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## Period Poverty: Achieving Menstrual Equity in Bowling Green, Ohio

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**Period Poverty in the United States: Achieving Menstrual Equity in Bowling Green, Ohio**

Courtney Foerg

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honor's College

At Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for graduation with

University Honors 2022

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## I. Introduction

In high school I first heard the term- “period poverty”. I watched a video featuring a homeless woman roll toilet paper into make-shift tampons and was struck by the horror of facing menstruation without the comforts of products, medication, and a warm bed. It shocked me that as a menstruating individual it had never occurred to me that some people are not able to afford menstrual products. I wanted to do something about it, but the opportunity did not present itself until I came to Bowling Green State University. Through my studies as a social work major, I have learned about the importance of advocacy and social justice. My desire to address period poverty combined with my ongoing knowledge of advocacy were the perfect ingredients to create my honors project. My honors project is an applied research project on period poverty. My research focused on the research questions: *What is period poverty and is it a problem in the United States? How can I create resources to help the Bowling Green community to combat period poverty?* I spent my preparation semester combing the literature on period poverty in the United States and the current resources available to create a literature review proving the existence of period poverty as well as some of the reasons it is so prevalent.

As an applied project, the main goal of my honor’s project was to organize a menstrual drive for hygiene products for menstruating individuals in Bowling Green, OH. I utilized this drive as a way to educate campus and the community on the presence of period poverty in America. Simply holding a menstrual products drive was not enough to combat period poverty which is why the advocacy component was so crucial to my project.

Through my research on period poverty in America, I synthesized the information into educational flyers and social media posts. These advertisements provided people with information on what period poverty is, how it affects them, and what they can do to help.

My goals for the project were:

- a) Organize and facilitate a menstrual drive in Bowling Green, OH
- b) Create awareness for period poverty
- c) Develop a document with steps to create future drives on campus

## II. Literature Review

Period poverty, though a recently coined term, has always been prevalent in society, specifically among low-income individuals. Period poverty is the persistent lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, and sanitary facilities (Alvarez, 2019). This global issue has received relatively little attention in the United States until quite recently. The current efforts to end period poverty in the U.S. are part of the fight for menstrual equity, a concept formulated by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf the author of *Periods Gone Public* (2017), to refer to the belief that all menstruating individuals should have access to menstrual products in order to lead dignified lives just as any non-menstruating individual could. The use of the term “menstruating individuals” is used throughout this paper as menstruation is not exclusive to those who identify as women, furthermore not all women menstruate. However, not all the sources speaking on period poverty use such inclusive language and will refer to women when the correct term is “menstruating individuals” (Period, 2020). The impact of period poverty is felt most significantly in the lives of low-income and homeless menstruating individuals. Menstrual equity also includes menstruating prisoners as until 2019, prisons did not have to make menstrual products free and even now they often only provide one sanitary pad per month. The cost of menstrual products is the most pervasive problem in resolving period poverty and has created a multitude of issues for those who are homeless and living in poverty (Alvarez, 2019; University of The District of Columbia, 2018).

According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, in 2017 about 553,742 people experienced homelessness on any given night and a little less than half of those are menstruating individuals. Homeless shelters cannot afford to provide menstrual products and menstruating individuals have to use other methods such as old socks, torn clothing, and toilet paper often resulting in infection. In 2019, the poverty rate in the U.S. was 10.5 percent equating to roughly 25 million women who have no access to menstrual products as food stamps do not cover them (Alvarez, 2019; Semega et al., 2020). The average menstruating person spends roughly six and a quarter year of their life on their period and products need to be changed every eight hours to avoid infection. Therefore, the average menstruating person would spend about \$1,773 on tampons in their adult life (University of The District of Columbia, 2018).

In addition, many women below the poverty line also have to provide menstrual products for their teenagers. A study in 2019 by the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology following low-income women with children in St. Louis, Missouri found that two-thirds were unable to afford products and had to forgo food to provide products for their teens. For many individuals around the country the decision comes down to eating or buying tampons that week. This dilemma has an extremely negative impact on girls in school. In 2019, Christopher A. Cotropia completed a study which found that of 693 women who recently graduated from a U.S. high school, 45 percent missed school at least one time for their period. This hindrance to education negatively impacts girls' grades which could impact their future and opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty. If students do not have their basic needs met, they cannot be expected to excel or even focus on school. The study also found that 73 percent were embarrassed to request products due to the stigma surrounding menstruation. Girls are often taught that they should hide their periods while at school creating a taboo of menstruation. The

lack of sex education in U.S. middle schools contributes to the stigma surrounding menstruation which thus leads to a lack of advocacy for period poverty (Bobel et al., 2020; Cotropia, 2019).

Public discourse about menstruation is practically non-existent despite the fact that hundreds of millions of women are on their period every single day (Alvarez, 2019). At this time, fourteen states have proposed legislation to provide free menstrual products in schools and the measures passed in four states. Ohio is not one of the states that has proposed menstrual equity legislation (Cotropia, 2019; University of The District of Columbia, 2018). Period poverty has gained recognition around the world as a public health issue during the past ten years. It started from the realization that periods were affecting the gender gap in education as girls were 2.4 percent less likely to attend school when on their periods. Grassroot organizations in third world countries began working to end period poverty, however it has not been recognized within the U.S. until much more recently (Sommer et.al, 2015). In the past few years menstrual equity has caught the attention of the feminist movement because of the tampon tax. The tampon tax allows for menstrual products to be taxed as luxury products which have a higher sales tax. This tax is currently legal in thirty states. There is little definition of what a luxury item is, for example, condoms are not classified as luxury products (Period, 2020). Feminists are calling for the repeal of the tampon tax and Times Magazine named 2016 the “year of the period” as protests formed. However, repealing the tampon tax is not enough to end period poverty. According to Jorene Ooi, a professor at Northwestern University Law School, many suggestions have been made, but each has their own faults. One option is a government funded free-tampon program; however, this can be costly and also infringes on bodily autonomy because the government would regulate the type of products citizens receive. Another idea is for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program otherwise known as food stamps, to

include the purchasing power of menstrual products. This may help with period poverty, but it would not improve the fight for menstrual equity because then menstruating individuals would have less food stamps to use on food than those who do not menstruate. Ooi believes the solution will ultimately have to be a combination of ideas such as a tax credit for menstruating workers and free products for homeless menstruating individuals (Ooi, 2018).

Grace Meng, a New York congresswoman, has spear-headed much of the current legislation for menstrual equity. In May of 2020 she introduced two pieces of legislation to the House of Representatives to bring attention to period poverty during National Period Poverty Awareness Week. The first piece was the Good Samaritan Menstrual Products Act to increase donations to non-profit organizations. At this time, menstrual products are a “class 2” medical product which limits donations because donors are held responsible for any harm caused by the menstrual products. Meng’s bill would mean that donors cannot be held liable for any harm from donations thus increasing manufacturers' likelihood to donate. Meng also sponsored a bill in Congress to provide extra menstrual products funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meng is a strong advocate for providing free products to students, the homeless, and the incarcerated (H.R. 7054, 2nd Cong, 2020; Office of Grace Meng, 2020).

Lack of awareness and education on this issue means that there are few government resources that have been dedicated to addressing period poverty. According to M.L. Stubbs and The Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, this lack of education has always been apparent in our school system and has improved little since sex education was implemented in the early 1900s. Until 1980, menstruation was largely viewed as a negative and traumatic experience that provoked anxiety and loss of self-esteem due to hormone fluctuations. Though it is no longer seen as traumatic, the negative connotations of menstruation have remained in both

male and female perspectives (Stubbs, 2008). Many cultures have celebrations and rituals for a women's menarche, or first period (Sommer et. al., 2015; Stubbs, 2008), however, in the U.S. menstruation is handled as a secret which is largely enforced by sex education.

In a review of the current materials used by public education in the last century, Daci Charlesworth found that the education material used today in public schools has not changed much in its fifty years of use. The content presents conflicting attitudes towards menstruation, defining it as both a natural occurrence and a secret. The material starts out with a scientific explanation of menstruation that presents periods as both trivial and a natural part of life. The materials tell girls to simply ignore the discomfort and that menstruation is a "very commonplace routine" (Charlesworth, 2001, p. 4). However, as the pamphlet continues into a cultural discussion the narrative switches to one of secrecy. Girls are told that when on their period no one should be aware and that menstruation is a "silent and secret journey" (Charlesworth, 2001, p.5). When asked if anyone can tell if a girl is menstruating the answer is, "No, unless you tell someone, it is your secret" (Charlesworth, 2001 p. 5). The pamphlet also gives tips for keeping their periods undetectable and are advised to hide menstruation products in discrete bags. Students are provided with solutions to the worst-case scenario: someone discovering you are menstruating. These conflicting narratives work together to make a girl feel both ashamed and unremarkable for menstruating. The scientific narrative does little to celebrate the shift into puberty for young girls and celebrate what their bodies can do. Simultaneously, the narrative of secrecy makes menstruation a taboo and embarrassing topic. Many menstrual product companies enforce this narrative through their commercials. Menstrual products are rarely shown in advertisements and when they are a light blue liquid is used in place of blood. These

advertisements perpetuate the idea that periods are unhygienic and secretive despite the fact that almost half the population will menstruate at some time in their lives (Charlesworth, 2001).

As for the non-menstruating population, little education is provided on periods. Most schools separate boys and girls during sex education and boys are only provided with a brief account of how menstruation works. This is especially problematic for menstruating boys who will receive no information on the many questions they may have regarding their personal reproductive process. Most boys receive all their information about the female body from male role-models which is often inaccurate. (Stubbs, 2008). In the 21st century the internet has become a more popular place for young teenagers to seek information, however that can also provide many misconceptions and false information. A study by Swenson and Foster in 1995, interviewed 39 public school nurses who taught sex education. Most reported that menstrual content was presented in fifth or sixth grade and was taught in gender separate classrooms. The majority of nurses stated that the male students only received a brief lesson on the emotional aspects of menstruation and an overwhelming majority said that content on sexual health and menstruation is in need of re-evaluation. Despite the fact that this study was completed over twenty years ago calling for change in sex education, little has actually changed in the implementation of sex education. Middle schoolers continue to be separated by biological gender and the content presented remains divided resulting in a lack of understanding for the overall reproductive process suggesting an overdue need for the re-evaluation of the U.S. sex education curriculum (Charlesworth, 2001).

This narrative of secrecy surrounding menstruation contributes to the overall stigma in discussing the issues of period poverty. While many menstruating individuals can afford to purchase the products to keep their periods hidden, most people in low-income communities

cannot, contributing to low self-esteem and a loss of dignity. Without proper education on menstruation for all genders there will continue to be a lack of understanding and appreciation for the menstruation cycle. This lack of understanding is a large factor in why there is little government action in the fight to end period poverty. In order to effectively combat period poverty, there needs to be more government resources to provide products to low-income individuals and homeless shelters. The only way for these measures to be implemented is to increase awareness on the problem of period poverty through education. In addition, to bring an end to the stigma of menstruation we need to increase conversation and normalize periods. The separation between males and females that is introduced in middle school sex education must change in order to foster discourse on ending period poverty (Charlesworth, 2001; Ooi, 2018; Stubbs, 2008).

### III. Methodology

Throughout my project I researched the struggles those in poverty face during their periods and how these struggles affect menstruating individuals especially young girls. I also examined the resources that are currently available and those that are still needed in the United States. My research outlined three main topics. The first topic was defining period poverty, the populations it affects, and its prevalence in the United States. Secondly, my research explored what resources are currently allocated by the government to combat period poverty. Third, it covered how education, or lack thereof, has contributed to our lack of awareness about period poverty.

The sources of my project are limited to U.S. resources and research. My research focused on the U.S. because period poverty greatly differs in other countries especially third world countries. A challenge I faced is the lack of research conducted on period poverty in

America. However, through utilizing BGSU resources I found sufficient studies as well as government documentation of period poverty in America. My research is a combination of peer-reviewed studies, proposed bills, and statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. It is important to note some of the sources used focused only on women; however, not all menstruating individuals are female, and my paper will use inclusive language even if the sources do not.

For the second phase of my project, I developed a plan to hold my drive and start the social media campaign. The information found through my research was used to create advertisements/educational content. I used the website Canva to create engaging posts for social media. I created a social media account on Facebook and Instagram to post my weekly content six weeks before the drive. I brought followers to the accounts by sharing a poster on my personal social media accounts, the honors college newsletter, the Health and Human Services newsletter, the Center for Women and Gender Equity at BGSU's social media, and the Student Organization of Social Work's social media (see appendix B). I also generated interest through the news. I reached out to the BG Independent Media and was interviewed for an article about my project (see appendix D). I also wrote a blog post about period poverty for the school blog BG Authors (see appendix D). Then I posted weekly content to educate my new following on what period poverty is. As I neared the drive, I began posting content to advertise the drive as well as reaching out to all the newsletters and organizations to advertise a second time. I also printed physical posters which I placed on campus in the Education Building, Student Union, and Olscamp Building (see Appendix B).

To hold the drive, I reached out to a new food drive on campus that was looking to provide menstrual products and asked if they would like to partner with me. I then secured a CURS grant to purchase the bin for the physical drive as well as a starting amount of menstrual

products. I knew that people may not be inclined to go to campus to donate especially given COVID-19, so I also created a donation page. I choose to use the website Givebutter because it did not take a profit from the donations and allowed me to create a URL and QR code to share the link (see Appendix E).

#### IV. Results

The results of my research can be seen in my literature review and the culmination of that research can be seen in the appendix advertisements. The topics fell under three categories: education, starting conversations, and sharing resources (see Appendix C). Education topics included: the impact of COVID-19 on period poverty, an interview on people of color and period poverty, steps to ending period poverty, which institutions are most affected by period poverty, shame and menstruation, and a basic guide to period poverty. Starting conversation topics included: share the story of your first period, would you rather, and period myth busters. Sharing resources topics were a graphic on the Period Doctor, Dr. Charis Chambers, and an advertisement for BGSU's FORGE. The Instagram and Facebook pages garnered 163 followers from both North America and Europe and engagement data shows that the posts reached 583 people. My two articles do not have exact numbers but were able to reach the greater Bowling Green community and were the advertisements that I received the most feedback on.

The drive was extremely successful. The donation page had eighteen donors and raised \$1,220. The donation bin had an estimated eight donors plus the products purchased with my CURS grant equaling 2,000 menstrual products. I price compared multiple wholesale websites and used the raised money to purchase an additional 7,750

products. The number of products purchased would, on average, cover 541 months of menstruation.

V. Challenges and Strengths

The main challenge I faced with this project was finding where the goals fit in the BGSU community. After already conceiving the idea and beginning the process of my project, I learned that there was a new campus organization called FORGE. FORGE is also working to end period poverty on campus and place products in campus bathrooms. To overcome this challenge I joined the organization so I could blend our efforts in order to make both our projects stronger. I was able to build a relationship with the executive team and while we did not end up doing the project together, we both found ways to support each other's efforts. We both shared information about the other on our social media and to our following. Furthermore, as FORGE is a club and does not have as much time to devote to their efforts, I decided to document my findings and steps so that they can use the information to better their future drives. At the conclusion of my project, I will be presenting them with the document which they are expecting. Another struggle was getting people to follow the social media at first. I overcame this by sharing the social media accounts on my personal accounts and asking family and friends to share them as well. Once I got a steady flow of followers the account started getting suggested to others and grew from there.

A key strength of this project was the organization. I had a schedule that I followed for completing tasks as well as a posting schedule to keep track of what content I was putting up each week. I also kept a checklist to make sure I was meeting all of the goals I had set. Finally, I had a separate spreadsheet to keep track of donations so that I

could analyze my results at the end. Having two methods of donation helped increase the donation amount significantly. The donation page allowed donors who did not live in Bowling Green to support the drive and also meant that people did not have to make the extra effort to go purchase and drop off items. As soon as people learned about my project online, they could click the donation link and donate immediately. The donation link accrued more than triple the amount of products than the drop-off box.

## VI. Implications for the Future and Conclusion

The most direct implication of my drive will be the BGSU students, faculty, and staff who will benefit from the donations. The almost 9,700 products will cover 541 months of menstruation. The document synthesizing what I learned will be the legacy of this project as FORGE will continue to benefit from the knowledge for many drives to come. The document illustrates all the advertisement methods I used, the types of advertisements, the importance of the donation link, and the websites that I utilized. It also listed the websites I purchased my products from after researching the most cost-efficient wholesale companies which will allow FORGE to make the most of the future money raised (see Appendix A).

While my drive only benefited individuals in Bowling Green, OH, through the use of social media, my advertisements expanded beyond this community and educated people across the nation. The advertisements were the highlights of my research which included the most impactful statistics and information to implore people to donate. It is hard to quantify the impact that the drive had because some of the best results have been the conversations. I have had countless people reach out to tell me that they never knew what period poverty was or to share a connection to policy they have realized is needed

because of my advertisements. These conversations are the key to starting the fight for menstrual equity. Widespread awareness of period poverty combined with the tools I refined during my project are the path towards ending period poverty in the United States.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A. Instructions sheet

The instructions sheet was the third goal of my project designed for the purpose of recreating the drive in the future.

#### A. Planning

1. Choose donation location
2. choose week for drive
3. CURS grant
  - a. apply for a CURS grant to cover funds of project and bulk up donations
4. create donation page
  - a. Givebutter does not take any proceeds and creates a shareable link and QR code
5. secure drop-off location
  - a. go to Conference and Event Services in BTSU
  - b. purchase large bin with lid
  - c. create large poster to label bin

#### B. Advertisements

1. acquire social media platforms- Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter
2. create poster
  - a. Canva- free design website
  - b. include location, dates, purpose, QR code, and brief information on period poverty
3. create educational content
  - a. share weekly information about period poverty as a way to advertise drive

b. find ways to engage followers

a. myth busters, conversation starters, would you rather

b. give each week a purpose- educate, share a resource, start a

conversation

4. Seek places to advertise

a. Social Media

1. Center for Women and Gender Equity (email: [jamielw@bgsu.edu](mailto:jamielw@bgsu.edu))

2. post on personal social media platforms

3. Student Organization of Social Workers (dm bgsu\_sosw)

b. Campus Newsletters

1. Honors College Scroll (email: [spatzg@bgsu.edu](mailto:spatzg@bgsu.edu))

2. Health and Human Services Newsletter (email: [potterm@bgsu.edu](mailto:potterm@bgsu.edu))

3. Campus Update (<https://www.bgsu.edu/marketing-and-communications/campus-update-submission.html>)

e. posters

1. Education building, student union, and Olscamp

f. News

1. BG Falcon Media

2. BG Authors (write a blog post about period poverty literature email: [mkross@bgsu.edu](mailto:mkross@bgsu.edu))

3. BG Independent News (email: [mclaughlinjan40@gmail.com](mailto:mclaughlinjan40@gmail.com))

g. share with professors

C. Purchase

1. Boxed and Contar
  - a. wholesale websites with free shipping and no sales tax to buy bulk menstrual products
2. Walmart also has bulk products

### Appendix B. Advertisements

Below are examples of my advertisements for the menstrual products drive.



Figure A: Poster placed in physical locations on campus.



Figure B: Online poster shared on social media.



Figure C: Poster advertising where to drop-off menstrual products in Student Union

### Appendix C. Social Media Content

Below are examples of the social media campaign posts to educate the public on what period poverty is and how to fight for menstrual equity.

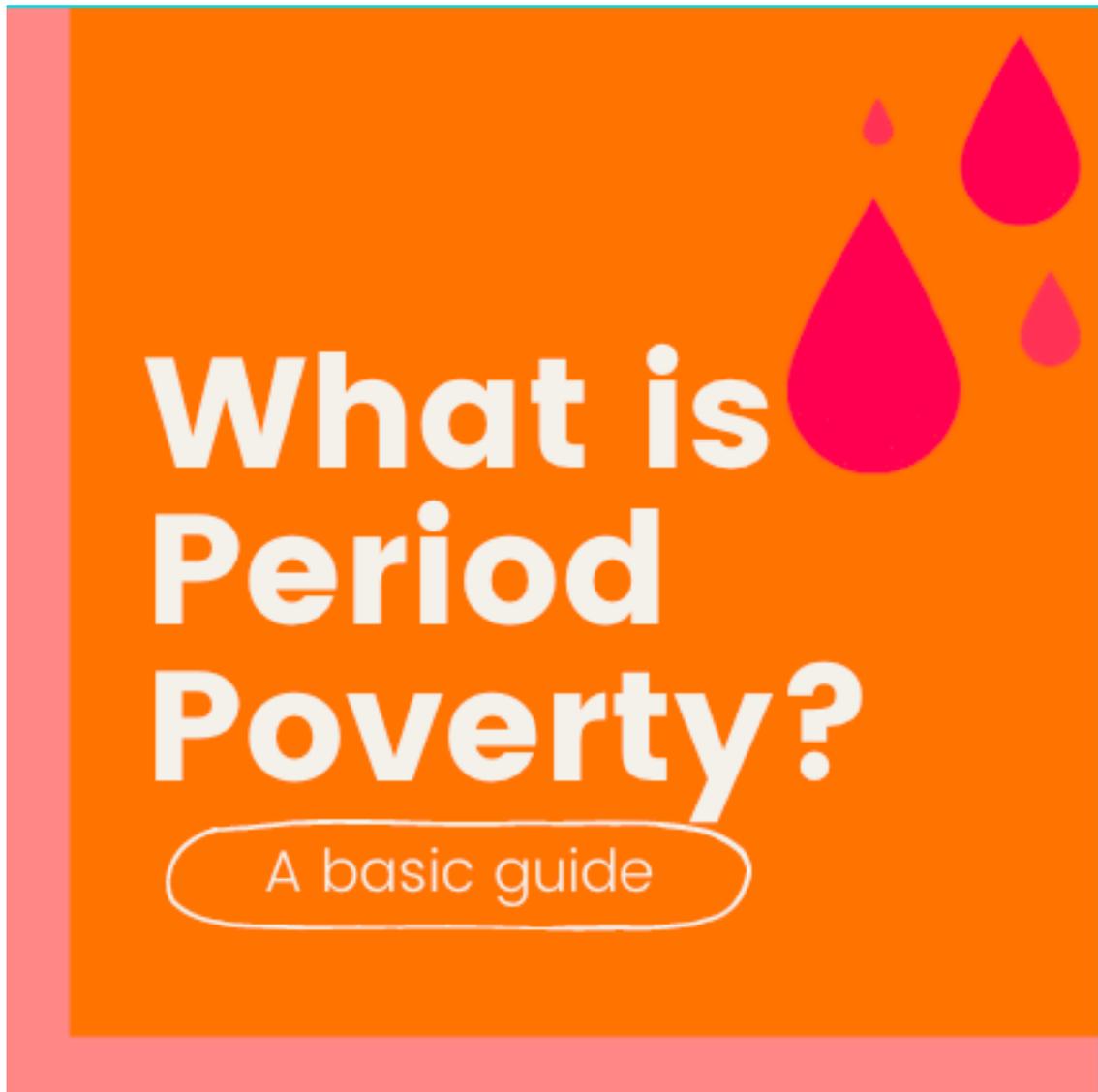


Figure D.1: Title page of an education advertisement

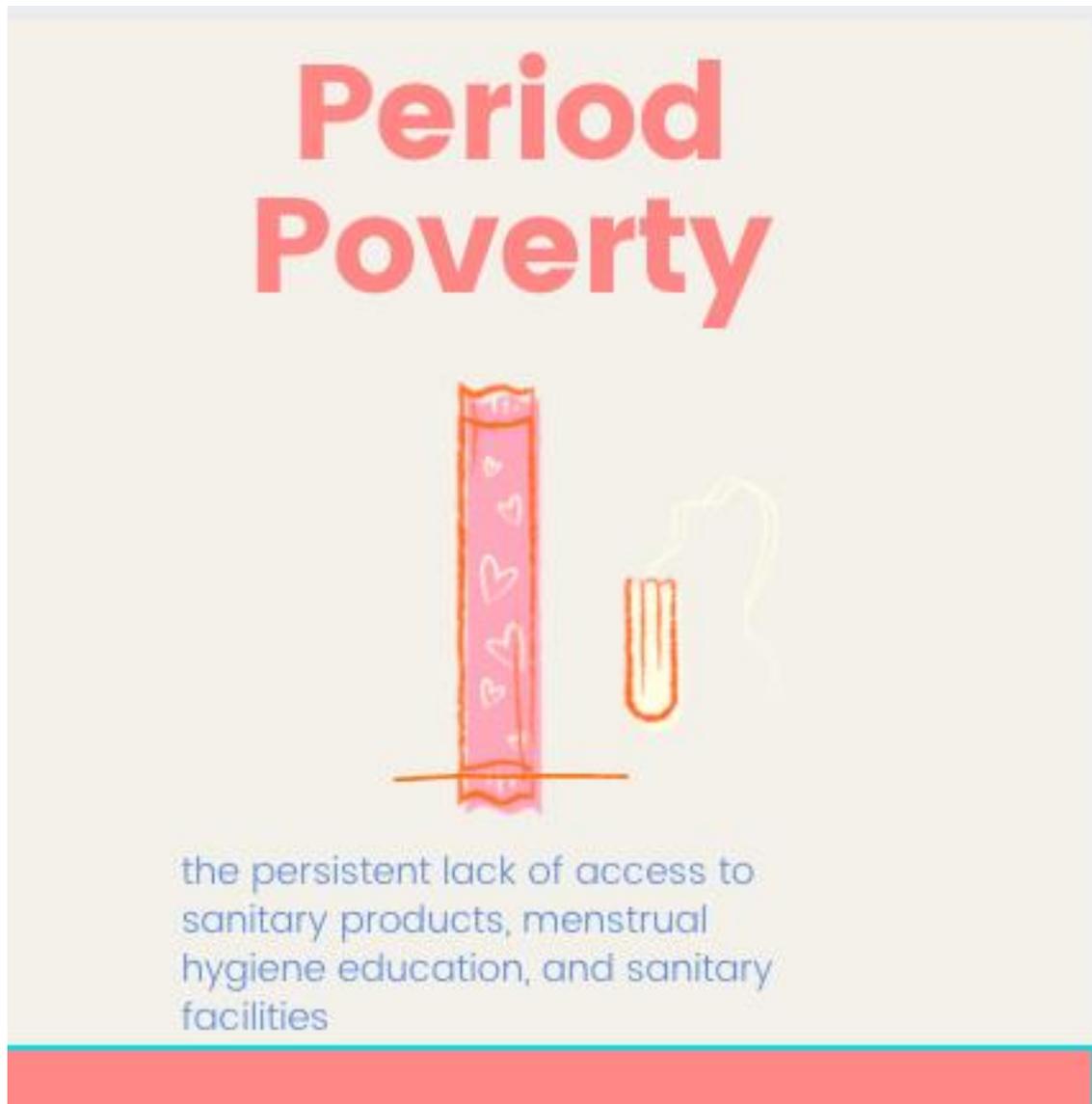


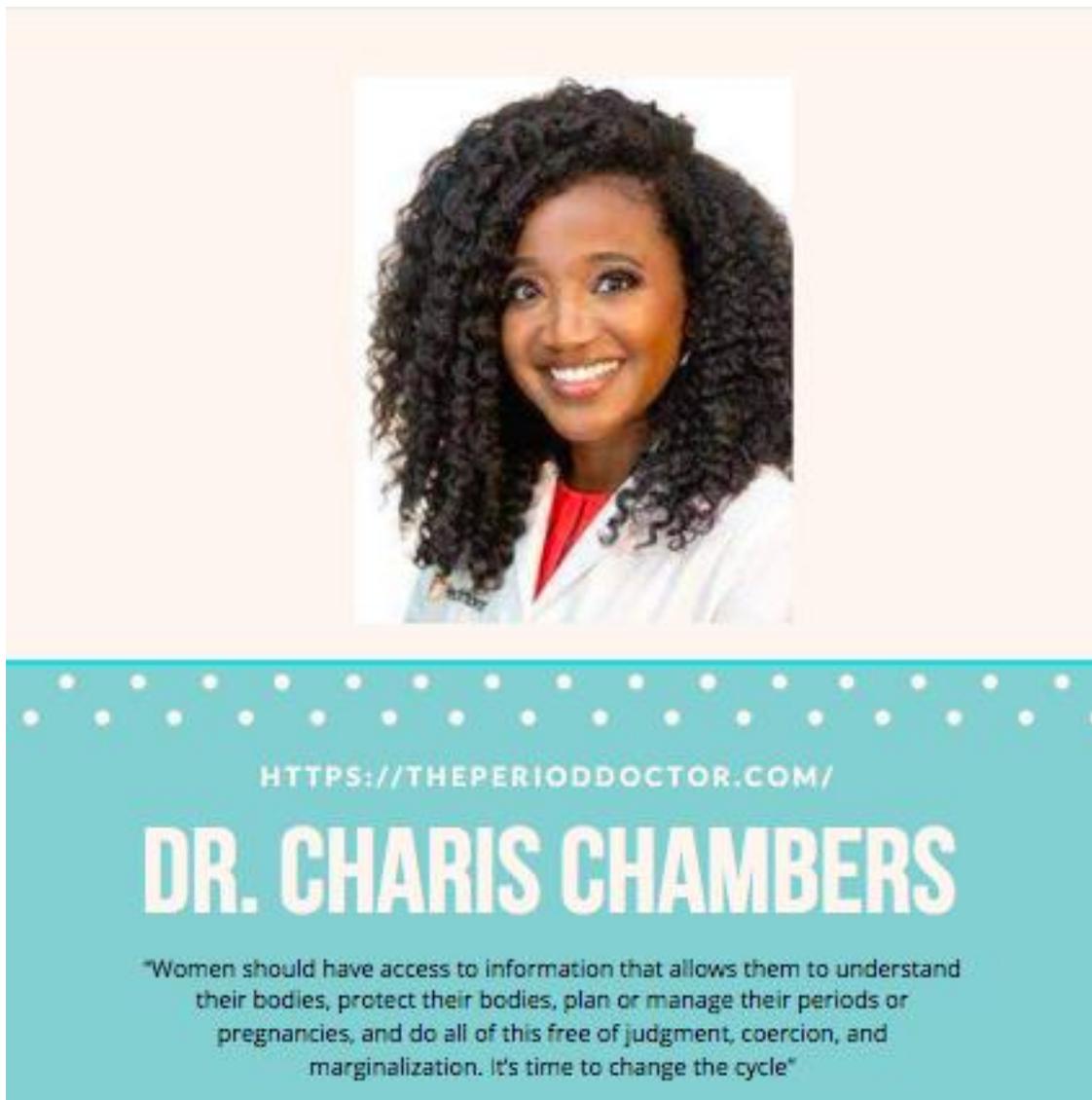
Figure D.2: page 2 of education advertisement



Figure D.3: page 3 of advertisement



Figure E: Another example of an education advertisement.



The advertisement features a portrait of Dr. Charis Chambers, a Black woman with voluminous curly hair, smiling and wearing a white lab coat over a red top. Below the portrait is a teal banner with a row of white dots at the top. The banner contains the following text:

[HTTPS://THEPERIODOCTOR.COM/](https://theperiordoctor.com/)

**DR. CHARIS CHAMBERS**

"Women should have access to information that allows them to understand their bodies, protect their bodies, plan or manage their periods or pregnancies, and do all of this free of judgment, coercion, and marginalization. It's time to change the cycle"

Figure F: An example of an advertisement designed to share resources.



Figure G: An example of an advertisement designed to start a conversation.

## Appendix D. News Coverage

Local news coverage of the menstrual products drive.

# Taboo topic – ‘period poverty’ affects millions of women

**TOPICS:** BGSU Honors College Period Poverty



Courtney Foerg works on "period poverty" project at BGSU.

**POSTED BY:** JAN LARSON MCLAUGHLIN SEPTEMBER 30, 2021

**By JAN LARSON MCLAUGHLIN**

Figure H: Title page of article with BG Independent Media titled “Taboo Topic- ‘period poverty’ affects millions of women” by Jan Larson McLaughlin

*BG Authors*

## Period Poverty and the Strive for More Research

👤 Bg / 📅 October 11, 2021 / 📁 Uncategorized

Courtney Foerg – Contributor

Figure I: Title page of blog post for BG Authors titled “Period Poverty and the Strive for More Research” written to advertise the drive.

### Appendix E: Donation Page

A visual of what the donation page on Givebutter looked like.

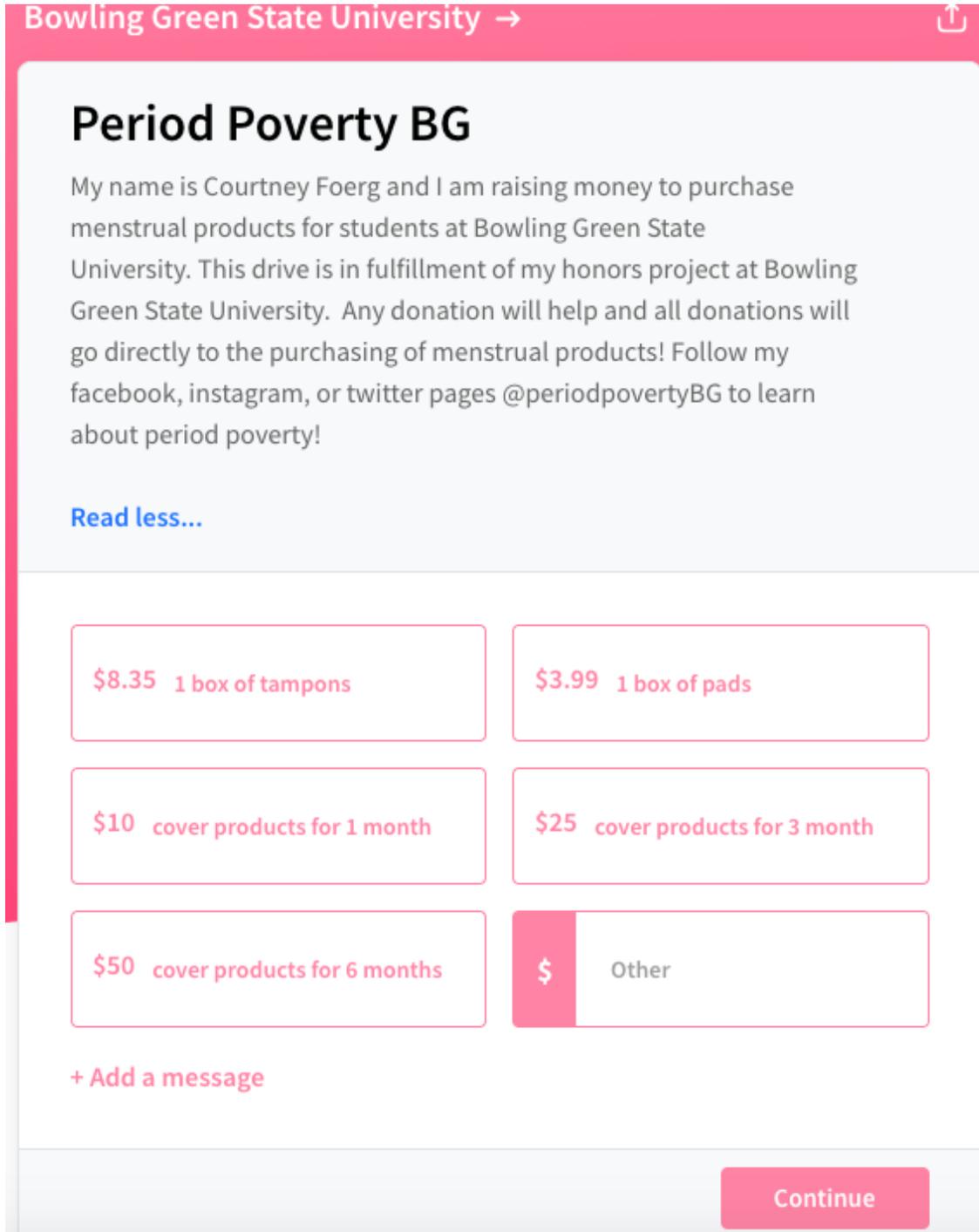


Figure J