

## Bringing to Light the Silence of Period Poverty

By Jieru Shen

A conversation about period poverty, and the inability for low-income women and girls in suburban cities to purchase safe sanitary products, has erupted on Chinese social media, igniting an online campaign calling for more awareness on period poverty and women's needs of sanitary products in China.

Period poverty refers to inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products. This issue can be caused by expensive prices, scarce resources and the lack of consciousness of sanitary products.

At the end of August 2020, several screenshots on Taobao, China's biggest eCommerce site, of package-free sanitary pads sold at a very cheap price sparked heated discussions on period poverty.



*Screenshots of unpackaged sanitary pads from Taobao, a Chinese eCommerce site*

Featured in the picture above is a packet of 100 package-free sanitary pads sold at 21.99 yuan (\$3.20), a price much lower than that of well-known manufacturers. In a screenshot showing in the product's review section, a person alerted potential buyers that the pads' incredibly cheap price might be an indication of their low quality. One person wrote, "Why do you buy these cheap sanitary pads? I suggest buying pads of famous brands because they will be used in your private parts." to which a woman replied, "I have difficulties. Life is tough."

It is easy to understand the person's concern since, for women, hygiene products are a necessity. However, women explaining their difficulties alerts the public to a group of ignored people and their uncovered pain.

Claire Zhu, 20, an undergraduate student who has lived in Shanghai since birth, said she had never heard of period poverty until the screenshots became headlines and a trending topic on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform.

“I didn’t know that there are many girls suffering from this situation in China because I don’t personally have this issue. After I saw this news, I felt shocked and I wanted to do something for them,” Zhu said. “There are many donations and most of the products are food and clothes for poor people in suburban areas, but no one ever identified a demand for female hygiene products.”

According to the statistics on CBNDData, there are 4 million young girls facing period poverty in China. To them, a strip of cloth or a piece of lined notebook paper can function as sanitary pads. Some girls from low-income households may also use socks to substitute sanitary pads. And after their period, they wear the same socks again.

The lack of proper sanitary products directly influences the issues of female safety and mental health, especially for girls living in suburban areas.

Dandan, 17, a high school student in a village of Guizhou Province who wished to remain anonymous for privacy concerns, talked about her experience during her period.

“I used a strip of cloth to cover my blood and washed it for durable use,” she said. “I had experienced vaginitis last year, which was miserable and I couldn’t go to the doctors. I think it was because of my improper treatment during my period.”

Xiaoli, 12, an elementary school student in a village of Guangxi Province who wished to remain anonymous for privacy concerns, talked about her experience in school when she had menstruation for the first time.

“Boys in my class laughed at me when they saw blood on my chair. They had no idea what menstruation was and they just thought that my buns was bleeding. I put some paper on the chair to avoid more blood but clearly it didn’t work.” she said. “I asked my mom about this. She told me that it is normal for girls at my age to experience the blood and it only lasts for several days each month. I could feel that she didn’t care about this thing at all and she said that I didn’t need to worry about this.”

“Sometimes, I didn’t want to go to school because I was afraid of other classmates laughing at me, and when I tried to explain to them that it was a normal phenomena for girls, they never listened. I felt so desperate and I had no idea how to face this. Therefore, the only way for me was to be absent from school during menstruation.” Xiaoli added.

According to the statistics on CBNDData, the average menstrual cycle for a Chinese woman is 5.8 days and each woman needs about 30 sanitary pads per menstrual cycle. The cost each year is at least 1040 yuan. According to the report on National People's Two Sessions in China, there are still 600 million people whose monthly income is less than 1000 yuan (\$150). The actual cost of sanitary products may be far more than this.

One sanitary pad is about one yuan and females will spend 20 to 30 yuan each month on hygiene products. This cost can be the living expense of one day for women whose monthly income is only 1000 yuan. And this price is considered relatively cheap in the market. Among these women, some are students who don't have income sources and some are moms who just had newborn babies.

People discovered that for some women in difficult financial situations, the price of sanitary pads is extremely expensive. Apart from the discomfort during a menstrual cycle, these low-income women also said it feels like they lose their dignity when they are only able to use a strap of cloth, napkins, or other unofficial sanitary products to cover their blood. For women who live with incomes just above the poverty line, the cost of hygiene products also doesn't go unnoticed. They all said they desired a reduced cost. Women and girls in suburban cities cannot afford sanitary products and it is the material aspect of this problem that causes period poverty.

Juan Chen, 29, a middle school teacher in a village of Guizhou province in east-southern China, has seen many girls unable to use proper sanitary towels, especially those raised by single fathers.

"Girls just used paper or a towel to keep the blood. They were afraid of losing blood. Some were absent from class during their period time because they didn't want to be laughed at by other classmates and they were afraid that their blood would leave marks on the chair," Chen said. "Those who were raised by single fathers didn't know anything about the menstrual cycle because their fathers either didn't want to bring this up to them or didn't give their girls money to buy sanitary pads."

Chen added that one girl in her class told a school volunteer she did not want pencils or books. The only thing the girl wanted from the donation is sanitary products.

The lack of sex education also contributes to the stigma around periods. A survey in 2012 of 1,593 teenagers ages 14 to 17 showed that 73.5 percent believe that they barely receive sex education at school, while 86.6 percent said that they rarely learn about sex from their parents. Many Chinese women also still believed they could lose their virginity by using tampons as of 2016, and only 2 percent of women nationwide had used them.

Ziyun Wang, a college student from Shanghai University of Finance and Economics who is originally from Sichuan Province, said she never received sex education from either school or her family.

“I started wearing bras when I saw that other students did. My parents were not willing to tell me about sex and how I was made,” Wang said. “The first time I knew of the existence of sanitary pads was in college.” Wang said she felt awkward during her period and she tried to avoid talking with other classmates in case they laughed at her.

“My mom told me to put toilet paper on the underwear. She didn’t know that it would hurt my body because it was insanitary. She didn’t have the knowledge,” Wang added.

Guozheng Fang, 45, a single father of an 18-year-old girl, said he’s never taught his daughter sex education.

“I never told my child about sex. As a male, I think it would be weird to talk about this with my daughter. She will understand it when she grows up,” said Fang. “Actually, I don’t know too much about women’s menstruation. I have no idea how to explain it to my daughter and I think her teacher should teach her.”

“My daughter never told me that she needs sanitary products and I didn’t have the awareness that girls should buy these products,” Fang added.

In China, menstrual products are subject to a 13 percent sales tax, the same as for most consumer items. As these screenshots shown above spread on Chinese social media platforms, the public became concerned with the expectation of a decrease or an elimination of the sales tax for menstrual products.

Junsheng Chang, a public health associate professor at Shandong University, believes that period poverty should not be discussed secretly, and hopes this wave of attention can lead to actual support from the government.

“The more people discuss it, the more attention period poverty will get,” Chang said. “Hopefully there will be policies implemented to solve the problem, or at least, to educate more people and encourage them to help poor women.”

Chang regards period poverty as an issue that is worth public awareness and involvement.

“I know there are many nonprofit organizations trying to help these poor girls by donation, but it is not enough for the whole society to raise its consciousness,” Chang said. “We should make the

public realize the existence of period poverty and then policymakers can make corresponding regulations on public health and the tax on feminine hygiene products.”

Chang also explained how many girls are naive when it comes to menstruation and even consider it to be dirty and shameful. “It will affect their perspectives on menstruation and their future personality growth. Girls are lacking ways to express their demands,” Chang said. “Many girls in poor areas with rare sex education are reluctant to go to the doctors when they already feel uncomfortable using under-qualified sanitary pads. It will lead to negative effects on body health.”

Sanitary pads became available in China in the 1980s. After 40 years, Chinese society still doesn’t feel comfortable talking about the products. In girls’ memories, there is a small bag used to hide sanitary pads when on the way to the toilet. In daily conversations, people use the word “auntie” in place of menstruation and “little bread” as code for sanitary pads. On TV, the product’s spokespeople are full of energy, and the blood is presented as transparent blue or pink.

The problem is that people are lacking awareness of period poverty. People in suburban cities don’t have enough money to buy proper sanitary products. It is important for the government to make a corresponding policy on sanitary products and provide more resources for women.