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Importance of Intersectionality in Discussions of Menstrual Injustice and Period Poverty in
the United States

I am 10 years old, going into a separate classroom with all of the girls to watch a dated video about periods. The boys aren't taught about it; they get to go to the playground. I am 11 years old, and I finally learn from a friend that girls don't actually pee and menstruate from the same hole, and we in fact have three. I am 12 years old when I get my first period. My mom stands outside the closed bathroom door giving directions for how to put in a tampon, yet I still manage to do it wrong. I am 13 years old, and I ask my teacher if I can go to the nurse to get Advil for my bad "menstruational" cramps – how was I supposed to know it was pronounced "menstrual"? I am 14 years old when I get my period at a club meeting after school, and I ask my friend for a quarter so I can buy a pad from the dispenser in the bathroom. The dispenser takes the quarter but has no pads, so I stuff a wad of toilet paper in my underwear and go back to the meeting. I am 15 years old, and I see a homeless woman walking down the street, her pants covered in menstrual blood. I am 16 years old when my mom tells me I shouldn't talk about my period as much in front of my dad and brother.

I am now 19 years old, and even as an adult and a college student, I still hide my pad in my back pocket or my tampon in my sleeve while I walk to the bathroom, as if to hide my period, to pretend it doesn't exist. Admitting that I am experiencing what half of the world's

population experiences is too embarrassing. The idea of periods being something that should be hidden was ingrained in me from a young age, and the stigmas around menstruation have lasted throughout history.

In many major religions and society as a whole, periods have been associated with dirtiness and met with disgust. Christian women were traditionally separated from others during their cycle. Hindu women have also historically been isolated, as the impurity of menstruation was believed to be contagious. Menstruating women were also deemed unclean in Judaism. In Islam, women have traditionally been prevented from participating in religious activities while menstruating (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 16-17). Women throughout time have been thought of as incompetent and impure due to their menstrual cycles, and as a result have been taught to feel shame and avoid talking about their bodily functions. Periods are a healthy and normal process, but for many menstruators, punishments of their periods – including those based in religion – have lasting effects of uncomfortability and embarrassment.

Examples of women being ostracized by others due to their periods exist outside of religious beliefs as well; in fact, prejudices against women and menstruators permeate nearly every part of our society. A New York Times opinion article in 1912 asserted that “the mind of a woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies (i.e., menstruation)” (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 19). In 1964, NASA stated their opinion that hormonal mood changes associated with periods would make women unable to be astronauts (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 19). More recently, in 2015, Instagram twice took down a post showing a picture of artist and poet Rupi Kaur laying on her bed with a spot of blood on her pants and sheets; while this picture shows a familiar occurrence for menstruators, it

was deemed inappropriate on social media (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 6). As Margaret E. Johnson, Professor of Law and Co-Director of the Center on Applied Feminism at the University of Baltimore School of Law puts it: “Rather than treating menstruation as a natural monthly bodily event that is linked to reproduction, society expects menstruators to hide menstruation, to be shamed by menstruation, and to be solely and invisibly responsible for the care of and the effects of their menstruation” (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 6). Instances of prejudice against menstruators could fill an entire research paper in and of itself. Discrimination against menstruators is deeply ingrained in American society, and the public belief that periods are something to be hidden negatively affects menstruators.

A psychological study known as the Tampon Experiment further proved the bias against menstruators. This experiment involved a woman dropping a tampon or a hair clip from her bag in front of a person, and then determining how that person evaluated and observed the woman. The observer viewed the woman who dropped the tampon as “lower in competency and less likable” than the woman who dropped the hair clip. The observer also avoided sitting next to the woman who they believed to be menstruating, while simultaneously being more likely to objectify the woman (“Menstrual Justice” Johnson, 49). Even in the present day, women are seen by others as more irrational and dirty when it is assumed they are on their period, no doubt due to the aforementioned history of shaming women for their periods.

This stigma and shame surrounding menstruation is something that is taught as a way to keep men comfortable and to degrade women. Factors like religion, media, and unconscious bias create a taboo around periods. They make menstruators feel unable to talk about menstruation and feel embarrassment around their bodily functions which then causes anxiety, stress, and

pressure to hide period products. According to one adolescent surveyed for Professor Johnson's journal article titled, "women don't like to talk about having their period because, alright, because it's gross to men. And men don't like to hear it and men are the more dominant people in society, and if a man doesn't like it being talked about then women are not going to talk about it in front of people in general" ("Title IX and Menstruation" Johnson, et al., 260). Menstrual injustice is inherently a feminist issue: women are perceived to be less-than because they experience periods, and therefore women feel shame in their bodies and themselves. Centuries of men degrading women due to menstruation has resulted in periods becoming taboo.

Patterns of viewing periods as specifically a feminine issue cause negative psychological effects in menstruators, perpetuate dated ways of looking at sex and gender, and lead to discrimination against women solely because of their perceived periods. While it is important to recognize the ways in which misogyny plays a role in the stigmatization of periods because as previously mentioned, periods are mostly linked to cisgender women, it is also important to recognize that this association isn't completely accurate. Not all women menstruate, and not all menstruators are women. For example, transgender men and non-binary people may menstruate, or transgender and cisgender women may not menstruate. Cass Bliss, a transgender activist, artist and educator, states that "menstruation is almost always tied to womanhood... does not having the ability to menstruate make you a man? And if menstruating is what makes you a woman, then are women who may not have periods, for a variety of health reasons, not real women?" (Bliss qtd. in "Menstrual Justice" Johnson, 26).

This idea of intersectionality also adds nuance to how period products are marketed. Take the 2014 "#LikeAGirl" advertisement campaign from pad company Always, for example.

While this campaign was intended to reduce the stigma associated with periods and make girls more confident, it also furthered the idea that periods solely affect women. Imagine suffering from body dysmorphia as a transgender man: you feel like a man, you *are* a man, yet every month when you menstruate and you have to unwrap products plastered in pink and “#LikeAGirl” messaging, and your dysmorphia gets worse. Or, think about the signage in pharmacies for period products; more often than not, the signs say “feminine care.” This emphasizes the idea that only cisgender women are affected by periods and that periods are too shameful to be put on a sign and instead have to be written in code: “feminine care.”

In addition to thinking about gender identity, it is also important to understand how poverty, race, and their intersection affect access to period products and can exacerbate already existing menstrual injustice. Based on a survey of 1,036 American women, 23% of Black and 24% of Latina people with periods strongly agree that they've struggled to afford period products in 2020-2021, compared to 8% of white respondents (U By Kotex). Further, a 2019 research study of low-income women in St. Louis, Missouri found that 64% of the women studied could not afford menstrual products in the previous year. One third of women surveyed had resorted to using “strips of cloth, rags, tissues, or toilet paper” in place of menstrual products, whereas some women reported having to go to hospital emergency rooms to get products (Knudtson, et al. qtd. in Crays, 136). Given systemic inequalities that create issues like the racial wealth gap, where a typical white family's net worth is nearly ten times greater than a typical Black family's net worth (McIntosh, et al.), it is clear how an individual's wealth and race impact access to period products and make it even harder to manage their menstrual cycle.

Menstrual injustice and period poverty are inherently rooted in misogyny. For centuries,

women have been viewed as less-than because of the connection between women and menstruation, and therefore it is important to address these issues through a feminist lens. However, it is equally as important – if not more so – to analyze menstrual injustice with an interdisciplinary approach. People experience menstruation differently depending on their gender identity, race, and socioeconomic status. Based on these factors, people are also perceived differently in relation to their periods. The issues of menstrual injustice and period poverty are systemic issues based on a history of sexism, but the effects of such issues extend far beyond cisgender women. In order to create a more just society for all menstruators, public perception around periods needs to change and more policy needs to be enacted to reduce barriers to accessing period products. Discussions around menstrual injustice and period poverty must focus on intersectionality instead of solely centering cisgender women. Changing how the public sees an issue and how the government takes action on an issue takes significant time, but as long as people continue to advocate for justice, progress will be made.

Works Cited

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