

© 2021 VICTORIA EFETEVIA. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.

VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: #LISTENTOBLACKMENSTRUATORS

VICTORIA EFETEVIA

The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

This essay is based on an undergraduate research thesis which was written on the heels of two cultural moments circa 2017 -- the increased attention to menstrual product access, and the increased attention to Black infant and maternal mortality (BIMM). As of April 2020, 20 states have eliminated tampon taxes.[1] 2019 Presidential Primary candidates laid out plans to address BIMM.[2] But, where do the needs of Black menstruating youth lie in this progress? Menstrual activism draws attention to youth but lacks race analysis. "Adultification" is a recognized phenomenon,[3] but linkage between the reproductive experiences of Black menstruating youth/girls and Black adult women is lacking. Both movements speak near each other. A focus on Black menstruation will enable them to speak to each other.

1. More than structural barriers

Although menstrual activism largely focuses on structural barriers, BIMM illustrates that racism and sexism, not class, are the root culprits of reproductive injustice for Black women.[4] Attention to police violence's impact on periods has helped foster the expansion of this discourse,[5] but more can be explored. The thesis' research respondents mentioned how anti-Black zero-tolerance school policies like denial of bathroom rights adversely impacts Black menstruators.[6] Respondents also noted how structural barriers like restrictions to university disability accommodations harm Black menstruators because of stereotypes that Black people are lazy.[7]

Menstrual activism's focus on tampon access could also benefit from race analysis. Several respondents noted that, as children, tampons were taboo, connected to ideas of sexualization. Respondents who grew up around white children noted that their white peers were often enthusiastic about tampons and that, in comparison, they often felt feelings of immaturity and lack of bodily awareness.[8]

2. #ListenToBlackMenstruators

In BIMM discourse, we often discuss how Black adult women's physical pain is invalidated. #ListenToBlackWomen calls for Black women to be recognized as credible sources in the

assessment of their own pain. However, in comparison to childbirth, which is universally recognized as painful (although, bias persists about how painful childbirth is for Black women),[9] menstrual activists struggle to have menstrual pain viewed as a valid form of pain. Thus, Black menstruators, youth/girls especially, experience double invalidation -- invalidation of their ability to feel pain and invalidation of menstrual pain at-large.

Several respondents shared experiences of their menstrual pain being invalidated using descriptors like "dramatic", "hypochondriac", or "disrespectful" by family, professors, and physicians. Respondents also explained how the stereotype of menstruators as irrational dangerously complements the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, further invalidating their experiences.[10] To effectively #ListenToBlackMenstruators, we must validate the experience of menstruation.

[1] 30 States have until Tax Day 2021 to eliminate their tampon tax, Tax Free. Period (Apr. 15, 2020).

[2] Li Zhou & Anna North, How 2020 Democrats would tackle the problem of startlingly high rates of maternal deaths in the US, Vox (Jun. 26, 2019).

[3] A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez, Why Won't Society Let Black Girls Be Children?, N.Y. Times (Apr. 17, 2020).

[4] Esther Gross, Victoria Efetevbia & Alexandria Wilkins, Racism and sexism against Black women may contribute to high rates of Black infant mortality, Child Trends (Apr. 18, 2019).

[5] Cecilia Nowell, Protestors Say Tear Gas Caused Them to Get Their Period Multiple Times in a Month, TeenVogue (Jul. 2, 2020).

[6] Victoria Efetevbia, Meaning Makers: Menstrual Experiences of Black Undergraduate Students at Georgetown University (May 8, 2017) (B.A. thesis, Georgetown University).

[7] See id.

[8] See id.

[9] Lisa Rapaport, Black, Hispanic mothers report more pain after delivery but get less pain medication, Reuters (Nov. 12, 2019).

[10] See id.

Keywords: law; gender; race; symposia; Are You There Law? It's Me Menstruation; #listentoblackmenstruators