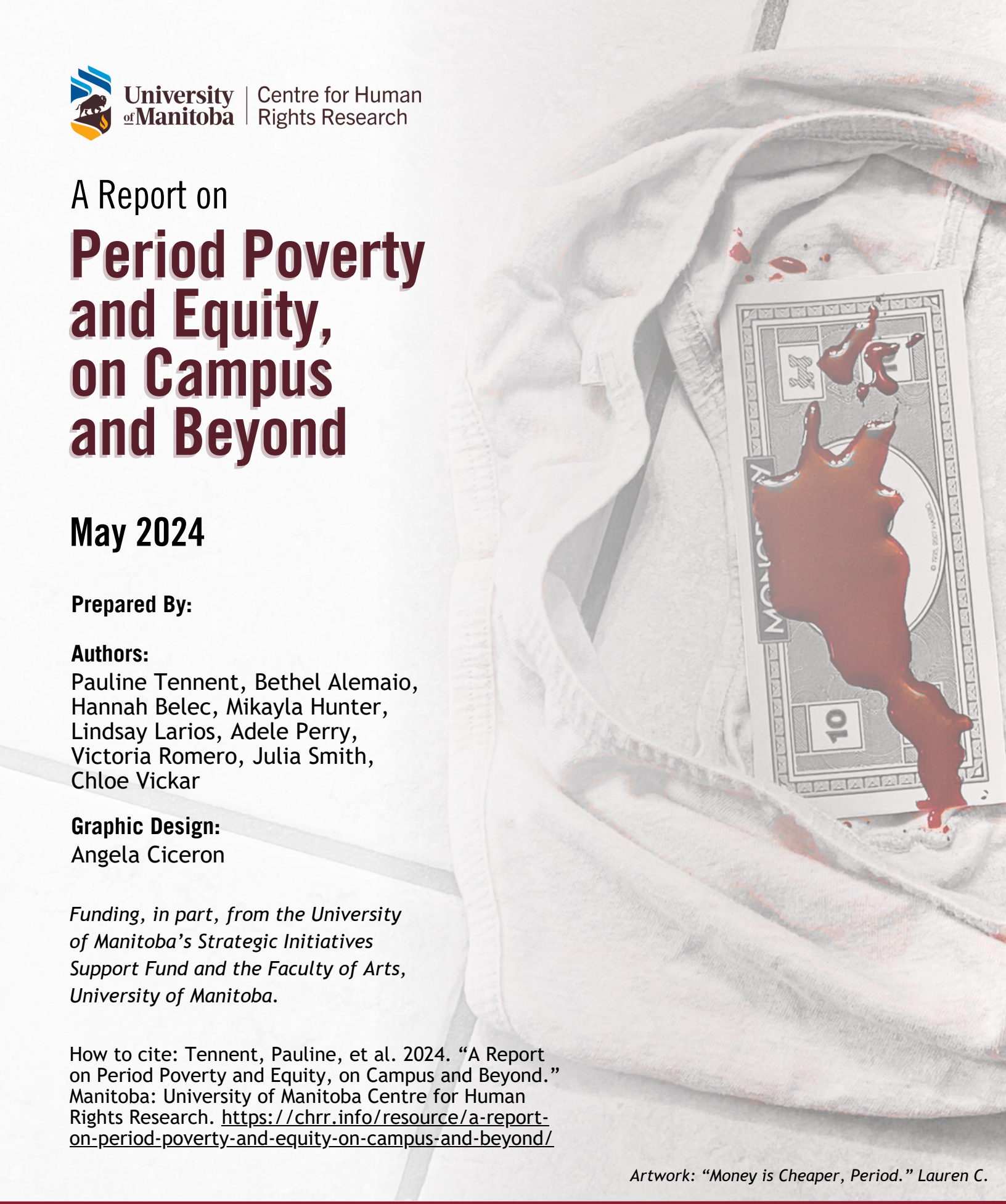
Prepared By:

Authors:
Pauline Tennent, Bethel Alemaio, Hannah Belec, Mikayla Hunter, Lindsay Larios, Adele Perry, Victoria Romero, Julia Smith, Chloe Vickar

Graphic Design:
Angela Ciceron

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Artwork: "Money is Cheaper, Period." Lauren C.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary..... **ii.**

Introduction..... **2**

Note on our Approach and Terminology..... 4

Context..... 5

University of Manitoba Pilot Project..... 6

"Period Poverty & Equity, On Campus and Beyond" **7**

Project Activities..... 7

Public Events..... 7

Campus Audit of Washrooms..... 8

Survey..... 8

Survey Demographics..... 9

Findings and Discussion..... **10**

Lack of Available Period Supplies..... 10

Impacts of Menstruation on Participation & the Experience of Stigma..... 13

Attention to Built Environment including Washroom Design 14

Visions for Menstrual Justice..... 16

Project Limitations..... 17

Recommendations..... **18**

Conclusions..... **21**

Acknowledgments..... **21**

Auditors..... **22**

References..... **23**



Image Credit: Valeriia Miller from The Valeriia Miller Collection

Executive Summary

Approximately every four weeks, many women and girls, and some trans men and gender diverse individuals experience menstruation. On any given day, menstruation is a regularly occurring experience for many students, staff, and faculty on a university campus, including the University of Manitoba, attended by more than 30,000 students and 9,400 faculty and staff in 2023-2024.

Menstrual management is costly. Research shows that in Canada, urban menstruators spend as much as $6,000 on menstrual supplies, while in rural or remote areas, that amount may double (Brown 2019). While period poverty is most often used in the public sphere to denote a lack of access (financial or otherwise) to period supplies, we embrace a more comprehensive understanding from scholars and activists that includes access to sexual and reproductive health education, to safe waste management, and adequate and safe facilities (Lee, Toory, and Harrison 2024). Other barriers including access to preferred supplies, geography, safer washroom spaces and facilities, and clean water, and/or a combination of these, should also be considered.

The University of Manitoba's Menstrual Product Pilot Project

The Menstrual Product Pilot project, implemented by the University of Manitoba Students' Union (UMSU) and the UM's Vice-Provost (Students) and Associate Vice-President (Administration), is working to make UM campuses a more equitable space for menstruating community members. The pilot project supplies menstrual products to ten washrooms across UM campuses. These products, available via dispenser, are only in female and gender-neutral washrooms.

Period Poverty and Equity, On Campus & Beyond

In April 2023, a group of researchers affiliated with the Centre for Human Rights Research came together with an application to the University of Manitoba's Strategic Initiatives Support Fund, with the goals of working to towards menstrual justice. The team is committed to an intersectional feminist lens that asserts that various forms and structures of inequality work together and are exacerbated by others (Crenshaw 1989).

Our Method

Our project looked at menstrual equity on the University of Manitoba campuses using a multi-faceted approach:

- In the Fall of 2023, we conducted an audit of washrooms on UM campuses. Over the course of two weeks, we surveyed 503 washrooms in 86 buildings counting more than 1,074 bathroom stalls (including women's, gender-inclusive, and men's). To our knowledge, this is one of the largest audits of period supplies on a Canadian university campus
- Between February and March 2024, we shared a survey to all UM students, faculty, and staff to capture experiences of menstruation on campus. After the data was cleaned, we received a total of 1,732 responses.
- We hosted several events and lectures on campus reaching more than 250 people.

Our Findings

- Of the more than 503 washrooms we were able to access as part of our project, period supplies were freely available in only 15 (2.98%) washrooms.
    - Only 60 (11.93%) bathrooms had baby change tables; 8 (1.59%) had condoms; and 6 (1.19%) had sharps disposal boxes.

- Of the 503 washrooms audited, 43 had coin-operated dispensers for menstrual supplies. However, 27 (62.8%) dispensers were empty of supplies or malfunctioning.
- Notably, at the time of the audit, of the 138 washrooms audited that were designated for men, there were no period products available on any campus.
- 1,304 (77.9%) respondents reported that they had experienced starting their periods unexpectedly while on campus.
- 1,102 (66.23%) respondents shared that they had experienced a spill, leak, stain, or overflow of menstrual blood while on campus.
- Of the 1,732 responses to the survey, only 278 (17.23%) respondents had used supplies from the UM pilot project. 930 (57.59%) respondents did not know about the pilot project.
- More than 850 respondents shared having to miss work or class to manage menstruation, with impacts on assignments, meetings, labs, study time, as well as social activities.

Key Recommendations

1. We advocate for the permanent implementation of free menstrual supplies in all washrooms on campus.

2. We urge the University of Manitoba to reconsider its decision to offer menstrual supplies through a dispenser model. We recommend that period supplies be available in university washrooms in a basket or freestanding container on the counter by the sink, or in a portable trolly/cart. This model has been implemented by a variety of universities globally.

3. We recommend the University offer a range of menstrual supplies including both reusable and disposable supplies.

4. We must ensure disposal facilities in all washrooms and considerations of the built environment. All buildings on campus must have gender neutral washrooms on each floor.

5. We recommend a more efficient system for managing and tracking available period supplies on campus. We encourage the development of an app to provide maps of: washrooms with available menstrual products, gender inclusive and accessible washrooms, and a refill request option for washrooms that are low on period supplies.

6. We encourage addressing menstrual justice as part of efforts towards Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Conclusions

Working towards period equity is not as a charitable endeavour to be ameliorated by donations of period supplies; rather menstrual equity is an issue of justice. Shifting the conversation from period poverty to menstrual justice means asking that all people who menstruate be provided with the resources, tools, and infrastructure to do so with safety and dignity.

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Introduction



Approximately every four weeks, many women and girls, and some trans men and gender diverse individuals experience menstruation. For many, menstruation can be a site of discrimination, of microaggressions, and of overlapping oppressions (Johnson 2019; Crawford et al. 2019). This burden of menstruation is compounded by the layers of stigma experienced by many who menstruate (Gillibrand 2023; Chrisler 2011; Olson et al. 2022). The expectation that those experiencing periods and its associated symptoms do so in the private sphere (Bobel and Fahs 2020), in silence, have led feminist advocates to frame the issue of menstruation as one of gender injustice, and a thus site for intervention (Smith and Gacimi 2022).

There is growing attention to periods; and to the fact that period supplies (ex., tampons, cups, discs, period underwear, pads) may not be readily available to all who need them, and when and where they need them (Lee, Toory, and Harrison 2024). In Canada, it is estimated that people who menstruate spend up to $6,000 on period supplies in their lifetime. The amount spent on these supplies is significantly higher for people living in rural communities, and higher still for those living on reserve ("Evidence: Let's Talk About It, Period: Achieving Menstrual Equity in Canada" 2023; H. Lane 2024). In one example, a pack of 10 pads was estimated to cost $17 Canadian in some First Nations communities (Wilson 2022). In rural and remote communities, there may also be times when period supplies are simply not available for purchase (H. Lane 2024). Recent polls estimate that anywhere from 17-25% of those who menstruate struggle to afford supplies for themselves or their dependents (H. Lane 2024; Plan International Canada 2022; Women and Gender Equality Canada 2023). Often, this results in individuals rationing period products (Plan International Canada 2022), impacting safety and health. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted those already marginalized (Ali, Asaria, and Stranges 2020; Tomlinson 2023), and combined with the cost-of-living crisis, the current experience of period poverty is likely higher than these estimates, particularly for those facing interlocking structures of oppression.

Image Credit: Cliff Booth, Pexels

For many people who menstruate, managing periods is not only about managing bleeding, but also the range of associated symptoms and experiences. People who menstruate may experience emotions such as anxiety, irritability, and gender dysphoria, but also feelings of being capable, empowered, and connected to oneself (H. Lane 2024). Periods may come with a range of physical symptoms including cramps, pain, general discomfort, headaches, diarrhea or constipation, low energy, and fatigue. Managing these symptoms, while ensuring access to period supplies, means that some people who menstruate may miss work, educational activities, and participation in daily life (H. Lane 2024; Plan International Canada 2022; Smith and Tribe 2021). The costs associated with managing these symptoms (for instance, purchasing pain relief supplies), as well as loss in work/education due to symptoms has rarely been factored into understandings of period poverty or menstrual justice.

Attention to menstruation as an issue of equity and justice is growing – in the media and in society with period activism and community mobilization, in public health and policy making, and in academia in the fields of critical menstruation studies. Questions of menstrual justice and period equity surpass bathroom provisioning and must also include efforts to address the material conditions that make period poverty a factor in so many lives, work to unlearn stigma and ease the burdens that come with menstruation, and providing space to make the private burden public. Menstruating safely, comfortably, and with dignity, is a public health and human rights issue.

The primary audience for this interim report is the University of Manitoba community, including administrators. However, this report will also be relevant to policy makers, post-secondary campuses across the country, and to the general public.

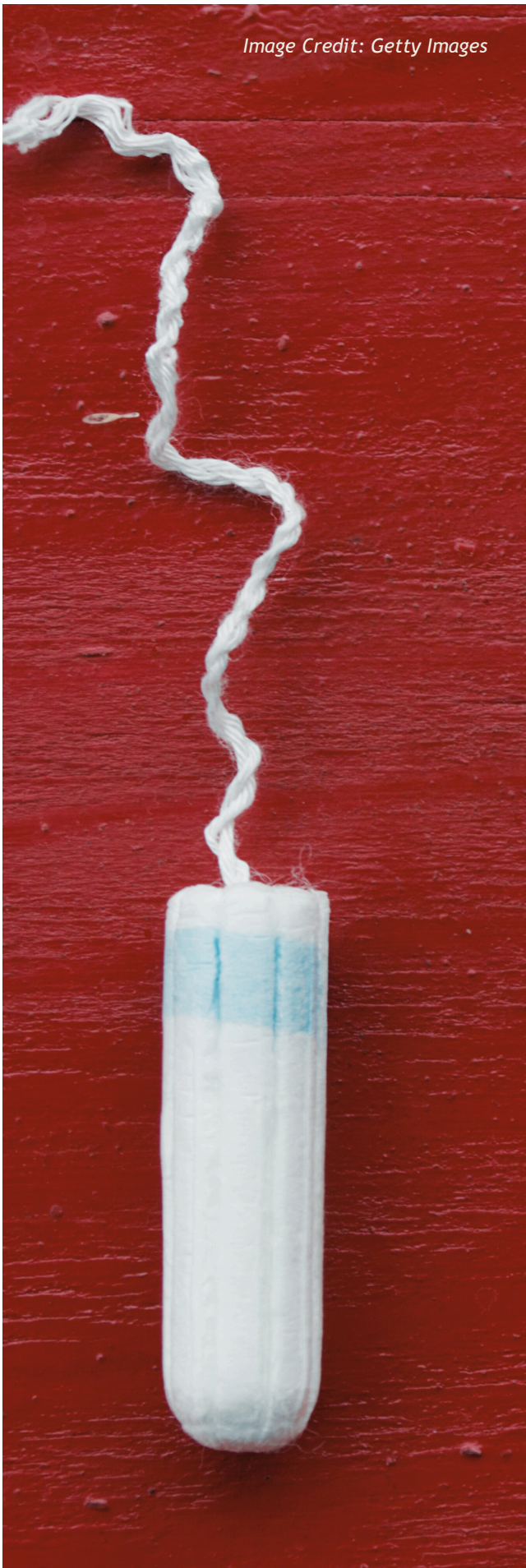


Image Credit: Getty Images

Note on our Approach and Terminology ▶

> **"Not all women menstruate, and not everyone who menstruates is a women."**
> *Dr. Jen Gunter, BLOOD, p. xii*

Assumptions around menstruation often frame it as a binary issue that only includes certain bodies and gender identities. Our project centres questions of access and bodily dignity for all people who menstruate. We are committed to an intersectional feminist lens that asserts that various forms and structures of inequality work together and are exacerbated by others (Crenshaw 1989). We acknowledge that the experiences of people who menstruate are influenced by gender identity and expression, race/ethnicity, indigeneity, socioeconomics including housing status, geography, ability, sexuality, age, and immigration status, as examples. Our project is inspired by the experiences and activism of women and gender diverse people, both of whom have had to fight for visibility and recognition in public spaces.

While period poverty is most often used in the public sphere to denote a lack of access (financial or otherwise) to period supplies, we embrace a more comprehensive understanding from scholars and activists that includes access to sexual and reproductive health education, to safe waste management, and adequate and safe facilities (Lee, Toory, and Harrison 2024). Other barriers including access to preferred supplies, geography, safer washroom spaces and facilities, and clean water, and/or a combination of these, should also be considered. Following the lead of experts in critical menstruation studies, we are also deliberate in our use of the term period/menstrual supplies, rather than menstrual products or feminine hygiene products in an attempt to disrupt both "the commodification and gendering of periods" (Smith, Khan, and Oveisi 2023a, 8). Where we do use such terms, it is a direct quote from survey respondents.

We view working towards period equity not as a charitable endeavour to be ameliorated by relying on goodwill for donations for period supplies; but rather see menstrual equity as an issue of justice. Shifting the conversation from period poverty to menstrual justice means asking that all people who menstruate be provided with the resources, tools, and infrastructure to do so with safety and dignity.



Menstrual justice vision board created for the CHRR's Politics.PERIOD. panel.

Context

The University of Manitoba (UM) has two main campuses in Winnipeg, the Fort Garry campus and the Bannatyne campus. The Fort Gary campus, located in the south end of Winnipeg, is the largest, measuring more than 280 hectares, with some of its first buildings completed in 1912. This campus has more than 90 major buildings and hosts most of the university departments and programs. The Bannatyne campus, which began to take shape in 1906, is located in downtown Winnipeg, neighbouring the Health Science Centre Hospital. The Bannatyne campus has 9 buildings which focus on health care and medical education. The UM also includes the William Norrie Centre, located in the north end neighbourhood of Winnipeg. This building houses social work education for inner-city students. In total, the UM campuses have over 900 washrooms (not including Residence Buildings). The UM's website currently notes that the University campuses have 83 Gender Inclusive washrooms, however results of our audit suggest that this number is closer to 140. Although UM has campuses outside of Winnipeg, this project primarily focused on its Winnipeg-based campuses.

In 2023-2024, 9,400 faculty and staff, 26,000 undergraduate students, and 4,000 graduate students were part of the University of Manitoba community (University of Manitoba 2024). As such, when classes are fully in session, the population of the University of Manitoba is third largest city in Manitoba, following Winnipeg and Brandon. On any given day, menstruation is a regularly occurring experience for many students, staff, and faculty on a university campus. While public washrooms such as those on a university campus are required by law to provide soap, water, toilet paper, hand-drying facilities, sanitary disposal bins, and urinals in men's washrooms, at present, there are no requirements for period supplies (Government of Manitoba 2022).

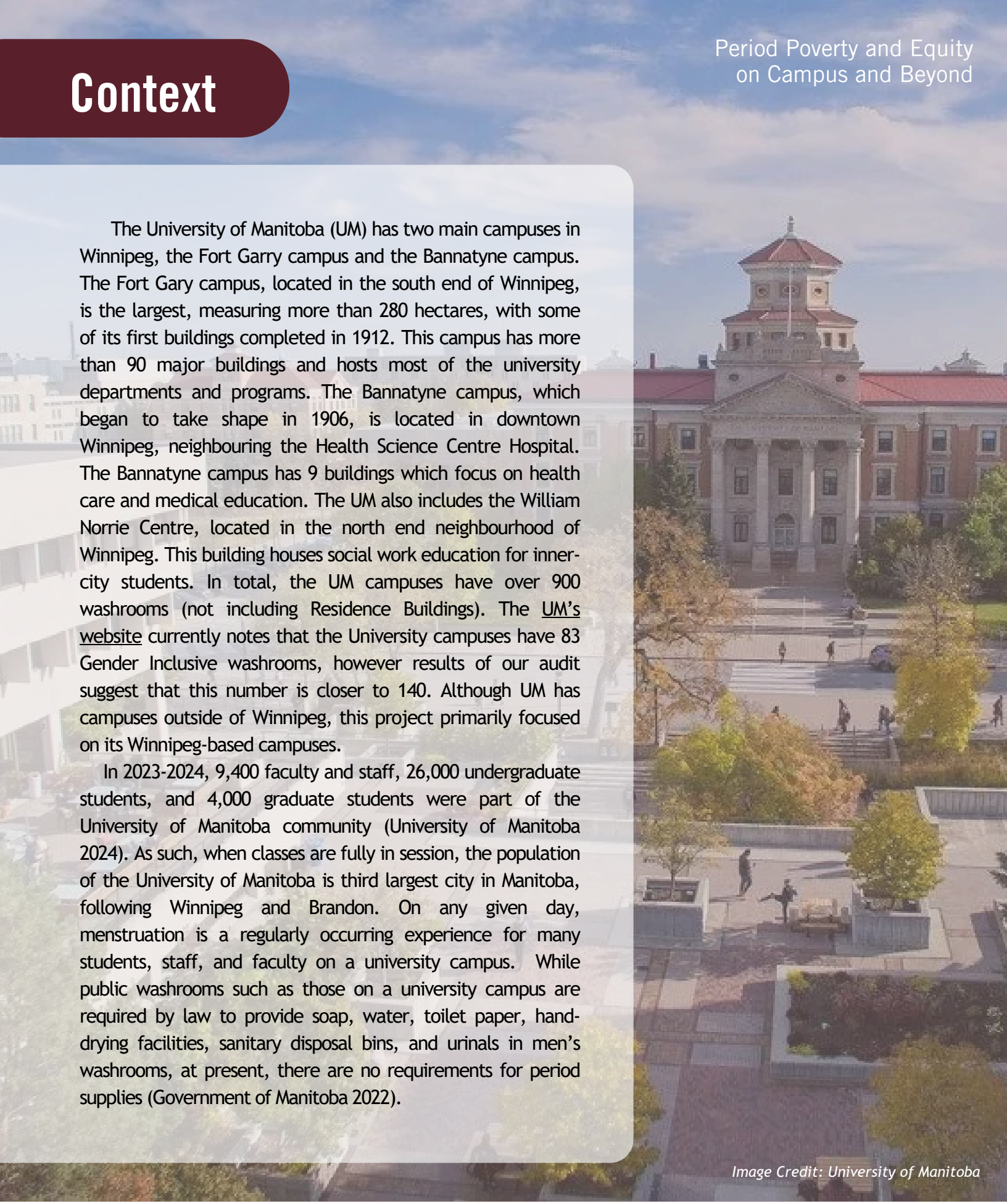


Image Credit: University of Manitoba

University of Manitoba Pilot Project ▶

The Menstrual Product Pilot Project, a collaborative effort between the University of Manitoba Students' Union (UMSU) and the UM's Vice-Provost (Students) and Associate Vice-President (Administration), aims to address period poverty in the UM community. The pilot project owed much to the advocacy of UMSU, who in May 2022, drafted a proposal for free menstrual products (Romero and Yasay 2022). The cost estimates referenced in UMSU's proposal were based in part on expenses incurred by UMSU Women's Centre on campus who have long provided menstrual supplies in baskets freely available to the campus community.

The pilot project provides free menstrual products offered via dispensers in ten bathrooms across UM's Fort Garry, Bannatyne, and William Norrie campuses, albeit limited to female or gender-neutral washrooms [As of April 2024, owing to the advocacy of students on campus, the University has now installed two additional dispensers in the Chown Building of the Bannatyne campus, in a men and a women-coded washroom]. The Menstrual Product Pilot Project worked with an initial budget of $24,500, the majority of which was expected to cover time-lock dispensers, installation, and supplies, funded by UM's Vice-Provost Student Services, Laurie Schnarr, and Associate Vice-President Administration, Raman Dhaliwal. Initial estimates for the cost of this pilot project were larger than what was used; this is similar to the City of Winnipeg's pilot project that began with a projected budget of $58K, but spent only $17K in its first year (MacLean 2024). The Menstrual Product Pilot Project at the University of Manitoba, like the City of Winnipeg (MacLean 2024), has seen positive uptake and minimal concerns regarding misuse/abuse.

As of the 2023-2024 term, UMSU remains an advocate in the advancement of menstrual equity and accessibility at the UM. Plans for the future include advocating for continued funding through the university's budget submissions, leveraging available resources within UM Vice-Provost Student Services, and potentially expanding the program in collaboration with faculty associations, clubs, and community groups. Looking ahead, UM administrative discussions on program expansion await the findings of the "Period Poverty and Equity, On Campus and Beyond" project, including insights from the campus washroom audit.



Image Credit: UM Today

"Period Poverty & Equity, On Campus and Beyond"

In April 2023, a group of researchers associated with the CHRR came together came together to explore issues of menstrual and reproductive justice with an application to the University of Manitoba's Strategic Initiatives Support Fund. The project brings together a collaborative team of faculty and staff at a crucial moment in the period equity conversation – with the goals of working to challenge menstrual stigma and educate audiences about issues of period equity and menstrual justice.

Project Activities ▶

To meet our project goals, over the course of eight months, our team, with the support of four student research assistants, worked on a number of activities that aimed to assess period equity at the University of Manitoba, while also contributing to public dialogue and combatting stigma around menstruation. Two of the major initiatives of our project – an audit of campus washrooms and a survey of the campus community – were inspired and informed by the work of Dr. Lisa Smith, Coordinator of the Menstrual Cycle Research Group at Douglas College (Smith and Tribe 2021; Smith and Gacimi 2022; "Free Periods Canada" 2023; Smith, Khan, and Oveisi 2023a).

Public Events ▶

Throughout this project, we hosted a number of outreach events aimed at raising awareness of the issue of period equity and menstrual justice, both on campus and beyond (Ajene 2023; Campbell 2023; Peters 2024; Gordon 2024). This included an orientation for volunteer auditors, a student artwork competition, a period equity button-making event featuring author Ariel Gordon, alongside ArtsJunktion; and a panel discussion and community gathering entitled Politics.PERIOD in honor of International Women's Day with Christine Cyr (Associate Vice-President (Indigenous) – Students, Community and Cultural Integration, University of Manitoba); Jelynn Dela Cruz (MLA for Radisson Constituency and Legislative Assistant for Health, Seniors, and Long-term Care), Victoria Romero (Research Assistant "Period Poverty and Equity, On Campus and Beyond"), and Dr. Lisa Smith (Coordinator of the Menstrual Cycle Research Group at Douglas College). Dr. Jen Gunter, author of Blood: The Science, Medicine, and Mythology of Menstruation, opened the event. In total, events reached a combined audience of more than 250 people.






Photos from public events held as part of the "Period Poverty & Equity, On Campus and Beyond" project. From left to right: period awareness buttons created during the buttonmaking event; author Ariel Gordon speaking during the buttonmaking event; and the Politics.PERIOD. panel.



Image Credit: The Manitoban

Campus Audit of Washrooms ▶

In the Fall of 2023, over the course of two weeks, we surveyed 503 washrooms in 86 buildings across the Fort Garry, Bannatyne, and William Norrie campuses at the University of Manitoba (women's, gender-inclusive, and men's), counting more than 1,074 bathroom stalls. Attempts were made to audit an additional 369 listed washrooms however auditors were unable to access them for a number of reasons: the rooms were locked, they were temporarily unavailable, the area was closed, or the washroom as noted on the UM Campus inventory did not exist. In our audit, we identified the availability of menstrual supplies in washrooms, and the ease to which people who menstruate could access these supplies. In addition, we administered a set of questions to assess the functionality and accessibility of all washrooms to understand whether the current designs adequately support students and staff needs.

This observational study was a collective effort, with many volunteers from the student body joining our team. A team of forty-two faculty, staff, and students underwent a thirty-minute orientation, with an abbreviated version available online for convenience. Auditors worked in teams, entering washrooms they felt comfortable going into, with a time commitment of two hours, but were welcome to audit more washrooms. The average building took approximately fifteen minutes to audit.

To our knowledge, this is one of the largest audits across a Canadian University campus to assess period supplies.

Survey ▶

Between February and March 2024, we conducted an online survey to document the menstruation experiences of UM students, staff, and faculty. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete and consisted of a series of demographic questions, multiple choice, and some short answer questions. Survey participants had the option to be entered into a draw to win a gift card. Eligibility criteria included: over the age of 18 years and had experienced menstruation on UM campuses. After the data was cleaned, we received a total of 1,732 responses.

Survey Demographics

Fig. 1: Participants' gender identity

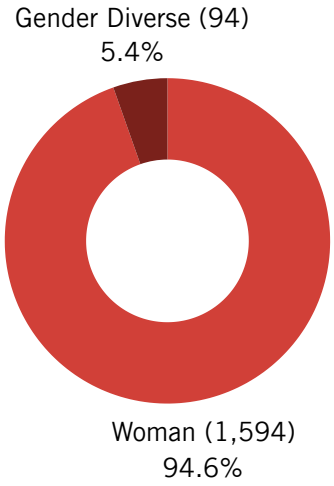


Fig. 2: Participants' racialized status

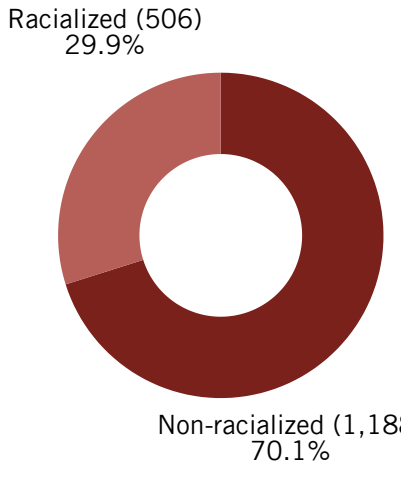


Fig. 3: Participants' Indigenous status

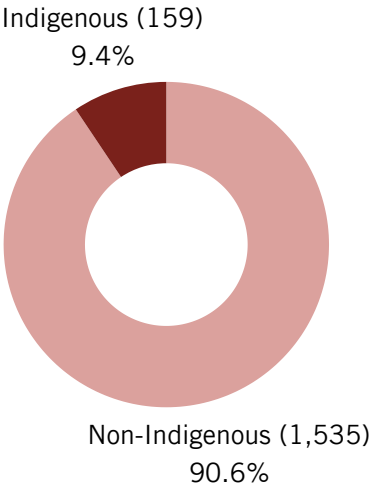


Fig. 4: University of Manitoba affiliation

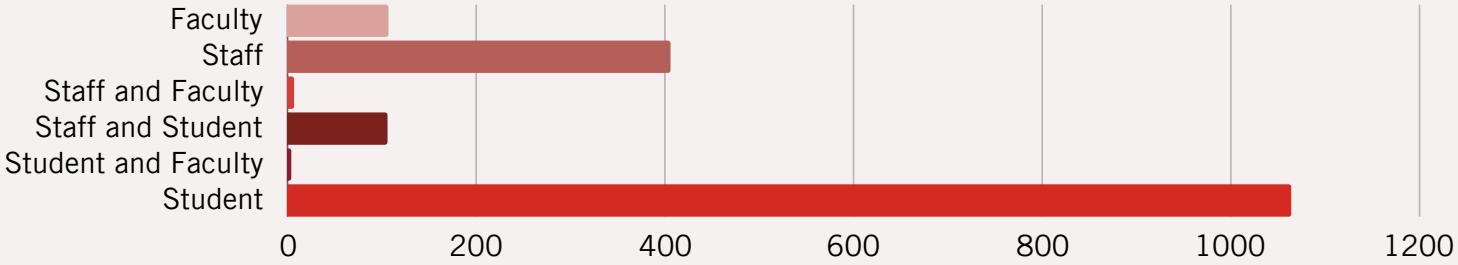


Table 1: Respondents' Income Range

Income Range	Frequency
Below $20,000	846 (50.54%)
$20,000 - $29,999	141 (8.42%)
$30,000 - $39,999	74 (4.42%)
$40,000 - $49,999	98 (5.85%)
$50,000 - $59,999	136 (8.12%)
$60,000 - $69,999	111 (6.63%)
$70,000 - $79,999	80 (4.78%)
Above $80,000	188 (11.23%)
Total (N)	1,674 (100.00%)

Note: Entries are frequency counts.. Frequency counts exclude missing values.
Source: University of Manitoba Period Poverty Survey (2024)

Findings and Discussion

Overall, our project documented a piecemeal approach to period equity at the University of Manitoba. Our findings – all of which intersect – highlight the overall lack of available and accessible period supplies on campus; the impact of menstruation on participation and experiences of stigma; the need to consider built environment; and the need for educational and outreach opportunities on issues of menstrual justice.

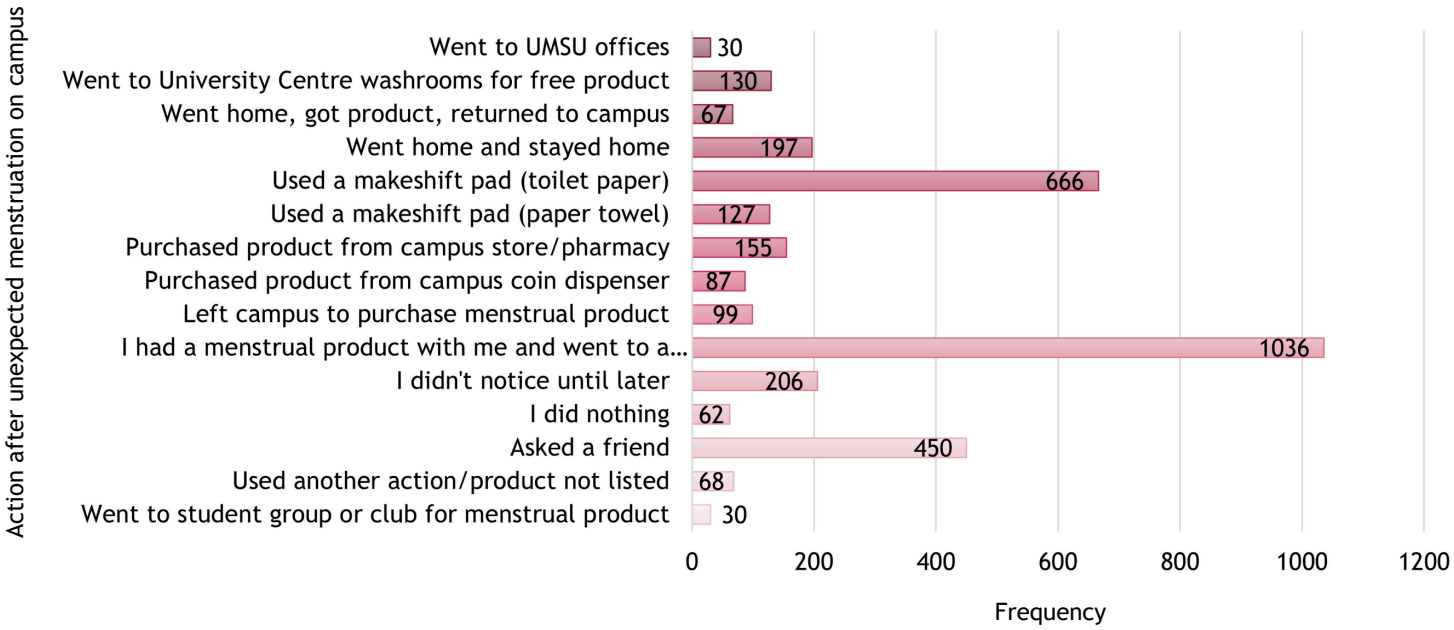
Lack of Available Period Supplies

Analysis of the audit data reveals a pressing issue that demands immediate attention – of the more than 503 washrooms we were able to access as part of our project, period supplies were freely available in only 15 (2.98%) washrooms. At the time of the audit, of the 138 washrooms audited that were designated for men, there were no menstrual supplies available, nor adequate and safe means of disposal of used menstrual supplies.

Survey responses highlighted that it was a common occurrence to start a period unexpectedly – and thus need emergency menstrual supplies. 1,304 (77.9%) respondents reported that they had experienced starting their periods unexpectedly while on campus; and 1,102 (66.23%) respondents shared that they had experienced a spill, leak, stain, or overflow of menstrual blood while on campus. While many respondents (n=1,034) had a menstrual product available, many reported having to use a makeshift pad with either toilet paper or paper towel (n=793). When starting their periods unexpectedly, some respondents (n=99) left campus to purchase supplies. At the Fort Garry campus, for individuals without a car, this may mean a 35-minute walk to get to the nearest store, as one example. Other students left campus for a product but stayed home (n=197), while others still left campus and had to return (n=64). A large number of respondents reported asking someone on campus for a product (n=450), often strangers. Only 130 respondents mentioned using a product from the pilot project if they started their period unexpectedly.

In managing these menstrual emergencies, there was significant effort and time made by individuals to seek supplies in the context of their day. Respondents shared stories of having to decide whether to go looking for a period product often leaving the building they were in to travel across campus, even if it risked being late for class or work; or deciding to stay put and risk a leak or spill.

Fig. 5: Frequency of actions taken after unexpected menstruation on campus.



Questions of availability of period supplies was exacerbated by questions of affordability. Winnipeg's recommended livable income for 2023 is calculated at $19.21/hour (or an annual salary of $39,957) (Harney, Hajer, and Dandeneault 2023); 1,061 (63.38%) survey respondents lived below this liveable income. An undergraduate student with a reported income of below $20K a year, shared a story of having to purchase period supplies at the grocery store on campus but reflected on the inflated price explaining that it was "money I could have used it [sic] elsewhere for something else. Every dollar counts at the end of the month." Many respondents recalled resorting to makeshift pads from toilet paper at school because they "didn't have money for pads" but that the poor quality and absorbency of the toilet paper and paper towel on campus was uncomfortable and required multiple trips to the bathroom to manage. An undergraduate student shared:

> *I'm a bit older and circumstantially in a place of privilege but I remember times where buying period products was stressful being on a very tight budget. There were times when I have spent the last 8 or 10 dollars in my bank account on pads and tampons. I see how hard people are working to stay in school and maintain employment. The cost of period products should not add to anyone's burdens.*

This sentiment was echoed by another undergraduate student: "There has [sic] been points in my life where a box of tampons had to take priority over dinner that night. Prices have gone up for everything, included [sic] these type of products and not everyone can afford them." An undergraduate student shared "I believe that every person who menstruates should have a clear access to menstruating products of their choosing. This is a basic women's health right. I wish capitalism didn't have a say in whether you choose between buying groceries and buying feminine hygiene [sic] products, but that's what it's come to."

The provisioning of free supplies on campus was almost exclusively via dispensers. The proprietary nature of these dispensers has meant that the products may not be suitable nor preferable for many who may rely on them. An undergraduate student explained:

> *The free period products are a huge blessing related to when I'm in immediate need but also money wise as a student. However, as someone with a stronger period flow, the products unfortunately are not suitable to help out longer than 10 minutes on a heavy/normal period day. They aren't absorbent enough and also not long enough and easily leak.*

Of the 503 washrooms audited, 43 had coin-operated dispensers for menstrual supplies. However, 27 (62.8%) dispensers were empty of supplies or malfunctioning, and we could not discern whether an additional 4 (9.3%) dispensers were operational. These malfunctioning dispensers were often not identified as empty or broken and run the risk of creating a false sense of availability and accessibility for people who menstruate. Even the recently-installed free dispensers had challenges – with respondents and auditors alike recalling instances of empty or broken dispensers. An undergraduate student shared: "I went to a washroom in UMSU to get a free pad but the thing that hold the pads was broken kinda, then I started panicking, but almost immediately, a girl who'd saw me struggling to open the thing, offered me a tampon from her bag. I was immediately relieved. went through so many emotions in a span of 5 minutes, lol." There were also a number of instances of signage in washrooms directing people to alternate locations to access menstrual supplies. However, when we followed those directions, many of those locations no longer had supplies available.

In some buildings and units across campus, menstrual supplies are available, but only on request, leaving many people to not even know such supplies exist. Given the pervasive stigma that exists around periods, having supplies behind a barrier is problematic. A staff member shared: "I would never ask a person I don't know extremely well for a period product. Putting this barrier here will keep these products unavailable to people who need them. If you're thinking about distributing them for free, do NOT [sic] put a human barrier between the product and the person who needs it."

Issues of access must include the menstrual management needs for trans and gender diverse people for it to be truly equitable. An undergraduate student shared:

> *As a trans man, I feel isolated with studies and initiatives like this sometimes. I get it, most trans men don't menstruate, and I don't anymore but early on in my transition I did not feel comfortable asking for these supplies, talking to anyone about it, or using the men's room while I was actively bleeding. I felt like there was a huge stigma around it and no one talks about it, or really wants to. I felt compelled to always have supplies on me in case and I kept doing this months after my period stopped just in case. Because who would take someone who looks like a guy seriously when asking for period products?*

Impacts of Menstruation on Participation & the Experience of Stigma ▶

Respondents to the survey repeatedly called attention to the impacts that periods have on their lives. They shared experiences of debilitating symptoms including pain, migraines, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, diarrhea, difficulty concentrating, overall discomfort, and heavy flow. Symptoms related to endometriosis and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) were noted as particularly problematic to manage given the limited supports and structures in place and a lack of education. Respondents shared how they were expected to act as though they were not in pain or discomfort – "It's frustrating to have to pretend like nothing's happening and that I'm just fine" (undergraduate student). A graduate student shared "I get debilitating cramps and migraines; my migraines are extremely sensitive to light and sound, which often means I have to lay down in a quiet and dark place to feel any measure of relief, so I have to go home." An undergraduate student echoed "it's the mood changes and the fatigue that drags me down. It would be nice if it was recognized, and not stigmatized that a period can take a lot out of you." A faculty member added: "On average, the greatest concern has been stigma around missed work/class for menstrual cramps. There is a perceived dismissal of monthly pain, despite extreme effects. I fear appearing weak, whiny, or dramatic if I am unable to attend work due to this pain."

The experience of pain and discomfort, when combined with the limited supplies on campus and a lack of understanding and stigma from professors, supervisors, and/or colleagues, often resulted in limited participation in campus work and life. More than 850 respondents shared having to miss work or class to manage menstruation, with impacts on assignments, meetings, labs, study time, as well as social activities. A graduate student shared that "It can be hard to match the practicalities of needing to be accountable and present on campus for work with the necessities of pain management- relaxing, hot packs, medicating etc."

Open-ended responses pointed to the importance of accommodations in the classroom and in the workplace. Remote work was noted as favourable for menstruation management for a number of respondents. There were multiple stories of a lack of understanding from individuals in positions of authority. An undergraduate student pointed to the power dynamics in the classroom and pondered if and how they would approach a professor to request accommodations for their period:

> *… having on-campus resources as a backup is a huge relief. It would be nice to have more sympathy from the actual institution and professors regarding these matters, though. As it stands, I'm already uncomfortable talking to many of my professors (particularly the male ones) regarding even standard academic matters. If I were to have an issue regarding menstruation, like having to leave class or miss an assessment due to cramps or other menstruation-related issues, I don't think I'd even consider asking my professor for some kind of accommodation. I'd resign myself to losing the grade or missing the lecture, despite having a completely legitimate excuse.*

For many students who responded to the survey, the lack of scheduled breaks during exams or long seminars was also identified as a challenge in managing their menstruation. At times, this lack of understanding from people in positions of power necessitated individuals having to explain their personal menstruation needs to professors or supervisors in order to go to the bathroom as an example. In such cases, respondents used terms such as “mortifying”, “horrifying”, and “the most HUMILIATING [sic] moment of my whole life”. For instance, a graduate student recalled:

> *I once had to explain (during an exam no less) that I was not able to use the washrooms in the building/exam library (in Machray Hall) because I was on my period. The invigilator argued with me and made me explain how a menstrual cup works and why I needed additional privacy to properly use the washroom, with them following me to find a private washroom and then forcing me to use a normal bathroom or "go back inside." It was disgusting and demeaning.*

A faculty member who had experienced cramps and migraines recalled a student with endometriosis that severely affected the student’s performance and noted “I found myself wondering if other professors would understand what the student was going through and offer accommodations as I had.”

Respondents offered their visions for the future and the importance of normalizing menstruation, and relatedly, menopause. The spoke of how powerful it would be “not having to be embarrassed by it… [would be] life changing.” A staff member suggested “I'm hopeful that we can get to a point where there isn't stigma around this anymore, that it's not something people have to be ashamed of or embarrassed about, and where it's possible to access the needed supplies, and decent ones at that, without additional financial struggles.”

Attention to Built Environment including Washroom Design ▶

In our survey, respondents commented on the built environment and the challenges of the current washroom design. An undergraduate student shared: “I think our bathroom systems need an overhaul to accommodate changing times and maybe we all could benefit.”

Repeatedly in the survey responses, we heard about the challenge of the gap between the doors of the washroom, the gap under the door, the small size of the cubicles which made changing products difficult, the distance of the sink from the toilet which is particularly important for those using menstrual cups, and broken and/or overflowing disposal bins. The need for additional space to change period supplies and to have additional surfaces in the stall was raised multiple times. An undergraduate student commented:

> *This may seem trivial, but I wish so desperately that there was infrastructure in the women's washrooms on campus particularly within the stalls to make the process of applying/removing menstrual products easier! There's nowhere to put anything down in the stalls. Often, I'm juggling a jacket, a backpack, a phone, a pouch of products, a new pad, a new tampon, the pad wrapper, the tampon wrapper, my old/used pad and tampon, and holding up my skirt, and it's impossible to do what I need to do quickly, easily, and hygienically.*

Due to long lines for washrooms (particularly when classes change) and lacking understanding and accommodations, we received stories from a number of respondents, particularly students, who recalled having to change their period product not inside the stall, but rather in the main bathroom space:

> *I asked my teacher to extend break time (impacting everyone there) so that I would be able to change my tampon as one of the bathrooms within a timely walking distance was being cleaned and due to the line in the second bathroom; I did not wait for a stall I just moved my panties to the side and inserted a tampon in and washed my hands; it was one of the most embarrassing moments in my life but I think everyone who could see me understood.*

This was NOT an isolated occurrence – there were a number of responses that spoke to such a situation, often after having had to disclose their periods to a professor, and it was always recalled with a statement on the level of embarrassment felt by the individual.

Many respondents commended the University for its work to increase the number of gender neutral and enclosed stalls on campus. While there were some cases where respondents mentioned feeling uncomfortable in the shared sink area, overwhelmingly these spaces were praised for their inclusivity and for offering more privacy to menstruators. A student shared:

> *I think I prefer to go to the gender neutral bathrooms when I need to change my menstrual product. Mainly because they are fully enclosed and offer more privacy then a regular bathroom stall. I find it very awkward to change my menstrual product in a stall because of the noise of opening a tampon wrapper, I guess I don't want anyone to hear it because I don't want people to know that I am on my period. I think it is more of an anxiety thing but it feels so pervasive the possibility of acknowledging to strangers that this very normal yet personal thing is happening.*

Many survey respondents commented on the usefulness of spaces to help those menstruating on campus – spaces that were quiet, and where people could rest and access pain management supplies. An undergraduate student commented:

> *I often have bad cramps, and a lot of the time the medication doesn't help to lower the pain so I often have to wait it out. When my cramps are the worst, I feel nauseous and sick, and noise really doesn't help with that. But campus is a busy and bustling place, and there aren't many quiet spaces (that I know of or that I have been informed about). I listened to my music to try to distract myself but otherwise felt I had no other choice than to sit/curl up in a noisy environment while trying to not throw up and wait for my cramps to go away before my next class.*

Such a space was identified by an undergraduate student as a space "to not have to hide that you're in discomfort."

Beyond issues of menstrual equity, though very much intertwined with issues of justice, auditors identified several issues that individuals visiting a UM campus may face when entering a washroom. Only 60 (11.93%) bathrooms had baby change tables; 8 (1.59%) had condoms; and 6 (1.19%) had sharps disposal boxes. Also beyond the scope and expertise of this project, there were a number of accessibility challenges identified – including a lack of accessible washrooms and questionable designations of accessible spaces. In another example, an auditor identified mistakes in braille translation on one of the washroom spaces.

Visions for Menstrual Justice ▶

Our project has identified the need to raise awareness about the UM's pilot program. For instance, in our survey, 57.59% of respondents stated that they "did not know" about the pilot. Those who did know commented that the pilot project left them feeling reassured when they had their periods, and eased the mental burden of menstruation. A staff member shared that the pilot project contributed to their feelings of being valued as an employee:

> *My building is one of the pilot sites for the dispensers with free products and I LOVE it. It feels so nice to have that consideration taken for me, and to not have to feel like my body is causing a problem that I have to deal with. I can afford menstrual products but not having to worry about having these items on hand at work is such a relief. It makes me feel my workplace cares about me.*

Our project heard time and again that the labour of advocating for menstrual justice and providing period supplies has come not from the institution, but rather relies on uncompensated labour of champions in units who have been committed to ensuring period supplies are freely available, often incurring costs on their operating budget. At an individual level, this may look like individuals sharing menstrual supplies with others, including strangers, or units having somewhat hidden stashes of supplies. At a more structural level, this includes the provision of free supplies by particular departments or units on campus, outside of the pilot project. Repeatedly in the survey, respondents mentioned making trips to the Elizabeth Dafoe library to access *Aunt Flow* period supplies, even if they were in a different building, citing their preference for the product, its availability, and the washroom space. *Aunt Flow* supplies (offered via a dispenser) at Dafoe are purchased through Libraries' operating budget. Other respondents commented on the availability of supplies at Migizii Agamik, such as this staff member:

> *Menstruating on campus can be challenging… As long as I can remember, Migizii Agamik has had period products in the bathrooms. They have done this through gifts from external organizations and no funding. It has been a HUGE [sic] lifesaver on more than one occasion. I have found myself walking across campus to get a pad because I knew that I could access them in the bathroom or ask at the front desk for one. Full Moon Ceremony reduces shame around moon time (period time) and normalizes the challenges that come along with it. It makes it easy to go there to ask for what you need in order to get through the day.*

There is also a crucial need to address stigma and provide educational opportunities on issues of menstrual justice – providing information on menstruation, on access to reproductive justice, and on menopause as some examples. Respondents emphasize the importance of contributing to the destigmatizing of periods, and the provisioning of free supplies as something that would benefit the entire UM community with attention not only to affordability but also accessibility more generally speaking:

"I loved seeing free tampons and pads in the library bathroom. It made me so happy for those who can't afford them." (Undergraduate student).

"I love the idea for other menstruating people to have free products (different choices) around campus, and maybe more information on how to relive pain, cramping etc." (Undergraduate student).

"I like that this survey asked about menstruation related health concerns (like PMDD). Inequitable access to period products can be extremely deleterious, but I think there are also issues around inequity in terms of supports and understanding for people who experience menstruation related health concerns--it's difficult to discuss these health conditions with others and probably like myself, many people who experience them manage the impacts silently and solitarily because we are concerned about how these conditions will be perceived." - (Staff member)

Project Limitations

There were several facilities that we were unable to gain access to in the campus audit, owing to a number of factors. However, we are confident that the results of the audit are representative of issues of access, or lack thereof, to menstrual supplies on the University of Manitoba campuses.

Students self-selected into the survey, and as such, may have a particular interest in the issue (i.e., self-selection bias), and may not be representative of the campus community. Moreover, given that our survey's eligibility criteria began with the question of "have you menstruated on a University of Manitoba campus", we missed including students, faculty, and staff who work and study remotely. Further research to include the experiences of these individuals would be an important contribution. Finally, more targeted recruitment strategies to include the experiences of gender-diverse menstruators on campus could have provided more of an opportunity to speak to issues of access and safety and gender inclusive menstrual management needs.

When we drafted our initial proposal for this project, we emphasized 'period poverty' as the focus. And while the issue of period poverty remains crucial, we also recognize and advocate for an approach that explores issues not only of poverty, but rather of access more broadly speaking. This is not to say that there are not instances of period poverty on campus – 50.54% of respondents in our survey reported an income of below $20K/year and throughout the survey, respondents touched on cost as a barrier to menstrual management. However, we acknowledge that participation in post-secondary education remains a marker of social privilege (Smith and Tribe 2021) and thus may not directly reflect more community experiences of period poverty.

Recommendations

The "Period Poverty & Equity, On Campus and Beyond" project has identified immediate priorities to address menstrual justice on campus.

1. *We advocate for the permanent implementation of free menstrual supplies in all washrooms on campus.*

As of December 2023, changes to the Canada Labour Code means that all federally regulated employers must provide free menstrual products in employee washrooms (Government of Canada 2023). The City of Winnipeg piloted a project to offer free menstrual supplies in City of Winnipeg facilities in 2022, and has indicated their plans to continue (MacLean 2024) and the current provincial government in Manitoba has signalled their plans to follow suit. In making permanent the Pilot project, the University of Manitoba stands to be proactive in its approach to equity and menstrual justice.

While we recognize the financial and logistical demands required, especially upon Caretaking Services, to successfully implement and manage a program, a collaborative cross-unit approach could alleviate some of the demands and further solidify the University's commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

2. *We urge the University of Manitoba to reconsider its decision to offer menstrual supplies through a dispenser model.*

We recommend that period supplies be available in university washrooms in a basket or freestanding container on the counter by the sink, or in a portable trolley/cart. The following Canadian universities have implemented this model of period product distribution: The University of Waterloo, School of Pharmacy; McGill University; McMaster University; Queen's University; The University of Alberta; and Memorial University. The following international universities have implemented this model of period supply distribution: University of Michigan (USA); universities in Scotland, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Strathclyde; universities in France; and the University of Stuttgart (Germany).

Dispensers are expensive, require ongoing maintenance, and often come with a required proprietary relationship, becoming obsolete if said brand goes out of business, or not used if the product is not one which people who menstruate find comfortable. In such cases, offering new or different products may require the purchasing and installation of new dispensers. Dispensers can also be inaccessible for folks with physical disabilities depending on where they are installed and require a certain level of dexterity and strength to operate.

We should be wary of making decisions to utilize dispensers as a method of delivery owing to worry of misuse or abuse of free menstrual supplies – there has been little evidence of abuse of such programs. Critical menstruation expert Dr. Lisa Smith urges a rethinking of the notion of "the greedy menstruator" and the misperceptions of the misuse of free menstrual supplies (Smith, Khan, and Oveisi 2023b).

Supplying products in a basket or portable cart at the sink allows flexibility in the types of products offered (disposable and reusable). It also affords greater accessibility for disabled menstruators. Further, baskets/trolleys are cost effective, do not malfunction nor require maintenance to the same extent as dispensers, and are faster to refill.

Existing, malfunctioning dispensers should be removed from all campus washrooms. They provide a false sense of security for people who menstruate, who may believe products are available particularly for emergency supplies.

3. *We recommend that the University offer a range of menstrual supplies including both reusable and disposable supplies.*

In recent years, there has been attention to use of eco-friendly and more sustainable menstrual products in efforts to reduce environmental waste. The University of Manitoba's Strategic Plan (2024) aims to reduce waste to achieve sustainability goals. Reusable supplies create significantly less waste than disposable supplies and are less expensive over time per menstruator. However, questions of accessibility and cost, as well as comfort, preference, and choice of those who menstruate must be considered (H. Lane 2024; Smith, Khan, and Oveisi 2023a). Other research has pointed to the need for more information and education for menstruators when deciding to use reusable supplies (Ramsay et al. 2023). The provision of reusable menstrual supplies also requires consideration of the built environment – with proximity of washroom stalls to sinks for rinsing cups and discs.

4. *We must ensure disposal facilities in all washrooms and considerations of the built environment.*

Open ended responses pointed to a need to consider whose body is safe on campus and in our community and considerations of the built environment and toilet design is an important consideration in working towards menstrual equity (B. Lane et al. 2022). All washrooms, regardless of gender, must have functioning disposal bins in every stall. The provisioning of sharps disposal bins, baby change tables, safer sex supplies, and first aid kids in bathrooms are important additions. Gender neutral washrooms must be in every floor of every building on campus. Where inclusive, multi-stall washrooms are used, menstrual supplies available inside the stalls rather at the sinks, should be considered.

5. *We recommend a more efficient system for managing and tracking available period supplies on campus.*

We recommend a more efficient and transparent process for refilling the free menstrual supplies dispensers. The refilling of dispensers is under the purview of Caretaking Services, (VP-Admin Portfolio), and the addition of the responsibility to refill empty dispensers has not yet been streamlined into an adequate, timely process, particularly for locations such as the William Norrie Inner-City Campus and Bannatyne Campus. For the duration of the pilot program, the William Norrie Inner-City Campus has only had their free menstrual product dispenser refilled once, due to lack of communication on how to request refills. We recommend improving the refill request system to ensure a standard of accessible free products across all University of Manitoba campus locations.

We would encourage the University to consider developing an online platform to support menstruating community members as they live, work, and study on campus. This would include:

- A map of washrooms with freely available menstrual supplies.
- An updated map of gender inclusive washrooms, as well as accessible washrooms.

- An online submission/request for restock for students, staff, and faculty to fill out when a washroom is running low or out of supplies.
- An online submission for students, staff, and faculty to suggest locations in which menstrual supplies/support for menstruators are needed.

Such technologies have been used in other locales and contexts, such as PeriodPin (Waterloo); or PickUpMyPeriod (Scotland).

6. *We encourage addressing menstrual justice as part of efforts towards Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.*

American political activist, professor, and author Angela Davis reminds us, university commitments to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are not necessarily about justice (cited in Gerges 2023).

The experiences of people who menstruate, as well as those experiencing menopause, are rarely considered in conversations of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The President's Task Force on EDI report from December 2020 did not specifically name period poverty or equity in their report. However, we are in a crucial time and space to contribute to conversations and policies that could build a safer and more equitable campus for all and could work towards menstrual justice.

Educational, outreach, and professional development opportunities for the UM community could address ongoing and pervasive stigma, misinformation around issues of menstrual and reproductive justice, and contribute to a safer working and learning environment. To benefit students, we would recommend:

- A university-level policy for symptom support and accommodation for students.
- Requirements for regular and scheduled breaks during classes.
- Information on the course syllabus about the location of free menstrual supplies.
- Pain relief be available at a subsidized cost to support the UM community experiencing menstrual and pre-menstrual symptoms.

We would also recommend educational and professional development opportunities for staff, faculty, and the community around issues of periods, menopause, and menstrual and reproductive justice. We encourage promotion of the pilot project and the availability of free period supplies. For instance, a window cling on a dispenser highlighting free supplies, with QR codes for more information offers an important learning and promotional opportunity.

Conclusions

There are important changes taking place in Manitoba and across Canada to support menstrual equity in schools, in universities, and in public spaces. There must be a commitment to ongoing conversations about what menstrual justice could look like on our campus and how to facilitate it. This is essential for the well-being and safety of community members to live, work, and study on campus. It is also crucial in the ongoing work towards equity and inclusion, including menstrual equity.

Future outputs from this project will provide a more in-depth analyses of our projects' data and contribute to peer-reviewed scholarly literature in the Canadian context, which is at present primarily being conducted by not-for-profit organizations or the period supply industry (Lee, Toory, and Harrison 2024).

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Auditors

- Grace Adams
- Bethel Alemaio
- Breanna Amoyaw
- Lily Barzegari
- Hannah Belec
- Hayley Bowley
- Holly Brown
- Angelica Buccini
- Emma-Marie Caine
- Isha Dave
- Emma Déquier
- Gulnaaz Dhillon
- Cassie Dong
- Courtney Edworthy
- Gwendelyn Freeheart
- Tamara Friesen
- Erin Gobert
- Kevin Heinrichs
- Leia Hermesdorf
- Indiana Humniski
- Mikayla Hunter
- Peter Jaeger
- Hayley Kirkup
- Lindsay Larios
- Michelle Lavallee
- Anna Lee
- Ethan Lee
- Leah Liu
- Corrina Minish
- Ngozi Okose
- Otito Onwukwe
- Adele Perry
- Alex Rana
- Danika Richard
- Victoria Romero
- Alexandria Shupenia
- Julia Smith
- Heather Stark
- Kayla Talabis
- Pauline Tennent
- Chloe Vickar
- Laura Westfall

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Centre for Human Rights Research
University of Manitoba
442 Robson Hall
224 Dysart Road
Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-6453 | F: 204-474-7580
chrrman@umanitoba.ca

Centre for Human Rights Research | University of Manitoba

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