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Period Problems

The fourteen-year-old girl whispers to her seat partner in hopes no nearby students will hear her ask, "Do you have a tampon?" If the person she asked does in fact have one, the product is passed so slyly that if a teacher were to look over they may assume a drug deal was taking place mid-biology class. Now the tampon is secured in her shirt sleeve. God forbid anyone knew it was that time of the month, or worse, that she was going to the bathroom to change her tampon.

Why is it that we, as young girls, feel like our menstrual cycles are something to be ashamed of? I feel fortunate to have grown up in a time when our society is beginning to feel less and less male dominated from school boards to workplaces. Women empowerment is something many American citizens are working towards. While the conversation around gender equality has shifted in the last decade, there is still a large body of men in power deciding our health rights. Women still feel shame around many issues that they may have no control over -- periods being a main one.

It is important for women and men to begin to address the lack of access to menstrual products in our country. In my personal experience, being able to spend money on these products has never been a huge issue for me or the girls with whom I have attended school with, but for many low income and homeless people, it is an unaffordable expense.

Periods are personal, so let me tell you about mine. They come like clockwork each month and last exactly seven days. I use around four tampons per day, and one pad at night. That's about twenty-eight tampons and seven pads. This cost comes to about fifteen dollars per month and about \$180 per year. Maybe at first glance this isn't a large expense, but it isn't just \$180 for one year; it's every year from the time a girl gets her period, say age twelve, until they hit menopause around age 51. Using the estimate of \$180 a year for 39 years, a woman will spend around \$7,020 on menstrual products. This does not include the cost of heating pads and pain medication -- oh and that monthly chocolate craving. But hey, at least the bloating, breakouts, and cramps come for free.

When thinking about "that time of the month" I would probably compare it to lounging on a tropical beach basking in the sun. Periods are pure luxury! Apparently that's what lawmakers in 40 states in America believe because in these states, menstrual products are taxed as luxury items, as if we choose to get our periods. Women are rallying to get this 5% tax removed. President Barack Obama expressed support for women spearheading the conversation regarding this tax. "I have no idea why states would tax these as luxury items," he said. "I suspect it's because men were making the laws when those taxes were passed." According to Patricia Garcia, a writer for Vogue magazine, some items exempt from the luxury tax include "sunscreen, ChapStick, anti-dandruff shampoo, and, yes, sometimes even Viagra." I feel that it is unfair to tax a basic necessity that is already an expense women have to pay in order to function during their cycles.

Furthermore, it is a sad reality that in many third-world countries, menstrual products just aren't something the majority population has access to. According to Days for Girls, an

organization dedicated to “changing the status quo, through menstrual care solutions, health education, and income-generation opportunities” in countries in need, girls and women have to resort to using items such as “rags, mattress stuffing, banana leaves, and feathers”. In countries such as India, or Sub-Saharan Africa, where educating girls is not valued, girls have to miss school every month. This unfortunate fact, however, is one that probably doesn’t shock many people. What many people may not know is that in America, girls are forced to skip school while on their cycle because their families cannot afford the monthly cost of tampons or pads. If young ladies are missing an average of five days each per month, how can we expect them to get an education equal to that of their male classmates? According to “Why Lower-Income Girls Are Forced to Skip School During Their Periods,” a Babble article written by Suzanne Jannese, in the last year, California has passed a law in which schools that have a 40% low income population and have female students in Grades 6-12 must provide free feminine hygiene products in at least half of the bathrooms on campus. It is important that there is universal access to feminine hygiene products in all schools across America with a female population. In the same way that many schools provide free lunches to their low income students so that their hunger does not get in the way of being able to learn, period products are just as much important in order for a student to get an education and should be provided as well.

Homeless women also lack healthcare and access to feminine hygiene products. Not only are they not able to take care of themselves, these ladies have no way to wash their clothes. According to a Vice Impact article by Helaina Hovitz titled “Tampons are a Necessity, Not a Luxury,” The US Dept of Housing and Urban Development Annual Homeless Assessment Report showed that, “Women who cannot afford menstrual products reported that they substitute

with whatever they can find: toilet paper, paper towels, rags, even dirty socks. Without access to period products, these women are at risk for infection, making a lack of access to clean feminine hygiene supplies a health issue *and* a human rights issue.” When having to choose between food or menstrual products, these women will chose food more times than not. This can make it harder for a homeless person to get back on their feet, limiting the days they can work until they can afford these products, or stopping them from attending job interviews. At homeless shelters, menstrual products are one of the least donated items due to a lack of education and awareness.

This is the same reason we aren’t talking about teenage girls’ periods and their lack of resources. The stigma around periods make women feel like their cycle is a secret, and that they are disgusting even though periods completely natural, and indicate a healthy reproductive system. Don’t get me wrong -- I understand that bleeding out for seven days is gross. But that doesn’t mean it’s something we need to feel shame about, or something that doesn’t need to be talked about in schools. If we start the conversation as early as sixth grade, with girls and boys, maybe it won’t be something women go their whole lives feeling ashamed of and boys may feel less uncomfortable when the topic arises. With this inclusive education, girls will also obtain a better education on what their body is going through and what a period really is.

Now I’m asking for your help. The conversation needs to start somewhere, so let’s start it here and now. This Club Saves Lives is doing their part, attempting to make an impact in the lives of women in need of menstrual products, and we’re starting local. Find a donation box in the library or one of your classrooms and donate tampons or pads because each one will do someone a favor.