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# Period poverty and sustainable menstrual hygiene practices in Fiji

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the sociocultural dimensions of period poverty and their relationship to sustainable menstrual hygiene management (MHM) through a qualitative case study of rural communities in Fiji. Fieldwork was conducted in four remote Fijian communities using talanoa methodology. The findings indicate that sociocultural stigma surrounding menstruation persists, although its intensity varies depending on community size and generational attitudes. The provision of free reusable pads encourages greater dialogue about menstruation between men and women and thereby contributed to reducing menstrual taboos within families and communities. However, limited water access, inadequate sanitation infrastructure, and enduring sociocultural stigma continued to impede effective MHM and the sustainable use of reusable products. Environmental awareness relating to menstrual waste remains limited. Addressing period poverty in Fiji requires context-specific programmes and interventions on MHM education for both women and men, not only in the community but also in schools and workplaces, while greater attention is given to improving water and sanitation infrastructure in remote settlements and villages.

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## Introduction

Period poverty has increasingly emerged as an international issue linked not only to access to menstrual products, but also to broader questions of gender inequality, health, dignity, and sociocultural exclusion. It is commonly defined as 'inadequate access to menstrual hygiene tools and education, including but not limited to sanitary products, washing facilities, and waste management' (Hunter et al. 2022, 2).

In many societies, menstruation remains associated with stigma, silence, and cultural taboos, which can intensify the effects of period poverty even where material support exists. Fiji provides an important example. Recent initiatives by the Fijian government and development organisations have included the provision of free sanitary products and improved facilities for school-aged girls (Akbar n.d.; Huggett et al. 2023). However, research in Fiji suggests that 'common beliefs and attitudes about menstruation being 'dirty' create needless stigma, making it more difficult to manage menstruation, contributing to unwanted behavioural restrictions, and negatively affecting emotional wellbeing' (IWDA, Burnet Institute, and WaterAid 2021, 6). Such perceptions continue to shape menstrual practices and women's participation in everyday social life.

Accordingly, this study approaches period poverty not only as an economic issue but also as a socio-cultural one shaped by local beliefs, norms, and gendered expectations. Despite increasing calls for context-specific research on menstruation (see also Mohamed et al. 2018), limited scholarship has focused on Pacific Island contexts, particularly Fiji. With this in mind, the research aimed to examine period poverty in Fiji by focusing on sociocultural aspects, with particular attention given to sustainable menstrual hygiene management (MHM). In doing so, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach using the talanoa methodology to facilitate open, relational, and culturally grounded discussions with participants.

Specifically, this study asks how sociocultural stigma, structural and infrastructural constraints, and limited environmental awareness interact to shape menstrual hygiene practices in rural Fijian

communities. In answering this question, attention is given to barriers to the adoption of reusable menstrual products, including hygiene concerns and the practicalities of washing and drying them; structural constraints such as water scarcity, sanitation infrastructure, and rural isolation; and the broader social and policy environment, including healthcare engagement and shifting norms around menstruation, within which these practices take place.

## Literature review

Period poverty tends to be associated with structural gender inequality, especially as there is a growing difference between the suppliers of menstrual hygiene products for economic gain and those who are committed to socially responsible practices (Haneman 2021). It can often be attributed to pre-existing social factors. For example, women are taught to conceal bodily changes during adolescence, and the social stigma surrounding menstruation has deprived many of 'essential menstrual knowledge' (Ahuja and Singh 2024, 1). In countries such as Nepal, local traditions isolate women and girls during menstruation and impose additional restrictions, resulting in serious physical and mental health implications (Baumann et al. 2025).

Education on MHM has an important role to play in addressing period poverty (Kaur, Kaur, and Kaur 2018). Criticisms remain however about the inadequate provision of such education and its failure to reduce stigma surrounding the topic. In the case of Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, a clear dearth of MHM education has allowed inaccurate cultural practices to pass as health advice, including dietary restrictions, not wetting or combing one's hair, having set times for bathing or going outside, or bringing in reusable cloths left hanging outside 'otherwise evil spirits will make them sick' (Mohamed et al. 2018, 12). However, MHM education with a positive social lens was identified as particularly pertinent to MHM initiatives in the Global South, and has been heavily promoted by United Nations (UN) system organisations and development agencies (Harrison and Tyson 2023; Kubovski and Shabot 2024).

At the same time, research suggests the need for greater clinical awareness of MHM among health-care workers (Critchley et al. 2020). For those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, educational workshops, facilities to safely change and wash reusable products, and spaces to dry them are needed (Blair, Bajón-Fernández, and Villa 2022). When it comes to reusable products, the use of organic menstrual products has been shown to reduce social stigma and economic inequality (Hand et al. 2023). In some settings, the shift to reusable sanitary products from single-use products appears to reduce stigma and taboo by giving users greater control over their own menstrual management (Blair, Bajón-Fernández, and Villa 2022). There is a need for programmes and interventions to go beyond providing products so as to challenge norms of concealment through open dialogue, social activism and discussion of MHM within the community and up to the highest level of political power (Kubovski and Shabot 2024).

However, there remain barriers to the adoption of reusable sanitary product and sustainable menstrual products (SMPs). Cost has been identified as a significant barrier, despite the fact that 'the whole life cost of reusable menstrual management products can be significantly lower than disposable alternatives' (Blair, Bajón-Fernández, and Villa 2022, 6). Studies have identified issues/problems in the utilisation of certain reusables in contexts where water scarcity is an issue (Fourcassier et al. 2022; Michel et al. 2022). Especially in low- and middle-income countries, economic inequality/period poverty forces many women and girls to manage their periods without adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities and/or with inconsistent access to period products (Harrison and Tyson 2023).

Beyond this, changing cultural habits and perspectives on menstruation can be challenging. The choices consumers make regarding sanitary products often depend on 'local social and cultural attitudes and infrastructures' (Fourcassier et al. 2022, 7). There exist disparities between those who live in communities where menstruation continues to be viewed as taboo, compared to those who are educated, and more independent (Fourcassier et al. 2022). Even where more choices are available, other factors may affect patterns of use. For example, internal menstrual products such as tampons and menstrual cups may be considered culturally inappropriate in some communities (Harrison and Tyson 2023). Finally, lack of understanding of the environmental impact of single-use products can be a barrier to the uptake of reusables.

With studies showing ongoing low levels of awareness, a clear line has been drawn between higher levels of environmental awareness and a higher likelihood of individuals using eco-friendly products (Harrison and Tyson 2023). This matters given the scale of the problem: disposable products contain plastic and non-renewable materials (Baskaya, Bidik, and Yolcu 2024), and the most commonly used sanitary pad takes an estimated 500–800 years to decompose (Ahuja and Singh 2024; Baskaya, Bidik, and Yolcu 2024). Each woman able to access sanitary products is estimated to use ‘10,000 sanitary napkins and 15,000 tampons’ over her menstrual cycle (Ahuja and Singh 2024, 630). Taken together, this literature suggests that while eco-friendly menstrual products offer a route towards more affordable and sustainable menstruation management (Ahuja and Singh 2024; Baskaya, Bidik, and Yolcu 2024), their uptake remains constrained by low awareness and persistent stigma (Haneman 2021; Kubovski and Shabot 2024) – a tension this study examines in the Fijian context

This study adopts an analytical framework that positions financial cost, sociocultural stigma, and environmental sustainability as interdependent dimensions of period poverty, rather than as discrete categories to be assessed in isolation. Case study data are analysed for the ways in which these dimensions reinforce or offset one another within a given community, rather than for their prevalence taken separately. This lens is applied consistently across the four case study communities, allowing local variation in how cost, stigma, and environmental awareness intersect to be identified and compared.

## Methodology and methods

Fieldwork was undertaken in Fiji during May 2025 as part of a qualitative research study conducted by the two authors. It had originally been intended to use semi-structured interviews and participant observation as primary data collection methods. However, during preparatory work for the study, it became apparent that conventional approaches such as these would not be effective, and talanoa method would be more appropriate.

Talanoa—literally to speak (*tala*) into space (*noa*)—is a form of storytelling and conversational exchange unique to Pacific cultural communication, particularly but not exclusively in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Hawaii (Hollis 2026). As a form of communication it has ancestral roots as a culturally grounded form of dialogue and knowledge sharing. Within contemporary research, Pacific scholars have developed talanoa as an Indigenous research methodology, with Vaoleti (2006) widely recognised for introducing it into academic research contexts. Talanoa emphasises Pacific values such as relationality, reciprocity, empathy, respect for cultural protocols, and collective participation (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014; Keil 2021). Rather than prioritising detached data collection, it encourages open and relational dialogue grounded in trust and lived experience. Recent scholarship has further used talanoa to centre Pacific women’s voices and experiences (Gibbons et al. 2024). In this study, the approach informed the conversational and relational aspects of the fieldwork, with attention paid to local cultural protocols and community-defined spaces in which to encourage open discussion.

A total of four talanoa sessions were conducted with Fijian communities located in the highlands of the country. A local non-governmental organisation, Earth Sisters Fiji, with established relationships with local communities facilitated access and recruitment.<sup>1</sup> Partnership with Earth Sisters enabled access to be agreed to local communities which are often protective and do not permit external visitors without prior consent.

Prior to the fieldwork, ethical approval for the study was received from the Ethics Committee at the University of Lancashire (BAHSS3 01301). The research protocol and its deployment within the field sought to ensure that the study would not reproduce colonial research dynamics and would respect community ownership. Within the local context, Earth Sisters functions as an aid provider, and development donors are expected to uphold recipient ownership principles (Lim 2022). The research practice during fieldwork adhered to these principles. During talanoa sessions, the research team shared knowledge with participants while simultaneously learning from local knowledge systems and cultural practices.

Initially, the research team had not planned to include girls under the age of 18. However, it proved challenging to control who participated in the talanoa, and some younger women who were menstruating voluntarily participated. They were accompanied by their mothers, who wanted their daughters to be included in the discussion. All participants were informed that parts of the conversation

would be published in a research article, and that information such as names would not be shared when citing the discussion. Only those who agreed to this took part in the talanoa, while others remained present but silent during each of the sessions.

Risk management, including health and safety considerations during fieldwork, was also addressed. Personal data were not shared externally unless explicit consent was obtained, and only data necessary for the research were collected. The research was undertaken by two female researchers (SL and KM) with prior experience in culturally sensitive and community-based fieldwork. The first author has extensive experience in development studies and previous research on period poverty and marginalised communities in multiple contexts, including in North Korea, Palestine, Nepal, and Myanmar. The second author is an anthropologist with previous fieldwork experience in Fiji and familiarity with the local cultural contexts. In order to respect local cultural practices, both researchers wore traditional Fijian dress when visiting each community.

## Case study

Fieldwork was conducted in Namoka settlement; Nasaibitu village; Naituvatuvatu village; and Nalidi village. All four locations are situated in rural inland settings, surrounded by hills, forests, and river systems, and are distant from major towns and cities in Fiji. They are difficult to access, requiring travel on unsealed roads. Residents in these areas have limited access to transport, markets, and healthcare services. Namoka and Naituvatuvatu are smaller in population size compared to the other two communities. Upon arrival, the team paid a courtesy visit to the head of each village or settlement. Meetings with women and girls for the talanoa discussions were only possible after this formal meeting with community leaders.

To provide some national context for the cost pressures raised by participants across all four communities, the prices of popular sanitary product brands in three major supermarket chains in Nadi and Suva were recorded and compared with published prices (Table 1). For reference, the national minimum wage has been FJD 5 per hour since 1 April 2025. As the price of single-use sanitary products has risen, families struggling to meet basic needs have, in some cases, prioritised food over sanitary pads (Nielson 2020).

### Namoka

Namoka is located in Naitasiri Province, in the highlands of Fiji, inland from the Kings Road. It is a small settlement of approximately 70 people, consisting of one extended family. Residents have constructed their own houses, communal facilities, and farms independently. Six women, four children, and one menstruating girl attended the talanoa discussion.

As part of the customary welcome, the research team members were adorned with flower garlands placed around their necks. After the ceremony, the settlement head and another male member remained present in the common hall during the talanoa session. While the women spoke openly during the discussion, the two men neither participated nor observed the session actively, but remained in the same space.

In Namoka, before the Earth Sisters introduced reusable pads, women and girls used sanitary napkins by combining four hand-sized pieces of cloth to increase absorbency. However, this was only possible when they could afford to purchase such products. When napkins were unavailable, they used alternative materials readily accessible to them, such as used clothing, avoiding single-use products due to cost constraints. Women in Namoka were unfamiliar with reusable pads prior to their distribution by the Earth

**Table 1.** Single-use sanitary product prices in Fiji (FJD).

| Single-Use Sanitary Products | Cost in 2017 | Cost in 2024–2025 |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Libra Maternity              | 4.54         | 4.60–4.65         |
| Libra Super                  | 3.40         | 4.15–4.35         |
| U-Kotex Regular              | N/A          | 8.50–9.25         |
| Kotex Regular                | 4.26         | 4.75–4.95         |
| Softex                       | 1.64         | 2.10              |
| Protex Her's                 | 2.29         | 2.25              |

Source: Authors, based on IWDA, Burnet Institute, and WaterAid (2021, 20) and fieldwork

Sisters. When discussing changes before and after adopting the reusable pads, participants strongly emphasised the financial benefits. The use of reusable pads enabled them to reduce expenditure on single-use products and napkins. It also became clear that reusable pads were used not only by menstruating women but also by menopausal women, particularly during travel, due to urinary incontinence.

When discussing whether menstruation could be spoken about with male family members, younger female participants stated that they openly discussed periods within the family but not with male colleagues at work. They explained that speaking about menstruation with fathers, uncles, brothers, and husbands was no longer considered taboo. However, workplace conversations were viewed differently. One participant stated:

If male colleagues hear about me having periods, they would be disgusted. Thus, I do not talk about it in public, but only to my husband. I can talk to my husband about my period cramps, even though he does not know what to do with it, but I never talk about my period cramps to male colleagues at work (Talanoa Quote A 2025).

In contrast, members of the older generation in the settlement continued to regard menstruation as taboo. For example, the eldest woman spoke very quietly and secretively about menstruation, stating that she never discussed it with male members of the village. A younger woman in her early 30s, by comparison, spoke in a normal tone, despite the presence of two male community members in the hall where the talanoa took place.

A 15-year-old menstruating girl commented: 'I do not talk about it with boys because it is private. I talk with girl friends only. I talk with mom but not with dad (Talanoa Quote B 2025)'. When asked why, she added: 'I do not know the reason why'. She also described harassment and teasing in schools, which in some cases was linked to absenteeism. Similarly, fear of teasing in the workplace has led some women to impose self-avoidance strategies in relation to male colleagues, thereby affecting equal participation at work. The research team also asked about hygiene, access to clean water, and the availability of secure facilities for changing pads. Not all schools or workplaces provide adequate toilets and water facilities.

The talanoa discussion generated limited dialogue on hygiene practices, with participants expressing confidence in their practices insofar as toilet facilities were available. Mindful of imposing external standards, the research team did not press the topic further, drawing instead on their own observations of the settlement's toilet facilities during the visit. The settlement had two shared outdoor toilet cubicles alongside individual household cubicles. The research team was invited to use one considered among the cleanest: a small, well-maintained space with a flushing toilet but no electric lighting, handwashing basin, or running water, secured only by a movable nail rather than a lock.

Water scarcity constrained the washing of reusable pads. Used pads were sometimes kept until clean water became available, or taken to nearby streams alongside other laundry, with residents relying on distant water sources and rainwater collection. Heavy flow days made washing particularly difficult, and some participants admitted being tempted to discard pads rather than wash them, as they had previously done with napkins. Drying was similarly linked to hygiene, given the risk of retained bacteria or mould in incompletely dried fabric. While Earth Sisters emphasised thorough drying before reuse, and participants were broadly aware of this, understanding of the importance of washing pads promptly after use appeared more limited.

On waste disposal, participants described burning or burying menstrual waste, including napkins, but had not considered the environmental implications of reusable pads specifically. Only one participant, a schoolteacher, had prior awareness of climate change or environmental protection.

### **Nasaibitu**

Nasaibitu is located in the Wainibuka district of Tailevu Province, approximately a 30-minute drive from Namoka. It is a larger village in terms of population. Upon arrival, the research team found the men were attending a village meeting in one of the two village halls. As is customary in Fijian villages, the research team was asked to wait until the head of the village had finished the meeting.

Unlike Namoka, where the community which consisted of one extended family and conversation was relatively relaxed, Nasaibitu had a more formal atmosphere. Following the formal greeting, without the

presentation of flower garlands on this occasion, the research team was seated in the other community hall, where 35 village women, nine menstruating daughters, and 23 children (nine boys and 14 girls) were present. One participant explained that the hall was referred to as the 'talanoa' space when it is used for discussion.

Before the introduction of reusable pads, women in Nasaibitu, like those in Namoka, were unaware of the existence of such products. They had used cloths, napkins, and towels, often reused materials, rather than commercially produced single-use pads. They reported that menstruation was discussed only with husbands, not with brothers or fathers. Some boys attended the talanoa session with their mothers. Those who understood the topic appeared embarrassed and shy. Participants stated that discussing menstruation with men remained taboo in the village. One woman explained the intergenerational transmission of silence by saying, 'because mom of mom of mom tell not to tell (Talanoa Quote C 2025)'.

Toilet facilities in Nasaibitu were broadly similar to those in Namoka. However, the construction materials varied according to household economic status. Poorer families used aluminium panels for toilet walls, while wealthier households had cemented brick walls. In all cases, toilet spaces were very small, had limited natural light, and did not contain a water basin. In the two toilets used by the research team, it was difficult to find a place for handwashing immediately after use.

Most women reported hiding reusable pads or cloths which were washed and then hung out to dry by placing them beneath other clothes or inside the house. As a result, the relatively thick reusable pads did not always dry out completely. Women expressed uncomfortable about drying sanitary products openly, as they feared that passers-by might see them. During periods of heavy menstrual flow, washing reusable pads or cloths was described as particularly challenging. Some women said they were sometimes tempted to discard used pads, fearing that menstrual blood in washing water might be seen by others.

When the conversation turned to sanitary waste and environmental impact, participants stated that they had not heard about climate change or environmental protection. As most had not previously used single-use sanitary products, they had limited experience of managing disposable menstrual waste.

### ***Naituvatu***

Naituvatu is also located in the Wainibuka district of Tailevu Province, in the highlands of the country. It neighbours Nalidi, with a road separating the two villages which belong to different provinces, divided by an administrative boundary. Initially, the research team had assumed they were one large village. During the talanoa sessions, however, it became clear that they were separate communities. Earth Sisters had been unaware of this distinction, partly because both villages shared a primary school. Naituvatu did not have a village hall so the talanoa session was held at the village head's house.

In Naituvatu, before the arrival of reusable pads, women and girls had used single-use products and napkins. They had not previously known about reusable pads. As not all women and girls received reusable pads, however, some continued to use disposable products and napkins. The research team observed that girls who had received reusable pads tended to show them to peers who had not. Because the pads were distributed in three different designs and colours, they were perceived as fashionable items.

Participants stated that menstruation was not considered taboo in their village. Breastfeeding also took place openly in the presence of men. This openness extended to menstrual hygiene practices. Unlike in Nasaibitu, women reported that it was acceptable to hang reusable pads outdoors to dry. The research team observed pads and napkins drying openly alongside other laundry, allowing them to dry thoroughly in sunlight and fresh air.

Toilet facilities were similar to those in Namoka and Nasaibitu. However, there was a groundwater pump located outside the toilet, which the research team used, enabling handwashing after use. Although single-use products and napkins had previously been burned or buried, participants did not associate this practice with environmental concerns.

## Nalidi

Nalidi is located in the Nakorotubu district of Ra Province, a remote highland area. To give birth, for example, women must travel approximately 7 kilometres from the village. As one participant explained, 'sometimes [the] baby dies because we do not have transportation all the time (Talanoa Quote D 2025)'. It was the largest of the four villages, with a population of 361. Due to its size and remoteness, Nalidi had a village nurse, a government-appointed health worker. Nevertheless, the nurse's role was limited. She could provide basic medication such as 'paradol' and make emergency calls, although mobile reception was often unreliable. The nurse came from the same village and reportedly received a monthly wage of FJD 200, although payments were sometimes delayed due to government budget constraints.

Unlike in the previous three villages, not all participants in Nalidi spoke English. Interpretation was provided by bilingual villagers. 30 women attended the talanoa session, accompanied by 10 children. The women had not previously received reusable pads, although their daughters had been given them at school. Women learned about reusable pads from their daughters' experiences. According to the village nurse, 73 additional women who were absent from the talanoa session due to housework commitments were also in need of reusable pads. Participants noted that menstruation had previously been considered taboo but, 'now, we can talk about it more freely than before as men encouraged us to use reusable pads (Talanoa Quote E 2025)', to reduce financial burdens.

According to the village nurse, educational sessions conducted by Medical Services Pacific, involving both men and women, contributed to improved dialogue about menstruation within the community. At school, however, sex education sessions were conducted separately for boys and for girls, as national education policy fell outside the scope of what an organisation such as Medical Services Pacific could provide. After-school 'gender meetings' for girls covered menstruation and included advice such as drinking more water, reducing sugar intake, and moderating food consumption supposedly to alleviate inflammation during menstruation.

Although Nalidi appeared to be economically better resourced than the other villages, toilet conditions were broadly similar. Water sources were not located adjacent to individual toilets. Instead, groundwater pumps were located centrally within the village, with three additional pumps situated at the periphery. Due to time constraints, the research team was unable to explore practices related to the drying of reusable pads or the environmental implications of using reusable menstrual products within the village.

## Discussion

While much of the existing literature has highlighted social stigma as a sociocultural aspect of period poverty, analysis of data collected from the four Fijian communities visited by the research team suggest a more nuanced picture. There was variation between villages in terms of the extent to which menstruation was seen as taboo. These differences seem to be influenced by variations in population size, kinship structures, levels of community formality, and exposure to MHM education initiatives. Smaller settlements characterised by closer family relationships appeared more open to discussion about menstruation, whereas larger and more formal village settings maintained stronger norms of silence and privacy. Regardless of community size, generational differences were evident. Menstruation was often considered shameful by members of the older generation, while younger girls still tended not to speak about it openly but only with each other.

Cultural stigma surrounding menstruation significantly affected MHM practices. Girls and women were able to dry reusable pads and menstrual napkins openly only in contexts where menstruation was not treated as taboo. In communities where stigma remained strong, women often hid reusable pads while drying them, resulting in insufficient drying and potential hygiene concerns. Menstrual stigma therefore acted as a barrier to hygienic and sustainable menstrual management. At the same time, changes were evident in communities where menstruation had previously been considered taboo, following the distribution of free reusable sanitary pads. As menstrual products represent a financial burden on many households, the availability of low or no cost reusable pads reduced household financial pressure. This is significant given that government support has proved limited and structurally constrained: a 2021 Menstrual Hygiene Management Programme provided vouchers for over 50,000 girls (Akbar [n.d.](#)), but

participants indicated distribution occurred only once, despite the monthly nature of menstrual need, making Earth Sisters' free of charge, ongoing provision especially welcomed. Such support also offsets women's constrained financial autonomy, as economic participation among women in Fiji remains limited, with many reliant on male partners for financial support (Gigov 2023), and entrenched gender norms continuing to concentrate financial control in male hands despite government commitments to gender equality (OCHA 2017; UN Women 2022). This created greater opportunities for both men and women to discuss menstruation more openly within families and communities. In addition, MHM education sessions involving both men and women appeared to encourage dialogue about menstruation.

However, while reusable sanitary pads contributed to reducing financial burdens and encouraging greater openness regarding menstruation, this shift was not necessarily accompanied by improvements in MHM infrastructure. With the exception of one village, the communities studied did not have access to clean water adjacent to toilet facilities. Due to inconsistent water supply and limited sanitation infrastructure, women and girls often faced difficulties washing reusable pads and menstrual napkins appropriately. Some participants expressed a preference for discarding menstrual products rather than reusing them because of these challenges.

Fiji has made progress in strengthening national Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) programmes, including Minimum Standards on WASH in Schools Infrastructure and, more recently, National WASH Cluster Standards that provide for a minimum hygiene kit containing menstrual materials (Huggett et al. 2023). By 2017, 90 per cent of schools nationally had access to improved water sources, although disparities between urban and rural areas were believed to persist (UNICEF 2017)—a pattern more recent sources continue to note despite limited official data (UNICEF 2025). This is consistent with observations from the four remote fieldwork sites visited by the research team, which indicated comparatively lower levels of awareness of, and access to, water and sanitation services in these inland communities. Although Fijian government policies recognise the importance of adequate toilet and water facilities in schools and workplaces, the findings suggest that practical MHM challenges in geographically remote communities remain to be addressed. While girls and women generally considered toilet availability acceptable, many were less aware of the importance of immediate access to clean water for effective MHM.

Awareness of the environmental implications of menstrual waste and the environmental advantages of reusable products remained limited in all four communities. These findings indicate that environmental sustainability alone may not be sufficient to encourage wider adoption of reusable menstrual products in remote rural contexts unless broader infrastructural and sociocultural challenges, such as inconsistent water access and persistent menstrual stigma, are also addressed.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Relying on the use of talanoa rather than structured surveys meant some demographic details, such as accurate settlement population figures, rest on estimates rather than verified data. Participants' limited awareness of climate change and the environmental implications of reusable products also restricted the depth of analysis possible on this theme. The purposive sample of four remote highland communities' limits generalisability to other Fijian and Pacific contexts, and the presence of male community leaders during some sessions, along with reliance on interpretation in Nalidi, may have shaped participants' responses. Time constraints further meant some topics, such as drying practices, could not be explored as fully in every community.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how sociocultural stigma, environmental awareness, and structural constraints interact to shape menstrual hygiene practices in rural Fijian communities. The findings confirm that stigma persists but varies by community size and generational attitude, and that free reusable pads reduced financial burdens and encouraged more open dialogue within families, though less so within schools and workplaces. Economic considerations, rather than environmental awareness, remain the dominant drivers of product choice, indicating that sustainability messaging alone is unlikely to shift practice in the absence of broader change.

These findings point to several practical and research priorities. With respect to practice and policy, interventions should extend mixed-gender MHM dialogue into schools and workplaces, alongside continued investment in rural water and sanitation infrastructure. For research, further work is needed on community-level water and waste management strategies, the processes that reduce menstrual taboos over time, more in-depth investigation of environmental awareness and attitudes towards reusable products within rural Pacific contexts, and comparative studies across other Pacific Island states, such as the Solomon Islands.

## Note

1. Earth Sisters Fiji is an Australian-based not-for-profit social enterprise that provides reusable sanitary pads to women and girls in Fiji and Vanuatu. In Fiji, the pads are manufactured locally in Nadi and are either sold at cost or distributed free of charge through partnerships with organisations such as Medical Services Pacific. Through its work, Earth Sisters aims to improve access to sustainable menstrual products while promoting environmentally friendly menstrual management and supporting women and girls through education and community engagement. The Earth Sisters' reusable pads distribution work in Fiji is funded by the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, a UK-registered international development charity.

## AI use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (GPT-5.6) for language editing and proofreading purposes only, including checking clarity, and grammar. No generative AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, interpretation, or content generation, and all AI-assisted edits were reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript as published.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Sojin Lim**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Kate Martin**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Data availability statement

Data to support the findings of this study, including talanoa transcripts and field notes, are not publicly available due to the personal and sensitive nature of the material and the terms of participant consent, but anonymised excerpts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval.

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#### Talanoa Quotes

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