

Periods In STEM: Challenges and Stigma

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Abstract

Despite decades of advocacy and progress in menstrual health, managing periods in workplaces or educational settings is still challenging. These difficulties are even amplified within STEM environments, where the physicality of work creates additional barriers. Long hours in laboratories, fieldwork conducted in remote locations, and limited access to suitable facilities all contribute to make it more difficult for those who menstruate to work under equitable and supportive conditions.

To better understand the nature of these challenges, *STEM the Flow* launched an online research project using an anonymous survey to gather direct insights from scientists. The study included participants both menstruating and non-menstruating, to consider different perspectives and get information not only on the practical barriers but also on the personal perceptions related to menstruation in STEM. From the results of the survey, 65% of scientists participating reported not feeling comfortable talking about periods in STEM workplaces, and 20% said they have never discussed periods at work. When they did discuss periods, it was mainly to justify absences or leave, request menstrual products, or during fieldwork and expeditions. Among scientists who do not menstruate, 88% considered menstruation relevant to equity and inclusion in STEM, and 71% believed it affects productivity at work, yet over 70% reported not feeling well-informed about period-related challenges. All participants indicated they had never received menstrual education or training in the workplace, though 65% expressed interest in receiving it. These findings highlighted not only the stigma surrounding menstruation but also significant gaps in knowledge, practical support, and institutional policies necessary to allow scientists to manage their periods with safety and dignity.

Guided by these results, *STEM the Flow* outlined priority goals aimed at promoting a more equitable STEM culture. These include the creation of a targeted educational program and workshop series designed to bring comprehensive period education directly into STEM workplaces and institutions. The workshop is being developed in collaboration with the organisation *Better Cycles* (based in Denmark) and researchers from the *University of Glasgow*, who have expertise in workplace menstrual health. *STEM the Flow* also aims at developing practical solutions for fieldwork in remote settings and environments requiring extended work hours, as well as promoting workplace policies that acknowledge and accommodate menstrual needs.

Keywords: STEM workplace; menstrual equity; period stigma; survey; education