

# Caring for the Other Half

PhotoVoice stories  
of menstruation



# Caring for the other half: PhotoVoice stories of menstruation from Khayelitsha

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The Caring for the Other Half project explores how sanitation systems shape women's experiences of menstrual health in informal settlements. The United Nations recognises good menstrual health as a human right, but achieving this right requires more than simply providing menstrual products or toilets. Women and girls also need safe, clean and private spaces to wash, change and dispose of menstrual waste, as well as supportive social environments and access to information about menstruation.

This project focuses on BM Section in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, where many residents rely on shared sanitation and communal waste services provided by the City of Cape Town. Across BM section, many of these sanitation facilities are difficult to access and may be unclean or unsafe. In 2025, we worked with women residents to understand how sanitation infrastructure, social dynamics, and everyday practices shape their ability to manage menstruation.

Our project conducted interviews and PhotoVoice, a participatory method that uses photography to document lived experiences. Women participants took photographs that reflect the realities of managing menstruation in the context in which they live, then shared the stories behind these images in their own words. Our research found that women's daily coping strategies are shaped by concerns around privacy, safety, stigma, cleanliness and waste disposal. Participants highlighted the need for safer and more hygienic sanitation facilities, private and secure bins for menstrual waste, better disposal options, and more education for both women and men to reduce stigma and improve understanding of menstruation.

This photo essay contains images and captions from the 15 PhotoVoice participants from Khayelitsha. Together, the photographs and narratives provide important insight into the everyday realities of managing menstruation in contexts with limited sanitation infrastructure and services.



“This is our toilet. It is not safe. The toilets in BM are not safe, there is this dark place here. Imagine going to the toilet at night. It is not safe.”



“None of these toilets work, or the tap. The bucket is for carrying water from another tap which all of this takes 5 minutes and the water pressure is low. With this reality how can one throw a pad in here?”



“Toilets broken, not being used. Don’t serve the purpose they are meant to. These toilets are so dirty inside; they are located at the back of BM. These toilets don’t function at all; they are just there for decoration. It’s like they don’t exist anymore.”



“This was a toilet that is blocked – you can see the pad there, it is a container for rubbish. People put their rubbish here.”



“This is u-Mshengu. People use it to throw away their pads.”

“I love my portable toilet compared to the toilet that everyone uses. I don’t have to worry much about being infected in my toilet. We even mark the toilet waste holder using our child’s name, so when they go to collect the waste, we get the same one we had before.”



“My private space but I can’t use it during the day, only at night because there’s no door. I use it during the day to pour my bucket.”





“My sister uses this to put her pads in. It is safer to use a portable toilet. If she takes her pads and wrap them and put them in there then no one is exposed to the pads. These are taken to be cleaned every day.”



“It's one step away from the door. With the smell usually gets inside the house here from there.

If I can't throw the water in broad daylight, because there are people around, I have to put it there, where there is a bucket until it's nighttime so I can throw it away.”



“When you have to throw the water in the drain, you have to worry about the people and cars who are passing [seeing the menstrual water].”

“Because we do not have drains, we have to dispose of the period water on the road.

You have to throw the water with blood in a way that is not obvious... You know, sometimes other people, when they're on their period, have blood clots. So when they throw their water there, you will see the clots there, then the man will say it is disgusting, and women don't respect themselves..”





“When you are done to throw the bucket from the drain, you have to rinse your bucket and your hands, that’s our routine.”

“Can we fix water? Clean water is important. We are tired of struggling for water. When coming back from throwing away pads this tap doesn't work; it's difficult to wash hands after.”





“Development...The container was locked at night, so people were just putting their plastic bags outside it when the workers arrived in the morning. They take those plastics that were left outside, tie them up again, and throw them into the container.”

“This is the container where we kept our plastic rubbish. Although it is not 100% safe from the dogs damaging our rubbish.”





“This is the container where we put our rubbish – they take the rubbish and put in here. The kids and dogs come here. You see your pads lying there and you see them playing with it. If only we had proper bins so that they come straight to your place. Not good for children to be playing with blood.”

“This is a safer place than using a plastic bag on the floor because the dog will tear it up.”



“There is a pad, but the plastic is broken. This is a municipality bag. Some of the workers are men. This mustn't be exposed like this.”





“This is the back of our place. We also turn this place into a rubbish place. Our kids are playing here, so it is not safe for our children. There are lots of mouse and snakes. When we are on our periods we put our pads and put it in – dogs and children play with it.”

“This is a dumping site, but since the new contractor we don’t get the plastics. People use this area and children are playing here and getting sick. When I’m on menstruation we wrap in paper and throw here – it is smelly here in this place.”



“We should stop throwing our sanitary pads to the drains.”





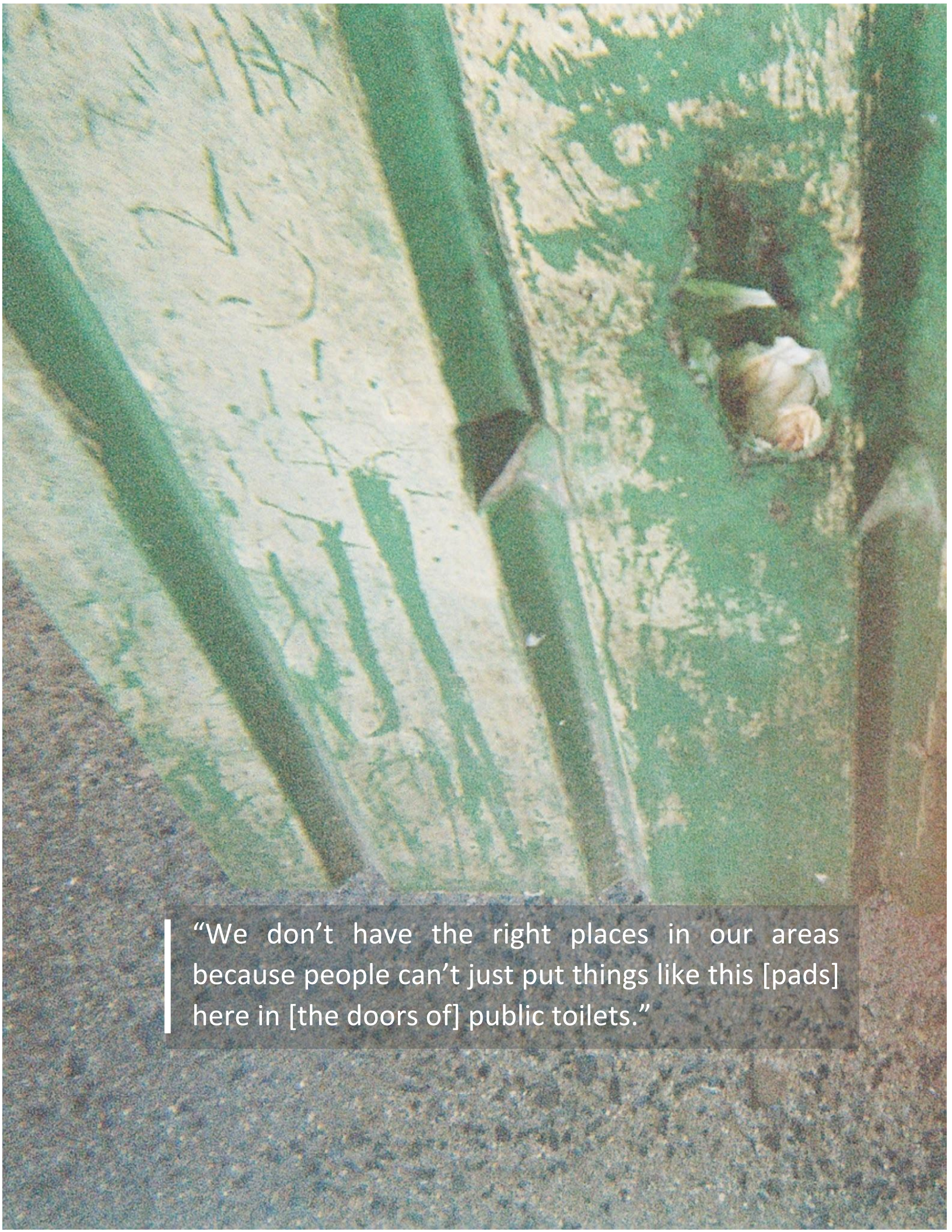
“These are babies’ nappies here. And even the food. There is a pad. There are too many rats running around. The dogs come and eat these nappies and come into our houses.”



“This way of disposing pads is not good. People should learn to wrap their pads and throw them into a plastic and then dispose of them. People can also use the flushing toilets to go and dispose of the menstrual blood, people don’t need to do this. Also, if you are going to use the bucket, close it so people don’t see it.”



“I like how I dispose the pads, burn the pads. Kids as well see that it’s good because there won’t be rats or dogs taking the pads, so for me it’s working.”

A photograph showing a close-up of a public toilet door. The door is painted a faded green and has a lock mechanism. A white sanitary pad is wedged into the lock, preventing the door from being closed. The pad is partially visible, with its ends protruding from the lock. The surrounding area is a dark, textured surface, likely the floor or a wall.

“We don’t have the right places in our areas because people can’t just put things like this [pads] here in [the doors of] public toilets.”



“People throw away their waste in this pathway, including pads.”

“We need to take further steps for our dumping sites, because it’s heartbreaking seeing someone who is a man at home, a father, a brother, losing his dignity on the dumpsite, trying to put something on the table.”





“She is taking her pad to the bin, but the father is using the same bin. It is not easy for a young girl to be on her period. They share a room and now they share a bin.”



“When someone has a problem with their menstruation at school, they shouldn’t be scared. Sometimes you don’t know when you are going to menstruate; it could be on the 1st or 3rd of the month. I wish they knew that when they see that their period has started, they could go and ask the teacher for help.”



“This is the back of the school. We usually use it for dumping and as a playground for the children. There is a sanitary pad there. The children pass through that and it is visible to them. No one is collecting those things there. Pads are private. Boys see blood, which is not hygienic to them. Some of the children may play with it. They want to play with it because they don’t know where it come from.”

“This is my boy and he is 13 years old. This is my niece, she is 25 years old. She is using a bucket when she is on her period, while my boy is in another room. When he needs the bucket he can see, because he is old enough to know she is on her period.”





“We keep our pads inside and my plastic bag stays inside until its full. The kids come and take the plastic with pads and play with them.”



“This area is not clean, it is very dirty - one of dirtiest areas in the community. Let’s say by mistake a child steps on that pad when they step on it, they can catch whatever disease is on it.”

“This place is a risk to the person staying in this house, when they step outside they are met with this dirtiness.

[Some women] take off their pads by the river and throw them there. This happens because they couldn't get to where they were going and can't go any further; they just throw it here or in the water.”





“The danger that the children face. The kids want to see what is happening there because of the pads that are thrown in the flowing water.”

This photo essay offers a glimpse into the everyday realities of managing menstruation in Khayelitsha, showing how women navigate limited sanitation infrastructure, stigma, safety concerns, and inadequate waste services with resilience and resourcefulness. Together, these stories and images highlight the daily challenges and coping strategies that shape menstrual health experiences in informal settlements, while underscoring the importance of dignity, privacy and inclusive sanitation governance.

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