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### Bleeding in Public: Menstrual Needs Among the Homeless

Imagine having to decide between buying a tampon or buying your lunch. For guys this may be an easy answer, but now imagine you are Anne, a lifelong resident of San Francisco, who is informed that her landlord has tripled her rent and is now left without a home, followed by a job layoff. For Anne, this is a decision she now must face every month, for about a week. That constitutes 12 weeks each year where she has to decide between self nourishment or maintenance of a biological cycle over which she has no control. If it is still easy to choose buying your lunch, let me make it a little more difficult. This biological cycle better known as menstruation, or a period, can be excruciatingly painful and embarrassing for any menstruator of any age, in any nation. Every month, the womb sheds its lining. As stated by PubMed Health, “to shed the lining... the muscles of the womb tighten and relax in an irregular rhythm [helping] the lining...to detach and flow out of the body, together with blood.” Side effects sometimes amount to “mild discomfort, but are also sometimes felt as painful cramps...in the abdomen, back, or legs...[causing] nausea, vomiting or diarrhea...as well as headaches or general discomfort.” Imagine constantly being in public enduring what 29 year old Sydney describes her experience as “[taking] probably more ibuprofen than I should in a day, just so I can walk around without a grimace on my face. I just feel really low on energy, as if it's hard to get the daily tasks done” and wish “I could curl up in a ball with a heating pad and shut out the whole world!” (Florio) In addition to this undesirable pain, the immense amount of societal taboo and stigma surrounding menstruation means that it is a topic of secrecy and avoidance not only to the public, but also for

a woman herself. These attitudes toward periods are just one aspect of the many struggles that come with “that time of the month.” Menstruation also comes with other emotional, financial and health related problems which are especially intensified among the homeless.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report recorded 549,928 homeless people. Of that number, 40%, or 217,268 were women. 78% were above the age of 18. Even when not accounting for the 22% of individuals under the age of 18 who have a period, that is an incredible amount of homeless women who menstruate. For any individual living on the streets, the challenges of homelessness include a daily lack of food, shelter, employment, medicine and a myriad of other vital resources. Furthermore, Anita Little, former associate editor for *Ms. Magazine*, states, “the daily lives of homeless women and girls are fraught with enough uncertainties,” yet they must add the “burden” of menstruation onto their already high stress levels. Once a month homeless women menstruate with or without the protection of standard hygiene products such as tampons and pads. Additionally, in order to properly manage menstruation, a sanitary, private environment is necessary. Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, writer and feminist activist, explains that the “inability to access menstrual protection is not just unsanitary and unhealthy for the days one is menstruating, but also amounts to having to wear blood-soaked clothing for days or even weeks.” Without proper protection, women run the risk of a number of health related issues such as toxic shock syndrome, infection, and an overall lack of basic comfort (Camions of Care). In addition the stress of having no access to menstrual protection, the homeless also suffer from lack of privacy, and limited access to restrooms, extra clothes, and bathing facilities. The homeless are already overlooked by society. Combined with the cultural stigma surrounding menstruation, homeless menstruators suffer from a lack of societal understanding of their predicament and lack of

concrete support that would mitigate many of their problems. It is pertinent that society turn their attention toward the homeless so that those who have the means to make a difference are aware of these women's needs. In addition, it is also important that the "tampon tax" be eliminated from state laws to allow women, especially those who can barely afford menstrual products, the opportunity to enjoy fairly priced, tax-free products that are not luxuries but rather necessities.

While we may not talk about periods, they are far from invisible or incidental in the lives of women. *Huffpost* estimates that "the average woman endures some 456 total periods over 38 years, or roughly 2,280 days with her period — 6.25 years of her *life*." If 70% of women use tampons as their main period protection, and it is advised that a tampon is changed every 4-6 hours, that equates to four tampons a day, or 20 per cycle (Kane). A standard box of 36 tampons is around \$7 at Walgreens, says Kane, and if a woman uses an average of 253 boxes of tampons in her life, that is a total of around \$2,000 spent solely on one aspect of maintaining her period. Taxes constitute part of this cost. Little claims that "even for homeless women who might earn some money, tampons and pads are frequently classified as nonessential 'luxury' items." This means that while "Viagra, an erectile dysfunction medicine, isn't taxed in any state except Illinois" (Qiu), menstrual products "are taxed in 40 states--putting them completely out of reach for women with limited funds" (Little). This makes it even more difficult for homeless women to maintain proper menstrual management.

While homeless women face the issue of societal rejection solely due to their homeless condition, the taboo surrounding menstruation compounds this experience. Elizabeth Kissling, author of *Capitalizing on the Curse*, states "in spite of all the social, political, and economic gains women made in the 20th century, taboos still limit women's activities and public communication about menstruation" (1). From Kissling's interviews with teen girls who "found

menstrual celebration to be laughable or embarrassing” to Karen Houppert’s analysis of product advertisements that promise “you don’t know you’re wearing [a tampon]--and neither does anyone else” (14) society is evidently still intolerant of periods. Sociologist Laura Fingerson states it clearly in her book *Girls in Power*: society views menstruation “as a private event not to be talked about in public” (Rosewarne, 7). Psychologist Joan Chrisler also adds that this “emphasis on secrecy reinforces the idea that menstruation is a negative, stigmatizing, and embarrassing event” (Rosewarne, 8). The stigmas that drown out the ability to talk about periods even create a societal ignorance to their existence. Sophie Laws, author of *Issues of Blood*, conducted interviews with men to determine their understanding of periods. She states that “only a few of the men [she] interviewed had heard their mother's mention menstruation...[and] two of them were quite startled by the thought that their mothers must have menstruated--it had not occurred to them until [Laws] asked them about it.” If “women are expected to buy, store and use [menstrual products] without men noticing,” then how are homeless women expected to deal with their periods while never having any privacy or menstrual products? (Laws) While women’s health has been a topic of neglect throughout history, Rep. Melissa Sargent, a Democrat from Madison, Wisconsin feels that “the reluctance to talk about [menstruation] has prevented the issue from gaining more momentum in state legislatures” and may also be the reason why women are paying additional costs to manage this bodily cycle. As a result of this reluctance, menstrual management is increasingly becoming an issue within homeless women’s lives.

The difficulty of proper menstrual management stems from the particular conditions of homelessness. In particular, the homeless suffer from being routinely ignored by the public which renders their specific struggles such as menstruation management invisible to society.

Little observes, “homeless people are some of the most invisible people to our society.” In her research, Little interviewed high school senior Francesco Wengrod, who helped start the Feminine Hygiene Project. Wengrod testified that “the female homeless population is enormous and almost completely neglected.” The National Institute of Medicine agrees, asserting that women “represent a segment of the homeless population that is growing both in numbers and in proportion.” Life for a woman on the streets is very unpredictable and a serious hardship. Homeless women are challenged in finding “a place to shower, let alone use a bathroom. There’s nowhere to store [their] belongings, so they can be stolen or cleared by police. Not to mention the stigma from passersby who may judge [them] for [their] predicament” (Covert). Doniece Sandoval, a successful marketing and public-relations entrepreneur, conducted a study in San Francisco and discovered that the “city of 800,000 people had exactly 16 available public showers.” From that “she learned that San Francisco is ‘home’ to more than 3,000 who don’t have a home, and she did the math. Sixteen showers. Three thousand people. ‘It just seemed criminal.’” This reality feels inhumane especially because, as Lisa De Bode, journalist at the Al Jazeera Media Network notes, the ability to “[cleanse] oneself can also remind women of the appearance they once maintained before a life on the streets.” In fact, some shelters require hygiene maintenance as a way of heightening self esteem. De Bode reports that “at the Bowery Mission Women's Center in Harlem...homeless residents are required to shower and make their beds daily.” Cheryl Mitchell, director of the center, believes that “self-care and the ability to receive care in this setting helps to build a woman’s self-worth and value.” The importance of reestablishing this confidence in homeless women begins with acknowledging their existence and providing them with these basic necessities. One of these basic necessities, though hardly acknowledged itself, is access to menstrual products.

As a result of the taboo that surrounds menstruation, those individuals who are capable of helping homeless women are often unaware that there is a need for menstrual products. Houppert says, “menstrual etiquette is so habitual with us, we barely even think about it. In fact, *nobody* spends time thinking about periods.” In discussing homeless women’s options, Little claims “the reality is that pads, tampons and liners often aren’t readily available to women living in shelters or on the streets,” therefore, “tampons and sanitary pads usually top the list of needs at shelters” (Goldberg). Many shelters provide menstrual supplies “along with toothpaste and shampoo” when they can, but social workers emphasize that these items are “often harder to source from public donors” (De Bode). Rosanna Montilla, an associate at Care for the Homeless, said that tampons and pads are “not one of the items that people automatically think of when they donate toiletries...when you get to specific items like female hygiene products, you have to specifically ask for it.” Margarette Purvis, president and chief executive of Food Bank for New York City, has similar issues voicing that “her organization receives the products sporadically, usually when a retailer has torn packages that cannot be sold” (Rabin). It is pertinent that society break the silence of menstruation and to understand the needs of the homeless. This is necessary because “everybody needs a toothbrush, deodorant, [and] soap,” says Joanie Balderstone, founder of the nonprofit Distributing Dignity. In addition, every woman needs proper menstrual products.

Without access to commercially produced menstrual products, homeless women have taken matters into their own hands. The lack of attention about this issue prevents society from understanding what it takes to manage a period with the limited, improper resources available to them. Some of the items they use include “resorting to using unclean methods like toilet paper, socks, rags or brown paper bags” (Camions of Care). In fact, homeless, 27 year old Kailah Willcuts says her personal experience is terrible and embarrassing stating that, “I only have the

clothes that I'm wearing, so I'm standing there half naked, bloodied...washing my clothes out.” She manages her period to the best of her abilities telling how “she washes up in public park bathrooms and goes to Starbucks for hot water and a water bottle to help with cramps. She also crafts makeshift tampons from pads, because tampons keep her cleaner and are harder to come by” (Upadhye). Willcuts and countless other women struggle to maintain proper management but have no way of bringing their issues to the attention of society.

In order to combat menstrual silence, society must turn toward those who have already begun to extend their help and resources to those in need. The inspiration for this paper initially began with Nadya Okamoto, a personal friend. She has an immense passion for the Menstrual Movement and founded Camions of Care as a high school student in Portland, Oregon. Camions of Care, now known as Period, is a non-profit organization that provides care packages with menstrual hygiene products to those in need. NBC notes that “in the last 18 months, [Period] has supplied 22,000 care packages in 17 different states with the help of about 2,200 volunteers.” What started with Okamoto and her friends “meeting around the lunch table and planning in high school” has now grown into a “global operation with 40 non-profit partners, in 23 states, 13 countries and on 60 campus chapters at universities and high schools across the U.S” (Vagianos). Period acts as “the middleman between women and shelters...[to] build awareness among nonprofits” (Vagianos) about the expressed need of these menstrual products. Okamoto believes that “when it comes to developing and cultivating our next generation and establishing familiar relationships, women have a lot of power. And by providing her with the resources to feel healthy and productive we’re ensuring that half the population is contributing to the society economically and psychologically.” Okamoto not only discusses the issue of homeless women and menstrual products with her audience, but she inspires individuals to think about the ways in

which they can utilize the privileges of their voice and their resources to draw attention to this important issue and to help others in need.

Several other organizations and nonprofits around the country, like Period, exist on the basis of providing resources to homeless women and spreading awareness of their needs. Many of these resources ameliorate the particular difficulties associated with menstruation. In San Francisco, a city carpeted with homeless individuals, Doniece Sandoval established a nonprofit called Lava Mae. This innovative project “transform[s] retired municipal buses into gleaming mobile restrooms that traverse the city...[and] offers the peace and dignity of clean, safe showers, sinks and toilets” (Weiss-Wolf) completely free to the homeless. In 2013, co-founders Joanie Balderstone and Rebecca McIntire established Distributing Dignity, “an official 501c3...[that] organizes donation drives of both sanitary products as well as bras to homeless and domestic violence shelters in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania” (Covert). Balderstone notes that “a lot of the shelters don’t even have a line item in their budget for these items...workers are running out to CVS to buy some with their own money so they have some in their drawer to give out.” These organizations stress that it is of vital importance to maintain clear communication so that they are constantly aware of what their partner organizations need and how much the donations mean to the women (Holter). Organizations like these are a crucial point of mediation between listening to what the homeless need and rallying the public to support these requests.

The increased awareness among donors for shelters’ needs of menstrual products has created major increases in public donations for these resources. In April 2015, a principal New York City homeless shelter received five times the amount of donations of women’s hygiene products than it did for the whole year of 2014 from private individuals and organizations (De



Bode). More specifically, Kendra Parker, a member of the First Baptist Church of Crown Heights, New York, said she “first read about the lack of menstrual products in the city's shelters” and soon after, “rallied colleagues to donate and collected 3,000 tampons, sanitary napkins and liners during a drive at the church in February.” There are many similar and convenient opportunities for the informed public to use their voices and resources to help these women in need. Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, deputy director of development and director of special projects at Brennan Center for Justice, believes that “the possibilities are endless. Canned food drives, organized by religious organizations, service groups and schools, could include requests for tampons and pads. Social groups, from book clubs to sororities, could tap their networks to raise awareness and collect supplies. And social media adds a fun factor (think ice bucket challenge).” Raising awareness is the first step toward progress for menstruation, but getting the public involved is the ultimate objective.

While providing homeless women the resources to manage their monthly periods is valuable, it is only a short-term solution. Cost of menstrual products are particularly detrimental to homeless women, exorbitant prices affect menstruating women of all stripes. Eliminating the “tampon tax” from state laws would not only serves as a long-term solution, but it would advance gender equality for female bodily processes. Since 1981, “women have tried to bring the issue relating to menstruation into the public sphere, as a campaign to end the taxation of sanitary wear” (Laws). Currently, the increasing number of advocates “want periods put squarely on the public agenda, and are demanding that businesses and government take menstruation into consideration when they design facilities, develop budgets, supply schools or create anti-poverty programs” (Rabin). However, this is challenging to lobby especially when “state laws [are] crafted by legislators who are, for the most part, men [who] don't think about menstruation”

(Peck). To be clear, “tampon tax” may be a slightly misleading term. As reported on *NPR*, “no jurisdiction has a tampon-specific tax, as it might an alcohol or tobacco tax, and there is no additional tax imposed on these products” (Gass-Poore'). However, no one, especially the homeless, should be taxed for anything of utter necessity. Indeed, it is easy to see this tax as rooted in sexism. An advocate for removing the tax claims that “if men had periods then tampons would be free, or at least as free as toilet paper.” Our society provides toilet paper to anyone who uses the restroom. This should also apply to tampons and pads, because they serve a similar purpose in tending to everyday, normal, bodily functions (Peck). However, even removing the sales tax of menstrual products, which are a necessity to nearly all women, would increase the affordability of pads and tampons and in turn move us toward equality for menstruators.

The increased attention toward removing the “tampon tax” has led to its abolishment in a handful of states with many others following close behind. Sales tax consultant, Diane Yetter states that “seven states currently exempt tampons, menstrual cups and pads from taxation, the latest of which came into effect Jan. 1, 2017 (Illinois). Washington D.C.’s exemption, passed in December 2016, is pending congressional approval, and Connecticut's will kick in July 1, 2018” (Qiu). Beyond simply eliminating the “tampon tax”, some states have taken further actions to provide menstrual products for free. According to *NBC News*, “June was the first time a U.S. city promised to provide feminine hygiene products to the public when the New York City Council approved a \$2.5 million program to supply them to women in public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons.” Other initiatives are emerging around the country as well. Wisconsin’s legislators introduced a bill making free sanitary products available in restrooms in all public state buildings, including schools (Rabin). Additionally, Councilwoman Elizabeth Brown wants Columbus, Ohio to have similar supplies “in restrooms at the city’s recreation centers,

community swimming pools, [and] public schools.” Measures such as these indicate an exciting swell in discussion of this important issue. While eliminating the tax creates a financial loss in the short-run, these state actions will not only improve the fundamental livelihood for homeless women, but also for half of the nation’s population.

Periods are “a biological process, not a choice,” says Chris Bobel, president of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research. Therefore, the Menstrual Movement is about “making sure that all women have access [to menstrual products]...whether they're living behind bars or not, or living on the street or in a comfortable town house" (Kasulis). Homeless women not only deserve these resources for their well-being, but providing essential health needs to those without resources is the right thing to do. States that have eliminated, or are in the process of eliminating, the “tampon tax” are taking the proper steps to demonstrate to women of any economic status that society acknowledges their gender equality. However, simply removing the tax is not enough. With ongoing awareness and collaboration, the future vision should not only be to provide a free supply of toilet paper, soap, and paper towels to public restrooms, but tampons and pads, as well.

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