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## "25 Cents Please": A Commodification of Menstruation

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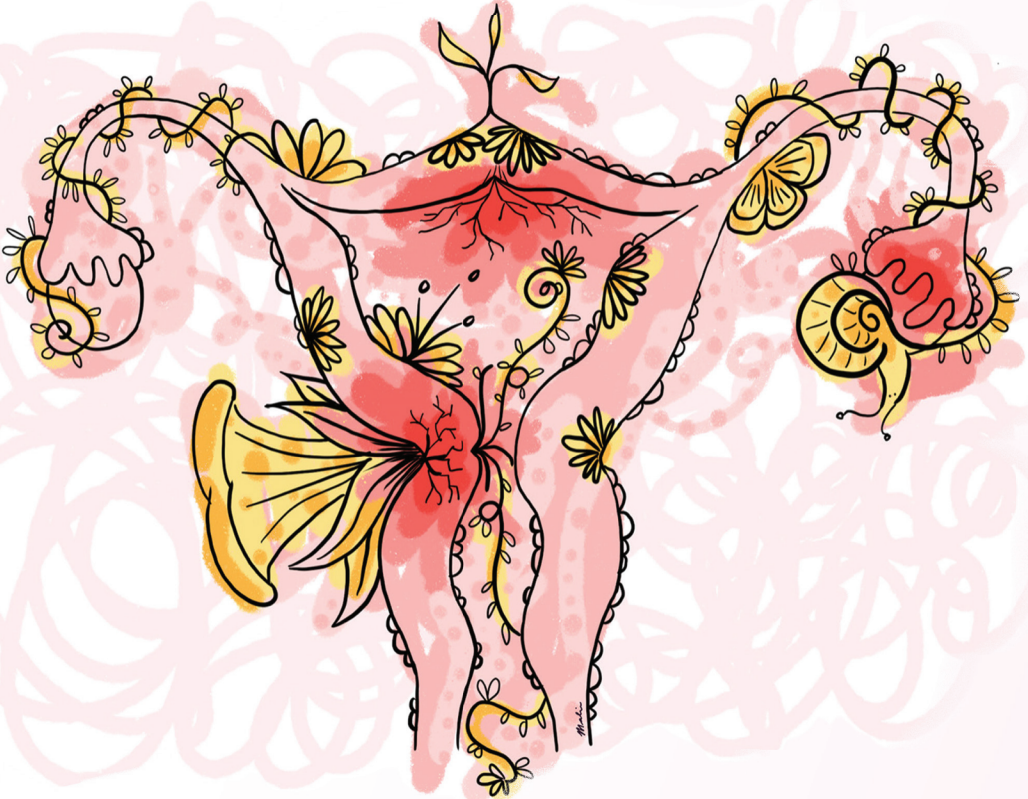
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## “25 CENTS, PLEASE”: A COMMODIFICATION OF MENSTRUATION

*SOLANGE JAIN*

One in five Americans who menstruate struggle to purchase period products due to a lack of income, as reported by Khadidah Stone in the *Montgomery Advertiser* in March of 2022. A 2021 study found that students across the country “continue to face considerable barriers in accessing menstrual hygiene products, and the COVID-19 pandemic has increased barriers to access”

(Thinx and PERIOD). Nearly a quarter of people who menstruate experience “period poverty,” a term that we have coined to address the lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints (Thinx and PERIOD).

Period poverty can be caused by a number of life events that negatively impact one’s ability to access sanitary products and manage a regular occurrence in their life. Menstruation typically lasts 2 to 7 days and occurs every 21 to 35 days, with the average menstruator getting a period for about 40 years of their life. Consequently, for about 40 years of their life, people with a uterus are enduring a bodily function that is beyond their control: not only are they often shamed for it in today’s society, but it is a struggle they may not be able to afford.

Menstrual products on the shelves at CVS show a box of 42 tampons for \$14.79 and a box of 60 pads for \$6.79, which translates to roughly 11 cents per pad and 35 cents per tampon. The manufacturing cost of both pads and tampons is about 2 to 3 cents per product, making the markup of these products significantly higher.

One individual can use multiple pads, panty liners, and tampons over the course of one cycle, which are not cheap. In a survey I conducted of Syracuse University undergraduate students, 84.6% stated that they would benefit from menstrual products being available free of charge in public restrooms. With many college students either navigating being financially independent for the first time, or being on fixed incomes from their guardians, using so many menstrual

products can feel like an indulgence. I know the experience of leaving a pad on longer than you’re supposed to in order to not have to buy a new box as quickly.

The term “pink tax” is used to explain the tendency for products marketed specifically towards women to be more expensive than those marketed towards men. The federal government has no law that prohibits price-based gender discrimination, allowing companies to inflate the price of women’s razors, female deodorant, and of course, menstrual products. For people experiencing period poverty, the pink tax is detrimental and turns menstrual products into a “luxury” rather than universally accessible items, regardless of financial status.

There are pad and tampon dispensers in the bathrooms of various buildings on Syracuse University’s campus. A single pad can be paid for only with a quarter. In our modern world, most people don’t carry small change or any cash at all, relying solely on a credit or debit card for transactions. An unnecessary obstacle is created when requiring individuals to have quarters on them to obtain essential menstrual products in public restrooms.

Pad and tampon dispensers are also often not well kept and not refilled, leaving them empty for months on end and unusable by anyone who might come across them. It is a heart sinking feeling, known to anyone who menstruates, to not have a sanitary pad or tampon on you and see that the dispensers in the public restroom are empty. I have personally been subject to the uncomfortable and degrading experience of using

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a wad of toilet paper as a makeshift pad. This, especially on a college campus that uses exclusively one-ply toilet paper, doesn't work out as well as one would hope.

Syracuse University has made it extremely easy for students to obtain sexual health resources and goes as far as to make contraceptives free and obtainable to all sexually active students, but it does not provide the same service to the hygiene needs of their menstruating students. Contraceptives are available in excess to students at Syracuse University's wellness center (also known as the Barnes Center at the Arch), as well as through the Safer Sex Express, which is a "no cost, discreet sexual health supply ordering service for Syracuse University students" ("Sexual and Reproductive Health"). The service does not include any menstrual products that could be provided free of charge, leaving students who are in need at the mercy of 25 cent tampons and braving the cold to buy an overpriced package of pads off campus.

Pads, tampons, and condoms all have a fairly similar production cost of around 2 to 3 cents, yet condoms are still freely available in many high schools and college settings across the country, while pads and tampons are consistently 25 cents. Even outside of college settings, condoms tend to be sold in drugstores for 2 to 6 dollars a box while tampons are 5 to 8 dollars. Right now, condoms are free or significantly cheaper in comparison to pads and tampons, which begs the question: why are we making it harder for people who menstruate to obtain a product that they have no choice but to use every month for about 40 years of their life?

### A Hopeful Future

After enduring the pink tax and bleeding through their pants in public, people are taking a stand. Students are organizing protests to speak their minds and push for free menstrual products to be provided in public restrooms.

Establishments are even beginning to take action by implementing pad and tampon dispensers that are free of charge in their restrooms. It's as simple as pressing a button and instantly having access to the supplies that you need. Changes like this are helping us move towards a world in which periods are *not* a luxury.

Students in high schools have even taken to running menstrual product drives through their schools. Organizations like this allow students to respond to the lack of government and administrative action by taking matters into their own hands. Menstrual product drives are a great way for people who are in positions to help to do just that in a very simple way. Products are collected in a public space and distributed to those who are unable to provide them for themselves or those around them.

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Art by Feimo Zhu.