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To: City of Philadelphia Health Commissioner

Subject: Period poverty/inequality-related disparities in Philadelphia

Date: 10/26/2022

INTRODUCTION

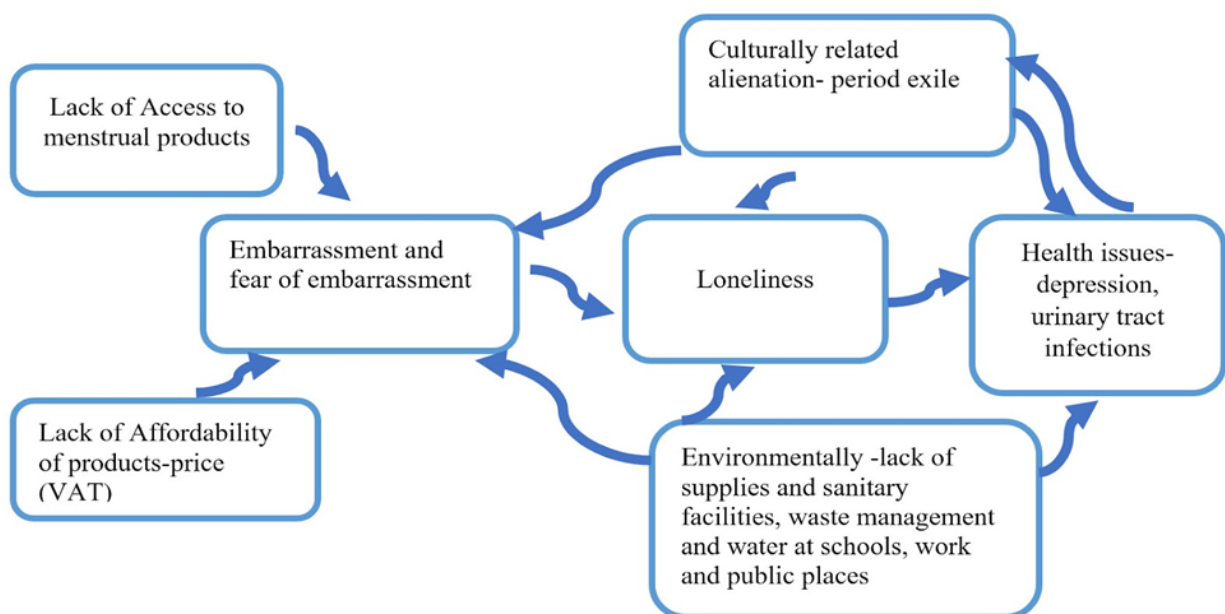
According to the CDC, Period poverty may be defined as the lack of access to affordable menstrual health products and nearly 25% of students in the United States are impacted by period poverty. (cdc.gov, 2002). Menstrual health is crucial in the overall health of people who menstruate and this physiological, biological and gendered phenomenon often has a significant impact on their mental, physical and social well-being (Critchley et al., 2020). In 2021, research was conducted to examine the frequency of period poverty in college-aged women as it relates to their capacity to afford menstrual health products and the consequent impact on their mental health. Results from this qualitative research show that 14.2 % of the research participants experienced period poverty within the past year and 68.1% - two out of three women- reported symptoms of moderate to severe depression due to lack of access to menstrual health products (Cardoso et al., 2021).

Qualitative research carried out by the policy lab of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), gave an insight into the lived experiences of menstruating-adolescents. The objective of this research was to help identify the key areas of improvement as it impacts the quality of life of individuals experiencing period poverty. Deductive findings from this research showed that students of color and those from low-income households were disproportionately affected and the concerns of each of the 20 interviewed participants focused mainly on accessibility and affordability of menstrual health products (CHOP policy lab, 2022). According to the Journal of Global Health reports, approximately 16.9 million

women of menstruating-age are living in poverty and about two-thirds of them were unable to afford these vital menstrual health products as they had to choose between this crucial purchase and putting food on their tables (JGHR, 2022).

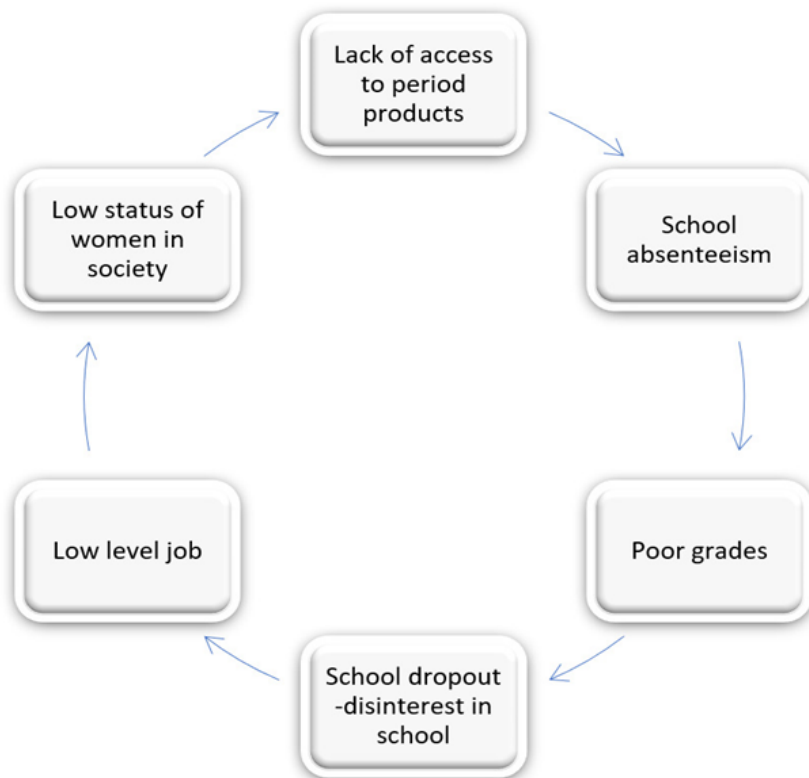
According to a policy memo submitted to the commissioner for prisons, one of the prison residents confirmed that she had to use napkins sometimes as there were not enough pads available to them in prison. A survey was carried out to ascertain accessibility and thirty-one out of the forty-six women that participated reported insufficient access to menstrual health products. Currently, women in prison are given three pads every one or two weeks and they are expected to make do regardless (Shubik-Richards, 2022).

Some of the types of period poverty identified are:



Source: Journal of Global Health report, 2022

Below is the impact cycle of period poverty on the lives of girls:



Source: Journal of Global Health report, 2022

Below are some quotes from the lived experiences of two individuals, resident in Philadelphia, who experienced period poverty as described in the CHOP policy lab research.

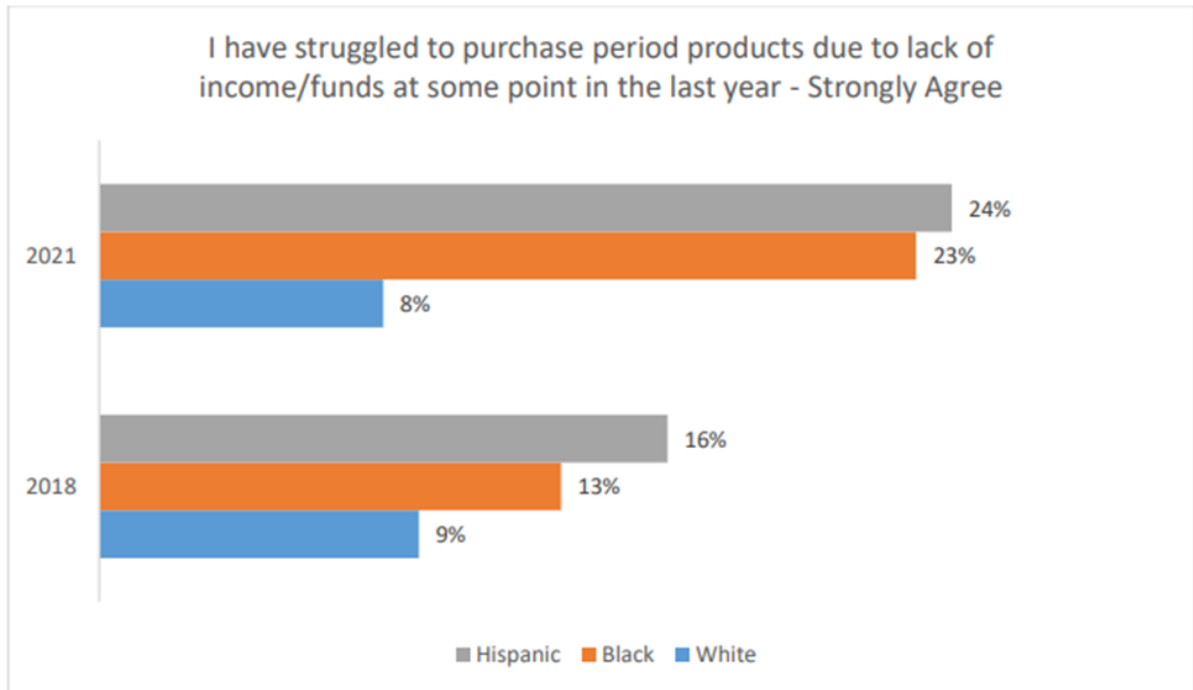
“I personally had instances when the only means to manage my menstrual cycle was to use old clothes or tissue because my family couldn’t afford to purchase menstrual products. As I gained more knowledge of period poverty in my community, I became more passionate about addressing this issue. In 2019, my younger sister, Lovetta Qualah, and I founded a nonprofit organization called Positive Action Driving Safety for Girls (PADS for Girls). We provide sanitary products to young, disadvantaged youth in rural parts of Liberia. By improving access and education about basic health needs, we are able to help youth at risk of poor health outcomes due to the undermining forces of poverty and stigma”

-Grace Clarke-MPH student, La Salle University

“In spring 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to shut down access to many services, I was approached by a colleague about a patient who badly needed menstrual products but could not afford them. Knowing my interest in the area, my colleague asked if I had any resources to share. The patient was in her late teens and had reached out in a moment of crisis in need of free menstrual pads. Her family did not have money for pads, and she often needed to use toilet paper as a replacement, which was both annoying and embarrassing. She had also become quite dependent on the pads she received from her school, which was now closed due to the pandemic. I was saddened to learn that there were so few local organizations that could offer assistance”.

-Shelby Davis- Fellow, CHOP (Division of Adolescent Medicine)

U by Kotex, an American menstrual health brand, conducted an online survey to understand the correlation between income, accessibility to menstrual health products and the consequent impact on the lives of these individuals. Two surveys were carried out in 2018 and 2021 and the results showed that there was a 35% increase in the number of people struggling to afford menstrual health products. The survey also found that blacks and Hispanics were more prone to experience this struggle due to income inequality (*Period Poverty Awareness Week*, n.d.). One of the data points from the survey by U by Kotex is represented in the graph below.



Source: U by Kotex

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The unaffordability and inaccessibility of menstrual health products creates a gendered health disparity in Philadelphia.

DISCUSSION

Recommendation 1: Increase access to menstrual health products.

According to a Harvard Health publication on menstrual equity, menstruating is a biological and physiological fact of human existence. health products to manage this natural human phenomenon are necessities of life and not luxuries (Farid, 2021).

In order to achieve accessibility, the following measures should be considered.

- A menstrual health product accessibility grant program should be developed and made available to existing period poverty banks like CLDA's Alliance for Period supplies and eligible local education providers/Agencies (LEPs & LEAs) through the school district. This will ensure that schools can provide these products free of charge to students who need them.
- The Department of Education should direct the Philadelphia school district to implement access points in all schools and ensure that these products are always available and in stock. A monitoring and evaluation unit should also be created to ensure efficient implementation of the program and equitable distribution of the products to all eligible LEPs in the city.
- The Department of Labor should add menstrual health products to its organizational requirements for occupational health and safety so that workers can access these products in their respective places of work. As an incentive, make this line of corporate expenditure tax-deductible.
- Although the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue considers menstrual health products non-taxable (Retailer's Information, 2022). However, pharmacies and stores still charge a county tax on these products. Removal of these taxes will make the products more affordable.
- Encourage companies that produce menstrual health products to donate a percentage of their products to schools as part of their corporate social responsibility.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) currently provides access to food and produce only. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture should authorize purchase of menstrual health products on food stamp cards. This is because the income of eligible recipients of this program is below the poverty guidelines- predominantly minority groups.
- To ensure equitable accessibility to those most affected, there should be engagement and coordination between the government and NGOs focused on minority outreach

and the homeless population. Some examples are BEBASHI (Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues), I AM FREE (focused on delivering menstrual health and health products to the prison population and ALLIANCE FOR PERIOD SUPPLIES (a subsidiary of CLDA, Philadelphia).

- Develop central collection sites in strategic parts of the city with accessible transportation. This will ensure that individuals that are not within a structured system, like schools and workplaces, can also access these products free of charge.
- Make menstrual health products available in the bathrooms of all government buildings and contracted organizations.
- The city, in collaboration with NGOs, school authorities and volunteers, should organize ‘BACK TO SCHOOL’ drives at the beginning of each school year to distribute ‘dignity bags’ containing menstrual health products to students.
- Individuals with disabilities and chronic diseases already have a particularly hard time accessing basic needs. Making sufficient menstrual health products available in their care packages upon delivery helps to improve their quality of life.
- Due to societal stigma and unfair moral standards, members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially the transgender population, are unable to access these products. It is important to remember that menstruation is a biological phenomenon and individuals with female physiology are bound to undergo this routine ‘shedding of the uterine walls’. Hence, the importance of accessibility to transgender men. In order to achieve this, the government should partner with LGBTQ+-friendly and inclined NGOs like WILLIAM WAY Community Center to cater to the needs of these marginalized populations.

Recommendation 2: Educate and Destigmatize

According to UNICEF, menstruation is a global phenomenon among girls, women, transgender men, and non-binary persons and most of these individuals are laden with

societal stigma making it near-impossible to go through this natural process with dignity. The advent of menstruation is a very vulnerable period in the life of an adolescent, some of whom would unfortunately deal with harassment and social exclusion. Likewise, transgender men and non-binary persons are discriminated against because of their gender identity, making it rather difficult for them to access menstrual health products even when they are free of charge. A lack of awareness further compounds this stigma, and the following are a few steps to address this issue equitably and effectively.

- The Department of Education should incorporate menstrual health into the curriculum to expose students to this phenomenon regardless of gender. Emphasis should also be made on the diversity of individuals that can experience menstruation, what it looks like and how to respond to it. This will give individuals of menstruating age a buffer and assurance that the people around them understand what they are going through without feeling embarrassed.
- The government, in conjunction with the public health department and relevant NGOs should design an infographic to bring awareness to how people can access menstrual health products in their communities.
- Health providers and social workers should ensure that menstrual health is included in the probes and consultations during visits especially for people in underserved communities and foster homes.
- Schools should put up infographic posters in common rooms to educate its students on menstrual period and health with emphasis on collective responsibility to make everyone feel safe without fear of harassment or retribution.

CONCLUSION

Period poverty is a global health issue. The United States has about 25 million women living below the poverty line which means that a significant part of the population is faced with the unthinkable option of providing food versus purchasing vital health products. Menstrual health is a human rights issue, and the government has a responsibility to ensure that these rights are protected and catered to. Forbes magazine describes the consequences of period poverty as potentially fatal. Improper menstrual health can lead to infection or depression, both of which can result in death or suicide, respectively (Magistretti, 2019).

We cannot afford to continue to ignore these crucial needs that define people's quality of life and wellbeing. We must act with urgency to address the issues of unaffordability and inaccessibility of menstrual health products without compromising equity or dignity.

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