

The Period Poverty Barrier: Understanding Its Influence on Bajau Laut Women in Semporna, Sabah

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ABSTRACT

The debate regarding period poverty became a hotly debated topic when it was first raised at the Dewan Negara conference on 15th December 2021. Normally, period poverty often occurs when there is a crisis such as floods, fires and migration, this is due to the supply of menstrual equipment such as sanitary pads being affected. The revelation about period poverty started to open the eyes of many parties regarding one of the aspects of poverty that needs attention even though it is still considered a trivial and taboo issue. Aware of this situation, this study wants to see the influence of period poverty among women of the Bajau Laut community in Semporna, Sabah. This study uses an in-depth interview approach with ten informants consisting of Bajau Laut women in the waters of Semporna, Sabah who have reached puberty. The interviews are finally analyzed using the thematic method by categorizing the influence of period poverty according to themes that have been set. The findings of the study found that there are four main influences that affect period poverty, namely 1) Inadequate menstrual management products, 2) Insufficient privacy to manage menstruation, 3) Education Deficiency, and 4) Insufficient Infrastructure. In addition, this study suggests that all parties (government and NGOs) should mobilise energy to ensure that the problem of period poverty can be overcome in stages.

Keywords: Period poverty, Bajau Laut community, Influence of period poverty, Insufficient infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a healthy biological process that occurs in women of reproductive age where the uterus sheds blood and tissue through the vagina in a monthly cycle. According to Dellanerolle et. al., (2023) menstruation is a biological process that is part of every woman's biological life and is defined as cyclic bleeding that occurs due to the regeneration of the uterine corpus endometrium. Menstruation occurs due to unstable hormone levels and leads to the endometrium layer and as a result shedding and bleeding during the menstrual stage when the egg is not fertilized (UNFPA Jordan, 2022). The menstrual cycle can be explained through the ovarian cycle and the uterine cycle. The ovarian cycle is the change that occurs in the follicles in the ovary,

while the uterine cycle is the change that occurs in the inner layer of the uterus (endometrium) as explained above. The ovarian cycle consists of the follicular phase, the ovulation phase, and the luteal phase (Mohd Nasir & Wan Abu Bakar, 2014).

The United Nations (UN) has recognized menstrual hygiene as a global public health and human rights issue, but throughout the world, it is called "Period Poverty". Therefore, the debate about period poverty became a hotly debated topic when it started to be raised. at the *Dewan Negara* conference last December 15, 2021. This issue is not a new issue but rather it has become a global issue.

Period poverty known as 'Period' refers to the constraints in managing a lot of menstruation during menstruation or 'period', which usually happens to women and teenage girls (Fatimah, 2021 & Siti Noor Azila, 2021). Reproductive poverty can also refer to a woman who has a lack or absence of sanitation facilities or difficulty in obtaining menstrual equipment such as no water supply, a suitable place to dispose of sanitary pads, and privacy to manage menstruation (Muhamaad Razis, 2021).

Oladunni et. al. (2022), stated that period poverty can be described as inaccessibility to menstrual hygiene management, facilities, supplies, and information but not limited to hygiene products, washing facilities, and waste management during menstruation. Period poverty is defined as the inability to obtain basic menstrual hygiene due to financial constraints (Najibah, 2022). According to Carneiro (2021), period poverty can be defined as the lack of access to safe and clean menstrual products during the monthly period and the inability to basic sanitation services or facilities as well as menstrual hygiene education. Period poverty is a global phenomenon, the main sociological and clinical characteristics may differ due to different risk factors in diverse geographical areas (Dellanerolle et al, 2023). Meanwhile, United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) Jordan (2022), states period poverty is defined as the lack or inability to access sanitary products and health services related to the menstrual cycle. These include sanitation and water facilities for personal hygiene, health education, and methods of managing menstrual product waste.

Period poverty affects women who either do not have access to menstrual products properly or cannot afford to buy them (Koussayer, 2022). Normally, period poverty often occurs when there is a crisis such as floods, fires, and migration, this is due to the supply of menstrual equipment such as sanitary pads being affected. There are four elements that are categorized as period poverty, namely lack of menstrual management products, lack of privacy to manage menstruation, lack of education about menstruation and lack of infrastructure such as access to clean water (Fatimah, 2021; Nor Faiza, Sh Fatimah, & Szariannie, 2021).

According to Dr Nor Faiza Mohd Tohit a Public Health Physician at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (UIAM), women who do not have the ability to buy sanitary pads, they are forced to use the same sanitary napkins for a long period of time, replacing sanitary pad with rags, coir or old newspapers. There are also women who reuse sanitary pads that have been washed and dried and some are forced to use inappropriate materials compared to sanitary pads (Muhamaad Razis, 2021). In addition, the period poverty and Stigma Study by Kotex involving a total of 746 female respondents between the ages of 10 and 24, found that one out of two female students wanted to skip school between one and three days each month during menstruation. This is because as many as five percent of girls cannot afford to buy sanitary pads and they replace sanitary pads by using cloth or paper (Fairul, 2022). This also leads to reduced school attendance and poor academic performance, or even dropout in learning (Lahme et. al., 2018).

Therefore, the revelation regarding the period of poverty began to open the eyes of many parties regarding one of the aspects of poverty that needs to be given attention even though it is

still considered a trivial and taboo issue. Therefore, Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is now a major public health priority for women and adolescent girls worldwide (Helen et. al., 2021).

Research Objective

The main objective on this study is to identify the influence of period poverty among women of the Bajau Laut community in Semporna, Sabah

Literature Review

According to Lopez et. al., (2023), in his study states that many teenagers in Spain face a lack of information about how to manage menstruation for the first time. In addition, non-menstruating people are less willing to support menstruating people due to lack of knowledge, especially beyond the biological basis of menstruation to consider management and life.

This is different from the study conducted by Mohammed & Larsen-Reindorf (2020), in which they found that most girls have heard about menstruation before their first period, but the main source of information about menstruation for teenage girls is their mother and it clearly shows that almost half of the girls in this study had poor knowledge about menstruation. In addition, the study shows that there are still misconceptions, taboos, and myths about menstruation and people who menstruate, where the discussion about menstruation in the community and schools in Ghana is not enough especially in rural areas because of misconceptions and superstitions.

According to Delanerolle et. al. (2023) in his study some articles found that the educational status of the father or mother is divided into illiterate and literate, but in other studies there are also fathers or mothers who are categorized as uneducated, primary education, secondary education or high school and educated. This study found that mothers or fathers who do not have proper education cannot manage menstruation well.

In addition, a study from Hafiz et. al. (2023) see from an educational perspective that lack of knowledge about proper hygiene practices and insufficient access to correct information are the main factors that cause negative opinions. In addition, women have no place to turn if they have any questions about menstruation.

A study conducted by Oladunni et. al. (2022) looked at the factors that influence poor menstruation among teenagers. Females in secondary schools in EDE North Osun state are from poor teenagers' backgrounds affecting poor menstruation by 76.6%. The same study also showed that 82.4% of respondents think that school toilets do not have privacy for teenage girls who are menstruating and 78.3% think that they do not have access to tap water at school. This study also found that as many as 84.6% think that there are no suitable trash cans to dispose of sanitary products.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach which is an in-depth interview with 10 young Bajau Laut women in the waters of Semporna District who still used Lepa (boat) as their settlement and medium of transportation. Informants are teenagers aged 13 to 19 years old with a purposive sampling method. This in-depth interview was conducted face-to-face on the Lepa for the Bajau Laut community and the interview takes about 50 minutes to an hour and a half. Several questions have been used as a guide in this interview covering all the elements of period poverty that have been outlined by Dr. Nor Faiza et. al. (2021) namely 1) Inadequate menstrual management products, 2) Insufficient privacy to manage menstruation, 3) Education Deficiency, and 4)

Insufficient Infrastructure such as access to clean water . After that, this study uses thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) by selecting some themes from the data obtained. The themes were then identified, coded inductively from the interview recordings based on theory (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis is a way of capturing patterns from the initial information pool obtained. This is intended to describe and interpret certain social realities (Poerwandari, 2009).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

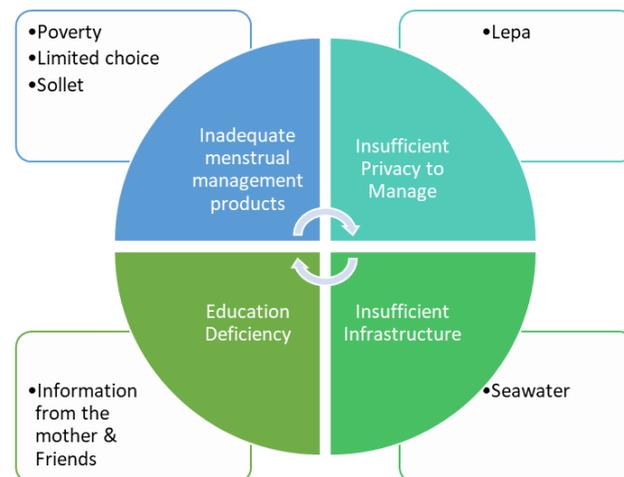


Figure 1: Influence of period poverty

Period poverty is important to discuss especially for women who struggle with daily lives as targeted in this study which is the Bajau Laut community. The Bajau Laut community is one of the communities that still live almost all of their time or life on the water although there are times when they are also on land to get their food supplies and other needs. The findings of the study found four main themes that affect the poor in this community. Among them are 1) Inadequate menstrual management products, 2) Insufficient privacy to manage menstruation, 3) Education Deficiency, and 4) Insufficient Infrastructure.

Interviews conducted with half of the adolescent women of the Bajau Laut community gave the impression that the main influence that affects period poverty in this community is that the poverty that surrounds their lives has caused them limited options to manage the menstrual process since they first started going through the process. their menstrual cycle.

The background of their life as a stateless community with a life pattern in the slums has given very limited opportunities to the Bajau Laut community to gain access to better resources such as health assistance, education, employment, and a better life despite being in an area that is growing rapidly with tourism activities. Limited movement also makes the Bajau Laut community more comfortable being in their own group and continuing to survive based on the cultural traditions handed down to them. It can be seen that the life pattern and the limited residential area have grouped them in the situation of poor menstruation. This is reinforced by the informant's view:

“...we only stay in Lepa because this is our home...here I stay with my family and sometimes we go to the nearer land to shelter from strong winds or to get food exchanged with local people...usually, we only do a system butter with the local people and not involve money...(I2), 19 years old.”

The simple life that has been practiced in the Bajau Laut community makes them only focus on

survival methods. This simple life makes them feel enough because of the limited choices that they have. This situation also indirectly brings them to the lack of period management that occurs due to period poverty.

Inadequate menstrual management products

In this study, young Bajau Laut women are exposed to four elements of period poverty which are inadequate menstrual management products that only rely on existing materials such as fabric waste to make sollets. The sollets used will be folded lengthwise and thick according to their comfort as long as they can absorb menstrual blood and do not penetrate the clothes they wear.

Other than that, the less movement due to limited space and limited activities in Lepa cause the sollet not to be changed too often and when it is full or the wearer feels uncomfortable. Period poverty can be considered as a form of survival that Bajau Laut community women have to go through in going through their menstrual cycle.

There is no doubt that the use of sollets has been applied for generations and passed down to the children of the Bajau Laut community as a form of cross-generational learning and is considered a practical way in the young Bajau Laut women to deal with menstrual issues. The use of the sollet is considered common and does not bring any issues related to hygiene and health but rather is considered an economical, comfortable, and clean tool in their cultural context. Furthermore, in the context of their culture, the sollet they use is clean and safe because the sollet will be washed until it feels clean and does not leave any blood residue which is then dried under the sun until it is dry before it can be used again. This is reinforced by the informant's view:

"...we wash it clean and use sea water, you can also use well water, you can see what is available at the time, but most of the sea water is dried until it is dry and can be used again...if the weather is hot like this, it will dry quickly... It's safe because that's what we always use because if we buy again we don't have enough money, it's good to buy food...it's also clean because it's washed until it's clean..."(I4, 18 years old).

Limited financial constraints make them unable to manage menstruation properly and limited choice. They cannot buy menstrual management products such as disposable sanitary pads that are sold in the market, instead they only rely on existing materials. The use of sollets cannot be rejected as it limits the available options. This situation is also indirectly a factor in the occurrence of low menstrual health literacy due to their lack of opportunities to access, understand, evaluate and apply health information related to menstrual poverty in their lives.

Their main need is for survival and makes other things less important which are more oriented towards the concept of 'usable origin'. The relaxed and simple life that leads to the concept of 'as long as can be used' creeps into each generation of the Bajau Laut community so that they do not feel they are living in deprivation. This is as explained by the informant:

"...use whatever is available, but we usually make sollets using any fabric, but it's even better if this fabric (sarung fabric) is easy to wash and dries quickly...as long as you can use it, you don't have to buy it..." (I2), 19 years old).

Insufficient privacy to manage menstruation

The Bajau Laut community still makes *Lepa* as their home and almost all daily activities such as washing, bathing, eating, and resting will be done in *Lepa*. This situation indirectly gives a very limited time, area, and space for women to do sanitary management of their menstruation more

regularly. In addition, they also do not have a private space such as a closed toilet to manage menstruation which allows them to take longer to change sanitary pads and subsequently clean themselves. The divide that was used only a piece of fabric as a curtain. This is as explained by the informant:

"...we live in here (Lepa) and mostly we will spend most of our time in here buat sometime we will go to a nearby island to stay especially in the afternoon to relax...about the sanitary when menstruation we need to hurry because share the washroom with other families in the limited area..." (I3, 18 years old).

This insufficient privacy to manage menstruation conditions makes women use their *sollet* more than the time they should use. Women usually need the right time and situation for example when all the men go outside the *Lepa* the women usually have private time and space in *Lepa* and have enough time to manage their period cleansing. Another choice that they have is they will go far away in the sea using another small boat called a *bogo bogo* and do the sanitarities there but the risk that they will face is their safety. This is as explained by the informant:

"...usually if we are too shy to change the sollet we will wait for nobody left in Lepa and will do that in far away from others using our bogo bogo but sometimes our parents are not allowed because of our safety. So we need to wait until we can change the sollet even if it was full and uncomfortable for us..." (I4, 18 years old).

Education Deficiency

Young Bajau Laut women are also seen to have an education deficiency about menstruation so the information they receive is limited due to the existence of shame and fear to ask about menstruation more openly to the family and have very limited access to information so they are not exposed to change their own physiology.

In principle, when starting to enter adolescence and begin to go through the process of the menstrual cycle, however, most informants who have reached puberty feel that they have limited information about menstruation before the first period, where basic knowledge about menstruation will be obtained directly from mothers and friends in particular in relation to the menstrual process which includes physical changes, preparations every month and how long the period lasts. However, their knowledge of proper menstrual management is limited due to their lack of sufficient information, the main source of which is mothers revealing to teenagers about menstruation (Mohammed & Larsen-Reindorf, 2020). This is because their mothers themselves do not have sufficient and accurate knowledge about menstruation and the biological processes they experience. This limited knowledge has limited knowledge regarding better menstrual management among women in the Bajau Laut community.

Young Bajau Laut women are taught by their mothers to manage the menstrual process only at the beginning of the menstrual process, which is on the first day only (Lopez et. al., 2023). Their mother would teach them how to use a piece of cloth known as a *sollet* to be used as a sanitary pad and usually the *sollet* belonged to their own mother. After that, they were also taught how to wash the *sollet* using sea or clean water stored in the *Lepa*. This is reinforced by the informant's statement:

"...Enggok (mother) also told us that it was the first time we got our period...had to tell us to make a sollet. We were told to take any cloth because it folds up and then we use it when we get our period (menstruation)... if it's not comfortable we wash it then change it to a new sollet..."(I1, 17 years old).

Insufficient Infrastructure

Young Bajau Laut women are also seen to have insufficient infrastructure to manage their periods such as the lack of treated water and soap to wash their *sollets* before they can be used again. In addition, they also do not have the infrastructure to better manage their *sollets*, such as placing the *sollets* that will be reused in a better storage place or throwing them away when they cannot be reused. Other than that the *sollet* will be washed using sea water or clean water obtained from their stopping place such as in the island area and then dried for use next. Usually when the menstrual cycle ends in that month, they will fold and store the *sollet*, and it will be used again in the next menstrual cycle. This process is repeated until the *sollet* is torn or can no longer be used. This is reinforced by the informant's statement:

“...we don't have many choice and money to buy the new sollet so as long as the sollet can be used we will use it...but sometime we will share the sollet if only me in that time was period but if my mom and sister also period at the same time we usually make the new one using the cloth that we no longer wearing...” (I4, 18 years old).

Thus, it can be seen that menstrual management performed by the Bajau Laut community is considered a norm that becomes a habit in their lives without any doubt or thinking about the health risks they will face in the future. Improper menstrual management and limited information and understanding regarding menstruation can contribute to poor health risks such as bladder infections and skin inflammation. Accurate information on menstrual management and menstrual hygiene is important for women and girls in managing their periods. Accurate and sufficient information is necessary to ensure that their emotions and health can be well controlled. Adolescent girls who are exposed to the problem of poor menstrual management, stem from a lack of knowledge, culture and tradition, as well as socio-economic and environmental constraints, which lead to discomfort, humiliation and stress.

CONCLUSION

Period poverty that plagues young Bajau Laut women becomes a social dilemma that requires help from various parties as agents of change that can further increase health literacy among them. Four elements of period poverty are seen to surround young Bajau Laut women even though culturally and traditionally the use of *sollet* is considered to be sufficient and they consider themselves as individuals who do not belong to the poor of menstruation but unsystematic handling can expose them to worse health hazards.

This study suggests that all parties (government and NGOs) should mobilize their energies to ensure that the problem of poor menstruation can be overcome in stages. This study suggests that the government and NGOs can apply awareness to sanitary napkin products that are eco-friendly with reasonable prices so that all women who cannot afford them can buy them. In addition, this study also suggests the construction of a prefabricated mini toilet on the Lepa in order to give space to the Bajau Laut Community to have a comfortable sanitary facility. Although menstrual poverty in the Bajau Laut community is seen as a little difficult to overcome, better health literacy can to some extent help young women in the Bajau Laut Community to manage their periods better and further help in improving their existing menstrual management system.

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