

MENSTRUAL POVERTY AND THE DEMORALIZATION OF FEMALE BIOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: Menstrual poverty is a recurrent controversy, but little discussed due to the taboo on the subject of menstruation, making menstrual hygiene an advantageous circumstance that does not align with the principles of justice and equity. Recently, the United Nations (UN) recognized the right to menstrual hygiene as a matter of public health and human rights, however, the reality of the facts does not exactly correspond to this perspective, due to the absence of free availability of absorbents by the network of the single health system and the high taxation on these products, the lack of access and the financial burden imposed on the population becomes evident. Additionally, it is important to emphasize the absence of comprehensive educational programs on intimate health in schools, as well as the lack of public policies that address this fundamental requirement. In this context, there is a high prevalence of female biological individuals unable to afford access to pads, facing infrastructural and educational deficiencies related to menstruation. As a result, women are made invisible and their fundamental needs are devalued.

Keywords: Menstrual poverty; menstrual hygiene; intimate health.

INTRODUCTION

The film “Pad Man”, in its plot, narrates the ills of menstrual poverty in India, highlighting the reality of the lack of menstrual hygiene and the lack of access to adequate articles. Similarly, in Brazil, it is clear that everything is intrinsically linked to social inequality and the violation of the rights of biologically female individuals, especially those who are in a situation of social and economic vulnerability. In this scenario, it appears that the lack of menstrual hygiene correlated with discrimination and taboos means the end of access to education and work for some people.

Given this scenario, it is clear that marginalized individuals, such as homeless, peripheral, black and deprived of freedom, are the most impacted by menstrual poverty. Since, unassisted by the authorities—which are absent from their responsibility to provide, free of charge, pads in the Unified Health System (SUS), these people do not have access to adequate menstrual hygiene articles, so they end up using inappropriate materials, such as pieces of cloth, toilet paper and even breadcrumbs (PERES, 2021) to stop menstrual blood. As a result, imbalances in the vaginal microbiota become inevitable.

As a result, the use of a new approach is fundamental. Thus, the availability, in a really efficient way, of menstrual hygiene articles becomes an alternative to alleviate an endemic inequality—which sickens and dehumanizes countless individuals of female biological sex who menstruate without the opportunity to acquire a basic input, such as the sanitary napkin.

METHODOLOGIES

This article was prepared through a narrative literature review, based on an extensive search of relevant databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, Science Direct and SCIELO. Data from researches related to the theme of menstrual poverty and the vulnerability of women in the context of menstruation were collected and analyzed.

In the search, the following descriptors were used: Menstrual poverty OR Menstrual hygiene OR Menstrual health OR Menstrual vulnerability OR Menstruation. There were no restrictions regarding date, language or area of knowledge. Thus, the article covers studies in English and Portuguese, published between 2017 and 2022.

When carrying out the research, 284 results were initially obtained, from which the titles of 85 articles were read and, then, 30 articles

were selected for full reading. At the end of the selection process, 6 articles were chosen to compose the present study.

RESULTS

In the 1920s, after the 1st World War, the first tampons for consumption arrived in Brazil—the Modess. However, this did not mean that menstrual hygiene would receive its due importance. From the 19th century to the current context, several models of menstrual hygiene products have emerged (disposable external and internal pads, reusable pads, absorbent panties, menstrual cups, among others). Despite significant advances in terms of hygiene items, intimate education has not progressed with equal intensity, although it is similarly relevant.

Research has shown that menstrual poverty is not just about ensuring access to menstruation resources and adequate infrastructure. Knowledge about the female body, instructions on menstruation, medical care, and basic sanitation are essential for good intimate health. (SOUZA, 2022).

Ross and Rossouw's study, carried out in eight low- and middle-income countries, addresses several factors that influence menstrual precariousness. Their indices indicate that across all countries that took part in the survey, those living in wealthier households are more likely to access sanitary napkins than those living in less wealthy households. At the same time, in Brazil, using menstrual articles has become a significant expense, considering that an individual of the female biological sex uses, on average, 20 pads per cycle, at the end of her fertile life she will have used about 10,000 pads. Estimating a cost of R\$ 0.60 per product, the value is R\$ 6,000.00. This seemingly insignificant cost is, in fact, unaffordable for many families. A study by Semper Livre associated with KYRA AND Mosaclaib exposed shocking data:

29% of the women interviewed expressed difficulties in purchasing menstrual hygiene resources during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Outside of this scenario, 21% of women witness the impasse every month. With regard to Canada, Rocha et al (2022) shows that 33% of citizens up to 25 years old do not find it easy to afford the cost of menstrual products. Analyzing the above, one observes the luxury that is menstrual hygiene and consequently health.

The scarcity of resources forces victims to make desperate decisions, so it is common to use cloth, rags, handkerchiefs, toilet paper, even baby diapers or paper towels taken from public restrooms to stop the blood. (KUHLMANN et al, 2019).

Although the female population is the majority in Brazil according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) with a total of 51%, the trivialization of women's biological needs, encouraged by the sexist culture rooted in the country for centuries, is notorious. Precarious menstruation is a taboo in society, since it is a subject relegated to ostracism and, therefore, devoid of clarifications, debates and solutions.

Based on this bibliographic review, it is possible to verify that women suffer devaluation due to their biological condition. However, it is noticeable that this unfortunate reality is gradually being fought and overcome. One example is the Brazilian regional bills regarding the distribution of sanitary napkins in schools, such as in the city of São Paulo, where the Executive Branch sanctioned in June 2021 the free distribution of sanitary napkins to female students in the municipal education network.

In summary, further studies are needed regarding solutions to the problem of menstrual poverty, education, taxation and the manufacture of intimate products for the portion of the population affected by such

conflict.

CONCLUSION

The content presented in the present work made it possible to understand menstrual poverty, aiming at the search for dignity, and to narrate the fact that the illness is not dependent, only, on the lack of access to sanitary napkins. Thus, I restore that menstruation is considered a burden for many individuals, especially those who are unable to access this basic right—considered a luxury item.

From this perspective, it is valid to recognize menstrual poverty as a social problem and a public health issue. Under this analytical bias, although there are draft regional laws that cover the free distribution of sanitary napkins, there is still a lack of coverage and inspection—the responsibility of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office—over marginalized people. In view of this, it is necessary to expand public policies that propose race, gender, social and economic equity.

Furthermore, the intellectual damage is highlighted. Since, due to menstrual poverty—an issue intrinsically linked to structural poverty—many people are inserted in a reality that, without basic sanitation and access to water inside and outside the home, they cannot manage menstruation. Consequently, they do not go to school or work during their periods, increasing an already latent inequality.

Thus, it is widely necessary to take menstrual education to the population as a whole, in addition to the creation and enforcement of laws for the free distribution of menstrual hygiene articles.

With this, it appears, through menstrual education and appropriate public policies, to give visibility to invisible people who menstruate, so that the quality of life increases and the physiological process of menstruating stops being a villain, that is, so that there is menstrual dignity.

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