

SEX EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS AS A SOLUTION FOR RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND GENDER EQUALITIES: A LOOK INTO MENSTRUATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Throughout a woman's lifetime, the consequence of poor or lacking sexual education leads to a negative impact in health, economic and even environmental aspects, due to the expenses regarding menstrual products and the residues that they produce, as well as the unsanitary solutions that are being practiced.

As menstruation is perceived in a sociocultural context, it is often seen as a taboo subject, thus, affecting a woman's perception according to her social status, age, beliefs, health and sexuality. In recent years, there has been an increase in alternative and ecological products, yet, the stigma regarding their use prevents them from being chosen as first choice. For example, conservative ideologies in developing countries have prevented technological advances to be seen within sexual education.

As a result, this study proposes sexual education campaigns on developing countries as a best practice supporting directly four SDGs: Gender Equality, Reduced Inequalities, Responsible Consumption and Production, and Clean Water and Sanitation.

In order to address the issues concerning menstruation, normalization is key. This can be achieved by ensuring quality sexual education, encouraging women empowerment and making affordable, healthy, and sustainable menstrual products accessible for all markets.

Keywords: Innovation, technology, research projects, sustainable development, menstruation, period poverty, menstrual hygiene management

1 INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization defines adolescence as a period of life with specific health developmental needs and rights. More specifically, adolescents are those people between 10 and 19 years of age (World Health Organization, 2019). As all societies recognize the difference between being a child and adult, the roles for these are understood in several very defined ways. For girls, the transition to adulthood is often linked to the start of their menstruation cycle. "The menstrual cycle is the monthly hormonal cycle a female's body goes through to prepare for pregnancy. Your menstrual cycle is counted from the first day of your period up to the first day of your next period. Your hormone levels (estrogen and progesterone) usually change throughout the menstrual cycle and can cause menstrual symptoms" (Office On Women's Health, 2019). A woman's reproductive phase starts with this milestone, more or less at 12 and 13 years of age (Kaur, R. 2017).

As the topic of menstruation faces restrictions imposed by social, cultural, economic and even religious factors, the options for menstrual hygiene practices may be limited for women across the world. They may vary from the ideals of the country they live in, personal income, availability of the actual products, access to educational programs regarding innovative products or even personal preference.

To compare both sides of the spectrum, it can be noted how, until recently in 2019, the majority of menstrual hygiene products were considered as "luxury items" in more developed countries and had the highest added tax of them all. Countries like Germany have started to acknowledge the issue this category imposed in women (Eddy, M., 2019). Less developed communities and within rural areas around the world that do not have access to any of these kinds of products, methods are usually inconvenient and highly unsanitary and disrupt their daily routine. The managing of their menstrual residues includes cloth pads being part of their domestic waste, as well as public toilets, between many

others. The health hazards and environmental damages associated with this management not only affects their communities but also their own sanitation.

Women use about 120 plastic sanitary napkins a year. These single use products represent approximately 125 kg of sanitary waste generated per woman during the menstruation years (Shethepeople, 2018). Responsible consumption of these types of products should be part of a sustainable development plan of any country as it affects a large proportion of their population. Those that are considered more vulnerable are females in rural areas or low- income countries, girls and women with disabilities and special needs, and even those in a state of emergency (UNICEF, 2018).

1.1 Motivation

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the negative impact that poor or lacking sexual education campaigns represent for women, specifically those in vulnerable communities. The study is relevant due to it being a pressing matter in both, economic and ecological aspects of society.

1.2 Delimitations

Our study focuses in the experience of 40 Mexican females that belong to different social classes and age groups.

1.3 Research Question

To help us comprehend the magnitude of the problem, the main question is: Are sexual education campaigns a solution for responsible consumption and a step further within gender inequalities: a look into menstruation and sustainability?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to analyze how the long presence of the same menstrual hygiene products have shaped women and affected the environment through time. It is also imperative to find an alternative solution that if implemented, would eventually help accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals regarding Inclusion and Sustainability.

2.1 Period Poverty

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), also known as period poverty, has been revealed to be a social issue in public health. The management of menstruation presents noteworthy challenges for women in vulnerable settings. UNICEF describes MHM as “Women and adolescent girls being able to use clean materials to absorb or collect menstrual blood, and to change them in privacy as often necessary throughout their menstrual period” (UNICEF, 2012).

Period poverty starts off with a disturbing pattern, which is described by author Tull (2019). The first is; water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. A common example of this is seen in low income communities, mostly rural, where the absence of toilets or proper sanitation facilities, make the female feel like it's best to be alienated from the community, even school, when she's menstruating. The second, regards health malpractice. A common example is when women cannot change frequently whatever method they use for their menstruation cycle and it becomes an infection leading into septic shock. A second example was exposed by the author Oppenheim (2018), is how in Kenya, girls are forced to exchange sex for sanitary products.

The lack of education surrounding menstruation creates one of the most significant social restrictions for women. Young girls either do not know what their menstruation means, nor the proper care for it and older women, may possess false information surrounding any type of eco-friendly alternatives (Tull, K., 2019).

2.2 Sustainability and Menstruation

Menstrual waste disposal techniques used by women differ according to their country of origin, social status, religious beliefs, among other factors. Most of the women in the world dispose their menstrual articles as solid wastes, however in rural areas these wastes are burned, buried or thrown in pit latrines. “Conventional disposable menstrual products are made from 90% plastic, and with their packages,

generate 200,000 tons of waste per year and takes between 500-800 years to biodegrade” (London Assembly Environment Committee, 2018).

Many women also use reusable cloths which are then washed in the nearest source of water they have. The consequences of menstrual waste disposal start with the fact that sanitation systems were designed for urine and feces in mind and are unable to cope with menstrual absorption. As men are in most cases the decision-makers at household level, their lack of knowledge about menstruation and the taboo of menstruation itself, makes them ignore the necessity of menstrual products, causing women to rely on cheap reusable cloth pads, compromising their menstrual needs, hygiene and secure disposal (Kaur, R. 2018).

2.3 Pursuable Change

Menstrual hygiene management is related to four of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in two levels. The first being personal well-being with: Goal 4, “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and Goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. The second level is infrastructure with Goal 6, “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”, and Goal 12, “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (UNDP, 2019).

3 METHODOLOGY

This project is classified as a qualitative phenomenological study as it analyses the experiences women from different age groups and different social classes have had with their menstruation cycles. The data was a random sample, collected from 40 responses to an online 10 question survey. It was distributed to the female Mexican population through Social Media, mainly Whatsapp, and it guaranteed their anonymity. The survey, and the results, were divided into three parts. The first one, basic information about the participant was asked, including age range and which social class they believed they were from. The second part involved a series of multiple questions regarding their experience and personal preference regarding the usage of menstrual products. The last part asked participants to identify the quantities of residue that are produced in the world and the alternative action to reduce these social inequalities and the negative ecological impact these products possess.

We used this methodology in order to examine the experience that women go through with their consumerism habits. The participants were female Mexicans that ranged from ages 21 to over 50 years old. The initial codification was to separate which type of product they preferred using and then analyzing from which social class they believed they belonged to and their age group, which are two factors that have a strong influence on any woman.

4 RESULTS

As this project is a work in progress paper, it is expected for it to have a continuity regarding the collection of experiences from Mexican women pertaining to different social classes and age groups in order to reach a bigger sample size. The limitations of this study included only considering the female preference regarding menstruation hygiene products and it did not measure the quality of the sexual campaigns that this paper proposed. In future research studies, the testing of quality campaigns, and the possible impact these may have in their preference and their consumerism levels throughout the years. Out of the 40 initial participants, one can state that those that belong in a higher income status use plastic-based product and all were younger than 30 years old. Most participants admitted to not know of eco-friendly alternatives and that they had never received education regarding them.

5 DISCUSSION

After considering the literature review and the results from the online survey, it can be inferred that the perspective, opinion and usage of plastic based menstrual products is affected by several personal factors like preference and religion. Personal money and sacrificed is often associated with the acquisition of such products and plastic based products, thus, them being associated with the higher classes in more developed countries. Even though plastic is not as present in, less developed or low-income communities, there is also contamination due to sanitary malpractices.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The initial research question of “Are sexual education campaigns a solution for responsible consumption and a step further within gender inequalities: a look into menstruation and sustainability” was examined through this work in progress study. Based on the data gathered and the literature review, it can be concluded that menstrual hygiene products and the lack of quality education surrounding the topic, creates a vicious cycle of pollution and both, class and gender inequality.

It is important to recognize that women should not be criminalized for these practices as menstruation cycles are vital for humanity. Menstruation is a taboo for most countries and societies, thus, the education regarding its care and eco-friendly alternatives is often overlooked. It is imperative for the creation of sexual education campaigns that allow people to expand their comfort zones and for them to practice a healthier and even eco-friendlier lifestyle.

This mission should not be considered alien to the SDGs previously mentioned, as these generate global guidelines to follow and accomplish those Goals. The first with the well-being regarding Quality Education and Gender Equality where these campaigns would impact growth immediately. The second, with infrastructure regarding water and consumption and production patterns. There will be better conservation of clean water and sanitation through better waste disposal practices, and less of a negative impact with plastic free alternatives and responsible consumption.

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