



Racheal Hendershot, PharmD student
University of Findlay, Findlay, OH 45840
Email – hendershotr@findlay.edu

THE PANDEMIC AND PERIOD POVERTY: COVID-19'S BLOODY MARK ON THE WAR ON WOMEN'S BODIES

“Period poverty” was a term that I had not heard until few months ago. Growing up in a lower middle-class family, I had faced financial insecurity countless times before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I have always been fortunate enough to have access to period products. I have always viewed them as a necessity, like my grocery bill or rent payment. How else would I be able to show up to class or work and perform my best if I did not feel confident and clean? My perception of women's health in the US changed when I had to consider how my health needs would change while I traveled to India for a pharmacy rotation next year. To find out whether I needed to pack these items on my trip to India - I googled “access to pads in India” as a string search. This led me to the discovery about period poverty around the world – and the fact that some of the greatest attacks on women's health needs have been taking place at my home country – in USA!

India has been actively fighting against its own “period poverty” over the past decades. Significant progress has been made on changing the stigma around menstrual education for young girls and changing accessibility of period products in Indian

schools. Menstruation is one of the main reasons that young girls are absent from school or unable to participate in sports. According to a study done in Delhi in 2018, 65% of over 600 school-age girls reported that menstruation affected their daily activities and caused them to miss school due to pain, anxiety, shame and staining of their uniform¹. Over 10-20% of school time is missed by menstruating school-age girls that do not have proper menstruation education or access to period products. Some studies suggest that over 70% of young girls in India and other Asian countries are unaware of the natural physiology of menstruation and lack education on this subject - until they experience their first menstruation². Poor sanitation in schools and limited access to period products greatly affects menstruating girls and jeopardizes their equal access to quality education. This awareness in the society has given rise to “Clean India: Clean Schools” movement¹. Back in 2018, India launched the Ujjwala Sanitary Napkin initiative to make low-cost period products more accessible³. Many Indian schools now include sanitation dispensers in the female bathrooms, increasing access to period products for young girls.

However, the lockdown that followed the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the challenges faced by young girls in accessing these essential items. With millions of young girls now staying home during lockdown, this financially vulnerable population was cut off from affordable and easy access to period products in schools. Reports from rural areas suggest that young girls have taken to limiting their food and water intake in an attempt to reduce their need for menstrual products caused by the scarcity of sanitary napkins - potentially damaging their long-term health². The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the gender economic inequality for women in India's predominantly patriarchal economy, as women and young girls in rural areas are dependent upon male family members for the purchase of necessities, including period products.



Moreover, many sanitary napkin production facilities have been temporarily renovated into makeshift personal protective equipment (PPE) facilities to keep up with the demand of hospitals and medical facilities worldwide during the pandemic². The effect of the COVID-19 virus on the scarcity of “period products” in India is projected to extend for years past resolution of the pandemic and rebound of India’s economy.

Despite the stirring movement in India against its widespread period poverty, the stigma around menstruation will take a lot longer to change. There is still much taboo shrouding the conversation on period poverty in India because many taboo traditions persist inside and outside of the home. In some areas of India, young girls are kept home from school, not allowed to participate in sports or swimming, and are isolated to certain parts of the house during their menstruation each month¹⁻³. In some religious cultures, menstruating girls are not allowed inside of temples or kitchens to participate due to their perception of being unclean³. The stigma surrounding menstruation is being challenged by gender equality and sanitation movements, but progress is slow.

In contrast to India, other countries have been more successful in their push back attempts on the war on women’s health. In 2019, Scotland became the first nation to have free universal access to period products⁴. Local authorities were mandated to ensure access to period products for all individuals that need them as one of the ways that they combat gender inequalities, and the financial insecurity onset by the COVID-19 pandemic. Scotland has a reputation for being progressive country when it comes to gender equality and minority rights. The population of Scotland is less than that of New York City, and its small size is one of the major factors that enables Scotland to

enact progressive measures⁴. As a result, Scotland’s model may not be possible in the United States at the federal level - however, States should be capable of enacting laws providing better access to period products.

The individual states of the United States are at odds over their policy for women’s health needs. The variation in state laws has placed pressure on millions of families struggling to make ends meet, especially under the added financial pressure of COVID-19. In an attempt to provide relief -, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act included a provision allowing for money from health saving and flexible spending accounts to be spent on period products in an attempt to make them more affordable⁴.

While this was a step in the right direction, not every woman or young girl has a health saving or flexible spending account, thus negating any benefit for millions of girls and women who were in desperate need. The New York Times interviewed a woman named Diamond Cotton during the COVID-19 pandemic as she spoke out about how her family was struggling to afford period products for herself and her two pre-teenage daughters. She reported that period products cost her family \$50 a month to meet her families’ menstrual needs. Her story is not unique, and it is not unique to the financial burden of the COVID-19 pandemic⁴.

State laws have been a frontier for war on women’s health needs for years. There are only 6 states that mandate access to period products in schools, and only 13 states that mandate access in prisons and jails for female inmates. In stark contrast, there are over 30 states that have a sales tax on period products because period products are perceived as a luxury item and deserving of a luxury tax⁴. There is nothing luxurious about the missed educational and work opportunities missed by women and



young girls every month on behalf of unmet menstrual needs. Young girls' population is most disproportionately affected by these taxes because they have the least control over their bodies or access to money to pay for these products. They are the most likely population of menstruating individuals to suffer from inconsistent or limited access to hygiene problems, and the most likely to suffer the mental burden of the stigma and shame associated with menstruation¹⁻⁴. Yet too few states are taking action to protect this vulnerable population of young girls. The menstrual cycle of a young girl is both volatile and unpredictable. I can attest to the shame and loss of confidence that comes with having to wad up cheap school toilet paper into a makeshift pad. The shame and taboo that surround menstruation can strip a young girl of her confidence and dignity. While individual states are a political battle ground for women's bodies, they are also the frontier where change needs to happen immediately – as it is both the basic and human rights issue for all Women in the world.

The war on women's health needs is being fought in countries all around the world, and close to home. While access to period products may be bleaker in countries like India or Asian countries, political and social movement groups in these countries are making progress at advocating for change. The United States is lagging shamefully behind other countries and has not taken extensive measures to battle period poverty. The population that is most effected by the inconsistent women's health frontier in the United States are school-age girls. Feeling clean and feeling confident should not be a luxury for school children. There is hope for change that has come out of the COVID-19 pandemic as the financial burden and insecurity of period products has been brought to light. However, until state legislators get more involved in protecting our

female youth from the worst side of period poverty there will continue to be more bloodshed in vain in this war on women's bodies.

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