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The Period is Political: Menstruation Begins with Blood

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ABSTRACT

The current conceptualization of menstrual activism carries the influence of neoliberalism, consumerism, and capitalism, resulting in product-based initiatives as opposed to radical, structural solutions (e.g. Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Helmick, 2020; Lysa, 2021). Western-centered activism has made menstruation visible through products, forcing menstrual management and concealment to become the standard way menstruating individuals care for their menses (Bobel, 2010; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Wood, 2020). The establishment of menstrual hygiene management initiatives and the formation of menstruation as a public health crisis perpetuates harmful rhetoric and places the burden of product use on individual menstruators (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015; Bhandal, 2020). Embodiment and inclusivity within menstrual activism must be brought to the forefront, and menstrual stigma and inequity must be resisted on a more radical level. In this paper, I will examine menstrual equity from a decolonial, feminist perspective to expand menstrual activist theoretical frameworks beyond menstrual management.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

code red
shark week
red wedding
lady business
strawberry week
out of commission
Mother Nature's gift
a visit from Aunt Flow
the red badge of courage
the painters are in the hallway
down the avenue of womanhood

“When something is difficult to mention, we call it something else. The more euphemisms in the cultural lexicon, the more taboo the topic” (Smiley, 2018, 13).

Most people with periods are taught about menstruation in the same way that they are told a secret; information about their bodies is delivered in hushed tones in a classroom with an instructor's request to keep the lesson private. Although roughly one quarter of the world's population is currently on their period, it remains a topic associated with stigma and spoken through euphemisms like the examples listed above (Miller, 2019). However, in recent decades, menstruation has gained increasing media attention. Cosmopolitan declared 2015 “The Year the Period Went Public” and highlighted several menstrual events of that year (Miller, 2019). In April 2016, Newsweek ran a feature on menstrual activism with an image of a tampon and the text “There Will Be Blood. Get Over It. Period Stigma is hurting the economy, schools, and the environment. But the crimson tide is turning” (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

However, even with recent media attention, menstruation remains socially stigmatized. Such stigma produces harsh barriers for menstruators across the world who may struggle to access menstrual products, receive social support, access healthcare, or even interact in the public sphere due to menstrual taboos (Bhandal, 2020; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). To understand the vastness of menstrual stigma, we must analyze the ways in which menstruation entered the mainstream. The early years of the menstrual movement were dominated by the WASH (Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sector, which oriented menstruation in frameworks based in gender and hygiene (Miller, 2019; Sommer, 2015). The foundation for menstruation as a public health issue emerged through menstrual hygiene management rhetoric from WASH initiatives, which focused on sanitation, cleanliness, and women (Sommer, 2015). Through this publicly approved lens, menstruation became commercialized, or designed for profit, which altered consumers' perception of periods (Helmick, 2020, Kissling, 2006).

Through the commodification of periods, capitalism and neoliberalism shaped menstrual language, preying on the secrecy and shame dominating periods; popular “feminine hygiene” products emphasized their abilities to fully conceal period blood (Ferranti, 2009). Menstrual product advertisements became a prominent source for menstrual health and product information, which, combined with insufficient comprehensive menstrual health education, promoted incorrect or harmful rhetoric about periods (Coleman & Sredl, 2022; Tilborghs & Lotz, 2022). *Managing* and *concealing* menstruation through single-use products developed into the “normal” approach to periods as opposed to holistic, open menstrual care (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020; Wood, 2020). Representation of menstruators in media remained bloodless and focused on cisgender women, leaving trans and queer menstruators out of conceptualizations of periods

entirely (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020; Rydström, 2020). Menstruation, as embodied from menarche to menopause, became a site of self-policing and scrutiny (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, Wood, 2020).

While menstrual activism and discussions of menstrual equity have recently gained traction, the path forward entails examining the root causes and manifestations of menstrual stigma.

This paper will examine menstrual equity from a decolonial, feminist perspective to expand menstrual activist theoretical frameworks beyond menstrual management. I hope to venture outside of the confines of menstrual discourse created by capitalism and neoliberalism and discuss a new framework of menstrual equity that moves beyond product access and into embodiment, shifting sociocultural norms, and centering the experiences of menstruators.

Specifically, this paper will address the questions: (1) How and why is a Western (consumerist and individualist) conceptualization of 'menstrual equity' problematic? What should true 'menstrual equity' entail? (2) How and why is the Western neoliberal capitalist focus on 'menstrual management' antithetical to menstrual equity? (3) How can menstrual activism movements incorporate body politics (visibility and embodiment) to move beyond the Western conceptualization of menstruation which labels it as a public health crisis?

Chapter 2

Reexamining Menstrual Equity

What is Menstrual Equity?

Menstrual scholars and activists utilize the term 'menstrual equity' to explain the importance of and need for public policy to address the safety, affordability, and availability of menstrual products (Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Crays, 2020; Sommer & Mason, 2021; Weiss-Wolf, 2017; Winkler, 2020). This term encompasses a legislative and policy-oriented framework; “menstrual equity” was officially coined by author Jennifer Weiss-Wolf (2020) to address menstrual shortcomings in American law and public policy. In her book, *Periods Gone Public*, she offers this definition:

In order to have a fully equitable and participatory society, we must have laws and policies that ensure menstrual products are safe and affordable for everyone who needs them. The ability to access these items affects a person’s freedom to work, study, stay healthy, and engage in the world with basic dignity. And if anyone’s access is compromised, whether by poverty or stigma or lack of education and resources, it is in our societal interest to ensure those needs are met. (p. XX)

Building upon previous menstrual activism, Weiss-Wolf (2020) deliberately chose the term ‘menstrual equity’ to create a realistic basis for political advocacy: while broader than a public health or hygiene framework but narrower than a human rights frame, menstrual equity appeals to Western ideals of civic, economic, and political engagement. Menstrual equity has gained momentum as a social and political movement, demanding the elimination of sales tax on

menstrual products in all states, the provision of free menstrual products in public facilities, and beyond (Lane et al., 2021).

The menstrual equity framework prioritizes individuals who cannot afford or access menstrual products and resources, termed “period poverty.” The concept of period poverty has been circulated by menstrual activists to refer to inadequate access to menstrual health resources and education, such as period products, bathrooms, washing and disposal facilities, and more (De Benedictis, 2022; Haneman, 2021; Sommer & Mason, 2021; van der Heijden, 2020). The issue of period poverty emerged into the cultural lexicon in the United Kingdom in 2017 as media attention focused on schoolgirls routinely missing school because they were unable to afford menstrual products (Haneman, 2021). This has grown into a global movement to address how many menstruators bleed without having essential resources to care for themselves. Period poverty affects menstruators' abilities to attend school or work and safely participate in society. When menstruators lack vital resources like clean water, bathrooms, or period products, they avoid going to school or work out of fear that they will bleed through their clothes, which is shameful due to menstrual stigma (van der Heijden, 2020).

Menstrual products are necessities, not luxuries, and should be treated as such. Unfortunately, in the United States, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) programs do not cover menstrual products (Gruer et al., 2021; Winkler, 2019). When individuals cannot afford or access menstrual products, they are forced to take drastic or unsafe measures to be able to participate in society while bleeding, which could entail using toilet paper, paper towels, rags, towels, or other household products instead of pads or tampons (Gruer et al., 2021). Homeless and incarcerated menstruators are especially vulnerable to a lack of access to clean water, a bathroom, or other essentials for self-

care. Globally, in low- and middle-income countries, millions of menstruators experience limited access to period products, menstrual or reproductive health education, or adequate water sanitation and hygiene facilities (Babbar et al., 2022). This illustrates how the silence and shame surrounding menstruation oppresses menstruators, occupying them with menstrual body projects and inhibiting their participation in the public sphere.

Menstrual inequity (inadequate access to menstrual products, education, and reproductive care) and period poverty have been unaddressed for decades due to stigma. The lack of global awareness, education, and action centered on this issue can be attributed to the silence and shame that shrouds menstruation; as stigma inhibits the public discussion of periods and dialogue regarding access to products, the tampon tax, and more, ultimately contributing to the oppression of menstruating people.

Stigma And Shame Surround the Menstrual Body

In US culture, menstruation marks bodies as shameful, dirty, disgusting, and is increasingly being considered even necessary (Bobel, 2010; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Freidenfelds, 2009; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020; Kissling, 2006; Owen, 2022). Menstrual shame has been studied for decades by menstrual researchers and feminist scholars (e.g. Bhandal, 2021; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Patterson, 2014). For example, Houppert (2000) wrote an entire book on menstrual taboos called “The Curse.” Menstrual stigma can be seen nearly everywhere in US culture. For example, accusations that a person is “PMS-ing” if they are perceived as emotional, veiled terminology for periods (euphemisms), lack of available period products and education, and associations of menstrual blood with impurity are all stigma manifestations. This all-encompassing menstrual stigma and the taboo nature of menstruation has significant implications for menstruators including feeling insecure, anxious, or self-loathing

because of their periods, being unable to bleed safely and developing infections, or missing school or work.

Menstrual stigma includes the current silence around menstruation that keeps menstruation invisible. Menstruators internalize these negative attitudes about their bodies and menstruation often feeling shameful, embarrassed, and even betrayed by their bodies during their menses (e.g. Bobel, 2020; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Zivi, 2020). Menstrual norms encourage menstruators to manage their bodies through the use of menstrual products, which were originally designed as ‘menstrual hygiene products’ (Houppert, 2000), implying menstruation is unhygienic if not properly managed through ‘sanitary’ products. Menstrual taboos and shame create a need for menstrual products while menstrual products simultaneously reinforce menstrual stigmas through complicity in menstrual invisibility (Kissling, 2006).

In this way, menstrual taboos limit the degree to which menstruators can even participate in the public sphere. The impacts of stigma are highly visible through the social construction of the menstrual body as dirty and in need of concealment. To analyze the social construction of the menstrual body, Patterson (2014) utilizes Foucault’s theory of the relationship between power and discourse. Foucault contends that scientific and medical discourses which materialized as a result of modernity hold power for social control and surveillance (Patterson, 2014). Essentially, social innovations, like menstrual products, emerged with a cost. Power and control of all social bodies and became ingrained in institutions from education to industry. Patterson (2014) states that Foucault’s theory can be extended to the social construction of the menstrual body; once a menstruator begins their first period, their body is processed through societal expectations and the lens of the male gaze. Menstrual concealment becomes a priority; the visibility of blood is too much of a risk for the shame that surrounds the menstruating body.

In this manner, menstruation is constructed as a feminine secret that must be kept for social survival. Menstrual discourse is embedded with power and control as it encourages menstruators to carefully practice menstrual (and thus stigma) management (Patterson, 2014). Menstruators are taught by their families, friends, schools, workplaces, religions, and media that menstruation is shameful. Menstruators experience constant and significant pressure to maintain the illusion that they do not menstruate (Earle, 2020). Leaks are a sign of inferiority and shame; blood stains mark female bodies as uncontrollable and undisciplined (Patterson, 2014). Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2020) conclude that menstrual blood may serve as a blemish on menstruators' character due to a learned aversion to menstrual blood. Menstruation marks bleeders as different from the normative and privileged cis male body while menstrual blood is stigmatized (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). One of the largest sources of pressure to conceal menstruation stems from modern advertising, which perpetuates and profits from menstruators' insecurities and fears.

Modern Advertising Reflects Social and Corporate Institutions

Advertisements for menstrual products are a large source of information about periods for many people. Advertising reaches huge audiences and has the power to spread stigma and shame around menstruation—or to inform and empower viewers (Helmick, 2020). The menstrual concealment imperative explains how menstruators internalize menstrual discourse and, as a result, conceal menstruation due to surrounding stigma and taboos (Wood, 2020). When individuals learn about menstruation from biased advertisements, they absorb new information along with shame-based concealment imperatives buried in corporate language. Menstruators are encouraged to hide their periods and menstrual advertisements feed into that narrative (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020). Alongside harmful rhetoric, menstrual product advertising is

grounded in representations of menstruating bodies on white, cisgenderist, ableist, fatphobic, and heteronormative terms to ultimately showcase the perfectly optimized feminine body (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). This concept refers to the construction of the ideal feminine body which does not bleed and “that exists in itself as a symbol of social equality and liberation” (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020, p. 382).

Bloodless, shame-based rhetoric are displayed through feminine hygiene advertisements. “Feminine hygiene” advertising both promotes misinformation about periods and shifts the burden of menstrual inequity to individual consumers (Coleman & Sredl, 2022). Menstrual products (such as tampons and pads) are designed to maximize absorption and conceal any odors. Compact, portable, and disposable models are popularized, communicating the idea that menstruation should only be acknowledged behind closed doors (Kissling 2006). Advertisements exacerbate fear regarding menstrual shame.

Historically, common tropes in advertising include menstrual blood depicted as “blue liquid,” a complete lack of visible menstrual blood, excessive bleeding where leaks are unavoidable and garner attention, and narratives of intense shame and secrecy. Disposable, single-use products are seen as a solution to this fear with no acknowledgment of the environmental impacts of plastic period products. Menstruators are taught to internalize the shame and secrecy surrounding periods, with the only solution for concealment offered is single-use products (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Currently, menstrual advertisements weave together conflicting messaging; product advertisements will establish that periods are normal and natural but emphasize that menstrual blood must be hidden, odor-free, and symptoms must be minimized (Lysa, 2021).

Examples of this are displayed in two popular commercials by brands Kotex and Always. The Kotex Luxe Commercial, titled “Love Yourself a Little More,” features different women in various workplace settings with captions such as “love yourself even on your red days.” The messaging of the commercial tied with the visuals of successful women in the workplace, all with the intention to sell tampon that specifically protects from leaks and odor, demonstrates that menstruators succeed as long as no one knows they’re bleeding. This intentional messaging, which encourages menstruators to hide their period from others, illustrates the menstrual concealment imperative (Wood, 2020). Empowerment becomes an individual responsibility based on the potential to be discreet (Lysa, 2022). The Always Radiant commercial emphasizes that “You Can Stay Protected and Wear What You Want” while promoting a product that is “up to 100% leak and odor-free protection.” Always appears to communicate the idea that menstruators reclaim their stolen freedoms (due to having a period) by purchasing this product (Lysa, 2022). This is a false sense of empowerment; while menstruators may be able to wear white pants, they are silenced by stigma and pressured to hide all signs of bleeding. Ultimately, product ads promise necessary experiences of freshness and concealment; these notions exploit the status of menstruators as “Others” for corporate profit (Haneman, 2021).



Figure 1. Kotex Luxe Commercial, “Love Yourself a Little More”

([Love yourself a little more], September 2020)



Figure 2. Always Radiant Advertisement

([Example advertisement for Always Radiant pads], n.d.)

When analyzing the messaging within menstrual product advertisements, societal contributors to the menstrual concealment imperative become increasingly clear. As Wood (2020) writes, self-surveillance regarding menstrual concealment “is not freely chosen, but a required self-disciplinary practice rooted in menstrual discourse that characterizes menstruation

as stigmatized” (Abstract). The messaging echoed in corporate advertising reflects societal stigma with the intention of making a profit. Menstruators are constantly told to hide their periods and subscribe to societal expectations. Recent “feminine hygiene” advertising also shifts the burden of menstrual inequity to individual consumers. For example, the hashtag #EndPeriodPoverty by the brand Always appears to call attention to menstrual justice. However, this hashtag, used by individuals through social media, shifts the attention regarding an institutional problem to individuals themselves in a neoliberal manner (Coleman & Sredl, 2022).

Though menstrual products are sold under the guise of comfort and freedom, gender scholar Kissling (2006) states: “Freedom is never really free, at least under consumer capitalism.” Menstrual activism that occurs within the corporate realm utilizes a neoliberal framework that employs falsely “woke” menstruation messaging that is exploitative and empty in action (Haneman, 2021). Advertisements reflect the concentrated combined power of the corporate world with visual media; they have the ability to communicate and shape social norms with implicit and explicit messages. Capitalism’s dominating influence leads companies to exploit social norms and encourage certain behavior for consumption and profit. In the menstrual realm, corporations possess the power to shape perceptions and attitudes surrounding menstruation.

The Rise of Neoliberalism: Menstrual Health as an Individual Responsibility

Neoliberal feminism, a term coined by Catherine Rottenberg (2020, p. 7), describes a form of feminism that “simultaneously disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives.” In this framework, feminist subjects assume full responsibility for their own wellbeing and self-care. This “hyper-individualizing” framework, which “construes women . . . as individual enterprises,” easily rises into the mainstream as there is little oppositional force to

individuals assuming personal responsibility for institutional failures (Rottenberg, 2020, p. 8). While certain forms of inequality (in this case, menstrual inequity) are acknowledged through neoliberalism, individual-based solutions override their structural causes.

In the context of neoliberal feminism, menstrual health discourse is maintained by emphasizing the accessibility of period products but the labor of “managing” a period is placed on menstruators (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019). Individual menstruators are responsible for acquiring their own menstrual products, accessing healthcare, looking for alternative affordable solutions, finding shelter, and more. The capitalist mentality is thus perpetuated as attention is diverted from large structural issues to individual failings. Social movements to address menstrual equity and period poverty must take the influence of capitalism and individualism into account; the Western construction of the menstrual movement has created various nuanced struggles in addition to certain freedoms. While period products allowed menstruators more comfort and convenience to participate in society, “liberation has come at a cost since [menstruators] become complicit in the creation of their Otherness” (Patterson, 2014, p. 104).

The Menstrual Movement Cannot be Confined to a Corporate Conceptualization

The Western conceptualization of menstrual equity is excessively product-focused, allowing consumerism and individualism to shape the dialogue surrounding periods and menstrual health. Lahiri-Dutt (2014) explains how the historical Western medicalization of menstruation, or the placement of menstruation through a medical lens, created the foundation for menstrual management. Menstrual management (how menstruators should “manage” their periods), influenced by the medical institution, has become tied with concepts such as “hygiene” and “sanitization” (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). The economic implications of this development are vast; an incredibly viable market materialized in the late nineteenth-century for menstrual products

(Patterson, 2014). Thus, consumerism began to take over the conceptualization of menstruation; menstruators have been encouraged to buy massive amounts of menstrual products and are individually responsible for their menstrual care.

Helmick (2020) critiques the commodification and corporate conceptualization of menstruation as the movement must shift away from solely product usage. However, under the constraints and enforcement of the culture of concealment, modifying advertisements to reflect progressive ideologies still encourages consumerism and does not radically address the biases embedded within social institutions. According to Helmick (2020), “within the discipline of critical menstrual studies, these emerging corporate tendencies must be approached with some level of ambivalence or skepticism” (p. 57). Western corporations have profited and continue to profit from menstrual shaming, even while also profiting from sharing feminist discourses and political advances; there is no intrinsic motivation to alter messages contained in product advertisements for the holistic well-being of menstruators (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020).

Focusing solely on menstrual products in menstrual discourse does little to dissolve the shame surrounding menstruation immersed in all societal institutions. When discussing how menstruators have learned to police their bodies, conversations regarding product access are not a sufficient or sustainable solution. In order to fully address menstrual equity, we must step outside of the confines of the corporate conceptualization of menstruation. Further, Bobel (2020) states that product-focused initiatives and solutions fail to challenge the social construction of the menstrual body as dirty and in need of concealment.

The origins of menstrual equity, while powerful and in opposition to existing societal conditions, now contain the influence of capitalism and consumerism. Limiting the mainstream discursive understanding of menstrual equity to menstrual *product* access (without thinking of

broader menstrual needs and structural barriers) reflects the Western emphasis on menstrual products. True menstrual equity, at a minimum, must incorporate education and reproductive care and ensure that people have the needs, support, and ability to decide how they want to take care of their menstrual health (Bobel & Fahs, 2020).

Holistic menstrual care extends beyond the use of period products. According to Babbar et al. (2022), menstrual health is defined as complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing of menstruators throughout their cycles. This definition encompasses the “multifaceted nature of menstruation” and the different ways it impacts menstruators' lived experiences and roles in society. Importantly, it also includes three spheres of life that are affected when a menstruator does not have access to vital menstrual resources. Menstrual health, of course, includes menstrual product access, but also includes all resources that menstruators need during their periods. This could entail accurate menstrual health programming in schools, supportive work environments with adequate sick leave, clean and reliable running water and bathrooms, accessible healthcare providers, and more (Babbar et al., 2022).

Chapter 3

The Western Focus On 'Menstrual Management' is Antithetical to Menstrual Equity

“Feminine Hygiene”

“Feminine hygiene” is a term still associated with menstrual products; most stores that sell period products like pads and tampons will place them in the “feminine hygiene” aisle (Cochoy, 2021; Tilborghs & Lotz, 2022). Menstrual scholars state that this inaccurate labeling is detrimental to the perception of menstruation (Luke, 1997; Tilborghs & Lotz, 2022; Waller, 2004). The term “feminine hygiene” rose in popularity after the passing of the Comstock Act of 1873, which banned all “obscene materials” that referred to sex to suppress commerce in birth control information and devices (Ferranti, 2009). While physicians were discouraged from discussing contraception with patients, entrepreneurs discovered loopholes by rephrasing their messaging; all reproductive health products were rebranded with intentional wording to avoid explicit terms in advertising and packaging. Vaginal douching, a common contraceptive practice, was now being praised as “hygienic” and “therapeutic,” spreading themes of “cleanliness” to larger audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century audiences (Ferranti, 2009, p. 596).

In the early 20th century, the emergence of the germ theory of disease solidified the importance of cleanliness and validated the association between “hygiene” and vaginal douching. Women began to scrutinize and cleanse their bodies due to the fear of germs invisible to the naked eye (Ferranti, 2009). Female anatomy became “pathologized,” or treated as if naturally abnormal, as women attempted to keep their vaginas and vulvas unnecessarily clean. For over three decades, advertisers took advantage of this fear as they continued to market feminine

hygiene care (Ferranti, 2009). This tactic is visible through the success of Lysol and Zonite (household disinfectant products that doubled as a contraceptive douching solutions). The marketers of Lysol and Zonite were the first to use the term “feminine hygiene” in their advertisements. This advertising trend continued throughout the 1920s and 30s to legally sell such products in the United States (Ferranti, 2009). The term initially only referred to douching, but began to encompass a variety of products including vaginal sprays, suppositories, wipes, and, finally, menstrual products.

Breanne Fahs (2016, p. 48) expresses her thoughts on the term feminine hygiene in *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance*, stating that the vague term “implies products to keep the unkempt, unruly, unhygienic, dirty, unsanitary, bloody vagina in check.” “Feminine hygiene” offers an inaccurate depiction of how menstruators take care of their bodies, simultaneously gendering and shaming the process of menstruation. Rather than using the accurate terms to designate period products and their functions, stores, advertisements, and signs continue to use “feminine hygiene,” perpetuating the idea that the words “pad,” tampon,” or “menstrual cup,” are inappropriate, dirty, or private (Fahs, 2016, p. 48). “Feminine hygiene,” circulated throughout various institutions, has influenced individuals’ perceptions of menstruation and the experience of purchasing menstrual products. She references Kissling’s *Capitalizing the Curse* (2006), which states that people feel “palpable anxiety” when discussing periods publicly or buying period products in stores (Fahs, 2016, p. 48). When remembering that feminine hygiene frames menstrual products “as products devoted to cleanliness and management of otherwise ‘vile’ bodily fluids,” this anxiety is understandable (Fahs, 2016, p. 48).

The Emergence of Menstrual Hygiene Management

In the mid-2000s, a global movement emerged to address the gender gap in education (Sommer, 2015). The WASH sector examined barriers for girls and women in education and discovered that frameworks to address the needs of menstruators were not sufficient. The WASH sector then calculated and publicized the repercussions of inadequate WASH facilities in schools for menstruating girls (Sommer, 2015). As a result, menstrual hygiene management received a name and spotlight by 2010. By framing MHM as a public issue, the WASH sector developed frameworks built upon the observed needs of menstruating girls and women (Miller, 2019). These frameworks included quantifying the impacts of inadequate menstrual resources on girls on a global level and creating large-scale solutions to keep girls in school. As Miller (2019) describes, this approach contributed to the “universality” of challenges experienced by menstruators, which seeped into menstrual discourse; this approach assumed that all menstruating girls and women faced the same struggles and that generalized WASH initiatives would serve as the panacea.

Sommer (2015) explains why the WASH sector assumed responsibility for MHM as opposed to the sexual and reproductive health sector, which sounded like a more natural fit. As MHM gained increasing prioritization, the sexual and reproductive health sector was already heavily occupied with STI transmission and reducing maternal mortality rates (Sommer, 2015). Consequently, the WASH sector dominated the menstrual sphere and combatted menstruation-related challenges for girls in school through a structural framework. Research reported that without menstrual resources, girls in school would have negative experiences leading to anxiety, discomfort, and ultimately missed school (Miller, 2019). “Sanitation” and disposal accommodations became targets for improvement to ideally lessen the gender gap in schools

(Miller, 2019). As a result, the global perception of menstruation was defined by insufficient access to sanitation and disposal facilities along with poor menstrual health education (Sommer, 2015).

Miller (2019) explores the foundation of menstruation as a hygiene issue. She associates the practice of hygiene (“conditions or practices conducive to maintaining health and preventing diseases, especially through cleanliness”) with menstrual health and focuses on specific synonyms: “cleanliness,” “sanitation,” and “sterility” (Miller, 2019, p. 17). When looking at the literal meaning of hygiene and the connotations the word carries, the labeling of menstruation as a hygiene issue clearly implies that menstruation is inherently unclean, that menstrual blood is dirty, that menstruators need to fully sanitize their bodies to maintain proper health. This medicalization of menstruation, which has been globalized through MHM initiatives, is now ingrained in menstrual discourse.

Lahiri-Dutt (2014) describes the framework of menstrual hygiene management as problematic; while MHM received an immense amount of attention, resources, and support due to the work performed by the WASH sector, awareness was centered around sanitation, hygiene, cleanliness, and menstrual product access. Periods became pathologized, or seen as abnormal problems that needed to be “fixed” with standardized solutions. Wood (2020) elaborates on the medicalization of menstruation, which designates menstruators as in need of treatment or management. Basing this ideology on biology restricts menstruators’ participation in both private and public spheres as menstruators become marked as ill (Wood, 2020).

Viewing menstruation through this unwarranted medical lens completely altered the societal perception of menstruation and the surrounding discourse (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). New expectations of “normal” for the menstruating body were established as global organizations

utilized the MHM framework on menstruating girls and women in the Global South (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015). The menstruating body needed resources to become clean, sanitary, and functional. The medicalization of menstruation essentialized periods to biological processes without altering sociocultural norms to challenge stigma. As Lahiri-Dutt (2015) explains, the confinement of menstruation to a pathological condition creates avenues for different institutions to “treat” periods without viewing menstruators as holistic beings.

A result of the treatment of periods exclusively can be seen in Bobel’s (2020) analysis of MHM being deeply rooted in a hygiene framework. The Western focus on hygiene embodies a form of colonialism in the menstrual space and paints a misinformed picture of menstruators in the Global South. MHM generates a Western conceptualization of the “third world girl:” a submissive, poor, powerless girl that needs saving. While this is meant to stimulate urgent support, Bobel (2020) states that this may increase the gap in understanding between the Global North and Global South. McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt (2020) expand on this by stating:

Rather than any specific engagement with these local meanings of menstruation, contemporary MHM initiatives emerging out of transnational human rights and development discourses, assume a universal human subject with rights to ‘dignity,’ ‘privacy,’ ‘hygiene,’ ‘health,’ and ‘productivity.’ While claiming universality, each of these terms has a unique history that cannot be separated from the violent construction of colonized, feminized, ‘dirty,’ ‘lazy’ bodies as the ‘other’ against which first colonial, and later developmentalist projects were created and sustained. (p. 17)

Bobel, McCarthy, and Lahiri-Dutt call attention to the discursive colonization embedded in MHM initiatives, which is yet another negative consequence of the MHM framework.

What is Menstrual Management?

The concept of *menstrual management* derives from the *Menstrual Hygiene Management* (MHM) agenda, which received increasing attention in recent decades from the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015). Bobel (2019, p. 5) provides her perspective on Menstrual Hygiene Management in *The Managed Body* and poses an essential question about “that last M” in MHM: “Well, what does it mean to *manage*?” She describes multiple meanings of “to manage,” such as “to govern,” “to cope,” to do “as well as can be expected” (Bobel, 2019, p. 5). The use of the word “manage” harms menstruators more than it helps; managing menstruation entails containing periods such that school, work, and functionality are not impaired. The “managed body” does not have autonomy, power, or pleasure, but is rather controlled by different institutions based on societal expectations (Bobel, 2019, p. 5). This perspective aligns with Wood’s (2020) statement that the social construction of the menstruating body prescribes consistent management, containment, and discipline. The menstruating body and the managed body display the power of societal control.

It is important to note that MHM interventions are “not unnecessary,” but the conflation of menstrual care with hygiene and management is damaging (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015). The very use of the term “hygiene” carries inherently negative connotations: periods are unhygienic, dirty, and treatable though different products. Insufficient attention is pointed at other aspects of menstruation or the lived experiences of menstruators. Instead of hygiene, referring to menstrual care with a holistic term such as “health” allows for menstruators’ physical and mental wellbeing to be considered. The misinformation and shame surrounding menstruation, including the medicalization of menstruation and the creation of “feminine hygiene,” have contributed to the menstrual concealment imperative.

Delving Deeper into the Menstrual Concealment Imperative

According to Wood (2020), the menstrual concealment imperative explains the internalization of harmful capitalist-driven menstrual discourse leads menstruators to self-surveil their bodies and conceal their periods with period products. This conceptual framework emphasizes that self-surveillance and vigilance regarding menstruation violates menstruators' agency; it is a form of social control based in harmful menstrual discourse. As menstruation continues to be surrounded by shame, disgust, and silence, menstruators will continue to be manipulated into "cleansing" their bodies of menstruation and concealing the fact that it occurs (Wood, 2020).

The menstrual concealment imperative further aims to reinforce traditional notions of femininity, such as cleanliness and beauty. Miller's (2019) analysis includes perspectives from Kissling (1996) and Newton (2012), describing how concealment boils down to the belief that menstruation is something to hide and feel shame about. Women are expected to meet socially constructed beauty standards and maintain sexual appeal, and bleeding, leaking bodies do not fit this narrative (Miler, 2019). As menstruation violates feminine ideals, concealment is necessary and can be achieved through marketed menstrual products. As discussed earlier, menstrual product advertisements promise menstruators a clean, odor-free experience that is well-hidden from others. This rhetoric feeds into concealment; menstruators are further taught the concealment imperative through each package they buy or commercial they see. Menstrual concealment rhetoric from such product advertisements can also be applied to lessons from the WASH/MHM sector, which link menstruation to sanitation and regulation. Miller (2019, p. 22) proposes the question: "With the emphasis placed on hygiene and sanitation, is menstruation actually being discussed or its concealment?"

Menstrual Activism: A Bloodless Movement?

Corporations intentionally create negative representations of menstruation to generate profit, demonstrating the impacts of capitalism in the menstrual space (Kissling, 2006). The conceptualization of MHM reflects “the Western imaginary of the Global South and, further, how entrenched gendered notions of what constitutes productivity, agency, modernity, respectability, and freedom shape the movement (Bobel, 2019, p. 32). This Western perspective, as established earlier, reflects capitalist and individualist mentalities ingrained in the fabric of society. Bobel (2019, p. 32) asserts that the majority of MHM interventions place the burden of work on individuals with product access and provision rather than calling for structural and societal change. This maintains perpetuates the need for menstruators to continue regulating themselves, illuminating the power of discourse and further creating an “anemic” standard for bleeders.

This anemic standard refers to the fact that menstrual activism seems to have shifted to a bloodless movement focused on cleanliness and sanitation at the expense of other forms of resistance (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). The menstrual equity and period poverty frameworks emphasize the accessibility of single-use period products for vulnerable populations to be able to manage their periods, allowing capitalist and neoliberalist agendas to shape the direction of the movement. The commodification of menstruation pushes the movement further from radical transformation and closer to safety and respectability, as defined by sexist and capitalist guidelines (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). “People are socialized to think about menstruation *through* products like tampons, pads, cups, and even birth control,” which obscures the sociocultural and political realities that shape periods (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p. 963). Prioritizing respectability allows menstrual activism to become exploited by capitalism and neoliberalism; the movement

becomes defined by product drives, businesses and NGOs providing products to girls and women in the global South, and political interventions that concentrate on product access alone (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Through this narrow focus, menstrual management thrives, and the concealment imperative becomes a lived experience for more and more menstruators.

Moving Beyond Management

In their critique of MHM campaigns, McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt (2015) call for reflection and raise the questions “who is doing the managing?” and “what exactly is it that they are managing?” MHM programs base the empowerment of menstruators in access to menstrual products and the ability to *manage* periods as *individuals* in *private*. Each italicized word in the previous sentence signifies a harmful connotation that becomes a lived practice. Managing menstruation becomes an individual struggle which is meant to occur outside of the public sphere. “Private” entails that menstruators can avoid sociocultural norms and stigmas when shrouding their menstrual blood in secrecy. As McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt (2015, p. 17) say, “underlying [MHM] efforts are a set of assumptions about the positive relationship between privacy, bodily autonomy and empowerment, and negative connotations of ‘public’ as the space where stigma and restriction are imposed.” Rather than placing the responsibility on menstruators to silently practice menstrual care, place the responsibility on societal institutions to accept bleeding bodies as they are (McCarthy & Lahiri-Dutt, 2020).

Many scholars and activists have contributed valuable insight into what menstrual equity should incorporate moving forward. Rajagopal and Mathur (2017) focus on menstruation experiences and challenges (both at school and at home) faced by menstruating adolescent girls in the slums of Jaipur, Rajasthan. The silence surrounding menstruation continues to be harmful; while providing physical and material menstrual resources is important, there must be a

supportive environment for young menstruators to learn about their bodies. While “menstrual hygiene” is important, reproductive health, sexual health, menstrual health, and sexuality must be discussed fully and openly in families, communities, and all institutions. Rajagopal and Mathur (2017) call for a holistic response in constructing a safe environment for positive body awareness, including creating a well-informed school education and empowerment program for students of all genders about menstruation to boost education and awareness.

Lahiri-Dutt (2014) demands that more feminist knowledge and practice should be centered in the movement, stating that we must relate menstruation and menstrual blood to body politics rather than letting capitalism, medicalization, pathologization, and commercialization define the movement. Bhandal (2020) continues this idea, raising several reflective questions about the way menstruation is situated in society. After concluding that 21st-century MHM discourse currently centers on hygiene, cleanliness, and financial access to products, they pose a variety of important questions:

- “Is a capitalist-colonial-heteropatriarchal, work all-year-round, linear, constant growth-centered approach to schooling the best way to empower young menstruators around the world?” (Bhandal, 2020, p. 298).
- “How can we uplift voices and pay women, especially in parts of Africa and South Asia, rather than try to speak for them?” (Bhandal, 2020, p. 299).
- “How are we impacting the land and all our relatives with our everyday (menstrual cycle) practices? Where are all the period products going to go once they have been used?” (Bhandal, 2020, p. 299).

Each of these questions demands a critical analysis of a different aspect of menstruation as it is now.

When reconstructing the path for menstrual equity, several themes are clear: menstrual equity must shift away from its product-focused status, in which the influences of capitalism and neoliberalism weave together to corrupt radical transformations. Menstrual health runs deeper than products; menstruators' safety, shelter, mental health, social support, and more factor into periods. Clinical solutions based in 'sanitation' and 'cleanliness,' popularized by corporate media, are not long-lasting or personalized. Menstruators should not have to worry whether they will have safe menstrual products while bleeding or access to clean water to wash their bodies nor should they feel ashamed about having a body that bleeds. Menstruators are entitled to have access to a range of menstrual products depending on their needs, along with access to resources such as safe and private facilities (lockable toilets, showers, and laundry equipment). Workplaces must recognize the validity of period-related issues and expand sick leave policies to encompass menstruation. We must think about institutional barriers that must be dismantled, approach menstruation with a lens of sustainability, and place the holistic wellbeing of menstruators at the center of these discussions.

Chapter 4

Expanding Menstrual Activism through Embodiment

Menstruation's Establishment as a Public Health Crisis

Through MHM initiatives, menstrual health has shifted into a globally recognized public health topic (Sommer, 2015). Various organizations, companies, social entrepreneurs, United Nations agencies, and academic institutions across the world have contributed to the growing spotlight on menstrual inequities in low- and middle-income countries. This movement, generally, expands interest in improving the often inadequate, unhygienic, and unsafe circumstances in which many women practice menstrual care and advocates for better reproductive health education, “sanitary” materials and facilities, and more (Sommer, 2015). The growing global social movement based on the MHM framework has undeniably gathered necessary attention on the realities of period poverty and menstrual inequity around the world. However, the nature of this attention stems from MHM rhetoric emphasizing menstrual management and hygiene. Further, the larger focus on low- and middle-income countries fails to create dialogue regarding the nuances of menstrual inequities across all countries. This exacerbates gaps in future menstrual advocacy (Sommer, 2015).

As the origins of the MHM agenda stem from closing the gender gap in education, more peer-reviewed scientific literature about challenges facing menstruating schoolgirls emerged from 2006 onward. Much of this research displayed increased engagement in MHM from academics from the education and public health sectors. Findings about schoolgirls' challenges with menstrual care were published in education, water and sanitation, development, and public health journals (Sommer, 2015). Public health academics utilized interdisciplinary innovative

methodological approaches and publishing in education and WASH-focused journals, which generated more awareness of the menstrual challenges facing girls across various sectors. The increased documentation about menstruation and schoolgirls led to the coining and acceptance of the acronym “MHM,” which provided a framing for its conceptualization (Sommer, 2015).

After the popularization of MHM, the issue of responsibility arose: as most governments did not initially accept responsibility for the realities of menstruation, global pad-producing companies began to shape their markets around pads as a potential solution. The “pad” response emphasizes that affordable reusable or disposable pads can alleviate MHM challenges faced by women and girls (Sommer, 2015). Although having access to menstrual products is essential, the narrow focus of this approach allows for capitalist frameworks to continue paving the future for menstruation and dismisses the importance of necessary political responsibility. Comprehensive and inclusive reproductive and sexual health education, clean and accessible water, disposal facilities, and safe bathrooms are some examples of resources that many governments do not provide, and many menstruators do not have.

The framework of menstruation as a public health issue has now shifted into advocating for underserved populations, such as poor, unhoused, or incarcerated people, to have better access to menstrual care resources. As Bobel and Fahs (2020, Abstract) write, “the discourse of menstrual activism as a matter of public health is ubiquitous and not without merit. That said, it often stands in for a deeper analysis of the problems.” Focusing on the unmet needs of low-income and unhoused menstruators is undeniably important. However, neoliberal, product-focused activism frameworks ignore the root causes of income inequality and social marginalization (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Further, the public health frame also narrowly constructs menstruation as a medical condition (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Menstruation becomes essentialized

and reduced to a biological process; attention is concentrated on hygiene, cleanliness, and access to menstrual products rather than on institutionally and socioculturally enforced stigma (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Public health, as a field, is invested in preventative measures for illness and disease and health promotion (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). As a result, certain issues become prioritized, such as access to menstrual products for low-income girls in school. While product access should always be a topic of importance, we must dig deeper to understand where the burden of solving this problem has been placed and why.

Western Conceptualizations of Public Health

The public health framework's primary focus on prevention appears through various interventions. For menstrual health, public health academics aim to stimulate greater awareness of the menstrual challenges faced by girls in school to prevent outcomes such as school dropout, lower self-esteem, or negative sexual or reproductive health outcomes (Hennegan, 2020; Sommer, 2015). Due to the known severity of these outcomes, a growing list of governments, international organizations, and NGOs have invested in menstrual health. Examples of interventions range from building washing facilities to providing menstrual health education in schools. Hennegan (2020) examines the effectiveness of interventions as menstrual health has increased in popularity, stating that "while swift action to address unmet menstrual needs is laudable, good intentions do not guarantee positive outcomes" (Hennegan, 2020, p. 638).

While menstrual health community programming can prevent certain negative health outcomes, if improper, it can have unanticipated and harmful results. Menstrual health is multifaceted; large, single-focus interventions are less likely to create sustainable beneficial change. Positive experiences of menstruation are dependent on both physical and social environmental factors (Hennegan, 2020). Menstruators deserve education about menstruation to

understand and care for their bodies, they deserve clean water and materials to absorb or wash menses, they deserve washing and disposal facilities and functional bathrooms, they deserve emotional and social support from parents, teachers, and friends. Menstruators could lack different combinations of such resources; menstrual inequities are interconnected, and menstruators may face deprivations across several contributing factors (Hennegan, 2020).

The public health frame, based in prevention, must be reexamined with the question: what is being prevented? Of course, interventions that help to improve sexual and reproductive health or mental wellbeing are important, but why end there? Is it possible to situate the menstrual public health frame in preventing menstrual inequity or period poverty as a whole? Bobel and Fahs (2020, p. 965) state that “current conceptualizations of menstruation as a public health concern are too narrow” as menstruation becomes reduced to a matter of hygiene and management and solutions are based in menstrual products rather institutional barriers:

Our aim is to expose the problematic conceptualizations set in motion by the tamer forms of menstrual activism that reign supreme today. The vision guiding the [public health frame], we assert, remains mired in the menstrual mandate of shame, silence, and secrecy because it does not fundamentally question the norms of embodiment rooted in the denial of (many) female bodily realities. Each frame begins with the largely unexamined premise that the body must be managed and controlled. We are pushing back against this to pry open more innovative and body-positive messaging and interventions, including educational programs that teach body literacy and promote the body as a source of power, pleasure, and potential instead of a problem to be solved through engagement with consumerism. (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p. 965)

Incorporating Body Politics into Menstrual Equity

The radical and intersectional potential of the bodily process as a site of political struggle has been diminished in menstrual discourse (Helmick, 2020). Menstruating bodies are constantly regulated due to patriarchal ideals; sociocultural norms silence and hide the realities of periods. Historically, the menstruating body has been the “invisible and overlooked site at which patriarchal and capitalist disciplinary rituals have been enacted, reproduced, and reinforced” (Helmick, 2020, p. 5). As the menstruating body is a site of political struggle, “menstruation should be conceptualized philosophically as a battleground of both capitalist and patriarchal norms with enormous implications for social justice, anti-capitalist, and feminist efforts” (Helmick, 2020, p. 5).

Bobel and Fahs (2020, p. 1001) state that “menstruation unites the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, the minutiae and the bigger stories about the body.” Menstruation is a highly productive space for analyzing the social body; the menstruating body reveals the potency of sociocultural norms (Guillo, 2020). “Menstrual activism works to move embodiment from object to subject status—to see the body not as trivial or unimportant, but as something foundational, urgent, and politically relevant;” menstrual activism thus holds the potential to address the forms of social control that surround and suffocate menstruating bodies (Bobel & Fahs, 2020, p. 1001). Embodiment must be seen as a crucial aspect of the movement; we cannot discuss menstruation without remembering the significance of body politics.

Embodiment allows for a concept to manifest and become comprehensible through the tangible human body. Bobel and Fahs (2020, p. 973) propose the vision “radical menstrual embodiment” for menstrual activism, the politics of which aim to “aim to remove the source of

body negativity that grows in the soil of white supremacist, heteronormative misogyny.”

Menstrual activism must address the shame, capitalism, neoliberalism, and colonialism that have infiltrated the body of people who bleed. Menstrual stigma must be addressed as it manifests personally for different beings.

Menstrual Equity for *all* Bleeding Bodies

As menstruation has gained popularity in academic and corporate spaces, menstrual narratives have changed to best appease different institutions. Just as menstrual blood is hidden from most forms of media, so are many menstruating bodies. In addition to the perpetuated invisibility of periods, media representation disproportionately features cisgender girls' bodies (with the majority being white) (Przybylo & Fahs, 2020). Feminist analysis of the way bodies are gendered and perceived through biological processes is not unvaluable; menstruation historically served as an essentialized marker of biological sex and a production site of gender on the body (Hasson, 2020). Stigma and shame surrounding menstruation are heavily intertwined with patriarchal ideals and misogyny; the menstrual concealment imperative displays the impacts of the social control of women (Wood, 2020).

However, not all women menstruate and not all who menstruate are women. Limitations of the gender equity framework for menstrual activism include excluding trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). The historic exclusion of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals from the menstrual movement paints an inaccurate picture of the diversity of menstruating bodies. Further, the gendering of menstruation and menstrual products leads many trans menstruators to experience gender dysphoria as they purchase period products or practice menstrual care (Rydström, 2020). As Rydström (2020) states, “we must pay attention to our depictions of menstruation and menstruators, and the knowledge we produce in

the pursuit to de-stigmatize menstruation” (p. 945). The binary gender structures that surround menstruation prevent queer and trans menstruators from accessing vital menstrual resources and healthcare. Degendering menstruation is the first step to addressing menstrual shame, taboos, and stigmas in a gender-inclusive manner. Because some trans people do menstruate, they must be recognized within any menstrual activist agenda.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Building inclusive, equitable, feminist frameworks for menstrual activism requires thoughtful analysis of the language and ideals embedded into the current movement. By utilizing a decolonial, feminist lens to examine the conceptualization of menstrual equity, I was able to develop and explore three research questions:

- How and why is a Western (consumerist and individualist) conceptualization of 'menstrual equity' problematic? What should true 'menstrual equity' entail?
- How and why is the Western neoliberal capitalist focus on 'menstrual management' antithetical to menstrual equity?
- How can menstrual activism movements incorporate body politics (visibility and embodiment) to move beyond the Western conceptualization of menstruation which labels it as a public health crisis?

Forming these questions and digging through decades of literature allowed me to pinpoint the “gaps” in menstrual activism discourse that I wanted to amplify.

Menstrual equity is understood as a movement dedicated to increasing the accessibility of period products seeks to alleviate many of the realities of period poverty (Crays, 2020; Sommer & Mason, 2021; Weiss-Wolf, 2017; Winkler, 2020). The severity of period poverty can be explained by menstrual stigma. The stigma surrounding menstruation is vast, bleeding into institutions, perpetuated by media messaging, and internalized by menstruators (Freidenfelds, 2009; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020; Kissling, 2006; Owen, 2022). Stigma enables capitalism to exploit and profit from menstruators' shame and fear (Bobel, 2010; Bobel & Fahs,

2020). However, rather than ripping out the roots of menstrual stigma through activism, we have grown a Western conceptualization of activism that focuses on product-based initiatives.

These product-based initiatives are further explained by the rise of menstrual hygiene management initiatives and following issues of menstrual management and menstrual concealment (Bobel, 2020; Wood, 2020). The terms “hygiene” and “management” signify many of the problems associated with the Western approach to menstrual care. Periods have become framed as a hygiene issue (as if menstruation is inherently dirty) and have become pathologized (treated as if abnormal) (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015). In low- and middle-income countries in the Global South, the Western focus on “hygiene” manifests as a form of colonialism for the constructed “third world girl” who *needs* period products to become clean (Bobel, 2020). The hygiene frame encourages menstrual management, in which menstruators cope with menstruation by continuously using period products. Their bodies become less concerned with power of pleasure and more focused on following societal expectations (Bobel, 2019).

This lack of autonomy is seen through the menstrual concealment imperative, in which menstruators police their bodies to hide any sign of bleeding (Wood, 2020). This has led to an anemic standard for menstruation; menstrual activism prioritizes bloodless respectability and cleanliness rather than other forms of advocacy that target the origins of self-surveillance (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). We have grown to think about menstruation through products, settling for menstrual management as our menstrual reality. Instead, we must strive for menstrual activism that moves beyond management and resists against the current neoliberalist, individualist mission.

Moreover, we must acknowledge the framing of menstrual health as a public health issue and examine the MHM rhetoric included in this approach (Miller, 2019). As we tie “preventative measures” and “hygiene” to menstruation without considering structural inequities faced by menstruators, we continue to encourage surface-level solutions rather than deeper forms of restructuring. We continue to separate the personal and the political and the body from the lived experience (Bobel & Fahs, 2020). We must work towards menstrual equity for all individuals who bleed and ensure that all menstruating bodies are represented in the movement. Some scholars believe that WASH initiatives and menstrual activism are separate issues, and that menstrual activism continues to thrive from the work of NGOs and emerging organizations (Gaybor & Harcourt, 2021). Working within WASH as a form of strategy for public attention has historically been successful, but is this truly the best path forward? It is important to shape menstrual embodiment and activism through the most inclusive, impactful, decolonial, feminist frame.

During my presidency of a menstrual activism organization, Days for Girls PSU, I spent countless hours discussing and educating others about menstrual stigma, period poverty, and menstrual equity. Our organization developed a large focus on distributing free menstrual products to all students in the community; we stock kits with free pads, tampons, and menstrual cups at various locations on and off Penn State’s campus. However, we also became invested in learning and educating others about structural barriers to menstrual equity. I started to learn, on a personal level, that product-based activism is not sufficient. Providing period products alone is the beginning; we must still work on issues such as eradicating the silence surrounding menstruation, establishing period-friendly work and school policies, providing holistic menstrual

and reproductive health education, and beyond. When I decided to dedicate my paper to menstrual activism, my goal was to solidify a foundation to base future menstrual activism efforts upon. I strive to create enough of a difference such that more menstruators can lead happy, healthy, and equitable lives.

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University – Schreyer Honors College University Park, PA
College of Liberal Arts – Paterno Fellows Honors Program May 2023
 Bachelor of Science in Psychology (Neuroscience Option)
 Biology Minor, Women’s Studies Minor, Public Health Focus

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Days for Girls PSU University Park, PA
President (2022-2023, Chair of Operations Team (2019-2022)) November 2019 – Present

- Guides Operations Team in sewing 100+ sustainable menstrual care kits per school year which are distributed globally
- Plans and directs two collaborative discussion-based meetings per week centered around menstrual health and related activism
- Coordinated CampusCup Ambassador event at PSU in which nearly 1000 OrganiCup menstrual cups were distributed to students or donated to menstruators in need in Pennsylvania
- Completed Ambassador of Women’s Health training and is certified to deliver menstrual health management education and speak on a variety of health and safety topics (ex. anatomy, hygiene, self-defense, etc.) while maintaining cultural considerations
- Designs informative social media posts and infographics to share with DfG’s growing Instagram platform of 1200+ followers

Triota - Penn State’s Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Honor Society University Park, PA
Vice President (2022-2023), Service Event Coordinator (2021-2022) January 2020 – Present

- Programs weekly member discussion-based meetings dedicated to topics such as feminist theory, reproductive justice, sexual violence, LGBTQ+ issues, diversity and representation, and inclusion
- Directs service and community engagement projects supporting the Penn State population including condom distributions, feminist book sales, healthy sex and relationship discussion panels, and additional activism-related initiatives
- Nurtures an inclusive, nonjudgmental, supportive environment for Triota members to share perspectives

SHO TIME - Schreyer Honors College Orientation University Park, PA
Orientation Mentor January 2020 – Present

- Facilitates positive peer relationships and introduces students to Schreyer through welcoming events, tours, and information sessions
- Mentored a closer-knit group of 12 students, fostering a supportive and encouraging environment for incoming scholars

RESEARCH AND SHADOWING EXPERIENCE

Laboratory of Personality, Psychopathology, and Psychotherapy University Park, PA
Lab Manager (2022-2023), Lab Coordinator for Participant Recruitment/Scheduling (2021-2022) June 2020 – Present

- Involved in on-going NIMH and foundation grant funded research program at Penn State investigating change in attachment representations during a randomized controlled psychotherapy trial
- Transcribes semi-structured interviews and is involved in the recruitment of participants
- Participates in didactic seminar that includes weekly readings and video case presentations

Principal Investigator: Kenneth N. Levy, Ph.D.

Certifications: Institutional Biosafety Committee (Summer 2020), IRB Human Subjects-Social (Summer 2020), IRB Human Subjects-Biomedical (Summer 2020), State of PA Mandated Reporter Training (Summer 2020)

MIDAS Project - Rhode Island Hospital Dept. of Psychiatry & Brown University Philadelphia, PA
Summer Intern June 2021 – August 2021

- Observed standardized clinical and diagnostic assessments, such as the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID); wrote up assessments of functioning such as the Mental Status Exam (MSE)
- Attended weekly literature review meetings consisting of an active, critical discussion of a recently published research article
- Shadowed PHP psychiatrists and psychologists and observed essential patient care (psychiatric diagnoses and assessments)
- Entered and utilized Redcap data to lead a research project investigating the relationship between patient race and PHP program satisfaction rating (both initial and upon end of program) to emphasize importance of cultural sensitivity in therapy