PRE-BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

## NATIONAL MENSTRUAL EQUITY PROGRAM




help a girl out

# PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2026

# SUMMARY

**Conclusion of the Menstrual Equity Fund Pilot (2023-27)**

The Menstrual Equity Fund (MEF) Pilot will conclude in March 2027, marking four years of significant impact and essential service to Canadians. Help A Girl Out (HAGO) has been a crucial partner in the MEF pilot, scaling from a grassroots initiative to a national charity with a network that extends to 360 cities across Canada's provinces and territories.

## ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATION

- **Help A Girl Out** is a national charity working towards menstrual equity by providing free menstrual products, bridging the uterine and menstrual health education gap, and providing empowerment opportunities for at-risk women and girls.
- Our organization, through 2018–26, has directly reached 25,000 Canadians through front-line programs that delivered 380+ uterine and menstrual health workshops and the distribution of over 2 million period products and 15,000+ three-month supply kits across 350 cities in Canada. Our resources have served hundreds of thousands of Canadians indirectly.
- With a network of 80+ partner organizations nationally, such as schools, community organizations, and corporate allies.
- Our small and mighty team includes the support of 100+ volunteers, 7 board directors, 3 full time, and 7 part time staff.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation #1**

- Establishment of a permanent and dedicated funding stream for Canadian Menstrual Equity Organizations to deliver ongoing programs, build capacity and establish sustainability.

**Recommendation #2**

- Renewed federal funding to sustain menstrual product distribution to low-income Canadians through community-serving organizations, complemented by an income-based subsidy program that provides individuals and households with reliable access to the menstrual products they need.

**Recommendation #3**

- Continuation of Canada's 10 year commitment to support sexual and reproductive health initiatives including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and programming serving women and girls in the global south.



## RECOMMENDATION #1

**Establishment of a permanent and dedicated funding stream for Canadian Menstrual Equity Organizations to deliver ongoing programs, build capacity and establish sustainability.**

There remains a crucial need for community-led programs that address menstrual and uterine health education, awareness and meet tailored community needs. Over the past 4 years of the pilot, Menstrual equity organizations, like *Help A Girl Out (HAGO),* have developed comprehensive education programs that fill gaps in the k-12 school curriculum. By providing evidence-informed, supplemental learning on topics that are not covered in sufficient depth through the Healthy Living curriculum, students are equipped to remain in school, participate in sports and to experience a dignified and confident menstrual experience. Topics related to menstrual and uterine health, menstrual hygiene management, menstrual product types and usage, diet and exercise, and period poverty. *Delivering this specialized content effectively often requires additional subject-specific knowledge and training beyond what is typically available to educators.*

Beyond the classroom, conversations about menstruation are often absent in households where stigma and shame remain deeply rooted. This is particularly common in some Black, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and refugee communities, where cultural norms, religious beliefs, or discomfort may limit open discussions about menstrual health. *HAGO helps bridge this gap by delivering culturally responsive programming and trainings led by facilitators with lived experience and expertise, while tailoring content to reflect the unique needs, experiences, and religious contexts of each community. This programming has trained parents, teachers and community leaders with holistic workshops that account for trauma, culture and socioeconomic factors – all of which play a vital part in the menstrual and reproductive health conversation.*

Menstrual equity organizations that have been leading grassroots work for nearly a decade recognize that significant gaps remain in the data, research, and statistics related to women's health (including uterine and menstrual health). These gaps often fail to capture the realities and unmet needs that community organizations witness firsthand. In addition to investing in continued programming, there is a need for coordinated data collection, analysis, and complementary research to better understand the social and economic impacts of inadequate menstrual health education, limited access to menstruation related care, and insufficient support systems. *Strengthening this evidence base will help inform policy, guide investment, and demonstrate the true economic cost of menstrual inequity.*

## THE STATISTICS

- **Awareness & Stigma Reduction** - Period stigma continues to isolate individuals across the country, forcing over 50% of Canadian menstruators to hide their cycles at school and work out of shame*.
- This pervasive taboo results in more than half of young women feeling that periods are treated as "dirty," while 1 in 5 experience active judgment or unfair dismissal in their personal and professional relationships simply due to their normal biology*.

**Menstrual Equity includes:**

- **Mental Health workshops:** Build body literacy and confidence at every developmental stage.
- **All-gender learning:** Normalizes menstruation, reduces stigma, and builds empathy.
- **Parent education:** Supports informed, open conversations at home.
- **Teacher training:** Builds confidence to deliver accurate, inclusive menstrual health education.
- **Faith-tailored workshops:** Respect cultural and religious values while providing accurate, stigma-free health information.



# RECOMMENDATION #1 CONT.

**Comprehensive Menstrual Health Education**

- The reality is that 65% of Canadian menstruators either did not receive adequate menstrual-health education or received none at all.*
- Menstrual health education remains sparse across Canada, leaving roughly 37% of youth feeling completely unprepared for their first period*
- Compounding this, a massive 65% of menstruators report receiving inadequate health literacy during their formative years, leading 78% of young Canadians to actively demand that comprehensive menstrual health become a mandatory, standardized part of the school curriculum.*

**Menstrual Equity Includes:**

- **Period Product Education:** Understanding the diverse range of period products available is crucial for making informed choices that suit individual needs.
- **Effective hygiene management:** Proper hygiene practices are essential for maintaining health and comfort during menstruation.
- **Age Appropriate Education:** Beginning education as early as Grade 4 helps prepare youth before their first period, particularly as some children experience menarche at younger ages.
- **Expert- and peer-led discussions** create supportive spaces to ask questions, reduce fear and stigma, and build confidence.



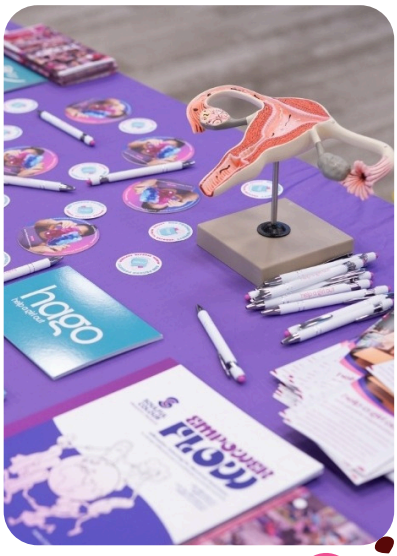
**Uterine Health Education & Research**

- Of the mere 6.4% of CHIR funding allocated to women's health, the majority of research areas were limited to pregnancy 33%, ***with only 0.4% for menstrual cycles, 0.6% for puberty and 2.5% for menopause***.
- This is rather striking considering the plethora of issues plaguing Canadians during these three life stages that account for the majority of the lifespan.



**Menstrual Equity Includes:**

- **Uterine Health Education & Awareness:** Builds knowledge of menstrual and uterine health, reduces stigma, and empowers individuals.
- **Advocacy to Healthcare Professionals:** Builds confidence to communicate symptoms, ask informed questions, and advocate for appropriate testing, treatment, and referrals.
- **Education on Uterine Conditions:** To recognize signs of conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids, and PCOS, supporting earlier assessment and diagnosis**.**
- **Cycle Tracking from an Early Age:** Establishes awareness of individual cycle patterns, making it easier to identify changes, irregularities, and potential health concerns over time.
- **Management of Menstrual-Related Discomfort:** Provides practical knowledge on nutrition, exercise, pain management, rest, and self-care to support menstrual health and overall well-being.




* Sources: Plan International Canada / National Union of Public and General Employees / Women's health research funding in Canada across 15 years. 2025 Oct 16;16(1):78. doi: 10.1186/s13293-025-00763-y. PMID: 41102872; PMCID: PMC12533434.

# RECOMMENDATION #2

**Renewed federal funding to sustain menstrual product distribution to low-income Canadians through community-serving organizations, complemented by an income-based subsidy program that provides individuals and households with reliable access to the menstrual products they need.**

Over the course of the Menstrual Equity Fund (MEF) pilot, Food Banks Canada, in partnership with 6 menstrual equity organizations (see list below) and a national network of community-serving organizations, undertook the significant logistical challenge of distributing menstrual products of varying types to low-income and at-risk populations across the country.

The success of the Menstrual Equity Fund provides Canada with an opportunity to transition from a temporary pilot model toward a sustainable national menstrual-product access strategy.

## Impact of the Menstrual Equity Pilot Product Distribution

Since 2023, nearly 400 pilot sites and more than 2,000 distribution locations have participated, reaching communities in every province and territory. More than 72.7 million menstrual products were distributed in the 2024–25 reporting period alone, with millions of instances of people accessing products through the program. Government reporting also identified low-income individuals as the largest group accessing products, followed by racialized individuals, youth, and people living in northern, rural, and remote communities.

The scale of uptake demonstrates that menstrual product insecurity is not a marginal or temporary issue. It is an ongoing affordability challenge closely connected to broader economic and social inequities. In Canada, 17% of people who menstruate have experienced period poverty, rising to approximately 25% among those living in lower-income households. In addition, 20% reported concern that they might not be able to afford menstrual products within the following year. When products are unaffordable, the consequences extend beyond menstruation as 15% of people who menstruate reported that product affordability had prevented them from participating in activities such as school, work, or sports.

## Why Continued Product Support Is Necessary

Period poverty rarely occurs in isolation. Rather, it is often intensified by other forms of economic and social vulnerability.

- For individuals experiencing **gender-based violence** and financial abuse, access to menstrual products can become an immediate safety and dignity issue.
- **Newcomers and refugees** may similarly experience heightened vulnerability because of limited income, disrupted employment, unfamiliarity with available social supports, and the costs associated with establishing a household in Canada. Newcomers and refugees: 43% of recent immigrants reported difficulty meeting basic financial needs in 2024, creating additional barriers to purchasing recurring necessities such as menstrual products.
- **Low-income students and young people** face another distinct challenge. When household resources or student financial assistance are insufficient to meet rising living costs, menstrual products remain an unavoidable monthly expense.
- **Single parents and families with multiple menstruating household members** can experience an even greater cumulative burden. A household with a parent and several menstruating children does not bear one menstrual-product expense but several simultaneously.

## From Pilot to Sustainable Access

Importantly, effective product-access programs should move beyond emergency relief toward providing an adequate cycle supply, while preserving individual choice among pads, tampons, reusable products, period underwear and other appropriate options.

The MEF pilot has also demonstrated that demand exceeds available charitable supply. Prior to implementation, 61% of organizations consulted by Women and Gender Equality Canada reported unmet requests for menstrual products. During the pilot itself, participating organizations continued to report product shortages, despite tens of millions of products being distributed. This indicates that charitable donations alone cannot reliably meet the scale and consistency of national need.

## THE STATISTICS

### Period Poverty and Product Access

- 1 in 6 Canadians who menstruate has personally experienced period poverty; this increases to 1 in 4 among households earning less than $40,000 annually.
- 74% of Indigenous respondents living in remote communities report sometimes or often having difficulty accessing menstrual products.
- 1 in 4 Canadian women who menstruate has had to choose between purchasing menstrual products and other essentials, such as food or rent.
- 83% of Canadians who menstruate believe menstrual products are too expensive.
- 21% struggle to afford menstrual products for themselves or their dependants.
- 22% have rationed menstrual products or used them longer than recommended because they could not afford more; this rises to 33% among households earning less than $50,000 and 48% among Indigenous respondents.
- In remote Indigenous communities, lack of menstrual product access has resulted in respondents missing exercise (42%), work (28%), and school (18%).

### HAGO Applicant Data — 2026

- 91% of HAGO applicants with fulfilled orders reported living on a low income.
- 62% reported receiving government assistance and 62% reported being unemployed.
- These figures demonstrate that menstrual product insecurity is closely connected to unemployment, low household income, and reliance on government income supports.

### Evidence for a Menstrual Product Affordability Benefit

- Period poverty increases from 17% nationally to 25% among households earning less than $40,000, demonstrating a clear relationship between income and menstrual product insecurity.
- 83% believe menstrual products are too expensive, while 1 in 5 struggle to afford them, demonstrating that affordability extends beyond people accessing emergency or charitable assistance.
- Free product distribution should remain available for people experiencing acute financial hardship, homelessness, crisis, or geographic isolation.
- An income-tested menstrual product affordability benefit could complement free distribution by supporting low-income Canadians who struggle with the recurring cost of menstrual products but may not access food banks or community distribution programs.
- Potential models include a refundable menstrual product benefit/credit, reimbursement program, point-of-purchase discount, or annual household allowance based on income.
- This approach would shift menstrual product support from primarily emergency relief toward a broader affordability model, recognizing menstrual products as a recurring and unavoidable basic necessity.

## TESTIMONIALS

"Single mom of 2 teen girls, currently temporarily living with my mother while trying to restart our lives after fleeing from domestic violence." *Jessica, 30+, Recipient*

"I am a single mom on disability and applying for my daughter who is not working or in school. Funds are extremely limited." *Gwendolyn, 30+, Recipient*




**2 OF 16,000 DIRECT-TO-INDIVIDUAL APPLICATIONS TO HAGO'S PERIOD SUPPORT PROGRAM SINCE 2022**

# RECOMMENDATION #2 CONT.

## THE ECONOMICS OF MENSTRUAL EQUITY

Menstrual equity is a crucial aspect of gender equality, influencing various socio-economic factors. By ensuring equal access to menstrual products and education, societies can foster greater participation and opportunities for all individuals.
Access to reliable menstrual products plays a significant role in performance and retention rates within educational and professional settings. When individuals have the necessary resources to manage their menstrual health, they tend to experience increased confidence and are more likely to seize opportunities for personal and professional growth. This enhanced participation leads to a stronger economy and a more inclusive and productive society.

- **Reusable Products as a Pathway to Financial Stability**

Reusable menstrual products, such as menstrual cups and cloth pads, provide a sustainable and cost-effective alternative to disposable products. By investing in reusables, individuals can reduce recurring menstrual product expenses while gaining access to products that can be used for years. This is especially important in circumstances where menstrual product costs are significantly high, like in Northern and remote communities. Beyond the financial benefits, reusable products reduce waste and support a growing shift toward more sustainable approaches to menstrual health and period poverty.

Help A Girl Out (HAGO), in partnership with True North Aid's Moon Time Connections, has established reusable menstrual pad sewing circles in remote, fly-in communities across Northern Canada. Through these community-based initiatives, participants learn the skills to sew and maintain their own reusable menstrual pads, increasing access to sustainable menstrual products while building practical skills. The sewing circles have been met with strong community interest and repeated demand.




Beyond addressing menstrual product access, the initiative creates opportunities for knowledge-sharing, relationship-building, reconciliation, and meaningful connection between Canada's North and South.

- **Waste Reduction & Climate Action**

The environmental impact of disposable menstrual products is significant, with billions of products and their packaging contributing to landfill waste over time. The growing availability and adoption of biodegradable and reusable menstrual products offer an opportunity to reduce this environmental footprint while expanding the range of affordable and sustainable options available.

Through the Menstrual Equity Fund (MEF) pilot, increased access to reusable and sustainable menstrual products has demonstrated the potential to advance both menstrual equity and environmental sustainability. As more Canadians become aware of and adopt these alternatives, there is an opportunity to reduce waste, improve long-term access to menstrual products, and lessen recurring costs for individuals.

- **Enhanced Economic Stability for Canadian small/medium Businesses**

There are economic benefits to supporting menstrual equity that yield positive ripple effects on the broader community. The Menstrual Equity Fund pilot has been instrumental in supporting Canadian small business suppliers, such as Joni, Marlow, and Bfree Cup. These companies have experienced increased economic stability and growth, thanks to the fund's support. However, with the pilot ending after only 4 years, they are at risk of losing their capacity.

The menstrual product industry is one worth investing in, with half the population being females with a significant portion of their life of menstruating age. The market is currently dominated by a few non-canadian brands that may not have equity and sustainbility at top-of-mind. However, by continuing to invest in local businesses that prioritize menstrual health, the environment and social responsibility, the program would not only boosts the economy but also contribute to building Canada strong.

# RECOMMENDATION #3

**Continuation of Canada's 10 year commitment to support sexual and reproductive health initiatives including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and programming serving women and girls in the global south.**

### Embracing Multiculturalism

As a multicultural nation, Canada is a vibrant mosaic of identities and experiences that enrich our diversity and resilience. Many Canadians feel deeply connected to global communities. Our country consistently champions international collaboration, believing that collective progress builds stronger, healthier, and more prosperous societies.

### Addressing Global Barriers

Globally, challenges in education, sexual and reproductive health rights, and economic opportunities disproportionately impact women and girls, affecting health, educational attainment, workforce participation, and community development.

By supporting local access to education, resources, healthcare, rights, and economic opportunities, Canada can continue to advance the wellbeing and agency of women and girls while contributing to stronger, more resilient global economies.

### The Importance of Canada's Leadership

Canada's leadership in enhancing the opportunities for women and girls worldwide is crucial. Access to education, healthcare, and reproductive services empowers them to contribute to the prosperity of their families and communities.

Canada's own social and economic wellbeing is increasingly interconnected with that of our global partners and neighbours. Health crises, conflict, economic instability, and social inequities do not exist in isolation; their effects can extend across borders. Supporting healthier, more equitable, and economically resilient communities abroad contributes to a stronger and more stable global environment from which Canada also benefits.

### Ensuring Access to Essential Services

Canadian investments have ensured access to vital services, including; Contraception, Maternal healthcare, Menstrual health services, STI prevention and treatment, Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).

## BUILDING THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Beyond the health impact, investments in Global Health deliver measurable economic returns— UNFPA estimates up to $8.40 in benefits for every dollar invested in family planning and maternal health.

Continued investment in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education (CSE) and rights should therefore be understood not only as an investment in individual health and gender equity, but also as an investment in shared global stability and prosperity.



**FOR INQUIRIES:**

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