

University of New South Wales’ Women’s Collective: Research on Menstrual Products

Authors: Gunathilake, A., Mathew, E., Matteis, D. D., Naeem, H., and Pinnell, C.

Editor: Adel, A.

OBJECTIVE

The UNSW Women’s Collective is an autonomous, independent collective that is focused on protecting and furthering the rights of women within the UNSW community. In line with the UNSW Strategy 2025 which focuses on gender equity and inclusion, the Women’s Collective has identified that a key step in fostering a culture that is truly inclusive is the greater availability and non-monetised dissemination of essential menstrual products.

This research paper will outline the reasons for why having menstrual products freely available is necessary, provide empirical evidence of other institutions that provide these products and to what extent they provide them, discuss risks and finances and explore how this scheme may be implemented in UNSW, including assessing organisations which provide these products and at what cost.

INTRODUCTION

Menstrual products are vital in protecting the health and wellbeing of women. It is a basic necessity that underlies the ability of female-identifying students and staff to participate equally.

Using incorrect products or wearing them over an extended period of time places individuals at a high risk of contracting reproductive tract infections and impacts overall personal hygiene. Furthermore, recent studies regarding the increasing awareness of ‘period poverty’ has

revealed various financial barriers, particularly for students and young women, in accessing vital menstrual products. Such situations can be overwhelmingly stressful, distracting students from their studies and barring active participation in university life. It can be unconsciously marginalising as students feel unsupported.

Within its community, the university bears a duty of care in ensuring the health and wellbeing of all students which includes taking such steps to achieve this as is capable. By providing free menstrual products at university, UNSW would actively demonstrate its commitment to providing the best care for its students and its core values of acceptance, respect and equality.

Since the removal of GST on menstrual products in Australia in 2019, there has been a greater push to recognise its importance. Recently, new government legislation enacted at state levels have reflected a social push to recognise the importance of increased and widespread access to menstrual products as a basic human right. From 30 June 2022, the NSW Government has promised to implement a state-wide initiative to place free pads and tampons in the state's public schools as part of a \$30m program. In line with increased access provided by these wider campaigns, a targeted program at UNSW would provide the same benefit and care to university students who also require this basic necessity.

The current lack of access to free menstrual products for all students and staff that require it highlights a fundamental failing in UNSW's path to achieving equality and inclusivity. We must take steps now to rectify this situation and create a healthier, safer environment for all members of the UNSW community.

SITUATION IN UNSW

Support Provided to Students at UNSW

UNSW provides support to students through student support advisors that can both assist and bridge the gap for those dealing with personal health issues. UNSW Psychology and Wellness include qualified psychologists that can provide you with the space to talk about your issues and come up with a solution. The University Health Service also allows students to drop in and talk to a doctor about any health-related concerns.

What more can UNSW do?

However, there is a lack of support given to students from rural, remote and other ethnic communities that do not discuss what periods are and how to work through them. Providing a workshop or class to raise awareness among women on period education and resources would help provide equal access to all women. Getting the word out there is also important so all women on campus are made aware of the services UNSW is offering. With periods being a monthly occurrence, having safe and accessible products on campus would help students perform to the best of their ability while taking care of themselves.

PERIOD PRIDE SURVEY

Share the Dignity is a not-for-profit organisation, advocating for Period Poverty, whilst distributing menstrual products across Australia. The Period Pride survey was conducted from 1st of March to 31st of May 2021, using 125,205 respondents to create a nationwide survey regarding Periods and Period Poverty throughout Australia. Although covering a broad demographic, the average respondent of the survey consisted of a woman aged 32-40, living in Victoria, working full time and identified as non-religious.

The Period Pride Survey highlights the importance of recognising period poverty as a prevalent health issue across Australia, whilst bringing light to the struggles some students face whilst pursuing their studies.

The survey found that 10% of individuals suffering from period poverty were University and TAFE students. They also discovered that 7,024 participants missed work every month due to their period, whilst 49% of participants had worn a pad for over 4 hours due to lack of personal supply.

"Every woman has had an experience with their period that they wouldn't wish on another" Rochelle Courtenay, Share the Dignity Founder.

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

The inequity amongst university students who menstruate is affirmed through rising inflation costs. Although the Morrison government removed the ‘Tampon Tax’ in 2019, the recent hike in inflation rates in Australia poses the affordability issues of menstrual products for low-income individuals and university students.

“The Bank’s central forecast is for the CPI [Consumer Price Index] inflation to be around 7¾ per cent over 2022, a little above 4 per cent over 2023 and around 3 per cent over 2024.”

(Reserve Bank of Australia 2022)

With NSW announcing that all public schools will offer free menstrual products this year, initiatives to combat Period Poverty amongst university students have been overdue, as no Australian university officially provides free menstrual products for students.

An investigation into affordable menstrual products at the University of Sydney (“USYD”) by Kat Porritt-Fraser for Honi Soit found that USYD only provides free menstrual products in the Wom*n’s space. Meanwhile, only three of the University of Sydney Union’s shops offer “*a very limited range of feminine hygiene products*”, whilst their “*retail prices are higher than what customers would typically pay*” (Porritt-Fraser 2021). This lack of accessibility of menstrual products on the USYD campus is what Jayfel Tulabing for Honi Soit described as “*lacklustre*” (Tulabing 2021).

Furthermore, universities in NSW do not officially offer free menstrual products on their campus, however, women and welfare rooms throughout universities claim to offer emergency menstrual products.

UNSW’s recent announcement of more spots for students from low-socioeconomic status (low-SES), focuses on expanding UNSW’s access rate to 25% over the next five years for first-year students. This program enables more students from underrepresented schools, who have diverse and low-socioeconomic status backgrounds to be able to study at UNSW (Baiocchi 2022). However, enduring these increasing costs of living at UNSW will harm their studies, highlighting the demand for free menstrual products at UNSW.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PERIOD POVERTY IN STUDENTS

In 2020, Victoria became the first territory in Australia to provide universal access to menstrual products across public schools. This \$20.7 million initiative was installed by term two in 2020, with Premier Daniel Andrews stating, *“Pads and tampons are just as essential as toilet paper and soap...It’s an Australian first and it’s the right thing to do”* (Andrews 2019).

Following Victoria, A \$30 million program was announced in NSW on the 7th of March 2022, ensuring free access to menstrual products in public schools. This initiative will commence by the 30th of June, and “[ensures] our young women have the support they need” said Minister for Women, Bronnie Taylor (NSW Government 2023).

“By openly discussing periods, endometriosis and reproductive health we are removing the taboo around women’s health issues.” Bronnie Taylor (Farid 2023)

CONSIDERATIONS

Risks

There are no risks associated with providing free menstrual products to women. It will allow them to save on costs and accommodate their needs. Just like toilet paper, pads and tampons are needed to ensure alternatives are not used and that their health and wellbeing are prioritised.

Organisations conducting this initiative for free

Earlier this year Ms Munro of USYD worked with Share the Dignity to install a vending machine for free period products in bathrooms. The University of Sydney Union attained Student Services and Amenities fee funding this year to install free PIIIXI menstrual products in bathrooms across all buildings as a 12-month pilot program. In 2021, dispensers filled with menstrual products were placed in 30 schools in Western Sydney and Dubbo for two terms. This resulted in a wider rollout after success.

Finance

The average price of one pack is \$3-5. This fluctuates based on demand and sales presentations. Buying pads in bulk can reduce the overall cost and accommodate all bathrooms on campus. With many students leaving campus to purchase pads instead of attending class, free pads in bathrooms would improve the quality of education attained. The university SSAF fee can be used to pay for menstrual products in bathrooms, similar to that done in USYD. Menstrual products are a necessity, not a luxury, so similar to toilet paper, the purchase of menstrual products at a reasonable price will help meet the needs of students.

COMMITMENT TO STUDENT HEALTH AND WELLBEING

UNSW has expressed a commitment to health and well-being for both students and staff on campus, and providing support for mental, physical and sexual health (UNSW 'Current Students' 2023). Support ranges from the provision of legal advocacy services to free STI testing through UNSW Health Services. These services enhance the quality of student health and well-being on campus, and, in doing so, are an expression of UNSW's values of creating a 'welcoming, caring and equitable community' (UNSW 'About Us' 2023). Menstrual health encompasses the intersection of physical, mental and social wellbeing in relation to the menstrual cycle (Babbar et al 2021) and the provision of free period products is a significant means of addressing UNSW's commitment to ensuring campus is an inviting and accessible environment that encourages student participation. In this way UNSW would be further aligning themselves with their commitment to student health and wellbeing by providing essential menstrual products to students free of cost.

SAFE PERIOD PRODUCT ACCESS AND HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR PEOPLE WHO MENSTRUATE

Menstrual health is multifaceted and so is the way menstruation management can impact the health of people who menstruate (Babbar et al 2021). Period poverty has a significant impact on the means in which an individual manages their menstruation and can have consequences on people's mental and physical health.

Poor menstrual hygiene arising from period poverty can pose serious health risks for people who menstruate. Due to the cost of period products, individuals may resort to the use of alternative materials like rags or paper towels, or the rationing or re-use of period products.

This means of managing menstruation is prevalent in Australian tertiary students and employees where 40.7% of respondents in a preliminary survey have ‘made do’ with other materials due to the price of products and 62.7% of respondents have worn a tampon or pad for more than the recommended four hours due to having limited products available (Knight 2022). Using products or materials in this way creates the risk of leaks or irritation, but more importantly, increases the risk of infections such urinary tract infections, bacterial vaginosis and sexually transmitted infections which have ‘cascading effects on overall sexual and reproductive health’ (World Bank 2022; Tolonen et al 2019; and Hennegan et al 2016). Moreover, rationing products by wearing tampons past the recommended timeframe puts menstruating people ‘at the risk of developing Toxic Shock Syndrome, a potentially fatal condition if left untreated’ (Smith and Sullivan 2020). In this way, period poverty can be understood as an unmet need and public health crisis, especially among students (Cardoso et al 2021).

Emerging research also highlights the psychological stress and impact menstruation management can have on mental health, particularly alongside menstruation-related stigma (Sweetman and Medland 2017). Research conducted on a nationally-drawn sample of undergraduates in the United States in 2019 who reported female sex at birth indicates as with other basic unmet needs like food or housing insecurity, period poverty has an association with the elevated likelihood of poor mental health including symptoms consistent with moderate or severe depression (Cardoso et al 2021). Thus, safe period product access is an essential to ensuring positive health outcomes for people who menstruate both in terms of mental and physical health.

MORE THAN A WOMEN’S ISSUE

Access to free period products is more than a women’s issue or a question of gender equality, but a social, economic and health need that impacts a diverse community of people and identities.

‘It is essential that when we talk about period poverty, we keep in mind that not all menstruators are women, and not all women menstruate’ (Rapp and Kilpatrick 2020)

It is important to recognise that period poverty is not an issue affecting an isolated section of society, especially when developing means with which to facilitate access to free menstrual products and the promotion of menstrual hygiene. For example, the provision of only insertion-

based products in restrooms, or the placement of product disposal receptacles in the stalls of female bathrooms fails to effectively respond to the need for free period products and menstrual health. Promoting menstrual health for all menstruators is an important means for safeguarding menstruating persons' dignity, privacy, bodily integrity and as a result, their self-efficacy (World Bank 2022).

Reference List

Andrews, D. (2019) '*Free Pads And Tampons To Help Girls Thrive At School*', Premier of Victoria. Available at: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/free-pads-and-tampons-help-girls-thrive-school> (Accessed: n.d.).

Babbar, K., et al. (2021) Menstrual health is a public health and human rights issue. *The Lancet: Public Health*, [online] 7(1). Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00212-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00212-7) (Accessed: February 28, 2023).

Baiocchi, L. (2022) '*UNSW to expand access for under-represented student groups, UNSW Newsroom*'. Available at: <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/general/unsw-expand-access-under-represented-student-groups> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Cardoso, L., et al. (2021) Period poverty and mental health implications among college-aged women in the United States. *BMC Women's Health*, [online] 21(14). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-020-01149-5> (Accessed: February 28, 2023).

BBC (2018) '*Tampon tax*' scrapped in Australia after 18-year controversy, BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-45727980> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Courtenay, R. (n.d) *Founder, Share the Dignity*. Available at: <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/about/founder> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Das, P., et al. (2015) Menstrual Hygiene Practices, WASH Access and the Risk of Urogenital Infection in Women from Odisha, India. *PLOS ONE*, [online] 10(6). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1381/journal.pone.0130777> (Accessed: February 28, 2023).

Engagement, C. (2023) *Free menstrual hygiene products for all NSW students*, Education. NSW Department of Education. Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/free-menstrual-hygiene-products-for-all-nsw-students> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Farid, F. (2023) '*Free menstrual products in NSW schools*', The West Australia. Available at: <https://thewest.com.au/politics/free-menstrual-products-in-nsw-schools-c-9552754> (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

Hennegan, J., et al. (2016) Measuring the prevalence and impact of poor menstrual hygiene management: a quantitative survey of school girls in rural Uganda. *BMJ Open* [online] 6. Doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012596 (Accessed February 28, 2023).

Knight, R. (2022) *Periods: How they impact our lives. Preliminary results of an Australian study*, Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Non Profit Studies, Queensland University of Technology. Available at: https://eprints.qut.edu.au/234106/2/PeriodsAndImpact_Final_3Aug22.pdf (Accessed: February 28, 2023).

Lyon, E. (2021) '*NSW government to provide free feminine hygiene products in schools*', News.com.au. Available at: <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/school-life/nsw-government-to-provide-free-feminine-hygiene-products-in-schools/news-story/3b1099c5c1f7b59621fc5e2b7965574a> (Accessed: n.d.).

NSW Government (2023) *Free menstrual hygiene products for all NSW students*, NSW Government. Available at: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/free-menstrual-hygiene-products-for-all-nsw-students> (Accessed: n.d.).

Porritt-Fraser, K. (2021) *The modern unicorn: The quest for period products on campus*, Honi Soit, USYD. Available at: <https://honisoit.com/2021/03/the-modern-unicorn-the-quest-for-period-products-on-campus/> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Reserve Bank of Australia (2022) *Statement by Philip Lowe, governor: Monetary policy decision: Media releases*, Reserve Bank of Australia, Reserve Bank of Australia. Available at: <https://www.rba.gov.au/media-releases/2022/mr-22-28.html> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Smith, K. and Sullivan, E. (2020) *Period Poverty*, RMIT Journalism. Available at: https://eprints.qut.edu.au/234106/2/PeriodsAndImpact_Final_3Aug22.pdf (Accessed February 28, 2023).

Tulabing, J. (2021) *It shouldn't be students' job to provide period products on campus*, *Honi Soit*, USYD. Available at: <http://honisoit.com/2021/04/it-shouldnt-be-students-job-to-provide-period-products-on-campus/> (Accessed: January 31, 2023).

Woodhouse, M. (2018) '*Should Colleges make Tampons free on Campus*', *BU Today*. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2018/free-tampons-on-campus/> (Accessed: n.d.).

The World Bank (2022) *Menstrual Health and Hygiene*. [online] World Bank. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/menstrual-health-and-hygiene> (Accessed: February 28, 2023).