

Bloody Burdens: Post-secondary Students and Menstruation on Campus

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Article abstract

In this paper, we discuss a qualitative data set that was gathered as part of a survey aiming to document access to menstrual supplies on campus and impacts on students. This research emerged in response to the growing interest in menstrual equity on campus, as well as literature examining student experiences of menstruation in the Global North. Through a thematic analysis, three main themes emerged: menstruation happens on campus, menstruation is managed on campus, and finally, the “solution” to the “problem.” Woven throughout the paper are notes on changes on the campus where the study took place and as the research unfolded—including the installation of barrier-free dispensers. In closing, we offer a postscript on the challenge of simple fixes—such as swapping out dispensers—in relation to addressing supports needed for menstruators. We found that menstruation is a burden that is experienced differentially by students, and outcomes and impacts cannot easily be confined to expected campus spaces, such as toilets. To this end, there is no easy fix, and we should not lose sight of the deeper and ongoing work ahead within post-secondary settings and beyond.

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Special Section:

Mis/classification: Identity-based Inequities in the Canadian and Global Post-secondary Context

Bloody Burdens: Post-secondary Students and Menstruation on Campus

by Lisa Smith and Rim Gacimi

Abstract: In this paper, we discuss a qualitative data set that was gathered as part of a survey aiming to document access to menstrual supplies on campus and impacts on students. This research emerged in response to the growing interest in menstrual equity on campus, as well as literature examining student experiences of menstruation in the Global North. Through a thematic analysis, three main themes emerged: menstruation happens on campus, menstruation is managed on campus, and finally, the “solution” to the “problem.” Woven throughout the paper are notes on changes on the campus where the study took place and as the research unfolded—including the installation of barrier-free dispensers. In closing, we offer a postscript on the challenge of simple fixes—such as swapping out dispensers—in relation to addressing supports needed for menstruators. We found that menstruation is a burden that is experienced differentially by students, and outcomes and impacts cannot easily be confined to expected campus spaces, such as toilets. To this end, there is no easy fix, and we should not lose sight of the deeper and ongoing work ahead within post-secondary settings and beyond.

Keywords: menstruation political and social aspects, menstrual/period products, post-secondary students, menstrual equity

Résumé: Dans cet article, nous discutons d'un ensemble de données qualitatives qui ont été recueillies dans le cadre d'une enquête visant à documenter l'accès aux produits d'hygiène féminine sur le campus et les répercussions sur les étudiantes. Cette recherche a été menée en réponse à l'intérêt croissant pour l'équité en matière de produits d'hygiène féminine sur le campus, ainsi qu'à la documentation sur les expériences menstruelles vécues par les étudiantes dans les pays du Nord. Une analyse thématique a permis de faire ressortir trois thèmes prin-

cipaux : les menstruations sur le campus, la gestion des menstruations sur le campus, et enfin, la « solution » au « problème ». L'article est truffé de notes sur les changements survenus sur le campus où l'étude a été menée et tout au long de celle-ci, notamment l'installation de distributeurs facilement accessibles. En conclusion, nous proposons un post-scriptum sur le défi que représentent les simples solutions, comme le remplacement des distributeurs, pour répondre aux besoins des personnes qui ont des menstruations. Nous avons constaté que les menstruations sont un fardeau qui est vécu différemment par les étudiantes, et que les effets ne peuvent pas facilement être limités aux espaces prévus sur le campus, tels que les toilettes. Il n'y a donc pas de solution miracle, et nous ne devons pas perdre de vue les efforts considérables et continus qu'il faudra déployer dans les établissements postsecondaires et ailleurs.

Mots clés: menstruation aspects sociaux et politiques, produits d'hygiène féminine; étudiantes de niveau post-secondaire; équité en matière de produits d'hygiène féminine

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The scarlet lady comes to campus...

One day, I had an unexpected visit from the Scarlet Lady and I was with my male classmates. It was very embarrassing to head to the washroom and come right back to where they are and head off again holding a small pouch. (woman, 24, domestic student [DS])

I am very grateful for the menstrual products at the Douglas College Student Union. They provide very high quality products (100% organic cotton) and they always have an excess. This puts me at peace of mind because otherwise, I would have to run to the mall to purchase some and buy underwear/pants if need be. (woman, 27, ds)

So begins a typical day of managing menstruation on campus. Gender, gender roles and identity, concealment, emotions, navigating to the restroom (and sometimes off campus), preparatory work, cultural euphemisms, all come into play in these excerpts from study participants sharing experiences about menstruation on campus. Menstruation management—which includes blood, pain, emotions, relational networks, but also various forms of activism and advocacy—is part of the experience of menstruating students navigating through post-secondary campus spaces. The politics of menstruation are a somewhat recent arrival to the Canadian campus equity space and have gradually built up in pockets across the country. Student-led menstrual justice movements across Canada are part of and connected to grassroots and community-based mobilization, at both local and global levels.

Research into menstruation and impacts on access to education is building (Cotropia 2019; Sebert Kuhlmann et al. 2020; Sommer and Sahin 2013); however, there is a tendency to reify, rather than challenge menstrual shame and stigma and intersecting inequities. The broader needs of menstruators are often, though not always, pushed to the side, especially within the context of discrete demands for change. As such, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of post-secondary student experiences with menstruation on a typical Canadian undergraduate campus through a campus-wide audit and mixed-methods survey. This paper presents a thematic

analysis of qualitative responses that were gathered as part of the survey.

Following a discussion of the broader context and theoretical frameworks, we present the method and thematic categories. To situate the research and participants' responses, we weave throughout the paper notes on changes on the campus where the study took place and as the research unfolded—including the installation of barrier-free dispensers. Overall, participants shared rich and varied accounts which highlight how menstruation happens on campus, the ways they manage menstruation, and the broader political work at play as they navigate campus spaces as menstruators.

Menstruation is a burden that is experienced differentially by students; women and gender-diverse menstruators are impacted in a range of ways by existing social strictures and expectations, as well as campus policies and practices. And yet, outcomes cannot easily be confined to expected campus spaces, such as toilets. There is no easy fix, even if we did find strong support for free menstrual supplies in campus restrooms. The rising profile of menstrual equity as part of campus politics and the lived experiences of students thus presents an important space for menstrual justice that is worthy of further examination.

The “Problem” with Menstruation on Campus

The research discussed in this paper did, in part, begin in the restroom and with dispensers such as those pictured below in Figure 1. Many will recognize these reflections of a bygone era, replete with knobs, cranks, and dusty pads. As the research was beginning, an initial demand to replace one dispenser in one restroom on campus was put forward at the annual general meeting for the faculty association by a faculty member who was part of the initial research team. The motion was passed enthusiastically and without debate. The cost of the dispenser was paid for by the faculty association, and yet it took another three years to be installed. At the time, the student union building and security desk were the only places where one could access free menstrual supplies on campus. Menstrual supplies were available for purchase at the campus bookstore, which had been illegally charging provincial tax since the 1980s, and federal tax since 2015. During the course of the research, we also uncovered several hidden caches of supplies in faculty

desks, and counsellors' offices. Through tracing the supplies on campus, we began to see connections to broader and related equity struggles, including, but not limited to, the politics of restrooms on campus.



Figure 1: Menstrual product dispenser, located in women's restroom, New Westminster Campus, Douglas College, Fall 2019.

In the Canadian post-secondary context, the past twenty years have seen rising demands for the inclusion of equity issues within policy, educational programming, and the physical structures of campuses (see Campbell 2021; Henry and Tator 2009; Quinlan et al. 2017). Demands for change and inclusion reflect the inter-connected nature of many social movements and post-secondary populations—women, racialized groups and individuals, Indigenous peoples, and 2SLGBTQ folks. Rising interest in equity issues reflects a push for post-secondary institutions to respond to broader political shifts and has also led to demands by students, faculty, and staff for services related to specific needs and accommodations. A related and recent example at Douglas College includes all-gender restrooms, to support the needs of gender-diverse campus community members (Del Cid-Luque 2019; Dobie 2016). All-gender restrooms on campus are part of a broader series of shifts, for example, ensuring students can change their name within educational management systems, and that

gender-diverse students are included in considerations related to education and equity within new programs and policies at the institution. Something that begins in restrooms does not end there and may include connections to other equity issues—such as menstrual equity.

Menstruation is an everyday bodily experience. Menstrual blood can be captured by supplies, including but not limited to, menstrual cups, washable pads and tampons, disposable pads, tampons and liners, as well as toilet paper. Free bleeding, or allowing blood to flow without capturing, is not generally practised within North American society and is typically shunned. While menstruation is associated with blood, it includes many other bodily experiences, such as cramps, pain, general discomfort, period poops, and increased urination. It relates to reproductive health and well-being, such as, endometriosis, poly-cystic ovary syndrome and perimenopausal flooding. It includes emotional experiences, ranging from joy, embarrassment, shame, irritability, and annoyance, which are intimately tied to one's cultural and social identity. It also connects in and is part of social and cultural attitudes towards menstruation, and by extension power, oppression, privilege, and intersecting inequities. Finally, it is part of the maintenance of the gender binary, and menstruation management is often understood along gendered lines, where women are perceived as insiders and men are perceived as outsiders. Menstruation has also long been identified as an important site for feminist activist intervention (Delaney et al. 1976; Seaman 2012; Shuttle and Redgrove 1978). More recent work has elucidated the shifting nature of activism under the third-wave of feminism (Bobel 2010). There is also a growing public feminism aimed at moving menstruation into the spotlight (Okamoto 2018; Weiss-Wolf 2017) through writing, film, activism, community, and grassroots mobilization, extending across the globe.

In Canada and globally, the movement for menstrual equity—including destigmatizing periods, bringing an intersectional lens to menstruation, raising awareness about menstrual precarity, the need for sustainable and safe supplies, pushing for better access to education and reproductive health, pushing back against laws that limit access to supplies—is intertwined and connected with education, and post-secondary students. Many activists and advocates began their work within the menstrual justice movement while at college and university, such as Nadya Okamoto (Harvard University) and Zeba Khan

(UBC). At [Institution name], the students' union was a signatory on the Period Promise campaign—making a commitment to provide free supplies and end period poverty—prior to the [Institution name] faculty association voting to install a barrier-free dispenser. Activism by students exists in tandem with a growing body of scholarship that documents the impacts of menstrual stigma and lack of access to menstrual supplies within the K-12 system, as well as the post-secondary sector. A range of informally published reports by student groups have helped situate campus inequities in the broader Canadian context (see Khan and Oveisi 2020), highlighting existing issues and advocacy by student groups, grassroots, and community organizations. In a systematic review of the scholarly literature, Munro et al. (2021) found that most scholarly studies examining the post-secondary context and menstrual equity were quantitative in nature and examined low middle-income countries. The researchers note that menstruation can negatively impact education, including “absenteeism, participation and concentration in class, or academic performance” (18), and that there is a need for “program and policy responses” (1).

In the Canadian context, recent policy changes include the removal of the sales tax on menstrual supplies, in 2015, and policies at the provincial level to make menstrual supplies freely available to students in the public K-12 education system. Changes happening on post-secondary campuses are thus part of a much broader movement that has in part emerged out of student experiences on campus, but also awareness of related issues within society more generally.

Asking for More from Menstrual Equity

Menstrual equity has been key for highlighting menstruation as a site of culturally defined shame, taboo, and stigma. Within North American society, menstrual blood is meant to be concealed (Chrisler 2011) and failure to conceal, and needing to identify a need for accommodation related to menstruation are understood as forms of “failed femininity” (Fahs 2018). Menstrual equity has been important for elucidating a framework for menstruation as an equity issue and identifying how menstruators are differentially situated in relation to power structures and within institutions. However, menstrual equity is often reduced to the issue of free supplies. The news media is a prime culprit for this oversimplification and reports abound of a single-issue win (Rodrigues

2021)—free supplies in educational settings—as opposed to the broader work of groups seeking change in schools, universities, and beyond.

The reduction of an equity issue to a single fix can be important for strategic purposes. Scala (2020) notes that the Canadian Menstruators intentionally focused on the tampon tax as a single-issue, in order to maximize lobbying strategies and strategic alliances comprised of divergent and often competing groups—such as media, opposition MPs, and the general public. Menstruation is, of course, not a single-issue struggle. Providing someone with free supplies does not address needs related to pain, cramps, discomfort, nor the feelings of exclusion that result from being “othered” because of one’s gender identity. In addition, it is important to situate menstruation advocacy on campus and off within the broader history of the development of menstrual supplies as the solution to the “problem” of menstruation. We ought to be wary of a tendency to reinforce product-based solutions for equity seeking groups, provided by the market, that then extend into institutions seeking to meet needs. However, we also ought to be wary of the tendency within menstrual equity to ignore the underlying power structures that push towards managing menstruation in particular ways as freedom and empowerment.

Relevant to the Canadian context, a settler-colonial nation, Risling Baldy (2017) challenges the universality of menstrual stigma, highlighting that the disgust and shame associated with menstruation, as well as women’s bodies more generally are deeply intertwined with colonialism. Accommodating menstruators by facilitating concealment may not mean liberation and empowerment for all, especially where cultural practices and traditions have been suppressed. In addition, the strong association between women and menstruation, ignores girlhood, trans and non-binary menstruators, as well as times when menstruation does not occur even when one is gendered female, including peri/menopause or amenorrhea.

As Bobel and Fahs (2020) have stated, “We are curious about (and puzzled by) the contradiction that, while menstruation has come out of the closet, there is still a deep investment in concealing it” (955). They seek to disrupt frameworks that centre on public health, rights-based approaches, and equity alone by proposing a new vision for menstrual activism called “radical menstrual embodiment” (973).

The radical vision we advocate is a conceptualization of the end goal of activism, that is, the construction of a progressive narrative and plan for action in which menstruators are freed from body-based stigma and its mandate to conceal and contain the menstrual body... [W]e are advocating for the erosion of a mandate of any kind—the world we want is one where menstruators are supported to care for their bodies in the ways that are right for them. (974)

We find inspiration in the notion of radical menstrual embodiment, yet we are troubled by the difficulties, within the range of structures and systems right now, faced by menstruating students who *have* discrete needs—an emergency supply, supplies provided in all restrooms, or the need to be able to leave without shame. Such needs occur and require support now, not in some utopian futurescape. How can we acknowledge these needs and still hold fast to Bobel’s and Fahs’ (2020) mandate?

The work of Tronto (1994) and feminist care ethics are helpful. For Tronto, care is understood as central to justice work. Post-secondary institutions are increasingly being asked to take up equity issues and offer care, based on demands from students and hopefully, an assessment of what is needed. However, care work is a process, and one that ought to connect with and reflect an understanding of the deep and embedded nature of structural injustices that lead to “othering” in the first place. Drawing on Tronto, we can understand menstruation on campus as connected to needs, know that those needs will vary, and understand that whose needs are recognized will be a function of privilege. Finally, Tronto urges institutions and people engaging in care to understand the work as ongoing and reflexive, meaning there will always be more to do. With these working theoretical frames in mind, we turn to the method and themes that emerged from analysis.

Method

The qualitative responses discussed were gathered through a mixed-methods exploratory study, involving a survey and campus audit. The study aimed to document access to menstrual products and student experiences with menstruation on campus. The research was reviewed and approved by the [Institution name] Research

Ethics Board and data was collected between October 2019 and July 2020. The final sample consisted of 370 participants. Of those participants, 97 percent self-identified as women, 4 identified as men, 3 as transgender men and 1 as non-binary. The sample was highly skewed towards domestic students with 91 percent of participants being Canadian citizens or holding permanent resident status. The remaining 9 percent were international students. As for racial and ethnic background, 41 percent of participants identified as racialized as a person of colour, and 6 percent reported having Indigenous heritage.

Quantitative responses documented students’ use of campus facilities, their experiences with unexpected spills (leaks, overflow, and stains), the different ways they managed flow, impact on class attendance (absences and lateness), and reported interruptions of education-related activities due to their periods.

This paper focuses on participant responses to two open-ended prompts:

Prompt 1: One aspect of the research project is to collect stories about student experiences of menstruating on campus. Do you have any stories you would like to share about menstruating on campus?

Prompt 2: If you have any additional thoughts or comments, please share them with us here:

In total, 194 students provided responses ranging in length from 1 to 193 words. As this study was exploratory, the data cannot be taken to be representative of the campus population at Douglas College or at post-secondary campuses in Canada. Participants could opt in or not to these questions, meaning we are unable to draw conclusions about the statistical significance of different kinds of responses and demographic characteristics. Participant responses offer reflections of menstruation on campus and shed light on broader changes happening on campus.

An in-depth thematic analysis (Bryman, Teevan, and Bell 2009) of responses was carried out by two researchers working simultaneously to ensure for reliability in the identification of themes. Responses were reviewed on two separate occasions in a four-phase approach, draw-

ing on a modified version of the “Listening Guide” (Doucet 2008), which included a reflexive positioning by researchers throughout the data analysis process, to identify experiences outside the researchers’ vantage point. Both researchers had experience of menstruating on campus and could relate at times to what students shared. In other cases, experiences of exclusion were outside of our own embodied reality, as for example in the accounts of trans-menstruators. Awareness of our own positionalities and collaborative analysis were key to ensuring we attended to the complex realities of students that came through in what they shared.

The first reading captured general impressions and how menstruation was presented within participant’s comments; the second reading noted common words, phrases, and stories; the third reading drew out unique or individual experiences, as well as relationships and connections that were part of, and extended beyond the campus experience; the final reading developed and identified connections to the theoretical framework and literature. Three main themes emerged: menstruation happens on campus, menstruation is managed on campus, the solution to the “problem.” We present each theme in turn and behind participant comments we provide gender, age, and student status, either domestic (DS) or international (IS). Given the specific nature of the dataset, we have refrained from modifying or editing excerpts and wherever possible present participant comments in their entirety.

Menstruation Happens on Campus

I felt blood beginning to leak through my pants but told myself I would finish the exam first before taking care of it. I used my jacket to cover the stain that was slowly forming on my pants so my peers wouldn’t notice it when I got up to hand in my exam. (woman, 19, DS)

While it may seem obvious to say so, the research, revealed that menstruation happens on campus. It happens regularly, and with a high degree of unpredictability. For example, 68 percent of study participants indicated that they had an unexpected period while on campus. Further, 63 percent experienced leaks, overflow, and/or blood stains while on campus. We argue that these findings are unsurprising, and they have been reported in other informal audits and studies. However, in the qual-

itative responses, we began to understand the deeper layers of how students experienced menstruation on campus. Like the student above, several participants shared experiences of menstruating during exams and class time.

It was while I was actually coming back from the bathroom. As soon as I entered the class and sat down on my chair, I felt my period. I was too embarrassed to get up and leave because I had just come back. So I waited for our next class break and went home. I knew I had bled through my pants. When it comes, my experience while on my period is a pretty horrible one. It’s heavy and cramps spread down my legs, so I find it best just to get home and wait until the worst has passed through. (woman, 18, DS)

Participants took time to share specific observations about their menstrual cycle. They noted that menstrual flow could be heavy, light, or unpredictable. They also highlighted how menstrual flow was part of other related bodily experiences, such as cramps, mood, emotions, and overall comfort.

Participants highlighted connections between their menstrual cycle and health and body wellness more generally.

I have Atypical Endometriosis, so during menstruation and ovulation I get extreme cramps that can sometimes feel like sharp contractions. The pain can get to the point where I am incapacitated for a few days. Luckily I haven’t experienced a bad episode yet, but I worry I might have one during class or an exam and have to rush home. Most of the time though I am taking advil in class to be able to stay and learn, but because of the endometriosis, I can’t always tell when I’m going to bleed and how heavy it will be. Sometimes I’ll go two months before I menstruate other times only twenty days. It’s not fun having to remember and be prepared at all times for your period to start and/or for extreme cramps to take over. (woman, 25, DS)

In another case, a participant shared that their health condition meant that their period does not come unexpectedly.

I have a low iron deficiency, so when my period does come unexpectedly, it doesn't leak through visibly. So I could ignore it until I get a ten minute break to go to the bathroom. (woman, 18, DS)

Diverse experiences highlighted the ways that menstruation was perceived as connected to health and body wellness generally, but also the ways that participants described varied accounts of menstruation as embodied on campus. Several participants took the time to indicate that they did not have issues to report. As one participant stated, "Gratefully I have never experienced that while on campus," (woman, 21, domestic student).

Experiences shared about menstruation often involved descriptions about the impact of things typically used in the restroom—such as pads, tampons, or toilet paper. However, participants also wrote about other supplies, including contraception.

I have an IUD so I don't experience periods as intense as others, therefore that's why my responses do not often show that my school life is impeded by having a period. Many other menstruating humans do not have my luxury therefore having a period is a much more stressful time. (woman, 29, DS)

Menstrual supplies are like toilet paper, but they are also not—as students made note of other devices they relied on for support. Prevailing cultural and social norms keep menstruation as a largely hidden element of campus life. However, participants provided rich and varied accounts of the diverse experiences that comprise how menstruation happens on campus. In the next section, we turn to the ways students manage menstruation, as they navigate through campus spaces on a daily basis.

Menstruation is Managed on Campus

As a user of reusable menstrual products, ie. cups, cloth pads, I tend to always be prepared and therefore have no unusual (to

my belief) experiences to share. (woman, 32, DS)

Menstruation management is often associated with the capturing of blood by using menstrual supplies. Indeed, throughout responses, participants shared the various things used to capture menstrual blood—tampons and pads, toilet paper, reusable pads, menstrual cups, and hormonal contraception (IUDs, nuva ring, and the oral contraceptive pill). However, study participants also expounded on other kinds of work, including pre-emptive and preparatory, gaining and acquiring knowledge of access points, and suppressing and navigating a range of emotions and embodied experiences.

Many participants expressed the notion of coming to campus prepared.

Although I am starting my full time program in September, I have visited the campus multiple times to speak with advisors about the program I am going into. During that time I was menstruating, however I came prepared with the products. (woman, 33, DS)

As the participant below shares, preparation has helped them avoid "horror stories."

... i always do my best to be well prepared for any possible issues involving menstruation so i don't really have any horror stories (woman, 18, DS)

As the participant below highlights their experience of managing menstrual blood has been impacted by having a supply always with them, but also the timing of their cycle.

I am often prepared as I keep my menstrual cup with me and have simply been lucky in that it has always begun between classes. I have never been disrupted mid-class due to menstruation. (woman, 27, DS)

The managing of menstrual blood was intimately tied to a range of preparatory work that feeds into the "norm of menstrual concealment," which supports and reflects North American standards for "acceptable feminine roles" (Wooton and Morison 2020, 89).

Many study participants shared accounts of needing a supply and not having one on hand.

When I finished my morning class, I started to feel cramps and dizzy. So, I went to the washroom to check if I'm on it and I did have my period. I checked my bag if I had brought extra pads but, I didn't so I started freaking out. In the end, I had no choice but to use toilet paper as temporary pads and they were uncomfortable to be in. When I got out of the washroom I hurriedly went out off campus to go buy pads at the stores because I didn't know that Student Union and the bookstore had them on campus. (woman, 18, DS)

Shared themes that emerge in this excerpt is the unexpected nature of menstruation, bodily cues that are experienced, heading to the bathroom, realizing one does not have supplies, and using toilet paper as a make-shift pad, even though it is less desirable. In addition, this student, along with several others in the study, noted that at the time, they were unaware that free supplies could be accessed at the student union building. The politics of concealment thus extend to knowledge-building in terms of access points within public spaces, for example, post-secondary institutions.

Many students shared stories where emergency menstrual supplies in restrooms would provide a temporary resolution.

I had gotten my period in the middle of class, I felt that something was wrong and did not feel right. I had realized what it was during the break of my class and I had leaked my period all over my underpants and I had cleaned my underpants as much as I could with toilet paper. I luckily had a pad that I used and as soon as class was finished, I went to the nearby store to purchase new underpants to continue on with my day. It was such a hassle, but that is what periods are. They are a hassle. (woman, 23, DS)

For the student above, the need extended beyond a menstrual supply to include underwear. The student also highlighted how the experience connected to their gen-

eral experience of periods as a "hassle." Thus, in addition to needed physical supports, participants highlighted a range of emotions and bodily experiences tangential to and connected to the experience of menstruating while on campus. Common words that emerged across participant responses were, "shame," "embarrassment," "being discreet," "discomfort," "annoyance," "stress," and "hassle." Other common phrases related to bodily experiences, such as "feeling like blood is seeping through." Finally, one participant only shared three words, "No. Too embarrassing."

Management of menstruation involved suppressing and navigating a range of emotions and embodied experiences within spaces that were perceived and experienced as unfriendly to menstruation and menstruators. Experiences shared related to the strictures and rules of classroom spaces and especially formal assessments, such as exams and presentations. Several participants spoke to how specific aspects of physical structures shaped emotional experiences related to the comfort of managing menstrual supplies in institutional settings, such as campus restrooms.

When I am changing my pad/tampon the gap in between the doors are quite big so I feel awkward when people are looking through to see if the stall is empty and if I am changing someone could probably see me changing. (woman, 19, DS)

The physical structures of the campus space also created barriers to access points and contributed to experiences of being excluded and "othered." Existing access to supplies on campus at the time of the study was limited to woman-identified restrooms. Thus, in addition to not being able to access supplies in restrooms to support menstruation if needed, one participant shared the emotional impact of the existing distribution system and made a requested change.

As a trans man, it would be nice to be able to access period products in the mens restroom. It would even be better to have an all gender bathroom in each campus with period products. I feel uncomfortable going to the office to get pads or buying period products myself. I'm always using toilet paper as pads or having to go to my sisters house for pads, which has made me late for

class multiple times. (transgender man, 22, DS)

As this participant highlights, because of their gender identity, they are cut off and excluded from the limited supports that are available. To manage menstruation, they use toilet paper or have to leave campus to access supplies. Accessing what one needs—supplies directly in the men’s restroom and/or an all gender restroom with period products—is all the more urgent and vital.

As much as emergency supplies were identified as important, accessing physical supports for menstruation in the form of supplies was connected to emotional and relational supports as well.

When i was in my secondary school. I got my periods. It was unexpected. I went to restroom. I realized i don't have and pads with me. I asked my teacher for help. I was so embarrassed at that time but my teacher made me feel comfortable and relaxed. (woman, 18, IS)

This participant highlights the impact of menstrual stigma on an experience within an educational setting. Here, care expressed by the teacher—as relational, reciprocal, and embodied—helped this student “feel comfortable and relaxed,” even though they were navigating a challenging experience—getting one’s period unexpectedly at school and not having a supply on hand. Menstruation management was thus expressed as individual emotional and body-work, but was also tied to navigating institutional spaces and structures, and finding sites of support and care with varying degrees of success.

The Solution to the “Problem”

I really appreciated doing this survey, I think it is great that people are potentially thinking of way that a menstrual cycle may affect a student on campus. I personally struggle with really bad cramps, back pain, headaches and irregular periods which makes days at school during my time of month often uncomfortable and I cringe when it happens. Also, I personally have always felt that menstrual products should be free, this is a function that women cannot control and ends up being quite costly. I'm

working and attending school but sometimes I think about the students that aren't working and struggling to make ends meet, \$7-20 depending on how heavy ones flow is adds up in a year! Plus I very much so think that feminine hygiene products should be more readily available to the public. Thank you for allowing me to take part in this survey! (woman, no age provided, DS)

On Canadian post-secondary campuses, students are managing menstruation within a general cultural ethic where menstruation is understood as an individual problem to be managed—concealed, controlled, and contained. Participants expressed frustration, disappointment, but also a sense that it was time for things to change; for many participants, the lack of support for menstruation and menstruators within campus space, but also beyond, was unjustifiable. The excerpt above highlights the day-to-day political work carried out by students where complex social networks are engaged to bring about menstrual flow management, the extent to which they were aware of the broader issues at play, and the value they saw in the research as a whole.

In addition to several comments about the value of the survey, we also noticed a few students sharing advice directly with us (the researchers) or noting advice that they regularly shared with friends, such as, “wearing dark coloured lowers/ jeans” and always being sure to have pads *and* tampons in backpacks. Advice sharing by study participants is connected to broader networks of gendered relational support that are part of the management of menstruation on campus, and off.

I always carry around extra tampons with me, but sometimes I have experienced leaking. When this occurs, I usually gather some toilet paper and wrap around my underwear as a makeshift pad (perhaps I should carry around additional underwear come to think of it!) and change my tampon. Also, I have a supply of Advil on hand if needed. This has come in handy for other students. I have more requests for pain management than for supplies (pads or tampons). Leaks, etc. can be embarrassing, but I think dealing with the cramping is

more inconvenient and can have a negative impact on learning. (woman, 49, DS)

Participant comments highlighted the extent to which students understood needed supplies in a broad fashion as connected to their own menstrual experience, and also to the problems of others on campus.

Within participant comments coin-operated dispensers were a common focal point for needed change. However, participants also provided lengthy responses that wove between their own experience and the broader social justice issues at hand.

I have experienced several occasions when I have unexpectedly started bleeding in class and did not have menstrual products with me. At those times when I am not prepared to handle my period, I have felt distress and embarrassment. I do not have friends to lend me products during class time and can rarely afford to purchase products on my own (I still rely on my mom). It is during these times when I truly feel the most oppressed by society. Menstrual products should not feel like a luxury and all women should receive equal access at all times. Sometimes my flow is so heavy I have to leave lectures every half hour, which can be distracting for myself and everyone around me, but I feel like I shouldn't have to miss out on learning because of menstruation! Ideally, I would like to see free menstrual products in all public washrooms with options that are safe and effective (scented products should not be allowed, and pads should be comfortably wearable). (woman, 20, DS)

The individual above highlights the regularity with which menstruation occurs unexpectedly on campus. They speak to the expensive nature of supplies and identify this as an equity issue. Their final comment was reflected in other participant responses as well. Several participants highlighted products accessed in dispensers were often dissatisfactory and “uncomfortable.” Participants also emphasized that supplies ought to be hypoallergenic and sensitive to issues of environmental sustainability. Thus, while there was general support for menstrual supplies in the restroom, this was by no means

understood as a one-dimensional fix. To this end, participant comments reflected broader tension points in the politics of menstruation and a demand that any institutional response be responsive to the diverse needs of menstruators.

Overall, we were amazed at the nuanced and wide-ranging set of accounts that study participants expressed. The study itself also led to related and unsolicited discussions in hallways, offices, and more as people across campus learned of the research. Faculty members regularly stopped by [Author A's] office to express their thoughts about the topic, and shared detailed accounts of related experiences. Most often conversations would close with people expressing support for the existence of free supplies on campus. In other cases, people came to author's (Lisa) office because they knew she was doing the research and were in need of a menstrual supply. They figured she would have some (which she did, including Tylenol and Advil). Other people wished to share other research and activism they thought needed to happen on campus, such as experiences related to peri-menopause and menopause, in-depth qualitative work to highlight experiences of gender-diverse menstruators, the importance of cultural experiences and identity as tied to menstruation, and circles for Indigenous students to explore and understand processes of cultural reclamation and the menstrual cycle, to name a few. Indeed, much more research is needed.

At the close of the full research project, a report was prepared and shared with members of the college community, including the student union. They went on to prepare their own report, which led to a submission, in September 2021, in the budget for Facilities and Operations, to install and stock barrier-free menstrual product dispensers in all campus restrooms. The ask was simple, confined and straightforward—free menstrual supplies in all restrooms to support gender equity on campus and the dignity and well-being of students. The dispensers were installed in March 2022.

Throughout this paper, in addition to responses from participants, we have shared notes on changes on campus, including political work and advocacy of students and faculty. Reflexive and attuned observations are key to highlighting the work of privilege in addressing equity issues. Within the presentation of data, this meant that the experience of a small population of gender-diverse menstruators was key for highlighting needs that would

be left out by a generalized picture of the issues. Similarly, we are aware that the capacity to pull levers for change on campus remains a function of power and privilege. In this case, students were ideally situated to make a request that led to a broader change. As a team of faculty and student researchers engaged in applied and feminist sociology, we were able to play a small, but important role through research.

Post-script on Simple Fixes and Ongoing Work



Figure 2: Menstrual Product Dispenser, Douglas College, April 2022

Excerpt from a conversation overheard in a classroom by the author (Lisa), where two students were discussing the new barrier free menstrual product dispensers:

“Did you notice that they have supplies in the restrooms now.”

“Oh yeah, that is so cool. Though the other day I went in to get a pad and the dispenser was empty. Luckily there was someone there. She ran down to the next restroom that had a dispenser that was stocked.”

“Thank god someone was there!”

The research discussed in this paper aimed to assess access to menstrual supplies on campus and impacts on students. Almost three years later, things look different on the campus: barrier-free menstrual product dispensers are installed in all restrooms, with signage explaining why. Things also look different in the broader Canadian political landscape. Following a wave of new policies at the provincial and municipal level, the federal government recently announced a pilot menstrual equity fund

(Ibrahim 2022). Our awareness as researchers of the work that was already happening at the time of the study on our own campus and elsewhere has grown immensely. From Free Periods Canada to Moon Time Sisters to Bleed the North, we have seen student-led advocacy related to menstruation expand and grow. At [Institution name], because of their work to push for barrier-free dispensers, members of the students’ union are now looped in with a broader community and movement.

Thus, I (Lisa) had to pause and listen to an exchange between students (outlined above) about how changes play out in real life. In the Winter of 2022, the [Institution name] student union began a pilot project that provides reusable menstrual supplies—including washable pads and menstrual cups—to students. They understand, as do we, that free disposable pads and tampons in restrooms are not enough. Indeed, students who used reusable supplies shared feelings of security and independence. Equally, students who used IUDs or hormonal contraception indicated feelings of control and certainty around their cycle and its predictability. There is still so much more to do; we have no doubt that students will be left to do much of this work, while the college takes the credit, for yet another equity checkbox. Drawing on Bobel and Fahs’ notion of radical menstrual embodiment and Tronto’s invitation to care as part of the political work of justice, we find hope in a vision of a campus and society that truly recognizes, supports, embraces, and welcomes menstruation and menstruators. What could it look like?

The vision will include the following. Menstrual supplies when needed and in the form one desires outside of a frame that reifies existing standards for respectability, but equally commercial profit through the “business of menstruation,” and the performance of equity by institutions. The capacity to step away and care for oneself without penalty. The continued strengthening of relational supports and the broadening out of how menstruation is understood and how menstruators can be. We dream of a deep reimagining of out-dated structures, such as toilets divided along the gender binary, where accommodation is an after-thought awkwardly adapted around physical structures that limit possibilities from the outset. Policies could include a range of menstrual supplies as essential and needed within medical insurance, such that the cost of emergency supplies within restrooms would be offset considerably and the waste generated by disposable supplies could be reduced significantly.

antly. We envision deeper work to shift cultural perceptions of menstruation at the individual and societal level that would remove pressure to continue in the face of our bodies. We seek spaces to explore and consider the range of experiences menstruators confront when working through the deeply embodied experience of menstruating. Such work is a burden, but one we might welcome for the rewards that could come, and the new possibilities that could emerge. However, we caution against assuming that any institution or individual can do this work alone, even if the post-secondary sector can be a place to start. So, barrier-free dispensers within post-secondary restrooms does not mean the work is over, even if it is *a* step forward.

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