

# THE CASE FOR BETTER MENSTRUAL WASTE SERVICING AND EDUCATION IN CAPE TOWN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

## About the research

This research has explored how women in Khayelitsha's BM Section manage menstruation and how City sanitation and solid waste conditions affect this. Conducted in late 2025, this research used interviews and PhotoVoice to understand women's experiences of menstruation and sanitation. Findings highlight that women's coping strategies are driven by the need for privacy, dignity, and safety, often in response to unhygienic shared facilities and stigma. Effective policy must be informed by women's needs.

## The live reality: Barriers to dignity and safety

### Privacy and Stigma



Women take extreme measures to hide menstrual waste due to fear of social judgement.

### Safety and Violence Risk



Lack of private facilities forces women to wait until dark, increasing risk of violence.

### Hygiene and Health Concerns



Shared toilets are often unhygienic, raising fears of infection and waste exposure.

Participants' choices and coping strategies are driven by their physical and social context. The lack of adequate sanitation, waste disposal, privacy, and education lead women to find their own ways to stay clean, safe and dignified during menstruation often under very challenging conditions.

# PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

## PRIVATE AND SECURE INFRASTRUCTURE

Private, secure bins with lids in toilet cubicles and in or near homes, to dispose of menstrual products



## IMPROVED SANITATION ACCESS

Access to household toilets or safer and more hygienic shared facilities.

## DEDICATED DRAINAGE SPACES

Safe, private spaces to dispose of menstrual bathing water.



## EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Education on menstruation helps women recognize normal flow and pain, and know when to seek medical advice.

## EDUCATION FOR BOYS AND MEN

It's also crucial for boys and men to learn about menstruation to help them be supportive



### For more information

Christina Culwick Fatti  
cculwickfatti@uwc.ac.za



### Funding

Matariki Network of Universities



### Research Partners

Fiona Anciano (UWC), Dani Barrington (UWA), Christina Culwick Fatti (UWC) & Carolyn Prouse (Queen's University)

# Emerging themes from women in BM Section

## Privacy, dignity and stigma

Many participants feel it is important to keep menstruation private—especially from men. They expressed embarrassment and fear of being judged as “dirty” if others see menstrual blood or used pads. This sense of shame means women often go to great lengths to hide what they are doing, such as diluting waste water (so that it isn’t red/pink) before throwing it away, going out after dark to dump bucket water, or disposing of pads discreetly. Cleanliness is closely linked to dignity and respect for oneself.

## Safety and accessibility of sanitation

Some women are using buckets in their homes for urination, defecation and/or menstrual hygiene because of safety concerns. This is common at night, but for some women even during the day, because it is considered unsafe or embarrassing to walk to shared toilets. Some participants wait until dark to dispose of waste to avoid being seen, even though this increases the risk of violence.

## Gender roles and support

Menstruation is considered a woman’s responsibility to manage privately. While some men and boys offer support, such as buying pads or helping with pain relief, many men are openly hostile and make disapproving remarks if they see women disposing of used pads or menstrual blood. Participants described that men need better education about menstruation to reduce stigma and promote understanding.

## Cleanliness, health and hygiene

Participants described challenges in keeping clean during menstruation, especially when they can’t change pads or bathe as often as they want. Shared toilets were sometimes described as unhygienic or unsafe; women are concerned that using them, particularly during menstruation, may lead to infection. They were also concerned about children, men, and dogs coming into contact with menstrual waste.

## Beliefs and menstrual literacy

Some participants described traditional or cultural beliefs around menstruation, such as fears that menstrual blood can be used for witchcraft. Some use home remedies, like vinegar or aspirin, to try to manage pain, reduce flow, or stop their periods. Many, especially younger women, use contraceptives to manage their flow.

## Managing menstruation in different spaces

Women use a mix of spaces and strategies for bathing, washing, and disposal. Shared toilets, drains, bins, and buckets are all used, depending on access, privacy, and cleanliness. There were complaints about dogs and children accessing waste from bins and about poor waste management overall.

# Menstrual health: Beyond products and toilets

The United Nations recognises good menstrual health as a human right. Achieving it goes beyond simply providing menstrual products or basic toilets. Women and girls need access to clean, safe, and private facilities for washing and disposing of menstrual materials, affordable and appropriate products, timely education about menstruation, and supportive healthcare and social environments.

Many government programs focus on distributing pads or providing toilets, but these efforts often fall short. They frequently overlook how social norms, cultural expectations, and the lived experiences of women and girls shape their needs. Effective menstrual health policy must be informed by what women say they actually require to manage menstruation with dignity, safety and comfort.

The City of Cape Town provides residents with access to toilets, where households can use a range of shared sanitation - including sewerled ablution block and container toilets - or small stand-alone household toilets where human waste goes into containers which are cleaned by the City. The City also provides for solid waste management, where households place their rubbish in central locations for regular collection.

