

© 2021 CLAIRE KINDERWATER. 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: THE INTERSECTION OF EDUCATION, MENSTRUATION, AND POVERTY

CLAIRE KINDERWATER; GRACE WANDLER

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

Menstrual inequality is a prevalent form of injustice throughout the world. The tampon tax, various taboos, and lack of access to products all highlight how periods come with a considerable number of inequities. While many organizations are dedicated to ending some of the specific issues surrounding menstruation, the topic of menstrual inequality in the school system is not discussed as often as it should be, particularly the unique confluence of injustices at the intersection of education, menstruation, and poverty.

Participating in a year-long project involving young women in Malawi opened our eyes to the injustices surrounding these topics. Our project involved sending reusable period underwear to impoverished women in Malawi and providing them with information about the biology of menstruation and ways to manage their cycles. In Malawi, once young girls begin menstruating, one in ten is forced out of school due to prominent cultural stigmas, and a lack of both menstrual products and menstrual education. Unfinished schooling means fewer job opportunities and less resources, pushing countless young women into a cycle of poverty. While young women in Malawi face more severe impacts from period stigma, we drew some immediate connections between our respective cultures.

Strong cultural taboos and lack of education on periods perpetuate disadvantages in U.S. schools as well. Our own experiences learning about menstruation were in classrooms separated by sex. The lesson took place in middle school, and we were taught basic biology alone, with nothing about how to manage period symptoms, limited opportunities to ask questions, and the bare minimum on hygiene products. This brief and superficial class gave hardly enough information for the students to manage their cycles, and further discouraged conversation around the topic of periods. For us, it also strengthened internal shame surrounding menstruation, as we were told not to discuss the lesson outside of the classroom. This instruction fed heavily into the notion that non-menstruating people should not discuss periods or even understand their biology. We felt the effects of this; until a health class in eighth grade, the majority of the males in our class did not even know what menstruation was. Overall, it was a vastly different experience than the girls of Malawi, but one that creates inequality all the same.

The primary goal of our project is to educate people about the disparities and taboos surrounding menstruation around the world, specifically in the US, as our country is often

overlooked in conversations about period stigma. With our involvement in this project we hope to bring these issues the attention they deserve, and to do our part in bringing period inequality to light.

Keywords: law; gender; menstruation; poverty; education; symposia; Are You There Law? It's Me Menstruation