PERIOD POVERTY? SYSTEMIC OPPRESION.

In the arid reaches of Pokot, 15-year-old Soipan wakes to a world of dust and whispers. Her period arrived yesterday. She tears a strip from her mother's frayed leso wraps it between her legs, and prays it holds through the 7-kilometer walk to school. The sun blazes as she walks past thorny acacias, her bare feet sore but steady. She is determined to try and make it in time for Chemistry, her favourite subject. She musters some courage to drag herself to school despite the painful cramps and the worry of soiling her dress.

Just before Chemistry class is over, the cloth soaks through. Blood trickles down her thighs as the boys erupt in laughter. The teacher pauses his Chemistry lesson. "*Clean yourself, msichana,*" he says, tossing her a rag from the chalkboard. Soipan flees ashamed, her face buried in her hands. She doesn't return for a week. Again.

At home, her mother brews bitter herbs in a dented pot. "*This is womanhood,*" she says. "*Endure.*" But Soipan dreams of nursing school, of touching stethoscopes and sterile gloves. She hides a tattered biology textbook under her mattress, its pages filled with diagrams of the human heart. "*Why do you need this?*" her father barks when he finds it. "*You'll marry, not waste time.*"

At 17, her father marries her to a man with three cows. His hut smells of sour milk and sweat. On their wedding night, he grunts, "*Now make sons, not trouble.*" Books are for boys, girls are supposed to stay home and care for their families. Soipan's textbooks become kindling for the fire.

Fatuma's Twilight

300 miles south, in Nairobi's Kibera slum, 19-year-old Fatuma knows the price of a pad: 100 shillings. Or 10 minutes in a stranger's car. She learned this at 14, when the government's "free pads" never came, and Mr. Otieno, the shopkeeper, offered a trade. "*Quick, quiet,*" he'd say, his hands rough against

her school uniform. Now, she stands at the *kibanda* bar, sipping watered-down beer as men eye her like meat. Tonight's choice: sleep hungry or bleed freely.

She picks a man with gold-capped teeth. He drives her to a dim alley, where rats scuttle over sewage. "*Hurry,*" he growls. Fatuma closes her eyes and thinks of her mother, who scrubs floors for 200 shillings a day. "*Better me than her,*" she whispers. Afterward, he tosses coins at her feet. "*Buy your vifuko,*" he sneers. *Pads*.

She stuffs the money into her bra, avoiding mirrors. Fatuma once dreamed of tailoring school—of stitching gowns for brides, not scars on her skin. She'd saved for six months to buy a secondhand sewing machine, but when her brother fell sick, the money became medicine. Now, her hands mend torn shirts for neighbors, earning barely enough for rice.

When a clinic nurse hands her an HIV test, Fatuma tears it up. "*What's one more death?*" she mutters, pressing a soiled rag between her legs.

Both girls grew up hearing promises. In 2011, Kenya abolished VAT on pads, declaring them "essential." Politicians posed with glossy packages, smiling for cameras. "*A new dawn for our daughters!*" they proclaimed.

But in Pokot, a pack of pads costs two goats—half a family's wealth. "*Tax-free?*" Soipan's mother laughs bitterly. "*Another lie from Nairobi.*"

In Kibera, Fatuma's friend Amina uses goat hide as pads; her thighs are scarred from rashes. "*Better to risk disease than bleed through my skirt again,*" Fatuma says, showing Amina the coins from last night. Amina shakes her head. "*One day, you won't wake up.*"

Senator Gloria Orwoba tried to rewrite the tale. In 2023, she marched into Parliament with period-stained trousers, shouting, "*Look! This is our shame!*" Male colleagues covered their noses; women clapped. Orwoba launched pad drives, partnering with NGOs to distribute reusable kits. But Pokot and Kibera never saw them. "*Politics is slow,*" she admits. "*But girls bleed fast.*"

Kenya's menstrual health policies—a VAT exemption on pads in 2011, the Sanitary Towels Program in 2017—are hollow victories. Corruption diverts funds; funds meant for this programs are used to buy new cars and for vacations while girls like Soipan bury bloodied rags and Fatuma trades her body for scraps of dignity. Women legislators, draped in privilege, remain largely silent. Those that do speak up, are met with misogynistic comments and mockery from their male counterparts and the story ends there.

If policies matched promises, Soipan would study nursing under a solar-lit classroom, her textbooks free of ash stains. Fatuma's sewing machine would hum in a sunlit shop, her hands crafting beauty, not bartering it. Boys, unchained from biology, sprint toward horizons girls are told don't belong to them. Equality isn't written in law—it's woven through enforcement, through classrooms where no girl hides, clinics where no woman bleeds in shame. Until then, Kenya's pledges remain ink on paper, as fleeting as the hope in a teenager's eyes.