

Recommendations based on the conducted research about menstrual poverty

The importance of menstrual health has been historically neglected, mainly because of the taboos and misconceptions surrounding menstruation and androcentrism in health awareness and health systems around the world (Medina-Perucha et al., 2020.). The concept of androcentrism takes a male body as reference, norm and as an example for all people which, in the context of health, leads to further invisibility of women, women's bodies and women's health in health sciences, policies and practice. Consequently, the issue of "menstrual poverty", which refers to financial, social, cultural and political obstacles for accessing menstrual products and education, is being ignored. Most of the research conducted relates mainly to countries of lower economic development, even though the problem exists even in economically developed countries such as the UK due to the fact that all people who menstruate need, at least once a month, menstrual products necessary for maintaining menstrual health (Haque et al., 2014; Sommer et al., 2019; Montgomery et al., 2016; Tingle & Vora, 2018.).

Menstruation begins in puberty, most commonly between the ages of 8 and 15, and ends with menopause between 45 and 55. The menstrual cycle lasts between 3 to 7 days and repeats itself every 21 to 35 days (USDHH, 2012.). People who menstruate and use single-use menstrual products will probably spend a significant amount of funds on menstrual supplies and leave behind substantial non-degradable waste. To be more precise, during their lifetime they will use about 12.000 to 15.000 single-use menstrual products which amount to 250 to 300 kg of waste per one menstruating person (Borovski, 2011.). However, waste is not the only issue because the environmental impact needs to be assessed throughout the entire product lifecycle: harvesting or producing the material, manufacturing and transporting it and finally using and disposing. Therefore menstrual products can have a significant impact on the environment such as: exploitation of resources (wood, crude oil, water, energy...), global warming, consumption of fossil fuels, acidification, abiotic land use and depletion, oceanic pollution and other (Weir, 2015., Cabrera & Garcia, 2019.).

Human Rights and Civic Participation Association PaRiter in collaboration with Tiiiit! Inc. is conducting a research on the topic of menstrual poverty within the project *Tetka Perioda (Aunt Flow)* financed by Frida – Young Feminist Foundation. The goal of this research was to collect data on the use, consumption and availability of menstrual products, conditions for maintaining menstrual hygiene and menstruation-related shame. The data was collected via an online questionnaire and the participants were people who've menstruated within the past year, regardless of their gender orientation, and are at least 16 years of age. The questionnaire was filled out by over 6000 people.

This is the first research of this kind conducted in Croatia and one of the rare ones in the European Union. Despite the limitations of the research method I believe that its results will

contribute to the discussion on the topic of menstrual poverty and encourage further research which can explore this topic deeper and wider.

The research points out several key issues faced by people who menstruate:

1. Menstrual shame and embarrassment;
2. Being judged and not understood by society;
3. Inability to maintain adequate menstrual hygiene;
4. Not being familiar with various types of menstrual supplies;
5. Lack of availability of menstrual products and pain relievers during menstruation;
6. Missing work, school or university classes due to menstrual pain, lack of menstrual products or inadequate hygienic conditions.

It is considered that these problems would have been even more pronounced on a nationally representative sample because this questionnaire did not include participants living in much worse economic conditions since they do not have access to the internet, or rather the technical conditions needed to fill out the online questionnaire.

Considering the fact that menstrual health is key to reaching gender equality and promoting the health of people who menstruate, further recommendations will be given on how to alleviate these problems, improve menstrual health and decrease menstrual poverty in Croatia, as well as negative environmental impacts of menstrual products. These recommendations have several goals:

1. Increasing the level of health education on the topic of menstruation for people who menstruate but also for the people who do not menstruate;
2. Providing basic hygienic conditions and availability of menstrual products in workplaces, schools and universities;
3. Encouraging reusable menstrual products for the purpose of decreasing negative environmental impacts of single-use products;
4. Lessening the financial burden of menstrual products on the household budget.

The recommendations given are based on the results of the conducted research, but also other recent scientific papers on the topic of economic and environmental impacts of menstrual products. The results of the conducted research show that reusable menstrual products place a significantly smaller pressure on the household budget in the long run and, due to their longevity, have a lesser impact on the environment¹. Considering the potential economic benefits widely provided by reusable menstrual products they could help reduce the existing problem of menstrual poverty (Cabrera & Garcia, 2019.).

Reusable menstrual products include the menstrual cup, washable sanitary pads and menstrual underwear. The menstrual cup is inserted inside the body to collect fluids. It is made

¹ We should keep in mind that reusable menstrual products are initially significantly more expensive than single-use menstrual products. However, unlike single-use menstrual products, the price of reusable menstrual products does not depend on the duration of a menstrual cycle, and it implies a one-time cost for many years which in turn means that reusable menstrual products in the long run represent a lesser financial burden. Also, the impact of reusable menstrual products is not negligible, but considering their durability, it is cumulatively significantly lesser (Weir, 2015.).

from medical silicone or natural rubber. They can be worn for up to 12 hours before emptying and they must be sanitized after each monthly use and they can last up to 10 years (Weir, 2015.). The use of menstrual cups results in 99% reduction of waste usually generated by using single-use menstrual products. Consequently, local government's expenses for waste management get significantly lower (Cabrera & Garcia, 2019.). Menstrual cups are an excellent alternative to single-use menstrual products, even in cases of bad hygienic conditions (van Eijk et al., 2019.). Reusable sanitary pads are worn attached to one's underwear. They are made of layers of absorbent fabric. They can be produced from natural fibers such as cotton and bamboo or synthetic fibers such as polyester. Pads can be worn for 4-6 hours and must be washed after each use. They last for approximately 5 years (Bussey, 2015.). Menstrual underwear is lined with cotton and waterproof materials in the pubic area, has a high level of absorbency and most importantly, it can be washed and reused for up to 3 years (Flux Undies, 2019.).

It's important to stress that reusable menstrual products are not appropriate for everyone and for every situation. For example, homeless people, refugees and asylum seekers who mostly live in accommodations without necessary hygienic conditions and/or washing machines and the ability to clean reusable menstrual products. Also, menstrual shame negatively affects the use of reusable menstrual products due to the necessity to wash menstrual products in community or public places (Cabrera & Garcia, 2019.). My stance is that consumers have the right to choose a product they feel most comfortable with and which fits their needs, but these recommendations are meant to raise awareness on the negative economic and environmental effects of single-use menstrual products as well as existing alternatives.

The expressions used in the following text are gender neutral and refer equally to the female and male gender.

- **Health education on the topic of menstruation**

Stigma and discomfort are reality for most girls. Many of them are unaware of what's happening in their body and what to do when they start their first menstruation (Tingle & Vora, 2018.). The results of the conducted research show that the feeling of shame is higher with participants who are younger, in other word it is reduced with maturity, but still present. For the purpose of decreasing confusion and consequently menstrual shame, embarrassment and stigma, it is necessary to raise the level of health education on the topic of menstruation and not just for the individuals who menstruate, but also those who do not menstruate.

Precisely health education on the topic of menstruation from a young age is crucial for understanding and improving the relationship people who menstruate have towards their own menstrual cycle. It's important that the menstrual cycle is understood as a natural process connected with good health. Menstruation is nothing dirty or bad, on the contrary, it is an indicator of a woman's good health. Therefore, educating society, which includes individuals who menstruate and individuals who do not menstruate should be a priority for promoting health and rights of young people who menstruate. More education and a more positive conceptualization of a menstrual cycle and menstruation in general could help young people

who menstruate to be more aware of their bodies and take better care of their menstrual and general health. Improved education would also decrease menstrual shame and embarrassment while on the other side, it would increase societal understanding and diminish potential discrimination and stigma related to menstruation.

Considering the above, our recommendation is that we should actively discuss menstruation in school classrooms, because the pressure on parents to educate their kids can be difficult, especially if they lack the necessary knowledge. Health education on the topic of menstruation should begin in elementary school. By educating society from an early age we primarily educate young individuals who menstruate on what to expect and everyone else that it is something completely natural.

In Croatia, the current curricular reform is introducing a cross-curricular subject Health in elementary and high schools. The cycle intended for 3rd, 4th and 5th grades encompasses topics such as the importance of hygiene for girls/women during menstruation and the proper application and replacement of sanitary pads during menstruation, while the cycle intended for 6th, 7th and 8th grades covers topics such as genital hygiene, menstrual hygiene, reducing prejudice and keeping a menstrual calendar (Act on curriculum adoption for the cross-curricular subject Health for elementary and high school in the Republic of Croatia, NN 10/19). From the aforementioned topics it can be seen that out of all existing menstrual products only sanitary pads are mentioned. Through the cross-curricular subject Health other types of menstrual products should be introduced and students should be educated on the environmental effects of menstrual products throughout their entire lifecycle. During all of this it is extremely important that each mentioned topic is approached in a professional manner without perpetuating stigmas and taboos.

The results of the conducted research show that almost 99% of participants are familiar with the use of single-use sanitary pads, a smaller number is familiar with tampon application, while almost 25% are not familiar with the menstrual cup and 45% are not familiar with reusable washable sanitary pads. Other than that there is a certain lack of awareness on the ecological aspects of these products, even in those individuals that seem to be more conscious of these effects. Peberdy, Jones and Green (2019.) point out that there seems to be a connection between the level of awareness and product choice, more precisely, that people with the higher level of awareness most likely choose products with a lesser negative impact on the environment. Therefore, education is the key prerequisite for a wider use of reusable menstrual products such as the menstrual cup or washable sanitary pads which, due to their longevity, have the least negative impact on the environment, especially menstrual cups (Mazgaj et al., 2006.; Weir, 2015.; Hait & Powers, 2019.). During all of this it is extremely important that each mentioned topic is approached in a professional manner without stigmatization or creating taboos.

Menstruation, menstrual cycle and various types of menstrual products should be talked about during regular check-ups in elementary and high schools. A continued discussion on this topic is vital for reducing and getting rid of menstrual shame while simultaneously connecting the menstrual cycle with overall health.

There are many initiatives through which medical students participate in campaigns to raise awareness on the importance of health education. We urge them to start similar initiatives on the topic of menstruation in elementary schools and contribute to the reduction of menstrual shame, embarrassment and stigma and a wider use of reusable menstrual products.

Other than the continuous education in elementary and high schools, for a better understanding of the menstrual cycle and the preservation of the reproductive system, a conversation with one's gynecologist is vital. Through our mandatory healthcare system a female child is entitled to choose a gynecologist when they reach 12 years of age. Therefore, it is recommended that all girls see a gynecologist from their early teenage years in the form of a conversation and with the goal of creating trust and a habit as well as learning about how our bodies work and preserving their reproductive health. Regular gynecological examinations are the basic condition for prevention and preservation of a woman's reproductive health. During the aforementioned talk with the gynecologist, the patient should be familiarized with different types of menstrual products including the menstrual cup and reusable sanitary pads, their advantages and disadvantages as well as ways to use and maintain them. Finally, they should provide recommendations based on the patient's needs and specifics of their menstrual cycle. In all qualitative studies that were so far conducted, adopting the use of the menstrual cup required familiarization with it over several menstrual cycles (van Eijk et al., 2019.).

Within the conducted research, a worrisome, but not surprising fact was that 24% of participants do not have a chosen gynecologist through HZZO (Croatian National Healthcare Service). When analyzing age groups, it was shown that 76.7% of high school students do not have a chose gynecologist, as well as 40.6% of university students. One can assume that the reason for this is the insufficient capacity of the public health system and the load put on gynecologists, using private gynecological healthcare services² or even the proven stress and discomfort that women feel with these types of examinations (Jones, 2014.). However, to confirm either one of these assumptions it is definitely necessary to conduct a research on this topic.

- **Providing conditions necessary to maintain menstrual hygiene**

Most of the participants have basic conditions for maintaining menstrual hygiene in their households. Unfortunately, these conditions are not equally provided by their workplace, schools or universities where they spend a significant amount of time during the week. This is especially the case with disabled people who do not have sanitary facilities adapted to their needs. Even though in 90% of cases the reason for missing work, school or class during menstruation are menstrual pains, one of the reasons listed is precisely the lack of conditions necessary to maintain menstrual hygiene. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for individuals who menstruate that their workplaces, schools and universities have a private, clean and fully

² One should keep in mind that gynecologists in private practice don't have the right to write referrals, as well as prescriptions or further tests, therefore these participants should have a gynecologist provided by the public insurance.

equipped space where they can safely and discretely change, wash and dispose of their menstrual products and maintain menstrual hygiene.

Based on everything mentioned, there seems to be a distinct need for the national/regional/local budgets to secure additional funds for financing basic conditions to maintain hygiene in public institutions such as elementary or high schools as well as institutions for higher education (and other public institutions) which includes warm running water, soap, toilet paper and necessary privacy. That would secure the necessary conditions for maintaining menstrual hygiene. It is also highly recommended that sinks with warm water and soap be placed in the same place as the toilets, not in front of the toilets which is necessary for discretely maintaining hygiene when using a menstrual cup.

Employers should also keep in mind these aforementioned necessary conditions. Improving hygienic conditions in the workplace is useful for everyone: those who menstruate and their right to a satisfactory hygienic standard and health preservation, but also their productivity and reducing absences due to menstruation, as well as those who do not menstruate who but will also benefit from a better work environment (Aidara, 2016). Providing hygienic facilities adapted to the needs of people who menstruate and taking into account their needs and the difficulties they face while constructing workplace policies can increase the participation of female workforce and open up a path towards gender equality (Essity & WSSCC, 2018.). The mentioned policies refer especially to the ability to take more breaks during menstruation, providing menstrual products and pain medication and options to work from home or take a personal day off during menstruation.

All of the above equally refers to people with disabilities and specific adjustments based on their needs.

- **Providing menstrual products**

The results of this research show that due to their lower economic status some of the participants are not able to use menstrual products at all during menstruation and they therefore use alternative methods such as toilet paper. Due to the same reason some of the participants are not able to change menstrual products regularly or they buy menstrual products of lower quality.

Based on this, it is recommended that a woman's chosen gynecologist is able to provide the patient with pain medicine for reducing menstrual pains, but also recommend and enable them to use a prescription/voucher/coupon for getting free (or for a very small fee) reusable menstrual products in a drugstore/pharmacy or a gynecologist office. In other words, that menstrual pain medication get put on the list of medications covered by the public health service and that their budget secures funds for the procurement of reusable menstrual products for people who menstruate. Especially for people of lower economic status. This would secure the availability of menstrual products for all people who menstruate regardless if their economic situation. Furthermore, it would encourage people who menstruate to regularly care for their reproductive health by seeing a gynecologist for an examination/conversation and prevent more serious ailments and thereby decrease public healthcare spending.

By analyzing the offers of various manufacturers of menstrual cups and reusable sanitary pads, these products can last up to several years, more precisely 5 years for reusable sanitary pads and 10 years for some menstrual cups. Depending on the chosen product and manufacturer it is possible to provide a free (or for a very small fee) replacement of menstrual products after a certain time period following a gynecological examination and consultation. This encourages a wider use of reusable menstrual products but also regular care of one's menstrual cycle and reproductive health as a form of prevention of serious illnesses.

Research has shown that leakage of any kind is similar or lesser when using a menstrual cup than when using single-use sanitary pads or tampons. The risk for infection is not increased by using menstrual cups rather than tampons or sanitary pads, it is actually even lower according to some research. Allergic reactions are also not often seen, but one should keep that possibility in mind before usage, and any pain one might have experienced during usage is usually related to mistakes in insertion of the cup or specific pelvic anatomy (van Eijk et al., 2019.). We cannot ignore the fact that a wider use of reusable menstrual products would greatly decrease a whole slew of negative environmental effects of single-use menstrual products as a group of widely used but rarely researched consumer products (Hait & Powers, 2019.). Similarly to diapers, tampons and sanitary pads are made from synthetic materials which are not easily biodegradable (Borovski, 2011.).

Lastly, the recommendation is that free menstrual products (including pain medication) are available in public institutions such as schools or universities since these places are mostly attended by people without personal income. Even though our recommendations are to encourage using reusable menstrual products, in this case it is sufficient that single-use menstrual products are made available as a solution in cases when students suddenly start menstruation while in school or at university or as an alternative for those who for some reason are unable to use reusable menstrual products. People who menstruate need to have the option to request menstrual products from a person they trust without any feeling of shame or embarrassment, such as their class master, guidance counselor, psychologist and such.

We are also asking all employers to similarly consider providing free menstrual products within their organizations and ensure the availability of menstrual products to all individuals who menstruate regardless of their financial status and possibilities. We believe that the ultimate cost is noticeably lower than the potential damages due to lower efficiency or absences of their employees due to menstruation.

- **Lower VAT rates**

Considering the fact that the general VAT (Value Added Tax) rate creates a high regressive effect we also apply lower VAT rates to lessen the regressive effects of taxation on the most sensitive citizen groups. Therefore, besides the general VAT rate of 25% Croatia also has two lower VAT rates of 5% and 13 % (Value Added Tax Act, NN 73/13, 99/13, 148/13, 153/13, 143/14, 115/16, 106/18, 121/19, 138/20). Three of the most commonly used reasons for applying lower rates are the following (IFS, 2011 according to Buljan 2020.):

1. Redistribution effects – they are focused on a more even distribution of real income by applying a lower VAT rate to various necessary goods such as food, energy, education, healthcare and such;

2. Merit goods (cultural events, sport activities, books, newspaper, etc.) and positive externalities - encouraging the consumption of goods which create positive externalities whose consumption would not otherwise be at a desired level. However, lower VAT rates for merit goods also have a redistributive effect and are primarily meant for encouraging consumption from individuals with lower income for whom demand is price sensitive.
3. Increasing economic efficiency and encouraging certain economic fields – encouraging employment and increasing work productivity, combating grey market and encouraging certain economic fields.

In Croatia 5% VAT rates are applied for merit and necessary goods and 13% VAT rates for products which are practically essential for most Croatian families as well as accommodation services and similar. Therefore, the 13% rates are used for food products such as eggs, meat, fruit, vegetables but also diapers, car seats and similar. Our suggestion is that the lower VAT rates are applied to all menstrual products as products used for healthcare and disease prevention within the frame of Addendum III. of Council Directive 2006/112/EC. Menstrual products are necessary and unavoidable for people who menstruate. Besides that, by lowering VAT rates we achieve a redistributive effect considering the fact that people of lower economic status are unable to use menstrual products at all (or regularly change them) during menstruation, something that is necessary to maintain menstrual health, due to their high price. In the same way that lower VAT rates for diapers have a pro-natal effect, lowering VAT rates for menstrual products would contribute to greater gender equality even though it would not entirely fix the problem of menstrual poverty.

Based on these results one could assume that the average monthly cost of menstrual products for people who menstruate is 50 kn. If we assume that one person on average menstruates 12 times per year, their yearly cost is around 600 kn. Out of these 600 kn VAT rates are currently 25% or 120 kn. Lowering VAT rates to 5% would result in saving 96 kn per year for each member of the household who menstruates, or 58 kn in the case of 13% VAT rates.³

We often see the attitude that lowering the general VAT rate does not have a direct impact on lowering prices, but rather that it contributes to increasing profit margins because the price of the products stays the same despite the lower VAT rates. This is especially the case with necessary goods whose prices are not elastic. Menstrual products are a necessary product for people who menstruate but considering the problem of menstrual poverty they also clearly belong in the same group as luxury goods. Therefore, it is my belief that lowering the price of the product would have an effect on increasing demand and ultimately lead to increased profits for the supplier by increasing sales. Our experience from 2019. has shown that certain stores used the lower VAT rates for certain products as self-promotion by claiming that the products in question would actually be sold at a lower price due to lower VAT rates. Ultimately, it is my belief that even though the transfer of lower VAT rates to the final price of the product may not be absolute, I believe that it would certainly result in lowering the price of menstrual products.

³ Author's calculations

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