

How menstrual poverty affects low-income girls in school age in Brazil.

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Abstract. Menstrual Poverty is understood as the lack of basic conditions to manage menstruation that women and girls face throughout their lives, which includes insufficient knowledge about the topic and how to deal with it, as well as prejudice and taboos around menstruation, scarce financial resources to buy tampons and adequate materials to absorb menstrual blood, and, ultimately, the deficiency of sanitation systems in poor communities. The purpose of this study is to investigate through literature and data review how it affects Brazilian students in menstruating age, as well as the attempts to solve the problem by both international, like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and national mechanisms, like actions from the Legislative and Executive Power, taking into consideration social and economic aspects.

Keywords. Menstrual Poverty, Menstrual Health Management, Gender Equality, Low-income Girls in Brazil.

1. Introduction

For many years and in many cultures, menstruation has been dealt with as something impure and dirty, banning the topic to an unspoken place, where even mentioning the word “menstruation” is enough to make people uncomfortable. For this reason, menstrual poverty has been a silent topic around the entire world, since no one talked about menstruating, no one would even talk about not knowing or not having ways to deal with it. That scenario of secrecy and silent difficulties is both a consequence and a cause of misogyny: a consequence because this silencing occurs due to hate and prejudice towards woman and their bodies, and a consequence. After all, the longer it continues, the more and more women are affected by gender inequality.

Woman not having space to talk about their blood only renegades their bodies to darker places, making them feel worthless and helpless. Neglecting access to hygiene products, proper bathrooms, and a prejudice-free education is to neglect basic human conditions to an important portion of the world’s population. Many women around the world, living in various contexts, are affected by Menstrual Poverty, but there’s a share specifically vulnerable: low-income girls of school age. In this article, we’ll be looking at this group, focusing on Brazil and its particular circumstances.

In addition, there’s a need to clarify that this study uses “women” and “girls” as synonymous for “person who menstruates” because it’s understood that, although there are people who don’t identify with the female gender and still produce and deals with menstrual blood, they’re a different demographic and their experience has its own challenges and particularities, with which the paper would be limited to deal and give the necessary and deserving attention. For the same reason, the paper won’t include imprisoned, homeless and refugees who menstruate as part of its research.

2. Methodology

The present paper is based on a literature review of books and articles concerning Menstrual Health Management and Menstrual Poverty, as well as reports from UNICEF and other UN Agencies, choosing to focus on girls of school age who come from low-income families and areas. Law Projects were also analyzed as a way to understand the attempts that have been made to solve the issue.

Since there aren’t official numbers concerning specifically this topic in Brazil, another methodology was to cross data regarding how sanitation, education and wealth statistics interacted with the demographic in question, while also observing racial aspects.

3. Results

The results showed that Menstrual Poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon, with many causes and different effects, that requires equally complex strategies to be faced.

During the research that led to this paper, it was noticed that this problem is rooted in three main pillars: Stigma and Taboo around menstruation and menstruating; precarious Health and Sanitation systems; and the lack of financial resources resulting from Wealth Inequality. These three aspects are essential to comprehend the issue of Menstrual Poverty, once all the topics that compose the issue, defined by UNICEF and UNFPA in its report "Menstrual Poverty in Brazil: Inequalities and Right Violations" [1], can be summarized by them.

The results also show that the Law Projects designed until now in Brazil are insufficient because they focus primarily on the distribution of tampons, which doesn't actually produce significant changes because it doesn't deal with the whole structure of Menstrual Poverty, focusing on only part of it.

4. Stigma and Taboo

The existence of Stigma and Taboo around Menstruation is a direct consequence of flawed and insufficient Education. All around the world, women are punished and segregated during their periods, restricted periodically from family and community living and religious practices. In India, for example, menstruation is considered to be a curse, leading women to be banned from entering kitchens, sleeping in their own beds and even praying [2]. In Brazil, the historical traces of remnants of the shame upon menstruation are still noticeable even in more urbanized areas, because menstrual blood is still seen as disgusting and dirty, pushing women to a place where everything revolving it should be a secret and a burden, which causes most girls to not have access to correct or even minimal information about menstruation. Many don't know what it is and why it happens, how to know it's starting, how to use or remove tampons, which materials are adequate, how to deal with cramps and pain, how to maintain proper intimate hygiene etc. until it's too late. Most girls are only given this information in school around the age of 13, when 40% of girls have already menstruated [3]. Because of that, this theme should be addressed much sooner, so they can have time to absorb information and therefore experience menarche with much more preparation and safety.

We focus on schools as a primary source of information because many girls can't count on their families to educate them on the matter. It becomes a cycle where older women didn't receive proper education on the matter, and so they become mothers and relatives who don't know how to educate either. A lot of myths hang over menstruation and are intricately in popular knowledge, sometimes stopping proven scientific

information from reaching women. It also can't be expected from men to help spread information, since taboos and cultural beliefs make it seem like it's not their business.

Stigma around menstruation can also lead to girls voluntarily avoiding school and social gatherings, by being afraid of bleeding through their clothes (especially if they're not using proper absorbents) or not having ways to change pads, etc. Thankfully, that issue is proven to be fixable, as studies in Ghana and Uganda showed that giving proper information about menstruation is more effective in combating school evasion than the distribution of hygiene products, even in really poor areas [4].

But women shouldn't be the only ones to have access to proper education about menstruation. The only way we could ever end prejudices and taboos around menstruating is if everyone is educated on the matter, including those who don't have to directly deal with it.

5. Health and Sanitation

Health and Sanitation systems are directly connected to Menstrual Poverty. UNICEF's and UNFPA's report "Menstrual Poverty in Brazil: Inequalities and Right Violations" (free translation) establishes that access to adequate hygiene products such as pads, toilet paper, soap, etc, as well as safe and decent bathrooms, piped water and treated sewage are key points to assure Menstrual Dignity. That is necessary because, when in shortage of appropriate items to stop blood, such as pads, tampons, menstrual cups etc, many women resort to old scraps of fabric, cotton or even bread crumbs [5], which be extremely harmful to their intimate health, as it can lead to serious problems, like infections, allergies and genital diseases [6].

Adequate public bathrooms, especially in schools, are a key to fighting Menstrual Poverty, once it allows girls to safely manage their menstrual blood whenever it's needed. UNICEF's report states that an adequate bathroom needs: safety and privacy, hygiene products such as toilet paper, soap, trash cans as well as piped water and electricity, accessibility and regular maintenance. Unfortunately, many scholars can't count on it either in schools or at home: according to POF/IBGE research [7], 5% of Brazilian girls between the ages of 10 and 19 don't have access to piped water, and the same percentage lives without any bathrooms with showers and toilet. The same report shows that 3% of all the female students in Brazil go to schools that don't have bathrooms in decent use conditions, which represents over 320.000 girls. That scenario is extremely alarming, as it shows that many women spend their entire lives without having access to basic human rights and are, unfortunately, unseen and uncared for.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the access to medicines, such as painkillers. The Farmácia Popular program, which allows citizens to buy medicines

with up to 90% discount (or even for free), doesn't offer the most popular painkillers for cramps or body aches typical of menstruation [8]. As we'll see in the next topic, many girls can't afford the expenses that come with menstruating, which includes medication, and are forced to deal with pain without any help or relief.

6. Wealth Inequality

One of the most noticeable aspects of Menstrual Dignity is how it's affected by economic factors. Wealth Inequality, which leads to a decrease in purchasing power, affects directly how people choose to spend their money, especially in poor families that need to carefully manage their incomes. That means that, a lot of times, when the person responsible for this decision doesn't menstruate, hygiene products related to that are frequently forgotten or simply not seen as a priority. In 2022, 80,5 million Brazilians were considered to be poor (67,8 million) or extremely poor (12,7 million), [9]. That reveals a reality of families that need to choose between food and sanitation items, even though both are extremely important to guarantee a dignified life.

It's important to remember that the demographic we're dealing with are students that don't have their own income, and therefore do not participate in their family's spending choices. That lack of financial autonomy, linked with the prices of tampons (and other methods) is a real factor of menstrual poverty, once girls can't count on their families to provide the necessary products but can't buy them themselves either.

Brazil is also one of the countries with higher taxes for hygiene products linked to menstruation, with an average percentage of more than 1/3 of its price being paid in taxes (in Brazil, taxes are included in the price of products), making it very expensive. There were some attempts to reduce the Taxation over Manufactured Products (IPI) for hygiene items [10], but that doesn't lead to its prices being reduced, and only prevents it from variations caused by inflation.

But not only tampons and pads have a high cost, in fact, many hygiene products have the incidence of the so-called "pink tax" [11], which causes products whose targets are women to have higher prices than the same products whose targets are men, for example, razors, deodorants or even medicines.

It's important to remember that poverty also includes housing, sanitation systems, violence and education conditions. It's a broad aspect and a very important one to understand that the conditions under which some people live have a heavy influence on how they deal with hygiene, especially the menstrual one.

Besides that, there's yet another aspect of Menstrual Poverty: the racial one. In Brazil, the proportion of those considered black or "pardos" (a popular term in Brazil that refers to mixed people, who don't see

themselves as neither black nor white, but as a miscegenation of them) adds up to almost 73% of the country's poor [12]. That leaves these groups more susceptible to violence, unemployment, insecure households with poor sanitation systems and school evasion. As a consequence, girls inserted in those groups are more likely to suffer from Menstrual Poverty as a result of Poverty itself and its racial aspects.

7. Law projects and ODS

But, after all, this problem had some attempts to be dealt with. Internationally, United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals are used as a guide to work towards a more equal and rightful future. Even though there isn't a Goal exclusively focused on Menstrual Health, together they can help achieve progress when each of them reaches a specific aspect of Menstrual Poverty. In this topic, we'll see how:

Goal nº 1, "No Poverty", can help reach Menstrual Dignity by focusing on ending poverty and therefore diminishing its aspects like low purchasing power and others mentioned in topic 6. Nº 3, "Good Health and Well-being" and Nº 6, "Clear Water and Sanitation" act towards the certainty of access to quality health care, including reproductive and sexual care, safe and proper sanitation systems and treated water to all. Nº 4, "Quality Education", to assure that every child and teen has access to an inclusive and equal education and opportunities. Finally, Nº5, "Gender Equality" is the one linked the closest to the issue, once Menstrual Poverty is a result of misogyny and gender social-political differences, and a way to segregate and limit women's opportunities.

In Brazil, there were some attempts to create Law Projects to fight Menstrual Poverty. In 2019, the congresswoman Marília Arraes proposed the Law Project nº 4.968, that establishes a system to provide menstrual pads in public schools. The project was turned into a norm, but with a partial veto by the President. Arraes is also the author of another Project, similar to the first one, but now focused on the distributions in Health Centers (nº 5.474/19).

Another congresswoman to create a project regarding Menstrual Health was Tabata Amaral (nº 428/2020), focusing on the distribution of reusable pads, with a more sustainable approach. She requested urgency but her project wasn't analyzed because the Pandemic was decreed soon after [13].

There were also state-level attempts to create projects that combat Menstrual Poverty, for example, the Law projects nº 158/2020 and 96/2021, by Luciana Genro. These two projects are the ones with wider perspectives as they focus not only on the distribution of hygiene products but also on educating scholars, lowering taxes and prices of pads, as well as the encouragement of reusable pads production [14]. These projects are still being analyzed by Rio Grande do Sul State's Legislative

Assembly [15].

Many Bills concerning this matter were proposed throughout the last years, in various spheres of the Legislative Power, but the efforts were mainly focused on the distribution of pads in schools and hospitals. The Executive Power is the most capable of implementing various politics to solve Menstrual Poverty, touching every one of its pillars, from improving sanitation systems in poor residential areas and schools, to alterations in schools curriculums, upgrades in school infrastructures, changes in the tributary system, in offers of free medicines and many other solutions that embrace the various aspects of Menstrual Poverty.

8. Conclusion

Menstrual Poverty is a sum of several situations that lead girls to an inability to cope with menstrual blood, either by not having access to information that teaches them how to change tampons and pads or safe and clean installations to do so, by not having appropriate materials to stop blood or financial resources to acquire them, or even by being told that menstruation is something that makes them dirty and worthless. It's both a consequence and an artifice of misogyny to keep growing gender inequalities, once all those situations represent obstacles to girls' educational, political, social and economic development. Many girls are already affected by poverty and socioeconomic underdevelopment, but that can become even worse after menstruating, for example: many girls drop out of school after menarche because they can't find in schools a safe space to deal with menstruation. Sometimes there aren't any proper bathrooms that allow them to proceed with proper hygiene, or they can't buy pads and tampons and so can't go to public spaces without fear that it will bleed through. By dropping out of school, they can't keep on with their studies and can't get well-paid jobs that could help them break the poverty cycle, making them even more vulnerable to gender violence. The situations are several, but there's a constant factor in all of them: girls suffering and being excluded because of their menstruation.

The efforts to date have been insufficient to solve the issue because they focus mostly on the distribution of hygienic pads in public spaces, rather than acknowledging that Menstrual Poverty is a multifactorial phenomenon that requires diverse solutions in many spheres, especially regarding still existing taboos, poor health and sanitation systems and a flawed education.

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