

SISC Advocacy Committee Presentation on Menstrual Equality* **February 13, 2019**

INTRODUCTION: Red Tide, curse, my friend, Aunt Flow, time of the month, period, monthlies....

Every woman in the history of humanity has or had a period. There's no human race without it. Yet most of us loathe talking about it.

When girls first start their periods, they embark on a decades-long journey of silence and dread. Periods hurt. They cause backaches and cramps, not to mention a cloud of emotional ickiness—and this goes on every month, for 30 to 40 years.

This presentation will focus on the problems within the US and globally.

THE SOROPTIMIST VIEW: Taboos, poverty, inadequate sanitary facilities, meager health education and an enduring culture of silence create an environment in which girls and women are denied what should be a basic right: clean, affordable menstrual materials and safe, private spaces to care for themselves. This includes access to clean water and toilets!

At least 500 million girls and women globally lack adequate facilities for managing their periods, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). In rural India, [one in five](#) girls drops out of school after they start menstruating, according to research by Nielsen and Plan India, and of the over 355 million menstruating girls and women in the country, just 12 percent use sanitary napkins.

In many countries and cultures, periods are like curses. Girls and women cannot cook, touch the water supply or spend time in places of worship or public areas when they're menstruating. In Africa, [one in 10](#) girls misses school during her period every month. [Seventy percent](#) of girls in India have not heard about menstruation before getting their periods, and four in five girls in East Africa lack access to sanitary pads and related health education. In Nepal, some rural families still follow an ancient tradition banishing girls and women to sheds when they have their period.

Soroptimist International wants us to talk about menstruation and take action. The President's Appeal of "Women, Water and Leadership" calls for women to take on lead roles in planning for access to clean water and hygiene. SI representatives at the United Nations are involved in WASH

(water, sanitation and hygiene) which promotes a rights-based approach to removing period stigma, providing sex education to girls and boys, securing sanitary supplies and providing clean, safe latrines for girls so that do not have to miss school. Local Soroptimist clubs support projects such as Moon Catcher and local efforts such as Days for Girls which provides period kits to girls in NYC. Clubs also carry out sanitary product collection drives and individual members advocate for social change.

Here's the problem, yes, even in the US!

1. Access: Men can walk into any bathroom and [access](#) all of the supplies they need to care for themselves: toilet paper, soap, paper towels, even seat covers. Women, however, cannot. In some schools and other institutions, girls have to trek to the nurse's office to ask for a pad or tampon, as if menstruating is an illness rather than a natural function. In most public and private places, women are lucky if there's a cranky machine on the wall charging a few quarters for a pad that's so uncomfortable you might prefer to use a wad of rough toilet paper instead. No change? You can pay for a parking spot with a credit card, but have you ever seen such technology on a tampon machine in a women's bathroom? The situation for prison inmates and homeless women is far direr.

2. History of Products: Before pads and tampons, women folded soft gauze or flannels and pinned them to their undergarments when they had their periods ("on the rag"). All that changed in the 1920s with Kotex sanitary pads, although they were only a cosmetic improvement. "They'd move, shift, chafe. People talked about getting their skin rubbed raw." "There were big tabs, and you needed an elastic belt. You had to do gymnastics to get them on."

In 1931, a Denver physician named Earle Cleveland Haas invented the modern tampon and cardboard applicator. (He also invented the diaphragm.) As women pursued more physically demanding jobs during World War II, their need for comfortable, discreet, reliable products grew. Between 1937 and 1943, tampons sales increased [five-fold](#), and 25 percent of women regularly used tampons in the early 1940s. Mainstream American culture gradually embraced fem-care products. Women started using tampons more than pads, and feminists heralded the tampon as a liberator. "No one was thinking about safety hazards. They were just grateful to have a product that plugs it up, literally," says Chris Bobel, president of the [Society for Menstrual Cycle Research](#)

In 1975, Procter & Gamble began test-marketing a tea bag-shaped, super-absorbent tampon called Rely (tagline: "It even absorbs the worry"). They were made of synthetic materials, and the key ingredient was carboxymethylcellulose (CMC), a compound that boosted absorption so much that the tampon could theoretically last for an entire period. Some women loved them, but others found Rely tampons painful to remove: "They absorbed so much fluid that they ripped the internal vaginal skin when you pulled them out." Another problem: The teeth at the tip of the plastic applicator sometimes cut women.

3. Lack of Technological advancements: U.S. consumers spent \$3.1 billion on tampons, pads and sanitary panty liners last year, according to Euromonitor, and the global sanitary protection products market reached \$30 billion. Yet in the last century, there have only been three significant innovations in the field: disposable sanitary pads, first marketed in the late 19th century and updated with adhesive in 1969; commercial tampons in the 1930s; and menstrual cups, which became popular in the 1980s.

4. No Oversight: Even if you do have access to tampons, the FDA does not require companies to list the ingredients – but the average the woman has a tampon in her vagina for over 100,000 hours during her lifetime. The average woman uses about 12,000 tampons in her lifetime

Tampons were also potentially lethal: CMC and polyester in tampons dried out women's vaginas, creating the ideal breeding ground for the toxin-producing bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*. In 1980, 890 cases of toxic shock syndrome (TSS) were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and [91 percent](#) of them were related to menstruation. Thirty-eight women died. At the time, around 70 percent of American women were using tampons, and while Rely had one-quarter of the market, it was responsible for 75 percent of TSS cases, prompting widespread panic. Other super-absorbent tampon brands were implicated, including Playtex and Tampax, but Rely was the only one recalled in September 1980. All tampon manufacturers faced lawsuits over TSS, but [over 1,100](#) were leveled against P&G. In 1982, the FDA [required](#) tampon manufacturers to warn consumers about the link between tampon use and TSS. By June 1983, the CDC had learned about [2,204](#) cases of TSS. It wasn't until 1989 that the FDA required manufacturers to standardize tampon absorbency levels and include warnings on tampon boxes.

In the 1980s and '90s, the safety profile of tampons improved and the incidence of TSS plummeted, but there were still 636 cases of menstrual-related TSS between 1987 and 1996, according to the [CDC](#), 36 of them

fatal. While CMC was no longer used in tampons, an explosive 1995 *Village Voice* [article](#) revealed a new threat: Dioxin, a carcinogen that's "toxic to the immune system" and linked to birth defects, had been found in some commercial tampons. The article slammed the FDA for sitting on memos revealing this link and for not testing tampons.

The FDA does not require companies to disclose the ingredients in tampons and pads, which means we know more about where our clothes are made than we do about what women put inside their vaginas. The average woman uses about 12,000 tampons in her lifetime, and that's a conservative estimate, says Philip Tierno, a professor of microbiology at New York University School of Medicine who was among the first to link TSS with the synthetic materials in tampons. "The FDA says dioxin is a trace, but it adds up when you're talking about decades of use." Viscose rayon, which is made from sawdust, is still used in tampons. As Tierno puts it, "it turns out to be one of the best of the bad ingredients."

Innovations – Yes, we have made SOME progress

First, to quickly recap the history lesson you just heard...

- We went from rags, to menstrual pads, to tampons all by the 1930s.
- The first menstrual cup was actually also invented back in the 1930s by a woman actress & inventor, Lenora Chalmers. However without the internet or even video, the message was hard to spread. With words referring to women's body parts and menstruation **forbidden** for use in advertising it was a very tough product to commercialize & the original company wound up going bankrupt.

So what happened next?

- Innovation went very quiet ...we can almost call it the dark ages for period related products – you just didn't talk about it, other than speaking in code.
- As you heard, it wasn't until the **1970s** when the next innovation emerged -self-adhesive pads

However I do have some "bright spots" to share on more recent innovations:

- There are a handful of new products on the market now, many of which look to **reduce waste**, and provide a **healthier alternative** to women. We found 3 innovative product categories to highlight:
- #1 Companies like **Thinx & Dear Kate** are making moisture wicking, anti-microbial, leak resistant underwear. This line of underwear can

hold up to 2 tampons worth of fluid, are reusable, & chemical free. The company **PantyProp** even incorporates the same technology into a line of swimwear! These products are especially welcomed by girls just starting their periods, and some woman prefer to use them for an extra layer of protection.

- #2 A second innovation which builds on the cup concept is a menstrual disc, made by companies such as **Flex & SoftCup**. It's a disc shaped product which is actually quite similar to a diaphragm. It's good for up to 12 hours and can hold 3 tampons full of liquid. It's made with safe hypoallergenic materials and not associated with TSS. The information online about the benefits and how to use this product is quite extensive and helpful with product adoption.
- And lastly, what is old is new again, our 3rd innovation that many women are now turning to is reusable, all natural cotton pads. Made by companies such as **Glad Rags**, these reusable pads made from material including flannel, terry cloth, organic cotton or bamboo cloth are eco friendly, reduce waste and are more natural alternatives. As a side note, they are also becoming popular to address bladder leakage issues, so they are an alternative for older adults as well.

A comment on availability

- We did not find many of these products available on local store shelves, however there is a lot of information available online by each manufacturer and Amazon actually has a large variety of alternative products to choose from.
- Many of these companies are also very interested in giving back, and distribute their products overseas in places where disposable menstruation products are just not attainable to many women.

Wrap up on Innovation

- In closing, we have just covered the entire history of menstruation product innovations...clearly we need to advocate for more research and funding to continue to develop innovative products to address this need! I think I've seen more innovations in my son's athletic equipment over the past 10 years than we've seen in the past 100 years for period related products.
- I'd love to see some young female entrepreneurs to come up with some additional innovations, and even read about them in future edition of the book by the terrific Cabin Fever author (Catheine

Thimmesh) in "Girls Think of Everything!" As you've heard it's a huge \$30B global market, just waiting for improvements!

Solutions and Opportunities for action:

1. There is good news: Many states, including New York have removed the sales tax from feminine hygiene. Some states, including New York have made products more accessible in schools and homeless shelters. and other institutions. FEMA has added sanitary products to the list of products eligible to be provided by disaster responders.

2. Women are calling on Education Secretary DeVos to require all k-12 schools to provide free products in restrooms, thereby removing a barrier to equal education.

3. Contact your members of Congress about legislation at the federal level. To find out who they are and how to reach them go to the NYS League of Women Voters Find My Elected Official site at <https://my.lwv.org/new-york-state>

federal Legislation: In 1997, U.S. Representative Carolyn Maloney of New York introduced the Tampon Safety and Research Act (now the **Robin Danielson Feminine Hygiene Product Safety Act**, named for a woman who died of TSS in 1998) to require the National Institutes of Health to research the health risks associated with menstrual hygiene products, as well as urge the FDA to disclose the list of ingredients in tampons, pads and other period supplies. Since then, she has reintroduced the bill eight times; it's currently sitting with the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health.

Check out **The Menstrual Products Right to Know Act (HR 2416)**, which was reintroduced in Congress last year by Representative Grace Meng (D–New York) and Carolyn Maloney (D–New York). HR 2416 is currently in the Subcommittee on Health and there is no hearing scheduled.

Concerning the lack of FDA (federal Food and Drug Administration) oversight on ingredients or safety, Legislators might need encouragement to address this failure! Also, tell the FDA if you've had symptoms that may be from a period or personal care product. Call 1-800-332-1088 or [fill out a consumer reporting form](#).

4. Contact your NYS Legislature members about New York State, Legislation ([A.164](#) / [S.2387](#)) has been introduced in New York by Assembly member Linda Rosenthal (D/WF-Manhattan) that will require disclosure of ingredients in menstrual products. It is in Committee. See the NYS League

of When Voters' [websitehttps://my.lwv.org/new-york-state](https://my.lwv.org/new-york-state) for contact information.

5. Other opportunities to be a period activist:

Subscribe to on-line communication from advocacy organizations such as Women's Voices for the Earth www.womensvoices.org

Stay informed about SIA's priority and the work of SI at the United Nations

Participate in hands-on projects such as those sponsored by the Moon Catcher project.

Donate menstrual hygiene products to food pantries, homeless and domestic violence programs. We will collect them at dinner meetings and distribute.

Go see the Oscar nominated documentary film, "Period: End of Sentence" to learn what one person can do!

Celebrate World Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28!

Add the promised new period emoji (coming next month) in texts and emails.

* Much of the background information is from an excellent article that appeared in Newsweek in 2016
<https://www.newsweek.com/2016/04/29/womens-periods-menstruation-tampons-pads-449833.html>