

The College at Brockport: State University of New York

Digital Commons @Brockport

Senior Honors Theses

Honors College at The College at Brockport

9-14-2020

Menstrual Equity within the Homeless Community: The Good, the Bad, and the Bloody

Courtney Earle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/honors>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), and the [Women's Health Commons](#)

Menstrual Equity within the Homeless Community: The Good, the Bad, and the Bloody

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
Courtney Earle
Women and Gender Studies & Public Health Major

The College at Brockport
May 15, 2020

Thesis Director: Dr. Bek Orr, Assistant Professor, Women and Gender Studies

Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.

Acknowledgments

I can say without a doubt that this thesis would not exist if I didn't have such amazing people supporting and encouraging me every step of the way.

To all of my Gender Studies and Public Health professors, thank you for making my experience at Brockport unforgettable. I am so lucky to have been in classes with professors as passionate and dedicated as all of you.

A huge shout out to my wonderful family for keeping me (mostly) sane. You've all done more for me than I can ever put into words, but we know it's all about the food. To my sister, thank you for the chicken wing pizza. To my mom, thank you for the mountains of dark chocolate. To my dad, thank you for all the home-cooked meals and glasses of wine. I couldn't have done it without you.

Last but definitely not least, I am eternally grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Bek Orr. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for being just as passionate about this topic as I am. Thank you for helping me write about capitalism. Thank you for the endless supply of pep talks and reminders that I'm great. I could go on forever, but really it all boils down to the fact that I am so thankful to have been shaped by you in class, in this thesis, and in life.

Abstract

Homeless menstruation is a prevalent issue across the United States, however, there is currently a severe lack of academic literature on the topic. This paper is a call to action for feminist and public health scholars to conduct more theory-based research in order to implement effective and inclusive solutions for problems associated with homeless menstruation. I utilized feminist media analysis and discourse analysis to examine articles about homeless menstruation published by popular media sources as well as organizations and businesses that are involved in the fight for menstrual equity. The work that is being done by these organizations and media sources to understand and remedy the problems of homeless menstruation is important and does have an impact. However, this work often centers cisgender women and ignores menstruators who identify as non-binary or trans, making these efforts less effective and further marginalizing these populations. A basic application of feminist theory would ensure a more intersectional approach to both understanding and solving issues of homeless menstruation.

Table of Contents

Literature Review	6
Menstruation	6
Homelessness	9
Homelessness and Menstruation	11
Section I: Homeless Menstruation in Popular Media	14
Methods	14
Key Themes	16
Discourse Analysis	21
Section II: Organizations and Businesses Fight for Menstrual Equity	27
What is the tampon tax?	28
Organizations	29
Businesses	31
What They're Doing Well	32
What Could Be Better	34
Feminism and Capitalism	38
Conclusion	41
References	43

Introduction

I got my first period in fourth grade. My mom cried when she saw the bloodstains on my clothing and my dad congratulated me on becoming a woman. I was nine years old.

Unsurprisingly, it was incredibly difficult for me to manage my menstrual cycle. I didn't know how to swallow pain pills so I stayed home from school more times than I can count. I didn't know when or how or why I needed to change my menstrual product so I left smears of blood on my clothes and bedsheets. What I did know was that my period was meant to be a secret. Maybe someone told me or maybe it was instinct but I knew I wasn't supposed to talk about my period with anyone else. For years I was ashamed of myself, my body, and my blood. I would say I was out sick with a cold when really I was lying in fetal position on my kitchen floor. I would wear a sweatshirt around my waist just in case I bled through my pad or tampon. I would shove period products up my shirt sleeves or into my bra. I would do anything to keep the secret.

I was a senior in high school when I stopped caring about whether or not anyone knew I had my period. After eight years, I had finally figured out the right combination of ibuprofen, Always Infinity Pads, and dark chocolate and I was tired of feeling ashamed. I would talk to anyone and everyone about anything and everything menstruation. It was that same year that I first learned about homeless menstruation. I watched a YouTube video in December of 2015 that talked about menstrual equity, focused heavily on homeless menstruation, and the obsession began.

I was a junior in college when I decided I wanted to write this paper on homeless menstruation. I had just declared two majors—public health and women and gender studies—and I figured no topic combined my passions better. I thought I would get IRB approval and do some interviews about menstruation within Rochester's homeless community. I thought I would

build on what had already been written and make a few suggestions on how interventions could be improved. I was told to look for a gap in the research, to look for some way to add to the scholarly discourse. What I discovered was that the gap was massive and there wasn't much scholarly discourse to build on. For months, I searched for *anything* on homeless menstruation and felt extremely frustrated when I continually came up empty handed.

This paper is a culmination of all of my life experiences and passions. I am a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman and I am very privileged to have never gone without the products or facilities I need to manage my period. However, I refuse to believe that feeling clean and safe and dignified while managing a natural bodily function should ever be a privilege. I hope that this paper leaves you feeling engaged, enraged, and empowered, period.

Literature Review

There is very little scholarship on the topic of homeless menstruation. While this is problematic, it is not exactly surprising. Historically, menstruation generally has not been a hot topic. However, considering the massive number of people who experience both menstruation and homelessness, it is necessary that this topic receives more attention. Due to the meagerness of existing research, scholarship on menstruation and scholarship on homelessness will be investigated separately in order to gain a better understanding of possible experiences of homeless menstruators. The scholarship that is available on homeless menstruation will be investigated as well and compared to the knowledge available on menstruation and homelessness.

Menstruation

Stigma and Shame

The negative stigma surrounding the topic of menstruation is one of the main barriers to knowledge. On the societal level, this stigma has resulted in less focus on menstruation in scholarly works (Sumpter & Torondel, 2013). Many researchers have noted the negative connotations, stereotypes, taboos, and shame that are associated with menstruation. On an individual level, this stigma can lead to poor self-esteem and negative body image which can damage mental and physical health (Swenson & Havens 1987; Schooler, Ward, Meriwether, & Caruthers, 2005; Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005; White, 2013; Johnston-Robeldo & Chrisler, 2013). In a multiethnic study of menstrual knowledge and taboo, White found that low self-esteem is often caused by a lack of knowledge of menstruation and the individual's body (2013). As previously stated, stigma is a barrier to knowledge of menstruation, however, stigma is also caused by a lack of knowledge of menstruation.

People are taught by their families, friends, educational systems, religions, and media that menstruation is shameful and therefore should be kept hidden (Cooper & Koch 2007; Zalcborg, 2009). In a study done by Jackson and Falmagne, it was reported that interviewees avoided using the term 'menstruation', saying 'it' instead. The same study also found that participants changed the way they dressed and carried bags to the bathroom to hide menstruation and their period products (2013), indicating that menstruators experience significant pressure to maintain the illusion that they do not menstruate.

One common source of shame is the belief or feeling of uncleanliness while menstruating (Kowalski & Chapple, 2000; Johnston-Robeldo & Chrisler, 2013). Advertisements for menstrual products frequently emphasize discretion and very rarely show images of anything resembling real-life menstruation (Simes & Berg 2001; Wister, Stubbs, & Shipman 2013). Additionally, advertisements for non-menstrual vaginal products like douches, sprays, and powders, often use

language that implies that the vagina and the fluids it secretes are unclean and need to be avoided or removed (Jenkins, Crann, Money, & O’Doherty, 2018). All of these messages and many more exemplify the negative stigma society has about menstruation and menstruating bodies. These negative messages are pervasive, crossing categories of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual identities, and socioeconomic status.

Developing Nations

The shame of living in a body that menstruates is ingrained in cultures around the world. Recently, there has been an increase in the scholarly investigation of menstruation in developing countries. Many studies have reported stigmatization and cultural taboos regarding menstruation. Like in developed nations, this stigma influences how people experience menstruation in myriad ways (Mahon & Fernades 2010; House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012; Shah, Nair, Shah, Modi, Desai, & Desai, 2013). Menstruation is hardly ever spoken about in public spaces, like school, so the taboos are generally taught to people by older family members and close friends. Young girls are not taught about menstruation until menarche, their first menstrual bleeding, and even then, there is very little discussion about menstruation. Young boys are provided with even less information about menstruation. This lack of knowledge about menstruation has been shown to negatively influence a person’s health and access to education as discussed below (House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012).

Multiple articles that investigate menstruation in developing nations also address UNICEF’s sustainable development goal for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH). Mahon and Fernades note that while menstruation should be included in the programs that are supported by WASH almost none are (2010). Access to clean water and a safe space to dispose of menstrual hygiene products are necessary to manage menstruation. Without these resources,

menstruators are at a greater risk of developing urinary tract infections (UTIs) or reproductive tract infections. Additionally, considering the taboo around menstruation, if menstruators are unable to access these things they could be ostracized by peers and experience high levels of stress. All of these factors lead to menstruators missing school more frequently or dropping out altogether (Mahon & Fernades 2010; Devnarain & Matthias, 2011; House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012; Shah, et al., 2013; Sarkar, Dobe, Dasgupta, Basu, & Shahbabu, 2017).

Homelessness¹

Stigma and Shame

Homelessness and housing insecurity is a prevalent problem in the United States. On any given night upwards of 500,000 people experience homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2019). Homeless people may have difficulty finding and accessing safe shelters, health care, and food for reasons such as financial strain, location, and ability (Hodnicki, 1990; Belcher & Deforge, 2012). Compounding these problems is the stigma that is attached to being labeled homeless. Research has shown that in Western society, specifically the United States, it is normal to blame impoverished and homeless people for their situations, instead of patriarchal systems of oppression (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997; Belcher & Deforge, 2012). This results in the perpetuation of poverty and homelessness. Most homeless people become homeless due to larger social problems like unaffordable housing, low-wages, and high health care costs. However, instead of blaming the systems that cause homelessness, the individual is blamed and stigmatized. When homelessness is seen as the individual's fault, fewer resources are provided to help the individual overcome the factors working against them and

¹ The term houseless is a better descriptor of this community as it recognizes that 'home' is not necessarily a physical space, however homeless is used throughout this paper because it is the most common term used in both academic and popular writing to describe those living without a permanent residence.

they remain homeless. Phelan et al. (1997) and Belcher & Deforge (2012) explain that the cycle of poverty can only end when society no longer views poverty as acceptable.

Not only does stigma influence society as a whole, on an individual level the stigma around homelessness may result in the individual seeking out resources less. Poor and homeless people who seek aid from the government and non-governmental organizations are often given negative labels such as lazy (Butterbaugh, Weir, & McGovern, 1998). This can discourage people from using social services, which may result in their situation worsening. Additionally, stigma can cause individuals to experience severe shame, stress, and decreased self-esteem, which can lead to problems with physical and mental health (Diblasio & Belcher 1993).

Health Problems

Homeless people have unique and specific experiences with health care. Studies have shown that due to their circumstances, homeless people are more vulnerable to contracting many diseases and health problems, including respiratory diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, and infectious diseases that may not pose as large a threat to the general population (Hodnicki, 1990; Muñoz, Crespo, & Pérez-Santos 2005). Ensign and Gittelsohn discovered that common health concerns of young people who experience homelessness included HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, depression, and pneumonia (1998). One study found that in a population of low-income mothers, poor health can increase a person's likelihood of becoming homeless, and being homeless can increase a person's likelihood of experiencing poor health (Park, Fertig, & Metraux, 2011). There are many possible explanations for this phenomenon, the most likely being that homeless people are less likely to seek and receive treatment for their health problems (Park, Fertig, & Metraux, 2011; Muñoz, Crespo, & Pérez-Santos 2005). One study that focused on homeless women with drug and/or alcohol addiction found that the biggest barrier to service was mental

health, specifically depression. Other barriers included the cost of service, not knowing where to find treatment, and distance from the treatment center. While these findings are specific to the population, these results may reflect the barriers among the general homeless population as well (Upshur, Jenkins, Weinreb, Gelberg, & Orvek, 2018).

Homelessness and Menstruation

Stigma and Shame

As previously mentioned, there is very little scholarly knowledge of the experiences of homeless menstruation. No articles were found that specifically investigated the topic, however, there are a few articles that focused on homeless women where the topic of menstruation was raised, however briefly. In these articles, researchers avoided focusing on menstruation, asking participants about topics like body-image instead. This showed me that not only does stigma influence the experience of the menstruator, but also the actual research being conducted. Problems of homeless menstruation can only be solved if there is no shame associated with talking about menstruation openly.

One article from 2017 looked at body-image among homeless women, and menstruation was brought up. One of the main body image influencers for homeless women was the shame of menstruation and difficulty avoiding shame and stigma. The researchers found that lack of access to hygiene products correlated with lower body image (Mitchel & Ramsey, 2017). Stigma heavily influences the separate experiences of menstruation and homelessness, so, logically, this stigma would be compounded among people who simultaneously experience homelessness and menstruation.

For homeless people who menstruate, one of the main sources of shame and stigma likely stems from the inability to manage menstruation. As previously mentioned, menstruation must

be kept secret to avoid societal judgment and embarrassment. Homeless people may not be able to access necessary hygiene products or follow recommended hygienic practices while menstruating. In a study by Ensign, some homeless women reported that it was sometimes difficult to use menstrual products while homeless (2000). While there was no explanation in the article, based on information about menstruation in developing nations, it could be hypothesized that this is because of a lack of access to clean water and sanitary facilities such as bathrooms and showers. Due to financial burdens, homeless individuals may also resort to stealing menstrual products when they cannot afford them, or when they cannot access them from organizations and shelters that serve them (Ensign, 2000). Along with feelings of shame and stigma, if an individual is unable to effectively manage menstruation their risk of developing reproductive tract infections increases. A review done by Sumpter and Torondel found that there was a correlation between menstrual hygiene management and infection, however, this correlation could not be deemed significant due to the small sample size (2013).

Lack of Discussion

There is a severe gap in the current literature about homeless menstruation. Similar to my own findings, in 2017, Parillo called this lack of knowledge a public health emergency and stated that “Although commonly reported in underdeveloped nations, [their] Google Scholar search for menstrual hygiene management in the United States homeless women revealed sparse mention of this pervasive health concern” (2017, pg. 14). Sumpter and Torondel also concluded that there is not enough existing research to understand how menstruation influences women’s lives and the possible benefits women would experience by improving menstrual health management (2013). When data is collected on the topic of menstruation, it is often collected from a narrow demographic. For example, Hennegan, Shannon, and Schwab found that menstrual data was

collected from predominantly wealthy, urban, and educated individuals in developing countries such as Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria (2018). Many of the articles also represented incredibly small populations, with sample sizes often being less than 100. Finally, none of the scholarship found in this review recognized the experiences of people who menstruate and do not identify as women.

This paper is a call to action for both feminist and public health scholars. Although there are many reasons to demand more academic research on homeless menstruation, in this paper I will make an argument for two specific reasons. First, the limited scholarship that exists on this topic does not do a sufficient job of representing either the prevalence of homeless menstruation or the general public's interest in the topic. As I will explain later, the general public is interested in issues of menstruation, specifically homeless menstruation. This interest has resulted in the creation of organizations and businesses that are specifically focused on solving problems related to homeless menstruation. It has also resulted in many popular media articles that center the experiences of homeless menstruators. Homeless menstruation and the multitude of problems that accompany it affects thousands of people in the United States, if not more. However, based on current scholarship, one might assume that homeless menstruation is a very minor problem or not a problem at all. Academic scholarship should both inform and be informed by the problems that influence and interest society, and the current scholarship does neither. Second, the current discourse and interventions that are being implemented both in academic research and beyond are not as effective nor as inclusive as they could be if they were informed by feminist and public health theories. A basic application of feminist theory would ensure a more intersectional approach to both understanding and solving issues of homeless menstruation. More scholarly research needs to be done that utilizes theoretical concepts and models as this work will

undoubtedly influence the general public's knowledge of homeless menstruation as well as the interventions that are implemented outside of academia.

Section I: Homeless Menstruation in Popular Media

Despite the lack of attention from academic writing, there seems to be an understanding among popular media sources that menstruating while experiencing homelessness is an important issue that needs to be given more attention. Because popular media often reflects and influences the views of society, it is interesting to see the difference in the representation of homeless menstruation in popular media compared to that in academic scholarship. This section will attempt to determine some of the key themes found in online magazine articles.

Methods

I used feminist media analysis on thirteen different articles published online by Bustle, CNN, Cosmopolitan, Forbes, Harper's Bazaar, HuffPost, LA Times, Ms. Magazine, Paper Magazine, Teen Vogue, and Yes Magazine.² To find these articles I searched Google using the terms homeless, homelessness, menstruation, and period. Thousands of results were offered including different blogs, organizations, and news websites, however, I chose to focus solely on articles from online magazines and newspapers that I felt were well established. In my initial search, I sought out and selected articles that specifically included the terms homeless, menstruation, and period. I made this a priority because I found while conducting formative research that many of the articles published in scholarly journals did not directly address homelessness and menstruation. The popular media that I analyzed needed to be focused on this specific topic. However, this still yielded fewer results than desired, so I expanded the search terms to include articles that referenced period poverty and menstrual equity. Period poverty is

² Feminist Media Analysis examines mass media in an attempt to understand the influence of prominent cultural ideas and power dynamics on marginalized identities.

commonly defined as lacking access to necessary menstrual hygiene products and facilities (Global Citizen). Menstrual equity is defined as having access to clean, safe, and affordable menstrual hygiene products and facilities (Women's Voices). Both of these terms are commonly used when discussing issues of menstruation faced by economically disadvantaged people and are therefore relevant to this research. Every article centered homeless menstruators living in the United States. Additionally, all of the selected articles were found on the first two pages of the Google search results, which suggested that they were the most relevant and popular articles on the subject.³ Finally, each article was published within the last five years, the oldest article being published in 2015, so the information was generally reflective of the current state of homeless menstruation.

Before reading the articles, I determined a series of questions to help guide my analysis and maintain some consistency in how each article was analyzed. My first question—what are the articles talking about—was very broad and mainly used to help determine if the articles were suitable for this research. The next few questions were focused on the experiences that I anticipated might be described in the articles. How do people manage menstruation? What are the comorbidities, or other health problems that commonly occur among homeless menstruators? What are other associated problems? Finally, the last set of questions were intended to critique the actual discourse of the articles. Who is writing about this problem? Who is being written about? Who isn't being written about? And who is the intended or expected audience? I took detailed notes while reading the articles and organized these notes by aligning them with the

³ Google search algorithms are specific to each individual based on search and browsing history. I have searched for and read articles on menstruation too many times to count, so the results of my searches may be quite different than someone else's.

question(s) they answered. After doing this I attempted to find commonalities across the articles and determine themes.

Key Themes

The Cycle of Stigma

The first theme that I found across all of the articles was what I call the Cycle of Stigma. Each article talked in different ways about how the general stigma or taboo surrounding periods affects the lives of homeless people. Menstruation is not a topic often discussed publicly because many people have been socialized to believe that it is a private or secret matter (Kerkham, 2010). In fact, because menstruation is such a taboo topic, a recent survey showed "...that there are 5,000 slang words used to refer to menstruation in 10 different languages..." (Sharma, 2019, para. 15). CNN Business published an article that reported that "stress and shame were the most common emotions that [U.S. students] associated with menstruation." (Okamoto & Molland, 2019, para. 3). This shame is only magnified among homeless people due to the shame of being homeless, the shame of not having menstrual products, and the shame of not being able to afford menstrual products. Shame leads to people not discussing periods or menstruation which means that many homeless individuals do not ask for the products they desperately need. Finally, when people don't ask for the products, the products are not donated and the whole cycle continues again (McNamara, 2017). Another article published by HuffPost echoed this point noting that "The fact that menstruation is a taboo topic, to begin with, means that people who are able to help, often aren't even aware that such a vast need exists" (Goldberg, 2015, para. 7). An interviewee in the Cosmopolitan article noted that menstrual products like tampons and pads are not donated as frequently or in as great a quantity as most other donations to women's shelters

(Moore, 2015). This cycle of shame may affect all people who menstruate, however, the articles note that these effects are disproportionately larger within the homeless population.

Comorbidities

Another theme across all of the articles were discussions of additional problems that homeless people who menstruate experience. Every article cited different examples of problems either associated with menstruation or homelessness that make the other worse. Commonly mentioned were issues of pain and discomfort that typically accompany menstruation. Pain from cramps and/or headaches was mentioned as a menstrual problem that can worsen due to homelessness because homeless people are often unable to access medications like ibuprofen (Moore, 2015). Another source of pain can be caused by infections, such as Urinary Tract Infections (UTI), that are more likely to occur among homeless people who menstruate for multiple reasons. One reason given by an interviewee in the HuffPost article was that homeless people have less access to bathrooms, and more specifically showers. Not bathing or cleansing regularly during menstruation can increase a person's risk of developing infections (Goldberg, 2015). Jennifer Weiss-Wolf gave another reason for infection in an interview with Harper's Bazaar.⁴ She noted that people experiencing poverty and homelessness may resort to reusing supplies, like old clothes, or wearing tampons and pads longer than recommended because they have no other choice (Kosin, 2017). Both of these possibilities can increase the individual's risk of infection and using a tampon for too long is especially dangerous as it could result in Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) which can quickly become fatal (Meadows-Fernandez, 2017).

The articles also noted that periods can become irregular due to the stress of menstruation and homelessness. This was the experience for one interviewee in the Teen Vogue article

⁴ Jennifer Weiss-Wolf is menstrual equity expert, author of *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity*, and co-founder of the organization Period Equity.

(McNamara, 2017). High levels of stress have the potential to influence a person's hormones which can result in irregular menstruation. Stress is often caused by uncertainty and there are many uncertainties that homeless people who menstruate experience. This could include uncertainty about where they will sleep, what they will eat, or when they will be able to use the bathroom. Stress can also increase due to medical issues such as pain and infection and the cycle of stigma, both mentioned previously.

The Cost of Menstruating

All of these physical problems can result in other problems such as missing opportunities, specifically school and work. Menstruation and homelessness as separate issues can negatively impact a person's ability to attend school or work, when a person experiences both simultaneously their attendance may decrease more (McNamara, 2017). This is due to the limited access to resources to manage menstruation and the associated physical problems compounded with the influence of negative stigma and shame surrounding periods and homelessness. However, homelessness does not just cause menstruation to be more difficult to manage, menstruation also makes homelessness more difficult to escape because of the missed opportunities. Less-educated individuals are more likely to be homeless, so are people who lose a job due to frequent absences and people who are not able to make interviews. In this way, menstruation perpetuates homelessness just as homelessness worsens the experiences of menstruation.

Missed opportunities are not the only cost of menstruating while homeless. The actual financial burden of menstruation places significant strain and stress on homeless individuals. In a series of interviews conducted by HuffPost and published in 2017, multiple homeless women reported that period products were essentially impossible to afford (Weiss-Wolff & Epstein-

Norris). There are of course multiple factors that influence a person's ability to purchase period products, one of the main ones being the tampon tax, which taxes menstrual products as luxury items and financially burdens all people who menstruate (Weiss-Wolf, 2019; Magistretti, 2019). An article published by Paper Magazine does an excellent job of explaining the problematic logic of the tampon tax, stating that "Soap and toilet paper are... available as a public commodity because there is a civically expected level of hygiene, however since tampons and pads are labeled as "luxury goods," they're somehow exempt from the basic hygiene category" (Sharma, 2019).

Finally, products like tampons and pads are often not covered by SNAP, commonly known as food stamps, and Medicaid. Once again, this is because these products are not viewed as necessary but rather luxury items (Little, 2015; Sharma, 2019). These programs are put in place to specifically help people who struggle financially, but by excluding menstrual products these programs are assisting the problem not the people.

Managing Menstruation

The final theme that was discussed across all articles was how homeless people manage menstruation. Two ways to manage menstruation that were often mentioned in conjunction were stocking up on products when they were available and rationing products. As mentioned previously, homeless individuals have difficulty with purchasing menstrual products and with finding organizations that will supply them with products. These people may be faced with an incredibly difficult choice to purchase a box of tampons or pads or purchase food for the night (McNamara, 2017). There were also examples of organizations that provide people with a set or limited number of period products (Moore, 2015). This is problematic because it could, and often does, result in people making dangerous choices with their health such as rationing their

products. Individuals may be forced to use only one tampon or pad a day which dramatically increases their risk of developing infections. Aside from these basic health concerns, rationing products could result in people bleeding through their clothing which can make them feel ashamed, decrease their confidence, and cause increased stress about hiding and removing stains on their clothing.

Another way homeless people manage menstruation is by using alternatives to products that are specifically designed for menstruation like tampons or pads. When people run out of their supply they are forced to turn to other resources such as paper towels, toilet paper, napkins, and old clothing like shirts and socks (Upadhye, 2017). These are, quite obviously, not effective solutions. First, there are questions of sanitation and hygiene, especially when potentially repurposing and reusing old clothing. If these items are not properly sanitized then the person could end up with a serious infection. Additionally, none of these products were designed to absorb blood the way a tampon or pad is. Using products like these could cause people to bleed through. However, even if they didn't bleed through, the person may be in a constant state of worry between the times they are in the bathroom about whether or not they are staining their clothing and inadvertently telling the world that they are on their period.

One of the main conclusions I came to during the process of this research is that none of the previously mentioned themes are experienced separately from the others. Menstruation, homelessness, stigma, shame, physical difficulties, missed opportunities, the way one manages menstruation, all of these experiences, and more are intertwined. When looking at representations of homeless menstruation it is not possible and not useful to look at each theme's individual influence, rather it is necessary to look at the complete experience and how each theme affects and is affected by the others.

Discourse Analysis

Who isn't represented?

Generally, the dialogue surrounding menstruation centers cis-women and largely ignores people who do not identify as women. When examining these thirteen articles, I found that there was little to no recognition of non-binary and trans people, in regards to both who was writing the articles and who the articles were being written about. Only six of the articles mentioned non-binary, trans, or gender-nonconforming people in some way (Barajas, 2019; Kosin, 2017; Meadows-Fernandez, 2017; Sharma, 2019; Upadhye, 2017; Weiss-Wolf, 2019). However, even though these authors recognized that menstruators are not exclusively cis-women, the majority of their articles centered cis-women. No more than one, maybe two, sentences were designated for the experience of non-binary, trans, and gender-nonconforming folks. Additionally, these identities were often quite literally parentheticals in the articles. Upadhye wrote “If you’re a woman (or a trans man or anyone who menstruates)...” in an article for Bustle (2017, para. 1). Placing trans men and all other menstruators inside the parenthesis qualifies these identities as secondary to cis-women, or less important, in the menstrual movement.

A few authors did a better job of including trans and non-binary people in their discussion of menstruation. Jennifer Weiss-Wolf dedicated a short paragraph to all people who menstruate and recognized that the current movement often excludes trans and gender-nonconforming people from the conversation (2019). The entire article was written as a call to action for changes that need to be made within the U.S. in general and within the menstrual movement. Weiss-Wolf is a prominent voice in the menstrual equity movement and I believe that she made this statement in large part due to her deep knowledge of the movement and the

feminist theory that supports it. Most, if not all, of the other authors, did not have this extensive knowledge of menstrual equity or feminist theory.

Finally, I found it interesting that one article briefly mentioned trans and non-binary individuals and how they "...continue to be marginalized in every way" (Sharma, 2019, para. 15). Although the author recognizes this marginalization, they do not offer any additional insights as to why this is or what should be done to change it. Recognition of injustice is simply not enough, action must be taken to stop the injustice. In this article, as well as all of the other articles, it is not enough to simply recognize that trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming people menstruate. The authors must actively choose to include representations of these experiences, examining the barriers that are specific to gender nonconforming homeless menstruators.

Who is writing?

I experienced quite a bit of discomfort when attempting to label the authors in some way. The purpose of determining their identities was to discover whether or not the articles I had read were written by a diverse group of individuals who were able to represent different groups and identities within the menstrual movement. I will admit I went into this exercise with a bias due to what I considered less than adequate representation within the articles themselves. However, even with this bias, as a feminist scholar, I wasn't comfortable labeling these authors without at least a few guiding ideas. First, I chose to use only the information that was presented on the magazine's website or in the article itself. While searching for the authors might have given me more insight into who they were, if they had wanted readers to have that information it would have been included in their biography. Also, by choosing to examine only the biographies that were available on the magazine website I was able to guarantee that I was, in fact, reading about

the author and not about someone else with the same name. Second, I chose not make assumptions based on the author's biography or photograph. This meant that I would use gender-neutral pronouns unless the biography specifically used gendered language, I would not assume race or ethnicity unless it was specifically stated, and I would not assume socioeconomic status, specifically housing status unless it was specifically stated.

Even with these guidelines, it was rather difficult attempting to determine the identities of the people writing these articles for a multitude of reasons. The main one being that most author biographies do not focus on the many complex identities of the individual, but rather their accomplishments and areas of interest. One exception to this was the author of the Forbes article who stated in their bio that they were visually impaired (Magistretti, 2019). No other author specifically stated any of their identities. Only two authors, Julia Barajas and Janet Upadhye, used she, her, hers pronouns in their biographies. However, based on prior readings and work, I was aware that Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, who authored two of the articles, and Nadya Okamoto both identify as female. None of the authors identified themselves as members of specific racial or ethnic groups or socioeconomic class. However, again based on prior readings, I was aware that Nadya Okamoto experienced housing insecurity for a time in her childhood which inspired her to go into this work. It was not surprising to me that the authors did not disclose this information as it is private and has the potential to incite negative criticisms from their online audience. However, as a researcher looking at these articles through a feminist lens, I think it would be beneficial for the authors to share the parts of their identities that brought them to this work and influenced their writing.

Who is Reading?

For this section, I will focus specifically on *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Ms. Magazine*. Each of these publications has both an intended audience and an actual audience. The intended audience is who the magazines' states they are writing for. For example, *Cosmopolitan* specifically writes for young women, *Ms. Magazine* writes for feminists of all ages, and *Harper's Bazaar* calls itself "... a daily resource for the modern woman" (*Cosmopolitan*, 2020a; *Ms. Magazine* 2020b; *Harper's Bazaar* 2020). Based on these descriptions it is easy to assume that the content published by these media sources is intended for young people, more specifically young, liberal women.

Unsurprisingly, the actual audience—which is represented by the demographic data—matches this description pretty well. For each of these magazines, the data showed that their audiences were predominantly made up of women. The median age for each magazine differed, however, the majority of readers were between 18 and 40 years old. Readers of *Harper's Bazaar* had a median income of over \$100,000 and *Cosmopolitan* readers have a median income of about \$66,000 (*Harper's Bazaar*, 2019; *Cosmopolitan* 2020b). *Ms. Magazine* reported that 78% of their readers are homeowners (2020). Finally, about 77% of *Cosmopolitan's* audience reported that they are either currently in college or were once in college (2020b). While there was no data on the political leanings of the audience, it can be assumed that because these sources generally publish liberal content their readers are probably also liberal, or at the very least concerned with social justice.

Based on both the intended audience and the actual audience, the typical reader of *Cosmopolitan* or any of the other publications is probably a young, well-educated, middle class, socially conscious woman. Not only is this reflected in the demographic data and the stated intended audiences, but also in many of the articles published on the websites that center the

experiences and interests of this type of person. Of course, I highlight these specific media sources because they published articles that centered the experiences of homeless menstruators, but homeless menstruators are certainly not a large percent of either audience and their stories are outliers on these websites. This brings up an entirely new set of questions starting with why do these articles exist, what is their intent, and what are the possible outcomes?

Why do These Articles Exist?

Are articles about homeless menstruators being published because they are the stories the actual audience wants to read or is it an attempt to expand the intended audience? Although it is unlikely that the media sources are attempting to expand their intended audience to include homeless and low-income people—because capitalism—it’s certainly something worth thinking about.⁵ Simply publishing one or two articles that center a group is not enough to bring that group into the discussion, especially not when it is an extremely marginalized group. Of course, representation is vitally important, however, accessibility is just as important in this case. In order to truly expand the audience, big changes would need to be made at a systemic level. Low-income people would need to have the leisure time that accompanies financial security, allowing them time to seek out and read these articles. They would also need to gain access to the necessary technology and appropriate education to not only read but comprehend the articles as well. For these reasons and many more, we can conclude that these articles were not published with the intention of expanding the current audience demographics and are more likely written because the topic is interesting to the actual audience.

What is the Intent of These Articles?

⁵ A feminist critique of capitalism can be found in the following section.

The most probable answer to this question is to get people to read the articles, click the link, view the advertisements, and generally make money. Young, liberal, socially conscious women have shown interest in issues surrounding menstruation, as it is a topic they can relate to, and therefore, would probably be interested in reading an article about homeless menstruation. Although making money is the biggest driving force to publish any article, these media sources could publish articles about anything and they chose to center homeless menstruators. Many of these magazines and authors claim to be committed to social justice in some way, shape, or form, so it is likely that this is the secondary intention of these articles.

What are the Possible Outcomes?

This is it, the big question: are these articles helping or harming the community of homeless menstruators? It would be easy to argue either side, so that is exactly what I'm going to do. These articles could definitely have a positive impact on homeless menstruators. They bring awareness to an issue that not many people know about or think about. Even better, the people reading these articles most likely have access to resources they could use to serve the community—if they chose to do so. On the other hand, for many of these articles, there is no way to know if the community is benefiting from the publication of their stories. We, the readers, do not know if the community is given access to these articles or if they are receiving any of the profit that has been made by these media outlets. Without this knowledge, it is easy to conclude that the authors and magazines are exploiting homeless menstruators by profiting off of their experience.

Is there a way to publish these articles without exploiting homeless menstruators and other marginalized communities? I am inclined to say yes. I would like to see a statement at the end of the articles saying something to the extent of “the magazine will donate a portion of the

profit made by the article to a menstrual equity organization.” There could also be a link to different menstrual equity organizations that the readers could follow in order to get involved in the movement. HuffPost, Harper’s Bazaar, Cosmopolitan, and Bustle each included a link with a statement encouraging readers to donate at the end of the articles (Goldberg 2017; Kosin, 2017; Moore, 2015; Upadhye, 2017). In public health, this type of statement is called a ‘cue to action’ and is part of a behavior change theory known as the Health Belief Model (Boston University School of Public Health, 2019). This theoretical construct is often used to encourage individuals to perform the desired behavior, which, in this case, would be to get more involved in the fight for menstrual equity.

The addition of scholarly research and theory in this conversation could have many potential benefits. Academic discourse could lead to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of who menstruates. Scholarly research is almost guaranteed to be more ethical than the media articles examined in this section. This is largely because scholars are required to receive IRB approval for any research they conduct in order to ensure that the research is ethical and that vulnerable populations, like homeless people, are protected. Feminist scholars are held to particularly high ethical standards as they recognize the influence of bias and power structures within the research. Additionally, articles published by scholars would ideally be informed by theory and include theoretical constructs like the cue to action, increasing the effectiveness of the research.

Section II: Organizations and Businesses Fight for Menstrual Equity

There have been many organizations and businesses founded in recent years that are determined to fight for menstrual equity in a variety of ways. Some organizations advocate for legislation that will remove the pink tax and require manufacturers to disclose the ingredients of

period products, while others collect and distribute period products to people who need them. These organizations are vital to improving the lives and experiences of homeless menstruators and the fact that they exist once again shows that there is a real need to address problems surrounding menstruation. That said, there are of course still ways in which these organizations and businesses could do better jobs of serving homeless menstruators and menstruators in general.

In this section, I will examine four for-profit businesses and five non-profit organizations that have a hand in the fight for menstrual equity. I will examine how each uses gendered language and symbols, and, in doing so, will attempt to explain why this happens and some of the negative implications of using gendered language. I will also specifically look at the for-profit businesses and their attempts to simultaneously support feminism and capitalism.

What is the tampon tax?

It is unclear where exactly the term *tampon tax* came from, however, there is a very clear understanding of what the tampon tax is both within the menstrual movement and beyond it. The term refers to the sales tax that is placed on tampons and other menstrual hygiene products such as pads, menstrual cups, and wipes. Thirty-three U.S. states still tax these products as “luxury items” as of April 2020. The simple fact that these basic hygiene products are considered luxuries is appalling as it is, but it is even more ludicrous in comparison to the products that these states consider to be necessities. Here are just a few examples of products that are not taxed across the United States (Tax Free. Period):

- Colorado: private jet parts
- Georgia: tattoos
- Hawaii: erectile dysfunction pills
- Idaho: hair loss treatment
- Louisiana: Mardi Gras beads
- Missouri: bingo supplies

- New Mexico: souvenir items at minor league baseball games
- North Carolina: fraternity and sorority meals
- Oklahoma: sun lamps
- Vermont: garter belts

Taxing menstrual products as luxury items sends the message that menstrual hygiene is not important. Not only is this message dangerous, it is simply not true. As discussed in the previous section, many menstruators go to extreme lengths to hide their periods and are shamed by society if they fail to do so. As a society, we demand menstrual hygiene in order to protect the comfort of those who do not menstruate, however obstacles like the tampon tax add undue stress, making it difficult for those who do menstruate to protect themselves. While there are many organizations and businesses that work towards making menstrual products more accessible, for the purposes of this paper I have chosen to summarize nine and conduct a more in-depth analysis on a select few.

Organizations

Period Equity describes itself as “The nation’s only legal organization dedicated to ensuring accessible, affordable and safe menstrual products” (para. 1). It was founded by lawyers Laura Strausfeld and Jennifer Weiss-Wolf. Period Equity has three main campaigns, the first and most prevalent across the website is to remove the tampon tax from all 50 U.S. states. To do this the organization partnered with the menstrual hygiene brand Lola and created a second advocacy organization, Tax Free. Period, with the specific intention of challenging the tampon tax. The second major campaign from Period Equity is to make menstrual products free in public spaces including schools, prisons, and homeless shelters. Finally, Period Equity is fighting to make all menstrual products safe for humans and the environment. The organization advocates for more transparency regarding ingredients in period products and more research to improve safety.

PERIOD is a youth-run organization founded in 2014 by Vincent Forand and Nadya Okamoto.⁶ Okamoto was inspired by her personal experience with housing insecurity. The organization's mission is "... to end period poverty and period stigma through service, education, and advocacy" (2019). There are currently over 600 registered PERIOD chapters across all 50 states, comprised of young activists who are passionate about menstruation. These chapters host period product drives, advocate for the removal of the tampon tax and facilitate educational discussions about menstruation. As of April 2020, PERIOD chapters have served over one million periods through the distribution of products. Additionally, PERIOD organized the first-ever National Period Day in October of 2019. People rallied across the country, bringing some much-needed attention to period poverty. Finally, the organization has started the Free the Period movement, and the petition to remove tampon tax from all 50 states has collected almost 10,000 signatures (Period., 2019).

The nonprofit organization, #happyperiod, was founded in 2015 by Chelsea VonChaz. Similar to the other organizations, the goal of #happyperiod is to end period poverty and get rid of the stigma around menstruation. #Happyperiod proudly claims on their website that "Our initiative supports anyone that is homeless, low-income, and/or living in poverty. Including LGBT, non-binary, teens, veterans, and disabled" (2018, para. 2). They do this through the collection and distribution of period packages to low-income and homeless individuals. The organization started in Los Angeles but has moved to other big cities around the U.S. like Chicago and Miami. Not only has VonChaz founded #happyperiod, but she also created a period guide that is free to download in order to help educate young menstruators.

⁶ Nadya Okamoto is prominent voice in the menstrual equity movement and author of *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement*

The Homeless Period Project, founded by Stephanie Arnold and Sharron M. Champion, out of Greenville, South Carolina in 2015. The organization has collected close to eight million menstrual hygiene products and created over 430,000 period packs. These packs include tampons, pads, and wipes for each month. The Homeless Period Project donates these packs to schools, shelters, and churches mainly around South Carolina, however, there are some locations now in both Georgia and California. Another key role of the organization is advocating for the removal of the tampon tax, specifically in South Carolina. Finally, volunteers go to shelters, churches, and schools to educate people on the state of menstrual hygiene both nationally and globally.

Businesses

Cora, Lola, Aisle, and L. are all businesses that sell menstrual products and are involved in the menstrual equity movement in various ways. As mentioned previously, Lola partnered with the organization Period Equity to create the advocacy organization Tax Free. Period. Lola has also donated over five million period products through their partnership with I Support the Girls, another organization focused on female equity. The brand's mission is to be "... the first lifelong brand for a woman's body, from first period to last hot flash" (Lola, 2020, para. 1). Lola sells typical menstrual products like tampons and pads, as well as products for sex such as condoms and lubricants, and multivitamins to help with cramping. All Lola products are subscription-based, giving consumers the ability to customize what products they receive and when they receive them.

L. was founded in 2011 by Talia Frenkel because, as the website claims, "women everywhere deserve better" (2020, para. 1). The brand strives to create products that are healthy, thoughtful, accessible, and free of stigma. L. supports low-income and homeless menstruators in

a couple of ways, the first being the brands' buy one give one policy. For any product purchased L. donates a product to a person in need. L. also has numerous partners worldwide that they support by funding pad-manufacturing plants and supplying sewing machines, which helps communities grow in a more sustainable way (2020).

In the middle of conducting this research on of the businesses, Lunapads, completely rebranded, they are now known as Aisle, a play on the period aisle. While this was certainly not something I was expecting, it does give an excellent example of how quickly things are evolving within this field. The brand founders Madeleine Shaw and Suzanne Siemens explained that the name Lunapads had served them well for many years but was no longer a good representation of the brand and its customers. Their goal in rebranding was to make the business as inclusive as possible and create a space for everybody who menstruates. Of the businesses discussed, Aisle certainly has the most radical approach to the issues they support. The brand is very invested in climate change and therefore all of the products they sell—pads, liners, cups, and underwear—are reusable. The brand has donated thousands of reusable pads to people who need them and have also mentored and collaborated with the organization AFRIpads, helping them to develop reusable pads and educational materials on menstruation (Aisle, 2020).

What They're Doing Well

I chose to include each of these businesses and organizations in this paper because they're all doing good within the menstrual equity movement. This is not to say that any of them are without fault, however, it is important to recognize the ways in which they are serving homeless and low-income menstruators well. The most important positive commonality is the understanding that period poverty is not caused by one single thing. Period poverty is influenced by many different social problems that require many different solutions.

A public health educator would describe the efforts of these organizations using the socio-ecological model.⁷ A feminist might explain that this approach is successful because it recognizes the influence systems of oppression have on individuals. Both of these explanations work because they are essentially stating the same thing. Often, when we look at a health problem, like homeless menstruation or period poverty, we attempt to diagnose and treat the individual. However, the socio-ecological model explains that we can have a much larger impact if we intervene at different structural levels (U.S. HHS, CDC, 2020). For example, giving people menstrual products is an important part of solving the problem of menstrual equity, but it focuses on the individual. It would be more beneficial to change enact a policy that requires all public building supply menstrual products free of charge or to educate students and encourage positive dialogue about menstruation to decrease stigma and shame.

Each of these businesses and organizations has a multi-faceted approach to serving menstruators. Almost all of them use some combination of advocacy, education, and grassroots efforts. While the focus of organizations like PERIOD and The Homeless Period Project may be supplying people in their communities with the products they need, they are also heavily involved in advocating for the removal of the tampon tax and educating the public on menstruation (Period., 2019; The Homeless Period Project). The main goal of brands like Lola and L. may be to sell period products, but they are also donating supplies to people in need, supporting menstrual projects in developing nations, and partnering with non-profits to advocate for policy change (Lola, 2020; L., 2020). None of the organizations are under the impression that there is one single solution. They recognize that this is a complex issue and in order for change to be effective, it needs to be comprehensive.

⁷ The socio-ecological model is a public health theory used to explain how different levels of a person's social environment such as educational systems, cultural norms, and political policies influences their behavior.

I doubt that the leaders of these businesses and organizations thought about the socio-ecological model when they started coming up with solutions to the problems they were witnessing. However, intervening at multiple levels has definitely lead to a lot of success and positive change. In order to continue this positive trajectory, these organizations should consider targeting interventions at other levels or structures. It would also be beneficial for these organizations to think about and actively utilize theories, like the socio-ecological model, because interventions based on theory are oftentimes more effective than those with no theoretical basis (Glanz & Bishop, 2010).

What Could Be Better

As was stated previously, these businesses and organizations are not without fault. Most notable and detrimental to the work they are trying to do is the gendering of menstruation. This is common across almost all of the businesses and organizations I chose to analyze, though the extent to which gender is featured does vary. Additionally, among the businesses specifically, there are problems related to capitalism and the way in which these brands advertise their products and appeal to consumers.

(De)Gendering Menstruation

It is well known and accepted among feminist scholars that gender is a social construct (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994). However, outside of feminist discourse, gender and biological sex are often mistakenly assumed to be synonymous. One example of this is society's understanding of menstruation, specifically who can menstruate. Many companies, businesses, organizations, and individuals subscribe to the notion that the only people who experience menstruation are cis women. When we talk about menstruation as something *women* deal with it erases the experiences of non-binary and transgender people. This limits the people who are able to access

products and resources to only those who identify and present as women and further marginalizes an already marginalized group.

There are a few different ways that menstruation is gendered on the websites of these organizations and businesses. Some are obvious, such as the use. Some are subtle and more discrete, like the use of color, designs, and language. The most common and arguably the most problematic is the use of feminine pronouns and words, such as she, her, hers, women, and girls. These words make appearances on every website except for Period Equity, Tax Free. Period., and Aisle, which I will examine further later. Some businesses and organizations, like Cora, Lola, and The Homeless Period Project, are incredibly liberal with the use of feminine language. The phrase “For women, by women” shows up on both the Lola website and L.’s product packaging. While others seem to make a conscious effort to avoid using gendered language wherever possible, like PERIOD and #happyperiod, the use of this language, whether it be featured in every paragraph or only a few times throughout, excludes menstruators who do not identify as women. This limits the people who are able to benefit from the services, and works against the missions and goals of these organizations and businesses.

Gendered language may be the most straightforward, in-your-face, way of gendering menstruation, but it’s definitely not the only way. Cora and Lola are both stereotypically female names and are literally the names of the brands. Cora, Lola, L., Period Equity, and The Homeless Period Project highlight photos and videos on their website that feature people who present as cis women and graphics that depict the female figure (2020; 2020; n.d.; n.d.). Gendering menstruation in these ways may be slightly more subtle than using gendered language, however, it still sends a very clear message. It says that there is a certain type of person who uses these products, who can benefit from these services, and who can participate in this type of activism. It

says that if any part of your identity is not reflective of the type of femininity that is featured on these websites, from your name to your body, then this information is not for you.

Color schemes seemed to be the one place where businesses actively attempted to be gender-neutral. Cora's website and products all used shades of beige because they didn't want their period products to boast "excessively pink packaging" (2020, para. 1). Lola also used those to diverge from a traditionally feminine color scheme across the website, opting for shades of blue and purple. I find the color choices interesting because without them these brands are easily the most gendered of any that I examined. Yes, these colors could be considered gender-neutral, or at the very least not stereotypically feminine, but the rest of the brand does not shy away from femininity, so why even bother? I want to say that the brands are making an effort to appeal to all menstruators, but I think it's more likely that they chose these colors to sell the idea that they are hip, nontraditional brands who will break gender roles in a way that is very comfortable for the average consumer.

While nearly all of these businesses and organizations have gendered menstruation in one way or another there are some that are taking steps toward de-gendering menstruation. #happyperiod and L. are not perfect but there is evidence that they are trying to be more inclusive. Both organizations have specific statements on their websites that recognize the diversity of menstruators. The mission statement of #happyperiod states that they "... [support] anyone that is homeless, low-income, and/or living in poverty. Including LGBT, non-binary, teens, veterans, and disabled" (2018). The statement made on the L. website shows that they have already begun to recognize ways that they have gendered menstruation. They state that while they originally proudly claimed to be "by women for women" they have since learned the importance of inclusivity and are "... excited for [the] products to continue to evolve in their

reflection of our expanding awareness” (2020, para. 12). I think this is an excellent statement for the company to have made as it shows that they are trying to improve but does not deny their past mistakes. These attempts to be more gender-inclusive can already be seen on both the #happyperiod and L. websites, and I believe that in the coming years they will continue this trend and inspire other brands to do the same.

Period Equity is one organization that is already doing an excellent job in their active avoidance of gendered language throughout the organization's website. Tax Free. Period., the advocacy cite co-sponsored by Period Equity and Lola, makes a point to clarify a reference to women in their legal action declaration, stating that, “We understand and celebrate the fact that not all people who get periods identify as women, and not all women get periods. But in order to show discrimination under the law, we need to make the case that the law burdens “women” as referred to in today’s legal terms” (Tax Free. Period). It is so important that this statement was made, especially by organizations with as much reach as Period Equity, Lola, and Tax Free. Period. I think this statement is reflective of the mission of the organization, but it is also most likely a result of Jennifer Weiss-Wolf’s extensive knowledge of and involvement in the fight for menstrual equity.

In my research of these brands and organizations, Aisle is undoubtedly the most gender-inclusive and the best representation of a feminist business. As mentioned briefly earlier, Aisle was originally known as Lunapads and went through a rebranding in the middle of this research. In a video on the website, co-founders Siemens and Shaw explain that “[Lunapads] was no longer 100% serving us” and that their intention with the rebrand was to create “... a space for everyone who menstruates to have a more comfortable, sustainable, and inclusive period” (Aisle, 2020). This is represented in every aspect of the Aisle website from the language to the products

to the models. In their rebrand, they made conscious choices about each design element for all products in order to avoid gendering. They also launched new styles of period underwear, including briefs and boxer briefs, which were not available before. Additionally, in both the video that reintroduced the company and all of the photos throughout the website, the people who represent Aisle are diverse, not just in terms of gender, but also size, race, and age. I believe that the successful rebranding of Lunapads to Aisle is in large part due to the founders' commitment to inclusion and community collaboration. A diverse group of decision-makers has resulted in a company that is reflective of all menstruators and is an excellent example of how other businesses can improve.

I would argue that all of the businesses and organizations that have been discussed could be defined as feminist simply because they serve and center a marginalized community. However, this is simply not good enough. These organizations and businesses can do great work all day long, but if that work does not support people of all identities, or even actively excludes certain identities, then they are not doing enough. Like I stated previously, interventions are often more effective when they are rooted in theoretical knowledge. The fact that these organizations and businesses center cis women instead of being inclusive of all people who menstruate shows that they are not utilizing theory and therefore their interventions will never be as effective as they could be.

Feminism and Capitalism

A Feminist Walks Down the Period Aisle

A feminist walks down the period aisle and is faced with many problems. They see that their options are limited to brands who advertise with pretty young cheerleaders in all-white uniforms who happily do the splits while menstruating. They see the price tags on the shelves

and know that when they get to the register they'll have to fork over even more money for this essential item. They see another customer glancing around nervously to make sure no one sees them grab a box of super absorbent pads and hide it in their cart behind their bread and bananas and ice cream. They think to themselves there must be a better way.

Then, one day, a feminist stumbles upon Cora or Lola or L. and they think "Holy cow! This is exactly what I've been waiting for!" They see that these businesses avoid using aggressively pink packaging and that their models are racially diverse and not all a size 0. They see that when they buy a box of tampons one gets donated to a menstruator in need and a girl in a developing nation receives the education they need. They see that the business advocates for the removal of the tampon tax and the regulation of ingredients that are allowed to be in period products. They see all this and realize that if they buy these products they can basically save the world for only \$10—plus shipping and handling—so they go for it.

But, when their order arrives in the mail, they realize that these aren't actually magical, life-changing tampons. The tampon tax still exists, and people everywhere still can't afford period products, and young girls in developing nations are still dropping out of school, and some old, white guy is still president. The feminist can't help but feel disappointed. So what happened?

Two Opposing Ideas

Many, if not all, of the businesses discussed in this section, have branded themselves as feminist, simply by operating businesses that do not center the needs of the patriarchy. Although there are clearly varying levels of success in regards to inclusivity and intersectionality, I am inclined to agree that these businesses can be labeled as feminist, or at the very least, concerned with social justice issues. They center the needs of menstruators by ensuring that the ingredients

in their products are safe for humans and the environment, supporting women in developing nations through business and education, decreasing the financial burden of menstruation, and providing products to menstruators who need them. However, even though these businesses are doing positive and important work, there is still something that does not feel quite right. There are many feminist critiques of capitalism that I will not venture into, for the purposes of this paper it is necessary to understand one simple thing: fundamentally, the goals of feminism and capitalism do not align. The most basic goal of feminism is achieving equality, while the most basic goal of capitalism is to make a profit.

The problem with these businesses is that they are trying to merge two opposing ideologies. The main goal of any business that operates in a capitalist society is to stay in business and in order to do this they must make a profit. So while it may seem like the main goal of these businesses is to support women and menstruators, the main goal is really to sell their product. These businesses use feminism as a marketing strategy to encourage consumers to purchase their product instead of their competitors. They appeal to the problems that consumers are probably interested in and convince them that the best way to support these causes is to buy their products. So, the consumer buys the box of tampons from Cora or Lola or L. because they are no longer just tampons, they are a physical manifestation of feminism.

This is not a critique of the individual consumers who chose to purchase products from these brands, nor is it a critique of the brands themselves. Both are simply trying to do their best within an exploitative system. This is a critique of capitalism as a whole as well, as a specific marketing strategy that these businesses used known as cause marketing. There are multiple definitions of cause marketing, but one that is easy to understand within the context of these menstrual businesses is the “You buy. We’ll give” model (causemarketing.com para 4). This is

the model that each of these businesses utilize in their business plan. In some cases, this looks like the donation of one product for every product purchased or having a portion of the profit used to support advocacy work or non-profit organizations. The consumer is encouraged to purchase products from businesses that are connected with a cause they support because it makes them feel like they are making a difference (Consumer Reports para 9). Additionally, under this system, the business is able to make a profit while also reaping the benefits of being attached to an important cause.

The problem isn't the consumer or even the businesses, it is capitalism, it is the patriarchy. It is the classic liberal feminist problem. Something is better than nothing. Some freedom is better than no freedom. Some rights are better than no rights. Some opportunities are better than no opportunities. Some education is better than no education. Some period products are better than no period products. But the only way to solve the problem is to stop working within the system that has created it. It's great that these businesses exist because they are providing solutions to problems that are often ignored, but the work these businesses are doing will not make these problems go away. Hundreds, thousands, millions of period products could be donated but that wouldn't stop people from needing them.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to show the need for more academic involvement in menstrual equity discourse. First and foremost, this is necessary because homeless menstruation and other issues related to menstrual equity are incredibly prevalent throughout the United States and around the world. However, despite the prevalence of homeless menstruation, there are so many factors that are still unknown. There is no data that can show how many people are not able to manage their periods, the demographic breakdown of those who experiences homeless

menstruation, or the potential lifelong impact homeless menstruation can have on an individual's health and wellbeing. Collecting this information is a necessary first step to understanding homeless menstruation and implementing solutions.

Throughout this paper, there is an obvious disconnect between the general public's interest in homeless menstruation and that of scholars. I was able to find more popular media articles documenting the experiences of homeless menstruators than those published in academic literature. The only solutions to homeless menstruation that are currently being explored are in non-profit organizations and businesses, not through academic research. The general public has recognized that homeless menstruation is a problem and has taken steps toward changing this, but academics have continued to ignore it.

Finally, the interventions and discourse surrounding menstrual equity are not as effective as they could be if they were informed by theory. Non-binary and trans menstruators need to be recognized. Multilevel solutions need to be implemented that target the patriarchal systems of oppression that perpetuate homeless menstruation. Feminist businesses need utilize marketing strategies that do not exploit marginalized identities. If theory based research was used to produce meaningful solutions, these interventions would be more inclusive and effective.

References

- #Happy Period. (2018). *Get involved in change of happy periods Los Angeles, US move*. Retrieved April 3, 2020 from <https://hashtaghappyperiod.org/>
- Aisle. (2020). *Aisle—Sustainable period products for every body*. Retrieved April 3, 2020 from <https://periodaisle.com/>
- Barajas, J. (2019, December 28). *'Menstrual equity': L.A. may offer free tampons and pads in public bathrooms*. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-12-28/la-moves-to-provide-free-tampons-and-pads-in-public-restrooms>
- Belcher, J.R., & Deforge, B.R. (2012). Social stigma and homelessness: The limits of social change. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 22, 929-946. DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2012.707941
- Boston University School of Public Health. (2019, September 9). *The health belief model*. <http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/MPH-Modules/SB/BehavioralChangeTheories/BehavioralChangeTheories2.html>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butterbaugh, L., Weir, L., & McGovern, K. (1998). Homelessness: Women search for answers. *Off Our Backs*, 28(7), 12-14. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20836144>
- Conde Nast. (n.d.). *Teen Vogue*. <https://www.condenast.com/brands/teen-vogue/#>
- Cooper, S.C., & Koch, P.B. (2007). "Nobody Told Me Nothin": Communication about menstruation among low-income African-American women. *Women & Health*, 46(1), 57-78. DOI: 10.1300/J013v46n01_05
- Cora. (2020). *Organic tampons delivered. Modernize your period with Cora*. <https://cora.life/>

Cosmopolitan. (2020a). *About Cosmopolitan magazine*.

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/about/a26950060/about-us-contact-information-masthead/>

Cosmopolitan. (2020b). *Cosmopolitan media kit*.

http://www.cosmmediakit.com/r5/showkiosk.asp?listing_id=4785154&category_code=demo&category_id=77109

Devnarain, B., & Matthias, C.R. (2011). Poor access to water and sanitation: Consequences for girls at a rural school. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 25(2), 27-34. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41321413>

Diblasio, F.A., & Belcher, J.R. (1993). Social work outreach to homeless people and the need to address issues of self-esteem. *Health and Social Work*, 18(4), 281-288.

Ensign, J. (2000). Reproductive health of homeless adolescent women in Seattle, Washington, USA. *Women & Health*, 31(2/3), 133-151. DOI: 10.1300/J013v31n02_07

Ensign, J., & Gittelsohn, J. (1998). Health and access to care: Perspectives of homeless youth in Baltimore City U.S.A. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 13, 717-726.

Glanz K., & Bishop D.B. (2010). The role of behavioral science theory in development and implementation of public health interventions. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 31, 399-418. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.publhealth.012809.103604

Goldberg, E. (2015, January 14). *For homeless women, getting their period is one of the most difficult challenges*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/homeless-women-tampons_n_6465230

Harper's Bazaar. (2020). *About*. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/about/>

Harper's Bazaar. (2019). *Audience- Harper's Bazaar media kit*.

http://www.harpersbazaarmediakit.com/r5/showkiosk.asp?listing_id=5748345

- Hennegan, J., Shannon, A.K., Schwab, K.J., & PMA2020 investigators. (2018). Wealthy, urban, educated. Who is represented in population surveys of women's menstrual hygiene management? *Reproductive Health Matters*, 26(52), 81-91.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26605070>
- Hodnicki, D.R. (1990). Homelessness: Health-care implications. *Journal of Community Nursing*, 7(2), 59-67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3427261>
- House, S., Mahon, T., & Cavill, S. (2013). Menstrual hygiene matters: a resource for improving menstrual hygiene around the world. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 21(41), 257-259.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43288983>
- Jackson, T.E., & Falmagne, R.J. (2013). Women wearing white: Discourses of menstruation and the experience of menarche. *Feminism and Psychology*, 23(3), 379-398. DOI: 10.1177/0959353512473812
- Jenkins, A.L., Crann, S.E., Money, D.M., O'Doherty, K.C. (2018). "Clean and fresh": Understanding women's use of vaginal hygiene products. *Sex Roles*, 78, 697-709. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-017-0824-1
- Johnston-Robeldo, I., & Chrisler, J.C. (2013). The menstrual mark: Menstruation as social stigma. *Sex Roles*, 68, 9-18. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-011-0052-z
- Kerkham, P. (2010). Menstruation—the gap in the text? *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 17(4), 279-299.
 doi: 10.1080/14749730310001609735
- Kosin, J. (2017, October 9). *Getting your period is still oppressive in the United States*. Harper's BAZAAR. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a10235656/menstrual-period-united-states/>

- Kowalski, R.M., & Chapple, T. (2000). The social stigma of menstruation: Fact or fiction? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24, 74-80. DOI: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.2000.tb01023.x
- L. (2020). *L.—Award-winning personal care products made with organic materials*. <https://thisisl.com/>
- Little, A. (2015, September 8). *When you're homeless and menstruating*. Ms. Magazine. <https://msmagazine.com/2015/09/08/when-youre-homeless-and-menstruating/>
- Lola. (2020). *We're LOLA—Reproductive care for women, by women*. <https://www.mylola.com/>
- Lorber, J. (1994). Night to his day: The social construction of gender. In *Paradoxes of gender* (pp.13-15, 32-36). Yale University Press.
- Magistretti, B. (2019, January 25). *FemBeat: Period poverty is a thing, even in the U.S*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/berenicemagistretti/2019/01/25/fembeat-period-poverty-is-a-thing-even-in-the-u-s/#5773faf0569e>
- Mahon, T., & Fernades, M. (2010). Menstrual hygiene in South Asia: A neglected issue for WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) programmes. *Gender and Development*, 18(1), 99-113. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25758884>
- McNamara, B. (2017, December 20). *What it's like to get you period when you're experiencing homelessness*. Teen Vogue. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/homelessness-and-periods>
- Meadows-Fernandez, R. (2017, July 27). *Getting your period can be a pain. Getting it while homeless is even worse*. Yes Magazine. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2017/07/27/getting-your-period-can-be-a-pain-getting-it-while-homeless-is-even-worse/>
- Mitchell, M.K., & Ramsey L.R. (2017). The body image of women at a homeless service center: An analysis of an underrepresented, diverse group. *Gender Issues*, 35(1), 38-51. DOI: 10.1007/s12147-017-9192-y

- Moore, L. (2015, October 13). *What it's like to get your period when you're homeless*. Cosmopolitan.
<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a47596/what-its-like-to-get-your-period-when-youre-homeless/>
- Moreno-Black, G., & Vallianatos, H. (2005). Young women's experiences of menstruation and athletics. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33(1/2), 50-67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/400055001>
- Ms. Magazine. (2020a). *About Ms*. <https://msmagazine.com/about/>
- Ms. Magazine. (2020). *Advertise with Ms*. <https://msmagazine.com/advertise-with-us/>
- Muñoz, M., Crespo, M., & Pérez-Santos, E. (2005). Homelessness effects on men's and women's health: A comparison between a representative homeless sample and an at-risk group. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 34(2), 47-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41345128>
- National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2019). *State of Homelessness*.
<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/>
- National Center for Transgender Equality. (2019). *Housing and homelessness*.
<https://transequality.org/issues/housing-homelessness>
- Okamoto, N., & Molland, M. (2019, October 21). *The cost of tampons is hurting low-income girls. Let's fix that*. CNN Business Perspectives. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/21/perspectives/period-poverty-menstrual-products/index.html>
- Park, J.M., Fertig, A.R., & Metraux, S. (2011). Changes in maternal health and health behaviors as a function of homelessness. *Social Service Review*, 85(4), 565-585.
<https://jstor.org/stable/10.1086/663636>
- Parrillo, A. (2017). Menstrual hygiene plight of homeless women, a public health disgrace. *Rhode Island Medical Journal*, 100(12), 14-15. <http://www.rimed.org/rimedicaljournal-archives.asp>

- Period Equity. (n.d.) *Period equity*. Retrieved April 3, 2020 from <https://www.periodequity.org/>
- Period., Inc. (2019). *PERIOD. Leading the menstrual movement*. Retrieved April 3, 2020, from <https://www.period.org/>
- Phelan, J., Link, B.G., Moore, R.E., & Stueve, A. (1997). The stigma of homelessness: The impact of the label “homeless” on attitudes toward poor persons. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60(4), 323-337. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2787093>
- Sarkar, I., Dobe, M., Dasgupta, A., Basu, R., & Shahbabu, B. (2017). Determinants of menstrual hygiene among school going adolescent girls in a rural area of West Bengal. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 6, 583-588. DOI: 10.4103/2249-4863.222054
- Schooler, D., Ward, L.M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A.S. (2005). Cycles of shame: Menstrual shame, body shame, and sexual decision-making. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 42(4), 324-334. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3813785>
- Shah, S.P., Nair, R., Shah, P.P, Modi, D.K., Desai, S.A., & Desai, L. (2013). Improving quality of life with new menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent tribal girls in rural Gujarat, India. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 21(41), 205-213. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43288976>
- Sharma, J. (2019, March 12). *The state of period poverty in the United States*. Paper Magazine. <https://www.papermag.com/period-poverty-tampon-tax-united-states-2631311601.html>
- Simes, M.R., & Berg, D.H. (2001). Surreptitious learning: Menarche and menstrual product advertisements. *Health Care for Women International*, 22(5), 455-469. DOI: 10.1080/073993301317094281
- Sumpter, C., & Torondel, B. (2013). A systematic review of the health and social effects of menstrual hygiene management. *PLoS ONE*, 8(4), 1-15. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0062004

- Swenson, I., & Havens, B. (1987). Menarche and menstruation: A review of the literature. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 4(4), 199-210. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3427576>
- Tax Free. Period. (n.d.). *Tax free. Period*. Retrieved April 3, 2020 from <https://www.taxfreeperiod.com/>
- The Homeless Period Project. (n.d.). *The homeless period project*. Retrieved April 3, 2020 from <https://www.homelessperiodproject.org/>
- Upadhye, J. (2017, October 9). *This is how homeless women cope with their periods*. Bustle. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/190092-this-is-how-homeless-women-cope-with-their-periods>
- Upshur, C.C., Jenkins, D., Weinreb, L., Gelberg, L., & Orvek, E.A. (2018). Homeless women's service use, barriers, and motivation for participating in substance use treatment. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 44(2), 252-262. DOI: 10.1080/00952990.2017.1357183
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *The socio-ecological model: A framework for prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/publichealthissue/social-ecologicalmodel.html>
- Walter, Z.C., Jetten, J., Parsell, C., Dingle, G.A. (2015). The impact of self-categorizing as "Homeless" on well-being and service use. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 15(1), 333-356. DOI: 10.1111/asap.12089
- Weiss-Wolf, J., & Epstein-Norris, L. (2017, December 6). *Blood in the streets: Coping with menstruation while homeless*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/blood-in-the-streets-menstruation-homelessness_b_9019638?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGdZRRrAMHH20cq8SDOfQsr1eoR1hwU06wjLAr2JNzLAW5

VCKfs1aUNTjsH6fDdPIOn2OMEFmu5maMp5OA4oQStpfqCJaiAInN7X1mjj4kvfr5orKxIOOE
cCliAql5cbGiJeXHaT0VMhP-bHf0VQesyKoGGefW7eL514imCn4kRzA

Weiss-Wolf, J. (2019, May 28). *Periods went public—now what?* Ms. Magazine.

<https://msmagazine.com/2019/05/28/periods-went-public-now-what/>

White, L.R. (2013). The function of ethnicity, income level, and menstrual taboos in postmenarcheal adolescents' understanding of menarche and menstruation. *Sex Roles*, 68, 65-76. DOI:

10.1007/s11199-012-0166-y

Wister, J.A., Stubbs, M.L., & Shipman, C. (2013). Mentioning menstruation: A stereotype threat that diminishes cognition? *Sex Roles*, 68, 19-31. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-012-0156-0

Zalberg, S. (2009). Channels of information about menstruation and sexuality among Hasidic adolescent girls. *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 17, 60-88.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/nas.2009.-.17.60>