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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: BETTER MENSTRUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES IS A NECESSITY

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

My menstrual health education often left me with questions, which usually led me to unreliable sources. More frequently than not, health education worldwide leaves students feeling unprepared and apprehensive about their menstruation. For example, a 2017 survey found that 1 in 7 girls and young women in the UK were not aware of what was happening when they got their first period.[1] This experience may be due to an overall lack of in-depth information, underlying stereotypes, and stigma surrounding menstruation, preventing students from asking questions in an educational setting out of uneasiness. I have learned from my experience and others that most health curriculums in the U.S. only cover the basic information, such as the menstrual cycle, and leave out information, such as proper hygiene product use. When I received this minimum level of knowledge in school, of course, I assumed that it was all I needed to know.

Young people deserve access to medically accurate, unbiased, and comprehensive sexual health education. Yet, there are often a lack of standards to address the inequities and lack of information students receive.[2] These gaps and inequities impact marginalized groups at disproportionate rates, translating into long-term effects on their health.[3] Including standards detailing menstrual health information beyond the cycle itself is vital in allowing young people to make accurately informed decisions surrounding their health. Without comprehensive education on menstruation, many menstruators may be unequipped to address health conditions, such as endometriosis, uterine fibroids, or Toxic Shock Syndrome. Many myths have perpetuated barriers and racial inequities in health, such as endometriosis being a condition more likely to impact white people. This myth, developed in the 1930s, has led to under-diagnosis for Black menstruators.[4] Improved education about these conditions is one step that would alleviate the influence of inaccurate sources on the internet or reduce late diagnosis.

The stigmatization of menstruation is harmful to all menstruators, and school settings frequently perpetuate this stigma. For instance, it is problematic how many schools separate students based on gender into health instruction on topics like menstruation at a young age. This not only is exclusionary toward transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students, but it also elevates the secrecy and shame around menstruation.[5]

Our relationship with periods matters. There should be no embarrassment or shame in discussing normal bodily functions. Comprehensive health education that includes in-depth and inclusive content surrounding menstruation is one step that must be taken in eliminating inequities for all menstruators.

[1] Gabrielle Rocha Rios, The Importance of Menstrual Health Education, *GIRLS GLOBE* (May 28, 2019).

[2] Division of Adolescent School Health, Health Disparities Among Youth, *CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION* (November 24, 2020).

[3] Annerieke Daniel, Comprehensive Sex Ed for All Can Improve People's Health, *HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH* (August 6, 2020).

[4] The History of Endometriosis and Racial Inequity, *ENDOMETRIOSIS FOUNDATION OF AMERICA* (September 14, 2020).

[5] Coshandra Dillard, Equity, Period, *TEACHING TOLERANCE* (2019).

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