

Annotated Bibliography: Period Poverty

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Introduction

Much of the research I found provided helpful information about period poverty, its effects on menstruators, and what can be done to lessen the effects. However, my research also demonstrated issues within the field of studying menstrual health because of the outdated, exclusive views of menstruation and the focus on low-to-middle-income countries. Many academic terms used highly gendered terms when discussing menstruation, neglecting to mention the transgender and nonbinary individuals who menstruate as well. Those who these sources leave out are just as, if not more so, victims of the stigma of menstruation and the difficulty in acquiring period products because so much of the conversation around menstrual health ignores them. That is something that stood out to me in the research, as well as how period poverty and the stigma of menstruation are topics often relegated to low-income countries. It is rightfully a large topic of conversation about those countries, but care must be taken to not diminish the experiences of menstruators in high-income countries who are struggling as a result of the perception of menstruation globally.

A common thread throughout the research was the need for education and conversation to end the stigmas surrounding menstruation. Too many menstruators feel ashamed of their periods, which can cause them to miss school, work, or other opportunities. Without this issue being resolved, movements to make period products more accessible are not effective, as people still do not understand or feel comfortable with menstruation as a whole. Therefore, research indicates that open dialogue and education are primary examples of things that can be done to lessen the effects of period poverty.

Brooks, Laken. "1 in 10 College Students Can't Afford Pads or Tampons. Could Menstrual Cups be a Solution to Period Poverty?" *Forbes*, 26 September <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lakenbrooks/2021/09/26/1-in-10-college-students-cant-afford-pads-or-tampons-could-menstrual-cups-be-a-solution-to-period-poverty/?sh=223cb5541c9d>

Summary

Laken Brooks is a PhD student at the University of Florida studying healthcare and how it works with art and technology. Part of her focus is in healthcare access, which comes from her upbringing in rural Appalachia and her undergraduate studies in Poland. She freelances for a variety of publications about LGBTQ+ identity and healthcare technologies, as well as healthcare access. This is pertinent to the subject of this piece, as it focuses on the difficulties in accessing menstrual products that many students across the United States face. Brooks begins by discussing the taboo of menstruation that exists and causes students to hide being on their period and struggling to afford products. She quotes period equity advocate Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, who says that period

poverty is believed to be less of a concern in many Western nations that may have more wealth, but that it is an inaccurate notion. Brooks then goes on to explain how period poverty is affecting college students in the United States, as menstruators spend \$9 per month on average and many cannot afford that. She then goes on to explain a solution to this problem: free menstrual cups distributed on campuses. These menstrual cups can be reusable for up to 10 years, and can save menstruating students up to \$1,000 during their continued use. Organizations like CampusCup help to provide these to students, and Brooks gives examples of universities where this was successful, like Penn State and Georgia State University.

Implications

Because Brooks' background is studying access to healthcare, this source prioritizes offering a solution to the issue of period poverty through menstrual cups on college campuses. Although this could be helpful in theory, many students are uncomfortable using menstrual cups as a new way to manage their period. They are newer options as menstrual products and were not widely available for many years. The college experience, particularly in residence halls, also goes against menstrual cup usage because it centers around using shared bathrooms. While menstrual cups can be used in public bathrooms, it is difficult to properly rinse out a cup in between uses when there is not a private sink near toilets. The taboo around menstruation also makes this difficult, as some may find it unsanitary or "gross" to rinse out menstrual cups in shared sinks. This works against using menstrual cups properly, so menstrual cups can appear scary or unknown to those starting to use them in college residence halls. This could be useful to my research question because it shows that I need to pursue other options for things colleges can do to lessen period poverty, as menstrual cups cannot be an option for everyone. The source does mention a period pantry that students at Georgia State University created using grant funding to provide sustainable period products to students, but even that could be restrictive to students with disabilities for whom products like menstrual cups are not as user friendly. It also solidifies my need to encourage more education about menstruation so that menstrual cups can be better utilized in shared bathrooms on campuses.

Cousins, Sophie. "Rethinking Period Poverty." *Lancet*, vol. 395, no. 10227, Mar. 2020, pp. 857– 858. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30605-X.

Summary

Sophie Cousins is a writer who focuses on the global health of women and girls. Her work has been published in journals like *Lancet*, *British Medical Journal*, and *Nature*. In this source, Cousins writes about the implications of stigma and inadequate menstrual resources, specifically in Nepal. She details stories of women and girls who missed school or suffered mentally as a result of poor menstrual education and discourse and then explains potential solutions to the issues of period poverty and inequality. She discusses how the United Kingdom has taken strides to

eliminate the tampon tax, provide disposable menstrual products to students, and make menstrual products free, but that they are not enough. If the conversations around menstrual health are still negative and limited, even free products will not be utilized and menstruation will be viewed poorly. Cousins concludes by emphasizing the need for menstrual dignity, which can be developed through education and open dialogue about menstruation.

Implications

This source is useful for my research because it reinforces the need for education and discussion about menstrual health, especially for those who do not menstruate. Having conversations about periods with menstruators is helpful to instilling pride and comfort about menstruation, but opening them up to those who do not menstruate can help shape society's views of menstruation, ultimately improving menstrual dignity. However, this source offers an alternative view to my claim by acknowledging that resources provided by schools and institutions may not be utilized without knowledge and communication about menstruation, making it a higher priority for universities than I had thought. This source does use gendered language about menstruation, which serves as a weakness and a place to depart from for my work.

Grose, Rose Grace, and Shelly Grabe. "Sociocultural Attitudes Surrounding Menstruation and Alternative Menstrual Products: The Explanatory Role of Self-Objectification." *Health Care for Women International*, vol. 35, no. 6, June 2014, pp. 677–694. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/07399332.2014.888721.

Summary

This source is a summary of research done by Dr. Rose Grace Grose and Dr. Shelly Grabe. Dr. Grose is a professor of Community Health Education at the University of Northern Colorado and Dr. Grabe is a professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Both have a focus on gender and sexuality and how they can influence social change. This source summarizes research they did on how the perceptions of menstruation in society affect how menstruators view menstrual cups, which many view as a newer alternative to disposable period products that pose dangers like Toxic Shock Syndrome. Grose and Grabe used a sample of female college students in California ranging from age 18 to 23. Participants first answered questions about their demographics and self-objectification. They then filled out an evaluation for a generic consumer product before filling one out for a menstrual cup. The results indicated negative reactions to menstrual cups that were correlated with negative views of menstruation and feelings of self-objectification that come from sociocultural influence.

Implications

This source is especially useful to my research because it gives reasoning behind why a positive solution to period poverty is often rejected by menstruators. Menstrual cups are not only safer than tampons, they also can save menstruators hundreds of dollars, making them a potential way to lessen period poverty on college campuses. However, societal norms and discourse create negative perceptions of menstruation that prevent menstruators from using a safer method that requires more contact with menstrual blood, which society has taught menstruators to reject. Education and conversation could be ways to change the stigma surrounding menstruation, and things that colleges can implement for the safety and benefit of their menstruating students. While this source is helpful in that, it, like many sources about menstruation, heavily gender the process. Exclusive language is used, demonstrating a different direction I can go in my work, one that acknowledges that menstruation is not something that is required to be a woman, nor is it something that only woman do.

New Mental Health Diseases and Conditions Research Reported from University of Pennsylvania (Period Poverty and Mental Health Implications Among College-Aged Women in the United States). NewsRX LLC, 2021. Print.

Summary

This source summarizes the findings of a research study done by a team of researchers affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania and George Mason University. The sample was of college students in the age range of 18-24 who were assigned female at birth. They were asked about whether they struggled to afford menstrual products in the past 12 months and if they struggle to afford the products every month. The researchers then utilized the Patient Health Questionnaire, which is widely used in this age group to ascertain levels of depression in respondents. The research acknowledges that causes other than period poverty can influence depression, but it concludes of a correlation between period poverty and depression.

Implications

This source may be helpful to addressing my research question because it demonstrates an association between being in period poverty and mental health symptoms. This is especially helpful at the university level because colleges tend to offer discourse about caring for their student's mental health and offering resources to support it. If students are not properly taught about periods and hide their struggles surrounding menstruation, including period poverty, students may feel higher levels of depression or anxiety which, paired with the stress of college life, could be detrimental. Therefore, this solidifies the need for schools to increase education about menstruation while also providing resources to support menstruating students. This source provides concrete statistics in support of reshaping the university approach to menstruation, which could potentially be helpful in convincing universities to adopt new methods and potentially grant funding.

Sommer, Marni, et al. “A Time for Global Action: Addressing Girls’ Menstrual Hygiene Management Needs in Schools.” *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 13, no. 2, Feb. 2016, pp. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001962.

Summary

Marni Sommer is a professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia University, specializing in gender, adolescent transitions, and environment. This source, featured in *PLOS Medicine*, a peer reviewed medical journal, starts by discussing the lack of education, facilities, and products available to many menstruators in school. It specifically discusses menstruation in low-and-middle-income countries, and explains the negative effects on sexual, reproductive, and general health that can come from these gaps in resources and knowledge. The source then identifies the results of the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in Ten conference sponsored by UNICEF and Columbia University, which established five steps to address public health issues associated with MHM by 2024. These steps include building cross-sectional evidence bases, creating and distributing global standards for MHM, initiating an advocacy platform for MHM across sectors, assigning responsibility for MHM to appropriate organizations and levels of government, and working MHM into global curriculums.

Implications

Although this source is focused on low-and-middle-income countries, it is also pertinent to my research in American universities. Higher institutions in high-income countries need to be a part of the evidence bases, the integration of MHM standards and advocacy, and must be responsible for incorporating sufficient MHM education into curriculum and dialogue. This is a useful source to see how organizations across sectors can work together to facilitate MHM and how universities can and should work within that. It is also a valuable resource for discussing the importance of advocacy work surrounding MHM and the negative impacts that neglecting MHM can create in menstruators. A weakness of this source is that it, like many about this topic, uses gendered language to describe menstruators and the menstruation process. This is a place for my work to go in a different direction by being more inclusive about menstruation and MHM.

Stubbs, Margaret L. “Cultural Perceptions and Practices around Menarche and Adolescent Menstruation in the United States.” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 1135, June 2008, pp. 58–66. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1196/annals.1429.008.

Summary

This source comes from Margaret Stubbs, a psychology professor at Chatham University. She discusses in this journal article primarily the views of menstruation in the United States, including how those views affect the way menstruators feel about their menstrual cycle. The source explains how society's emphasis on hiding menstruation and limiting comprehensive conversations about it can lead to objectification, body shaming, and dangerous sexual experiences. The research explains the different perceptions of menstruation that exist, like the more positive view of it marking womanhood and the ability to have children, or the negative view of it lessening performance and causing pain. The source then goes on to explain how the separate perceptions can impact menstruators differently, specifically in the United States.

Implications

This source gives comprehensive information about the perceptions surrounding menstruation in the United States and potential impacts of the negativity on menstruating students. This is beneficial to tackling my research question because it gives more reasoning for universities to support menstruating students by offering products and educational resources. This offers dangers to the taboos of menstruation and its impacts, like body shaming and a lack of sexual agency, which can lead to mental health challenges or physical violence. While this source is valuable for that, it uses exclusive language about periods. Stubbs uses terms such as "girls" and "women" instead of gender inclusive language, which demonstrates once again the need for more education about periods. She describes that positive views of menstruation center around girls becoming women and being able to have children, which is not inclusive to non-binary menstruators or transgender individuals who do not identify as women but still menstruate. I will utilize this source for the information about what can come from a lack of menstrual education, but use more inclusive language in my work.

“What Is Being Done to Tackle ‘Period Poverty’ in the West? The Economist Explains.” *The Economist (London)* (2021): n. pag. Print.

Summary

The Economist is a weekly newspaper produced as magazines and digitally. It is based in London, England, and covers current events, politics, and business. This source specifically comes from a production of *The Economist* that summarizes current topics in concise articles and is called “The Economist Explains.” The source begins with explaining scenarios in wealthier countries where menstruators struggle to pay for menstrual products and feel reluctant to discuss their experiences with menstruation. The source then explains ways to lessen period poverty, including providing menstrual products in schools, making them free, and eliminating taxes on them. The piece then

concludes with explaining the importance of menstrual education, menstruation-friendly bathrooms, and consideration of transgender and non-binary menstruators.

Implications

This source is valuable to my research because it touches on the importance of considering nonbinary and transgender menstruators in the fight against period poverty and the search of menstrual dignity. Many scholars and sources do not do this, opting for exclusive and gendered language to oversimplify a subject that is not simple. This source is also helpful because it is focused on wealthier countries, which are not always associated with period poverty. Because this piece is a popular source, it is less comprehensive than an academic journal or research summary on this topic. This makes it less helpful to my research, but its recent publishing does make it a more current and inclusive interpretation of the subject of my research than other sources.