

The Global Spectrum of Menstrual Equity: Policy White Paper

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Abstract

I studied a course on social identity and public policy, which prompted me to reflect on my own identity as a woman. I chose to research menstruation, a topic that affects me personally. I found that menstrual equity policies vary globally, with some countries having more equitable policies regarding menstruation products, prices, and education, while others have less equitable ones. In my paper, I discuss how these policies affect different social identities, the history of menstrual stigma, the global spectrum of policies, and propose recommendations to address menstrual inequalities worldwide. It is crucial to recognize that hindering menstruators from safely managing their periods is discriminatory and a violation of human rights, as menstruation is a natural bodily function that predates social constructs.

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Gender as a Social Identity is Still Affected by Menstruation

Beginning in the 1980s, concentration on the complexities of gender identity has increased, acknowledging that, like many other social identities, gender has a strong cultural component, and is not a straightforward biological characteristic (van Breen et al., 2017, p. 2). Today, individuals identify as women, and even as feminists, no matter the gender they were assigned at birth (van Breen et al., 2017, p. 2). That leaves researchers with new questions to ask, such as, “What does it mean to be a member of the social category of women? What does it mean to be a woman in terms of relative status, social (in) equality, and disadvantage?” (van Breen et al., 2017, p. 2). An individual’s personal, social, and sometimes biological factors determine their gender identity, and this identification can affect their attitudes toward the socially shared aspect of gender group membership as well as affect others’ attitudes towards that individual (van Breen et al., 2017, p. 2). For example, period shaming is a consequence of the social construction of menstruation as an undesirable female bodily function, where periods are perceived as a strictly negative event that is dirty, disgusting, and icky (Bobel et al., 2020). Additionally, in increasingly gender-fluid spaces, safety concerns and a lack of access to period products are among the issues transgender and non-binary people face every month (Atkins, 2020). Thus, while some may believe that belonging to the category of women is not purely chosen but ascribed by others largely based on biological indicators, even new social identity constructions around gender are continually affected by menstruation and the impressive biological performance of the female body (van Breen et al., 2017, p. 7).

History of Menstrual Products and the Social Stigma Around Them

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Social thought surrounding menstruation varied by civilization, but menstruation fears and taboos have existed in many cultures despite a diversity of social and religious composition (Dalechek, 2020).

Ancient Civilizations (3000 BCE – 500 CE)

As far back as the ancient Egyptians, hieroglyphs on menstruation have been found and translated to gain useful information, such as the fact that tampons made with rolled-up cotton or based on soft papyrus were commonly used in ancient Egypt (Ahmed, 2022). The ancient Egyptians believed that menstrual blood had medicinal properties and was used as a remedy for breast ptosis (drooping breast tissue) and in many sorts of drugs, ointments, and salves (Ahmed, 2022; Martinez & Chung, 2022; Armstrong, 2021).

Some groups found that menstruation added value and status to a woman. In the ancient civilizations of the Babylonian, Hindu, and Chinese, menstruation was viewed as a sign of fertility and a positive omen for the home (Ahmed, 2022). Additionally, the Aztecs believed that the menstruating woman was the most important person and was treated with respect by society (Ahmed, 2022).

Our ancestors' negative thoughts surrounding a woman on her period are still common today, as are their period products. Menstruators in ancient Greece used sea sponges, which are still in use and are marketed today as natural tampons made of the finest Caribbean silk sea sponge that are comfortable, non-irritating, money-saving, and eco-friendly (Ahmed, 2022; Varnalis, n.d.). The etymology of the word hysteria actually connects to the Greeks and menstruation. Syndromes, especially during the Middle Ages, that were considered to be of a hysterical nature came to be conceived as “products of witchcraft”, demon possession, and sorcery that had historical associations with dissociative phenomena (Dalechek, 2020). The term

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hysteria was derived from the Greek word *hystera*, meaning uterus, and the underlying theory was that the uterus became displaced from its normal pelvic placement and wandered throughout the body, then this “wandering womb” created symptoms in the various places that it passed, thus causing “hysteria” (Dalechek, 2020). The stereotypical idea that any emotionality in women can be firstly attributed to their reproductive function developed from here (Bella, 2021).

Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that if a woman with her period looked into a mirror it would cloud over, such was her force during that time (Armstrong, 2021). According to Aristotle, menstruation not only affected her eyes, which are full of blood vessels after all, but also had the power to disturb and distort the air around her, forming an angry female cloud (Armstrong, 2021).

A belief that is held throughout history is that period blood has the power to damage a man (Armstrong, 2021). Ancient Romans feared the mystical power of menstruation, and Pliny the Elder, wrote that if a woman got her period during a solar or lunar eclipse, she could kill a man simply by having intercourse with him (Armstrong, 2021). He once wrote that hailstorms, whirlwinds, and lightning would be scared away by a woman uncovering her body while her monthly courses were upon her (Armstrong, 2021).

Post-classical Societies (500 CE – 1500 CE)

Many groups’ beliefs surrounding menstruation reveal prominent dichotomies, namely that of a woman on her period being dangerous and in need of isolation while also having spiritual powers which could heal many. In North America, the Cherokee people believed that menstrual blood gave women special powers that let them destroy their enemies because of how potent they became, also meaning that they might become a danger to the world at large (Armstrong, 2021).

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Women have shown much resilience throughout history in adapting their menstrual cycles to the styles and trends of the era. During medieval times in England, there was a lot of religious shame surrounding menstruation, so women on their menses would take precautionary measures to dispel any suspicions, such as wearing scented herbal pouches around the neck or waist to mask the odor of blood and carrying the remains of a cremated toad near their waste as a cramp remedy (Ahmed, 2022). Rags were used to control menstrual bleeding but were difficult to keep in place because underwear was not widely available at the time, so women wore shorts under their garments to try to avoid spilling and staining, or simply wore red (Ahmed, 2022). If women through the dawn of time have had menstrual cycles, why was menstruation not commonly discussed or accepted? Why have women had to hide their periods? As it turns out, menstruation was not as common or regular for menstruators as it is now (Ahmed, 2022). Women in the past reached menopause at a much younger age than today, some as early as their late thirties, and due to poor diets among most women at the time, many were underweight and had irregular cycles¹ that resulted in fewer periods (Ahmed, 2022).

The Modern Era (1500 – 1945)

The importance placed on research and development during this time period caused the introduction of new sanitary products for menstruation and new thought surrounding its purpose as humans began to understand the workings of their bodies. In 1540, English physician Thomas Raynold argued that surely blood could not be evil, and that menstruation was clearly an ingredient in fertility (Armstrong, 2021). The Hoosier sanitary belt, a cloth belt with a site to attach a washable and reusable sanitary pad, was invented and became extremely popular beginning in the 1890s (Ahmed, 2022). The first disposable pads were called lister's pads by

¹ These conditions are still prevalent today, affecting those with low body fat percentages, such as athletes and those affected by eating disorders like anorexia.

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Johnson&Johnson in 1888 (Ahmed, 2022). Dr. Earl Haas invented the tampon with an applicator in 1931, which made placement easier (Ahmed, 2022).

Although kept quiet from the public for most of human history, periods were watched very closely because of their role in signaling the shift from childhood to adulthood and making a woman ready for marriage, in the eyes of some (Armstrong, 2021). “Virginity tests” began in Western culture, and are still done today, to check the state of a woman’s hymen and inspect their bedding for bleeding after consummation of the marriage (Heath, 2018). The tradition has continued because the virgin bride is still prized as untouched, unsoiled, and thus, still pure (Heath, 2018). While widespread, virginity tests are notoriously inaccurate because hymens get stretched and torn in all kinds of physical activity other than intercourse, yet there are punishments for ‘failing’ a virginity test that varies from public shame to corporal punishment to death, depending on the culture (Heath, 2018). The UN has called these tests, which are documented in at least twenty countries, a human rights violation (Armstrong, 2021).

Today (1945 – Present)

The conversation surrounding menstruation made its first appearance in the late 80s and early 90s when companies like Kimberly-Clark released print advertisements for menstrual products (Ease Editorial Team, 2021). However, the initial advertisements referred to “bandage suspenders” and “combination belts” in an attempt to be discreet and did not refer to their actual function, reinforcing the menstrual stigma (Ease Editorial Team, 2021). Menstrual stigma is defined as discrimination faced by people who menstruate, causing them to feel a sense of shame, embarrassment, or hesitation when talking about their periods (Resnick, 2021; Roberts, n.d.). The first commercial advertisement for menstrual products, such as sanitary napkins and tampons, was aired on “family-viewing” network programs in 1975, but the word “period” was

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not used in these advertisements until 1985 by Tampax, ten years later (Ease Editorial Team, 2021). Despite the technological and commercial advancements in normalizing menstrual hygiene, menstruation is still regarded as tabooed uncleanness and a shameful bodily function that is meant to be dealt with in private (Ease Editorial Team, 2021). Even menstruation education videos produced by manufacturers of menstrual products continue to reinforce these narratives², such as “The Story of Menstruation”, a film produced by Kotex and Walt Disney Productions to be shown in US schools that provides helpful animated diagrams to detail the menstrual cycle and debunk myths about menstruation, yet conveys the idea that menstruation is meant to remain hidden and unspoken in order to maintain a normal lifestyle (Ease Editorial Team, 2021).

Managing one’s monthly menses has become easier than ever before thanks to modern medicine, but there is a long way to go regarding accessibility (Ahmed, 2022). Knowledge surrounding periods is still lacking among all gender identities. In 2019, one in four menstruators did not know what a period was until they had one (Armstrong, 2021). Although lighthearted, in 1983, when NASA engineers asked Sally Ride, the first American woman to go to space, if 100 tampons would be enough for a weeklong journey, this anecdote is telling of the ignorance that also extends to those who do not menstruate (Armstrong, 2021). In addition, product accessibility is lacking, and period poverty is widespread because menstrual stigma surrounding menstruation prevents those who identify as women from speaking out or asking for help during their periods and because some countries have taxed tampons essentially as luxury items (Armstrong, 2021). Period poverty describes the struggle many low-income women face while

² Another example includes the film “Always Changing: About You”, created by the company that owns Always, which provided valuable biological information about menstruation in 1995 but contained comments such as, “The only one who has to know that you’re wearing [a sanitary napkin] is you”.

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trying to afford menstrual products, and it refers to the increased economic vulnerability all women face due to the financial burden posed by menstrual supplies (UNFPA, 2022).

Transgender and Non-Binary Identities Struggling with Menstruation

Regarding gender as a social identity, subgroups experience no struggles at all, many struggles, or distinct struggles based on their identification and unique characteristics. For some transgender³ and gender diverse⁴ people, getting their period is an okay part of being in their body, but for others it is uncomfortable and can be an actively distressing experience (“Menstruation”, n.d.; Google LLC, n.d.a.; Dictionary.com, LLC, n.d.). Menstruation might heighten gender dysphoria, be a reminder about a gendered experience that is not wanted, or just be uncomfortable (“Menstruation”, n.d.). Of course, many cisgender women⁵ also feel uncomfortable and uninterested in their period, and advocacy groups work⁶ to promote acknowledgement or acceptance with these feelings no matter one’s social identity (“Menstruation”, n.d.). Especially as it exists in transgender bodies, menstruation is not a well-understood process, and unexpected changes may occur when changing medications, lifestyle factors, etc., which can be surprising and discomfoting (“Menstruation”, n.d.). A study

³ A transgender person is a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex registered for them at birth.

⁴ A gender diverse person is a person whose gender identity is located outside of the gender binary recognizing solely male or female.

⁵ A cisgender person is a person who is assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman.

⁶ Many transgender and non-binary advocacy groups present that menstruation does not change anything about your gender, and that it is just a thing that some bodies do. When transitioning from one traditional gender binary to another, transgender people who go through a natal estrogen-based puberty usually get their first period between nine and fourteen years of age, though people who go on hormone blockers may not ever get a period. Organizations like ACON, a New South Wales based health promotion organization specializing in HIV prevention, HIV support, and LGBTQ+ health, have provided internet hubs where gender diverse people can access information such as a list of ten questions to ask one’s doctor to help determine if they are trans-friendly; letter templates to advise doctors of one’s name, gender, pronouns, and any information one would like to share about their body, such as if they menstruate; and safe ways to not menstruate, like masculinizing therapy, progesterone, or hysterectomies. Over time, these organizations are becoming more prevalent to help gender diverse people deal with their potential menstruation struggles.

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among transgender male⁷ or non-binary⁸ children's hospital patients found that 93% of the participants reported menstrual-related dysphoria, 88% were interested in menstrual suppression, and the most common reasons for desiring suppression were achievement of amenorrhea⁹ (97%) and improvement of menstrual-related dysphoria (63%) (Schwartz et al., 2022, pp. 452 & 454; American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, n.d.; WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2021).

Arguments linked to discriminatory laws based on sex-linked characteristics have posited that “only women” menstruate, get pregnant, or breastfeed (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). These claims do not fully or accurately portray the scope of the situation, as menstrual stigma and period poverty can hit transgender and non-binary people particularly hard (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). Transgender people are three times more likely to be unemployed and more than twice as likely to be living in poverty compared to the general population, especially those who are disabled, people of color, or undocumented immigrants (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). While free menstrual products are not uniformly provided in women's restrooms, they are almost never available for free or for purchase in men's restrooms, and men's restrooms are less likely to have a place to dispose of these products conveniently, privately, and hygienically (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). Parenthetically, women's homeless shelters and prisons sometimes provide menstrual products, but men's typically do not, even though transgender and non-binary people may be placed or incarcerated in either, respectively (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). Countless transgender men recount scouting out gas station restrooms to ensure their safety, checking to see whether there is a single or multi-stalled bathroom in a public facility, putting their used pads in

⁷ A transgender male is a person who was assigned female at birth but identifies as male.

⁸ A non-binary person is a person whose gender identity does not conform to either the male or female gender binaries.

⁹ Amenorrhea is the absence of menstrual periods.

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their pockets because there are no trash cans in the stalls of men's restrooms, swerving away from the feminine hygiene aisle at the grocery store, and avoiding leaving their house while on their period in case they have an accident (Brabaw, 2018). These stories highlight that the awareness of menstruating men and gender-diverse people is limited and, thus, not considered when designing public bathrooms or grocery aisle signs and can lead to various tense encounters and safety concerns (Brabaw, 2018).

Issues of Menstrual Equity Policy on a Global Spectrum

Menstrual equity refers to equal and comprehensive access to menstrual hygiene products and to the right to education about reproductive health, which both removes barriers to care and reduces the stigma surrounding it (Zraick, 2018). Menstrual equity is not solely about addressing the needs of low-income populations, as sheer availability is a necessary talking point (Schroeder, 2022). Menstrual equity has no regard for one's socioeconomic status; even the richest woman in the world has at one point in her life gone to the bathroom, gotten her period, and did not have access to a period product (Schroeder, 2022). The average menstruator has their period for 2,535 days of their life, meaning an individual spends nearly seven years' time making sure they have a pad or tampon, finding a makeshift solution if they do not, and managing pain and discomfort (Zraick, 2018). Recently, women and gender-diverse people are talking about menstruation in public more than ever before (Zraick, 2018). Advocates on the US Capitol Hill are using refrains such as, "Why are tampons taxed when Viagra is not?" to urge states to exempt menstrual hygiene products from sales tax, arguing that they are a necessity, not a luxury (Zraick, 2018). There has been increased global media coverage, with some high-profile episodes: Kiran Gandhi bleeding freely as she ran the London Marathon in 2015, a member of Britain's Parliament announcing that she was menstruating to make a point about period poverty in 2018,

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and Kenyan Senator Gloria Orwoba fighting the menstrual stigma this year in March by wearing a white pantsuit with a bloodstain to parliament before her senate colleagues called the issue “taboo and private” and asked her to leave and change her clothes (Zraick, 2018; Musambi, 2023).

I argue there is a global spectrum on menstrual equity policy. Some countries are placed at the highest end of the spectrum because their policies are the most equitable with menstruation products, prices, and education. Other countries are placed at the lowest end of the spectrum because their policies are the least equitable with menstruation products, prices, and education.

Highest End of the Spectrum

At the highest end of the spectrum, menstrual equity involves making period products easily accessible to every menstruator in the country, no matter their gender identity, and significantly reducing the menstrual stigma. In November 2020, Scotland became the first country in the world to make period products free for all, as Members of the Scottish Parliament unanimously approved a bill that places a legal duty on local authorities to provide free items such as tampons and sanitary pads to anyone who needs them (Diamond, 2022). Logistically, products will be distributed through the country’s thirty-two councils and education providers, making them as accessible as toilet rolls in public bathrooms (Diamond, 2022). The act requires that access to different types of period products must be given “reasonably easily” and with “reasonable dignity”, and the process should be neither “complex nor bureaucratic”, meaning an individual should not have to justify why they need them or the amount that is needed (Diamond, 2022). The act states there should be no forms to complete or other information required for individuals to access the products, unless it is needed for design or postal delivery (Diamond, 2022). As part of wider work to tackle the menstrual stigma, the act says responsible bodies

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should consider the importance of normalization and visibility because offering a dignified response does not necessarily require hiding products away (Diamond, 2022). Scotland's success in passing this bill came from the momentum of making period products free to students in 2018, which the government was also the first in the world to do (Diamond, 2022).

Middle-High End of the Spectrum

At the middle-high end of the spectrum, while period products may not be free to everyone, countries contain cities, provinces, and schools which provide free period products to anyone who needs them. The movement to provide free tampons and pads in public schools seems to be popular, perhaps because it is a policy that addresses two critical issues: period poverty and school attendance. In February 2021, New Zealand's Prime Minister announced that all schools in the country would start providing period products that June in an attempt to increase school attendance and address poverty head-on (Rodriguez, 2021). In 2018, Australia also announced a plan to provide free period products in all public schools, with Victoria becoming the first Australian state to implement the plan in 2020 (Rodriguez, 2021). The state of New South Wales followed suit and launched a trial in March 2021 to test the most effective way to roll out free period products in schools (Rodriguez, 2021). The country's education ministry said the plan would make schools more inclusive and help break down menstrual stigma (Rodriguez, 2021). In the US, New York City first passed legislation to provide public schools with free products in 2016, then the rest of the state followed suit two years later (Rodriguez, 2021). Four other states jumped on the bandwagon in 2021, requiring middle and/or high schools to provide period products free of charge in bathrooms rather than making students ask a school nurse (Rodriguez, 2021). After becoming the first country in the world to eliminate the 'tampon tax', Kenya started distributing free sanitary pads to girls in public schools in 2018, an effort that

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was supported after two years of parliamentary debate (Rodriguez, 2021). South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, British Columbia, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island (Canada)¹⁰ have also made period products free in schools in some capacity.

There are cases of countries on the middle-high end of the spectrum that do not just involve public schools. For example, women in South Korea have qualified for menstrual leave at work since 2001, but the city of Seoul launched a pilot program to hand out free period products in ten public spaces after the documentary *Insole Girls* highlighted period poverty and sparked backlash (Rodriguez, 2021). In Zambia, after two years claiming it would distribute free pads to girls in rural and underserved communities, the government began in 2019 and found that school attendance in the rural Lusaka province has improved since the measure went into effect (Rodriguez, 2021).

In listing the countries that have made period products free in some capacity, a trend emerges. One smaller, less widespread or less significant act in favor of menstrual equity is usually passed to begin changing stereotypical social constructs about two years before a larger, sweeping policy affecting close to an entire population can be passed with any success. I discuss the practical implications of this policy observation later when I discuss my recommendations.

Middle of the Spectrum

I place governments in the middle of the menstrual equity spectrum if their policies make period products available, but they are costly, discriminating against low-income women, prisoners, and homeless women. In many countries in Europe, the ‘tampon tax’ is a policy in which period products are considered a luxury item and consequently taxed at a higher rate than items deemed a necessary good, which many menstrual equity advocates argue is a form of impermissible gender discrimination under the Equal Protection Clause (de la Roche & van de

¹⁰ Prince Edward Island extended its policy beyond schools and to include food banks and shelters.

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Veerdonk, 2020). The reasons period products have been classified as luxury goods for decades are often assigned to tax legislators being predominantly male, the menstrual stigma, and the existence of gender-differentiated taxes as a form of discrimination (de la Roche & van de Veerdonk, 2020). In the EU as of 2020, it is estimated that one in ten girls cannot afford sanitary products because the Value Added Tax rate on period products in almost half of the member states is still over 20% (de la Roche & van de Veerdonk, 2020; Motreanu, 2020a).

Women prisoners in many US states have limited or no access to free period products and have to resort to unsanitary measures to try to conceal their periods. For example, two women cellmates in the only state women's prison in Connecticut received five pads to share among themselves every week, and asking a guard for another pad often led to a rejected request and ridicule (Lee, 2021). One of these cellmates had heavy bleeding from an undiagnosed ovarian polyp, so she began reusing the thinner-than-normal pads she was allowed, and the adhesive barely stuck to her clothes, increasing the chance of her pad falling to the ground in front of others (Lee, 2021). Even though Commissary sold a pack of pads for \$2.63, prison jobs paid as low as thirty cents an hour in Connecticut, and most prisoners could not afford the purchase on top of other necessities like doctor's visits, acetaminophen, or a phone call to a loved one (Lee, 2021). Prisoners are forced to be penalized for destroying public property when they tear cloths to use as makeshift products, or they bleed through their clothes until weekly laundry day, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness (Lee, 2021).

The average woman spends about \$20 on period products per cycle, totaling about \$18,000 over her lifetime (Kim, 2021). Many homeless shelters in the US lack resources to provide more than a few items per menstrual cycle (Kim, 2021). Alternative dollar store brands are often cheaply made and not durable enough to be a serious option, and opting to over-use

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pads and tampons can lead to the potentially deadly toxic shock syndrome or cause bacteria buildup (Kim, 2021). Homeless women being unable to wash themselves or any soiled garments, and their inability to feel clean and secure, can leave them in a depressive cycle of guilt and vulnerability (Kim, 2021).

Lowest End of the Spectrum

At the lowest end of the menstrual equity spectrum, menstruation is not only taboo, but there is no private or safe place to have one's period, so women are forced to stay home and miss out on schooling, work, and social life. Significant proportions of women in many developing countries are struggling to safely manage their periods because they lack access to period products, water, and private places to wash and change (Kottasová, 2021). Despite international humanitarian efforts, one in five women in Ethiopia, Samoa, and Laos use no suitable menstrual products during their periods, putting them at risk of infection and other health problems (Kottasová, 2021). Local customs also prevent menstruating women from taking part in life, such as in Nepal¹¹, where half of women from the poorest communities say they eat in a separate place and one in seven stay in a mud hut or cowshed while menstruating because if they touch a man or an animal, it will sicken, or because if they enter a temple to worship, their gods will be furious and take revenge (Kottasová, 2021; George, 2014). While anthropological studies have suggested this isolation is not always for punishment, but to serve as a space for rest and reflection, crafts and bonding, and a break from domestic demands, large percentages of women

¹¹ It is important to note that in 2005, Nepal's Supreme Court banned menstrual huts, describing them as a human rights violation. Since 2008, authorities have run public awareness campaigns. In 2017, the nation's parliament criminalized the practice, stipulating a three-month jail sentence or a 3,000 rupee fine (\$22.76), or both, for anyone forcing a woman to follow the custom. However, these measures have failed to put an end to the practice because of the ingrained superstitions and taboos concerning menstruation. In fact, 2020 marked the first year that a Nepali man was to be convicted, after his twenty-one-year-old sister-in-law suffocated to death in a menstrual hut. The man, after spending just twenty five days in police custody, walked free after paying 6,000 rupees (\$52) to avoid spending another 20 days in prison.

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in Nepal, India, etc. miss school monthly while in huts made of mud and grass with no space for one person to lie down (Armstrong, 2021; George, 2014).

Policy Recommendations

Policies promoting menstrual inequity rely on the stereotype that women who menstruate are overly unreliable and unfit for decision-making, resulting in lower earnings and fewer responsibilities, opportunities, and promotions in the workplace (Bachelet, 2022). Charging for and taxing period products leaves low-income women, homeless women, and female prisoners with little to no access to a safe and healthy method of managing their periods (de la Roche & van de Veerdonk, 2020; Kim, 2021). Additionally, menstrual stigma results in women experiencing menstruation negatively and prevents them from seeking to learn more about their cycles or accessing sexual and reproductive health services (Bachelet, 2022). The lack of adequate water, toilet facilities, and sanitation in schools affects girls' attendance (Bachelet, 2022). In many contexts, prohibitions to attend religious gatherings and isolation requirements impact women's ability and right to make free choices about their participation in cultural, social, economic, and public life (Bachelet, 2022). Additionally, the harmful long-held belief and practice in many societies that a girl is ready for marriage after her first menstrual cycle exposes them to a heightened risk of forced child marriage, sexual violence, and unexpected pregnancies (Bachelet, 2022). These outcomes on the menstrual equity spectrum are prevalent worldwide, depending on where a woman lives, and current policies are not doing enough to reverse these inequalities.

The first policy recommendation involves countries providing free period products to anyone who needs them, making it easier for them to fully participate in society, so people who menstruate do not have to worry about where their next tampon or pad will come from; they can

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concentrate more on school, work, and their well-being (Rodriguez, 2021). Limited access to and the cost of menstrual products can especially detriment transgender and non-binary communities, so a holistic agenda for menstrual equity and access must include gender diverse stakeholders throughout policy implementation (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). When governments do give out free period products, they are usually disposable pads and tampons and are very rarely environmentally friendly alternatives, so efforts should be made to distribute products like period underwear, menstrual discs, menstrual cups, and reusable pads (Rodriguez, 2021).

Free period products alone won't end period poverty, so the second policy recommendation is to work with international human rights organizations to provide safe and private sanitation facilities and water in especially low-income regions of the world (Rodriguez, 2021). Nonprofits already fighting for menstrual equity must work with national governments to invest in infrastructure and partner with local builders and/or portable toilet manufacturers so menstruators have access to clean, private, safe, and lockable menstrual health management spaces with water and soap (Rossouw & Ross, 2021, p. 2).

The third policy recommendation is for policymakers and menstrual equity activists to make a constitutional argument. Any law that targets one sex- or one race, or one religion- is inherently discriminatory (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). The tampon tax targets a bodily function associated with women for less favorable treatment and relies on sexist ideas that women's needs are frivolous and unnecessary (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). It directly affects cis and trans women, trans men, and non-binary people (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). It is irrational, unfair, unconstitutional, and illegal (Arkles & Weiss-Wolf, 2019). As mentioned earlier, however, even if a country has a democratic system of government with fair and unbiased courts of law and a constitution that holds discrimination towards any sex or gender illegal, it takes years to make

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even the smallest change and start the government on a path towards social and legal reform.

Therefore, this recommendation depends on degrees of political feasibility in each country.

None of these reformative policies regarding distribution or legal rights will pass unless the entire population, meaning all gender identities, are educated about menstruation and unless harmful gender norms are addressed. That is why this final policy recommendation is the most prudent course of action for menstrual equity activists and policymakers to take. While menstruation is a normal part of life for most women, in many societies, the experience of menstruators continues to be constrained by cultural taboos and discriminatory social norms (World Bank Group, 2022). The resulting lack of information about menstruation leads to unhygienic menstrual practices and creates misconceptions and negative attitudes, which motivate shaming, bullying, gender-based violence, and inequitable policies (World Bank Group, 2022). As a solution, organizations¹² must work to ensure schools incorporate information on menstruation into the curriculum for both girls and boys (World Bank Group, 2022). The goals of this education must be outlined as follows: (1) educate students on period poverty and menstrual stigma around the world; (2) reduce menstrual stigma, harmful stereotypes, and gender-based discriminatory social norms and practices impacting the menstrual experiences of women; (3) create an enabling environment where girls, in all their diverse identities, are empowered to exercise their autonomy and reach out to trusted adults about their bodies; and (4) ensure girls have access to remedies for violations of their menstrual health in schools (Bachelet, 2022).

Ideally, a holistic approach requiring collaborative and multi-dimensional responses is the best action plan (World Bank Group, 2022). While research shows that approaches that can

¹² The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nation's International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) already have a Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene. The JMP can be used to collect data and provide progress updates for these menstrual equity policies in order to analyze performance metrics and reassess strategic plans that may not work the first time it is implemented.

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effectively combine information and education with appropriate infrastructure and menstrual products, in a conducive policy environment, are successful in avoiding the negative effects of poor menstrual health and hygiene, not every country has a conducive policy environment (World Bank Group, 2022). Using education to change the harmful social construct surrounding gender and menstruation– to eliminate the menstrual stigma–, thus making policies aimed at reducing period poverty more likely to be approved and implemented, is the first step in this holistic process.

In conclusion, menstruation is an eternal bodily function that has existed before social constructs were invented, so equitable education and product accessibility should be inherent.

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