

Project: Menstrual Poverty in the Developed World

Globally, at least 500 million females suffer from menstrual poverty – the inability of low-income women to afford products or access facilities necessary to maintain proper hygiene while managing their periods (UNICEF). Menstruation is a naturally occurring biological process, and period products allow women to continue with their lives during menses. To think that millions of women must endure the pain and discomfort of menstruation without pads or tampons is horrific. However, females unable to afford these products not only have deteriorated physical and mental health, but many simultaneously lose the basic human right to education. According to a 2017 study by Plan International UK, “49% of UK girls have missed an entire day of school because of their period”, and a 2019 study commissioned by Thinx and PERIOD found that “1 in 4 U.S. teens have missed class due to lack of access to period products”. Menstrual poverty actively contributes to gender inequality by hindering women from receiving equal education opportunities as men. By eliminating period poverty, society becomes one step closer to achieving Sustainable Development Goal #5: Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls.

The UN and various NGO’s have worked towards decreasing period poverty in the past; however, nearly all past projects and media coverage targeted developing countries. Thus, a 2019 survey found that 34% of people in various countries falsely believe that period poverty exists exclusively in developing countries (Thorpe). In reality, period poverty poses a problem in every country; therefore, contrary to past UN action, my plan would focus on helping females in developed countries. Though menstrual poverty largely affects women in developing nations, those suffering in developed countries have become neglected and forgotten. Moreover, developed countries have more available resources – especially funding – to promptly and

efficiently abolish period poverty. For example, within the past two years, Scotland has worked to become the first country to eliminate period poverty by utilizing its available resources as a developing country. In August 2018, the Scottish government provided £5.2 million (~\$6.4 million) funding to begin requiring schools and universities to offer free tampons and pads as a matter of national policy. Within the same month, the Scottish government rewarded £4.5 million (~\$5.5 million) to the charity FareShare to provide for free feminine products in low-income households (*Period Products*). Most momentously, in February 2020, SB 19-67 – a bill stating that Scottish government would make all period products free of charge, with funding already allocated by the government – passed through the first of three stages in Scottish Parliament (Wamsley). If SB 19-67 officially passes, Scotland will become the first country to successfully eliminate menstrual poverty. Ideally, every country will abolish period poverty by achieving free menstrual products for all female citizens. Seeing Scotland's success, I believe the UN should use Scotland as a model when creating an action plan to eliminate menstrual poverty in other developed countries.

Already following in Scotland's footsteps, the state of Washington has worked to implement similar laws. Currently in Washington, the 6.5% sales tax includes feminine products like pads and tampons. SB 5147, which passed in both the Senate and the House and was delivered to Governor Inslee's desk just this month on March 12, seeks to change this, for if passed, this bill will exempt feminine hygiene products from retail sales and use tax (Senate Bill 5147). Next, SB 6073 passed in the Senate but has not yet passed in the House; this bill would provide free menstrual hygiene products in public school bathrooms (Senate Bill 6073). Washington legislators have taken crucial steps towards freeing women from menstrual poverty, and following Scotland, the next push should target low-income women, then all women in

Washington. Here is where the UN must enter. If I was hired by the UN to lead a project, I would first communicate with key UN committees and organizations that have worked to solve menstrual poverty in the past such as UN Women, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to write resolutions on creating project Menstrual Poverty in the Developed World. I would then establish chapters focused on different parts of the developed world to work with local legislators and community activists to pass laws following an action plan modeled after Scotland: 1. Abolish the tampon tax (for regions like Washington); 2. Provide free period products in schools and universities; 3. Provide free period products for low-income women; 4. Make period products free-of-charge for all women. Though abolishing the tampon tax would mean less tax revenue, according to calculations made by California and New York, states that have already abolished the tampon tax, revenue from menstrual products makes up an extremely small percentage (approximately 0.07%) of total tax revenue (Kaeding). Emulating states that have already exempted menstrual products from the sales tax, loss in tax revenue can be substituted by calculating the annual revenue loss, then appropriating this amount from the General Fund (California). Modeling off Scotland for action steps 2 through 4, governments should allot funding from state or federal revenue, and in step 3, governments may define low-income by the yearly poverty guideline by location ("2019 Poverty Guidelines"). The UN does not have the power to force any legislation onto countries. However, the UN holds the power to highly encourage countries to follow resolutions and cooperate with organizations, and this is just what project Menstrual Poverty in the Developed World will strive to do.

The UN cannot defeat menstrual poverty in developed countries with a single action or law; solving such a large-scale issue is a process that countries must culturally and financially

adapt to step by step. As countries begin freeing their female population of menstrual poverty, doors to new opportunities for women open. Achieving free menstrual products mean women don't need to worry about meeting their needs, but can strive to accomplish their wants. Females will become closer to receiving equal opportunities as men, but simultaneously, as women succeed in reaching their goals, they will empower others to do the same.

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