

The “Tampon Tax”: Public Discourse of Policies Concerning Menstrual Taboo

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The “tampon tax” is a policy in which feminine hygiene products are taxed as “luxury goods” despite the fact that many countries exempt “necessary goods”—such as basic groceries and medical products—from sales tax. In the summer of 2015, the Canadian parliament took steps to exempt feminine hygiene products. Academic literature supports the idea that menstrual taboo, which stigmatizes open discussion of menstruation, has contributed to the global pervasiveness of gendered taxation policies like the tampon tax. This study examines arguments for and against the tampon tax as well as how menstrual taboo plays into the public discourse in formal (e.g., parliamentary debate and news reporting) and informal (e.g. Twitter) platforms through content analysis. The study reveals trends among certain speakers. Politicians were more likely to use degendered and sterile language. Activists are significantly more likely to break taboo by openly discussing menstruation and using explicitly gendered dialogues. Laypeople engage in the conversation by sharing links and expanding the reach of public discourse. Greater understanding of the significance of menstrual taboo in public discourse reveals important insights into how taboos influence public policy.

Keywords: Tampon Tax, Menstrual Taboo

Introduction

In 1978, Gloria Steinem wrote an essay titled *If Men Could Menstruate* in which she posited a world where male privilege applied to the process of menstruation. In this hypothetical world, menstruation would be elevated to an enviable experience which would provide prestige and power to men. “Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free” (Steinem, 1978, p.110). Steinem’s theory that sanitary supplies would be free and subsidized by the government alludes to the significance gender plays in the creation of public policy. In the real world, menstrual products are only used by women and non-binary individuals (gender identities which are not exclusively masculine or feminine—for example, some trans men menstruate). Both of these groups have lower levels of representation in government worldwide. Subsequently, the taboo surrounding menstruation has created gendered and marginalizing tax systems in many countries. Why does this policy exist? What do arguments for and against this policy look like? How does menstrual taboo manifest itself in the discussion surrounding the tampon tax? This paper will examine these questions through a review of the literature and content analysis of public discourse on the topic.

Overview of the Tax

On July 1, 2015, Canada officially took steps to remove the tampon tax—a policy where feminine hygiene products are classified as a luxury item and consequently taxed at a higher rate than items deemed “necessary” and thus exempt from sales tax—across the country. The tampon tax is different in every country depending on local tax policies. In Canada, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) had certain

exemptions available for necessary items, such as basic groceries and medical supplies. But up until this summer, feminine hygiene products like tampons were classified as luxury items and therefore taxed at a higher rate. For years, activists and legislators in Canada have been trying to change this gendered taxation policy (Canadian Menstruators, n.d.).

Similar policies exist in Australia, where the Value Added Tax (VAT) sets feminine hygiene products at a higher rate. In the United Kingdom, the GST taxes feminine hygiene products at a reduced rate of 5% and other countries, such as France, Malaysia, and Slovakia, follow suit (BBC World, 2015). In fact, all countries in the European Union (except Ireland) tax tampons because there was a specific exemption in place before the EU reformed its taxation policy and required minimum percentages for the VAT tax. Activists in all of these countries are starting petitions, conducting demonstrations, and confronting politicians about these policies. The outcry is over unequal policies towards women. Since only women and non-binary people menstruate, these policies target a certain portion of the population based on a biological imperative. A member of Canadian Parliament remarked, “taxing feminine hygiene products is blatant gender discrimination” (41st Parliament, 2nd Session, 2015).

Understanding this policy in the United States can be a little difficult because sales tax is a power of the states, not the federal government. There are many varied nuances in taxation policies in each state. *Fusion*, an online news source targeted towards young people, released a map which outlines the tampon tax in the U.S. According to this map, only Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and New Jersey have actively chosen not to tax tampons (Hillin, 2015). Most states—like the countries listed above—tax “tangible personal property,” but outline specific exemptions that are considered necessities. This list

often includes basic groceries, food stamp purchases, medical purchases, and in some states, clothes. The *Fusion* article also outlines a few notable taxation policies. For example, in Colorado, pregnancy tests are exempt, and in Vermont there is no tax on disposable heating pads. Similarly, North Dakota and Connecticut both exempt incontinence pads. Perhaps, most notably, Alabama has “tax holidays” in the summer when everyday items, such as clothes, computers, art supplies, and books, can be purchased without tax, yet tampons are not included on the list (Hillin, 2015).

A new piece of legislation, HB 202-The Hygiene Tax Act, was recently proposed (and rapidly defeated) in the 2016 Utah State Legislature. The Act legislated for adding tampons, maxi pads, incontinence pads, and diapers to the list of items exempt from sales and use tax. Whenever a new piece of legislation is proposed, it must be accompanied by a fiscal note that outlines the potential fiscal impact should the policy be enacted. The fiscal note accompanying HB 202 estimates that the new exemption would save consumers who already purchase these products \$1,930,000 in the fiscal year 2017. That means the tax would also reduce revenue by \$1,350,800 for the state and approximately \$580,000 of revenue from local option sales and use tax, which are the taxes imposed by cities and counties (Hygiene Tax Act, 2016). As a rough estimation, if sales and use tax is currently at 6.85% (Utah State Tax Commission, 2015) in Salt Lake City then a menstruator is paying \$0.50 extra for every box of tampons (based on the \$6 generic box of 40 tampons at Walgreens); \$0.21 for every pack of pads (based on the \$3 generic package of 18 Ultra-thin pads at Walgreens); and \$2.74 for every menstrual cup (based on the Lunette menstrual cup at Walgreens) (“Search results for ‘tampon,’ ‘pads and liners,’ and ‘menstrual cup,’” n.d.). While these prices may seem small for an individual package, the costs add up over time and create a difficult burden for those in poverty. Representative Susan Duckworth (D-Magna), the sponsor of the bill, estimated women in Utah spend about \$1,800 on the tax alone in their lifetime (*Hearings on HB0202*, 2016) and the exemption would have saved consumers about \$30 a year (Golden, 2016).

There is disagreement in the feminist community over whether the fight against the tampon tax is an appropriate use of resources. *Cosmopolitan*, a prominent pop culture magazine for young women, recently published an article explaining the tampon tax (Gupta, 2015). Samantha Allen, a journalist for *The Daily Beast*, responded with an article titled “The ‘Tampon Tax’ Outrage is Overblown” (Allen, 2015). In this article she argues that “presenting the issue [in the United States] as an obvious and pressing instance of discrimination is a little misleading given the bizarre nuances of state tax codes” (Allen, 2015, para. 4). Allen points out that tampons have not once been singled out as an exemption because most states exempt other personal health products as well. For example, New Jersey and Pennsylvania both exempt toilet paper. Minnesota exempts dialysis equipment, breast pumps, and wheelchair lifts, while Maryland exempts baby oil and baby powder. Allen argues the tampon tax should garner no more momentum than the “toilet paper tax”—all but seven states tax toilet paper. On the other hand, Allen acknowledges the gendered nature of tampons, but sees this as a further complication because there are many other personal items used exclusively by women including vaginal creams, pregnancy tests, and breast pumps. Her strongest point is the assertion that the energies of feminists would perhaps be better spent making feminine hygiene products more accessible to people experiencing homelessness.

However, this argument and similar opinions opposing the tampon tax fail to acknowledge the intersection of both the gendered nature of feminine hygiene products and the necessity behind their use. The taboo surrounding menstruation, as shown in the literature and public discourse, necessitates further attention to the tampon tax.

Menstrual Taboo

The taboo surrounding menstruation is so strong that politicians can easily avoid the topic, thereby neglecting the interests of menstruators. Many myths exist in cultures across the world that perpetuates the idea that menstruation is unclean and unsafe. For instance, in traditional Judaism, physical contact with a menstruating woman is forbidden, and early Western cultures believed that menstruating women made meat spoil. Islam, like many other religions, placed restrictions on what religious activities a woman could engage in while menstruating. For example, women could not enter a shrine or mosque and were not allowed to pray or fast during Ramadan (Kaundal, 2014). The taboo that discourages open discussion of menstruation is largely at fault for allowing these myths to perpetuate into the 21st century. The taboo is evident in Western society today. For example, the recent 2014 introduction of the Apple Watch HealthKit allowed users to track everything from height, weight, and body mass index to sodium intake, medication usage, and blood alcohol content. But originally it did not include a period tracker, despite claims by the company’s technology executive that it would track anything in which users would be interested (Duhaime-Ross, 2014).

This taboo is a symptom of the greater gender inequalities that exist globally. “Of the 1.3 billion people worldwide in extreme poverty, 70% of them are women or girls. Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours, but earn only 10 percent of the world’s income. They own less than one percent of the world’s property” (Project Concern International, 2015, para. 3). The fight toward gender equality is complicated, and the list of necessary advances is long. People all over the world are fighting for equal protection for women under the law from voting and driving to receiving health care and equal pay. Combating the taboo surrounding menstruation is one step in the right direction toward empowering women as equal participants in our society.

Erving Goffman’s (1963) book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* defines stigma as “an attribute which is deeply discrediting” (p. 3). In essence, a stigma defines the possessor of the attribute as “other” and in most cases “lesser.” Goffman separates stigma into three categories: physical (deformity, scars, etc.), characterological (unemployment, addiction, criminality), and tribal (any characteristic from a distinct group identity, e.g. sex, age, race, religion, etc.) (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). For Goffman, social behavior surrounding stigma is characterized by distancing—avoidance of the “other” by the “normal.” Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler argue that menstrual blood fits all three categories as a stigmatizing mark according to Goffman’s list (2013, p. 10). Physically, menstrual blood is viewed as an abomination; it is unclean, disgusting, and more aversive than other bodily fluids. Visible marks of menstruation, such as leakage of menstrual blood, are a characterological flaw that discredits femininity and signals poor judgment. Further, menstruation is a tribal stigma, because it is limited to women and girls who are thus marked “as different from the normative and privileged male body” (Johnston-Robledo and

Chrisler, 2013, p. 10). According to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler “the stigma and taboo of menstruation both reflects and contributes to women’s lower social status,” (2013, p. 13). Likewise, the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation are the cause for and an effect of the tampon tax policies that exist around the world.

Public Discourse

Goffman (1963) recognized that stigmatized individuals often seek out others who carry the same stigma. They engage with each other through books, magazines, and movies. The world today is a different from Goffman’s milieu in the 1960s. Now possessors of stigma connect through the Internet. The movement to “axe the tampon tax” (a phrase commonly used in petitions for removal of the tax) is largely driven by individuals and organizations on social media and in the news (Liley, n.d.). Menstruators, activists, those in support of the tax, and those against it engage in conversation about these public policies, which has been a catalyst for action. However, the public discourse comes in many different forms. Some conversations about the tampon tax are strongly in favor of exemption, while others are negative and derogatory toward women. On one had there are informal spaces where this discussion takes place, largely on social media sites, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. On the other, there are formalized settings like the discourse that takes place in government debates and news outlets online, in print, on television, and on the radio. It is exceedingly important to understand the power of public discourse. Public discourse represents public opinions, popular arguments, and dominating trends in conversation. Research on the discussion surrounding the tampon tax can lead to a greater understanding of gendered public policies and gendered social movements that are the fuel in the fight for gender equality.

Methods

There is much to learn from how the tampon tax is discussed in public discourse. Content analysis illustrates how arguments for and against removal of the tax are constructed as well as how menstrual taboos influence discussion of the tampon tax. For this research, the content is divided into two categories for analysis: formal discourse—including BBC News reports and online transcripts of Canadian parliamentary debates—and informal discourse sourced from Twitter. Both BBC News and Twitter were selected as sources because of their international reach. At the time of analysis, BBC News was the most populated news source discussing the tampon tax. Most mainstream news sources in the United States had not picked up many stories yet. Both BBC News reports and Tweets were collected by searching for the term “tampon tax.” All results from BBC News were coded and Tweets were limited to May 2015 because they were most relevant for comparison to the parliamentary debates in Canada, which took place on May 8, 2015. Most codes were determined before content analysis began, but coding was adjusted throughout analysis to allow new trends to emerge. The codes were developed to answer the following research questions:

Q1: How do the arguments for and against the “tampon tax” differ in the formal and informal arenas of public discourse?

Q2: How does the taboo surrounding menstruation manifest itself in the formal and informal discourse of the “tampon tax”?

Codes were determined as follows:

Table 1.
Tampon Tax Discussion in Public Discourse

CODES	EXPLANATION
Formal or informal discourse?	
BBC News, parliamentary debate, Tweet	Each source was coded based on its
Country of reference	
UK, Australia, Canada, France	Country could be determined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct reference within the text • A place specific URL (for example: .ca, .uk) • Reference to a prominent political figure or party from a specific country • Identifying characteristics in the bio user-name, or profile picture of the user *Coding as “France” was excluded from the last criterion because of a trend at the time of coding to use the French flag in profile pictures as a form of solidarity with France after a recent terror attack.
For removal or against removal of the tax?	
For removal of tax	If the content of the text was arguing in support of removing or repealing the tax it was coded as “for removal of tax.”
Against removal of tax	Coded as “against removal of the tax” if content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made an argument for why the tax should not be or does not need to be repealed • Explicitly referred to a politician who did not support removal of the tax • Made an argument for either more or less taxes on specific items and belittled the need to change the tax specifically on feminine hygiene products
Is menstrual taboo present?	
Breaking menstrual taboo-positive view of menstruation	Content was coded as “breaking taboo” if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were pictures of feminine hygiene products • There was specific reference to the experience of menstruation (for example, talking about cramps or bleeding, emphasis on menstruation as a biological process) • There was specific reference to menstrual taboo
Negative view of menstruation-menstrual taboo present	Content was coded as “feeding into menstrual taboo” if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were obvious negative connotations to the use of the term “menstruation” • Anger over the prevalence of discussion of the “tampon tax” because it is gross, disgusting, etc.

CODES (CONT).	EXPLANATION (CONT.)
Does the argument acknowledge gender discrimination in the “tampon tax”?	
Gendered discussion	Content was coded as a “gendered discussion” if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content explicitly referenced women, transgender men, or menstruators • Made comparisons between gendered products (ex. comparing the taxation of tampons to the taxation of Viagra) • Explicitly acknowledged gender inequality
Degendered discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referred to feminism or sexism • Made reference to female sexual organs Content was coded as “degendered” if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparisons were made between feminine hygiene products and ungendered products (ex. compared tampons to maraschino cherries, wedding cake, etc.) • Intentionally removed the argument from the realm of gender by ridiculing or mocking activists, arguing that other taxation policies are more important, etc.
Did the source link to outside sources?	
Link to outside source	If there was a link to an outside source the content was coded to allow trends in how the discourse is used to emerge.
Miscellaneous	
Indecipherable	If content was in a different language or content could not be understood because of grammar or spelling it was coded as “indecipherable.”
Political capital	If content of source discussed politicians as leveraging their stance on the “tampon tax” in order to gain voters it was coded as “political capital.”
Poverty link	If the content made an explicit reference to the generally lower socioeconomic status of women or the hardship of the tax for people in poverty it was coded as “linking poverty.”

Results

Formal Discourse

BBC News reports returned 27 results, 21 of which were relevant. Interestingly, although Canada is the only country that had actually repealed the tax, there was no BBC World News coverage regarding Canada. Thirteen of the sources discussed the movement in the UK, seven were focused on Australia, and one profiled France. Several themes emerged through this analysis. First, there are two speakers emerging from this movement in formal discourse: activists and politicians. The types of discourse vary greatly between the two camps. Activists, including Mia Lethbridge (who made a music video parody of a popular rap song about the movement to end the tax) and Subeta Vimalarajah (who started the most recent petition to the government in Australia), tend to use gendered and emotional arguments. Lethbridge was quoted as saying, “It’s ridiculous that menstruating Australians have to pay an extra 10% in tax every time they get their period...it’s unfair to class tampons as non-essential items” (Wong and Jones, 2015, para. 5). Similarly, Vimalarajah said:

I’ve definitely had the experience of going to the supermarket to buy a box of tampons and being frustrated that I need to pay for them, but more significantly that the government is making a profit on my period. (Vimalarajah, 2015, para. 8)

These arguments clearly acknowledge that the tax is gendered in nature and that menstruators are negatively affected by the tax. Language, such as “unfair,” “ridiculous,” “frustrated,” and “annoyed,” points to a more personal and emotional connection to the argument. In addition, the activists were the only sources who acknowledged the role of menstrual taboo in the continued existence of this policy. Vimalarajah wrote on her blog:

The reason this has not been addressed already and why sanitary products were originally not exempt is either because politicians are too awkward to confront the reality of periods or they just want us to literally pay for them. Either way, it’s sexist. (Vimalarajah, 2015, para. 6)

In an interview with Tessa Wong and Anna Jones, Lethbridge discussed menstrual taboo:

To be able to talk about the tax openly the taboo conversation needs to happen—that’s where the tax comes from, that’s where the problem lies—in these deeply entrenched hush hush attitude [sic]. ‘I’m sick of feeling like it’s something I should be ashamed of.’ (Wong and Jones, 2015, para. 15)

No other sources acknowledge menstrual taboo so explicitly. Breaking the taboo was clearly powerful, because both activists used the taboo to their advantage. Vimalarajah held a large tampon covered with signatures when she first confronted the Australian finance minister, and Lethbridge showed images of used menstrual products throughout her music video.



Figure 1. Wong and Jones (2015)

In contrast, when politicians are quoted throughout news reports, their language is often degendered and limited simply to a discussion of taxation policy. In some instances politicians come out in favor of removal of the tax, which often results in one of two options: either they are in favor of removal, but subsequently explain why they are prevented from acting (e.g. federal policies, other political parties, etc.), or they make promises and other sources criticize them for pandering to women voters. Despite the latter, no one (with the exception of Canadian politicians) has followed through on such promises. Almost always these discussions are sanitized and do not acknowledge the role of gender in the policy. John Howard, the original sponsor of the VAT tax in Australia, dismissed an exemption for tampons in 2000 “on the grounds that it would lead to too many other exemptions” (“Australia tampon tax,” 2015, para. 20). British Prime Minister David Cameron was quoted as saying, “Some VAT things you can change. Other VAT things, if they’re linked to other products, it’s quite difficult to do within the framework of European laws and I can’t remember the answer” (“Election 2015”, 2015, para. 16). The politicians did not acknowledge menstruation or gender inequalities. One article in which politicians were quoted in favor of removal of the tax stressed that the conversation was taking place within the context of an election and noted that other political parties running had not commented on the issue.

One interesting trend in the news reports was the repeated comparison to other products. There were two types of comparisons being made: gendered comparisons (comparisons to Viagra and men’s underwear) and degendered comparisons (sunscreen, children’s car seats). The gendered comparisons were usually made by politicians and activists in favor of removal and the degendered comparisons were made by politicians against removal of the tax and the news sources themselves (Vimalarajah, 2015; Wong and Jones, 2015; and “Australian tampon tax,” 2015). To illustrate, one article listed items in the European Union which are taxed at the same 5% rate as feminine hygiene products: mobility aids for the elderly, smoking cessation products, maternity pads, car seats for children, solar panels, and energy supplies. Nowhere in the article is there a justification of how these items are similar to an item which is essential for half of the population based on gender (“Tampons aren’t the only product” 2015).

The other side of the formal discourse was the Canadian parliamentary debate on May 8, 2015. Irene Mathysen, a member of the opposition and author of the most recent motion to remove the tax, read for the New Democrat party about elimination of the GST from feminine hygiene products. The motion began by discussing victories for gender equity in Canada and then discussed “challenges,” such as the tampon tax, the wage gap, reproductive rights, the rights of the First Nations, and the need for a higher federal minimum wage. Mathysen specifically thanked the Canadian Menstruators, a group that started a petition and social movement to remove the tax and provide menstrual products to those who need them. Interestingly, she explicitly acknowledged identity intersections by emphasizing the greater marginalization of women who disproportionately live in poverty, First Nations women (i.e. underprivileged women of indigenous orientation), and transgender people. She remarked, “It may seem small but a tax on tampons, pads, panty liners, menstrual cups, and alternatives can add up quickly when combined with the systematic challenges

faced by many women, trans people, gender-queer people, and other menstruators in terms of income, housing, and economic stability” (Mathysen, 2015, section 1005).

Table 2:
Frequencies of code intersections by country

All Tweets 591	For removal of tax: 134	Gendered: 91	Breaking taboo: 10
	Against removal of tax: 21	Degendered: 7	Taboo present: 0
Australia 42	For removal of tax: 11	Gendered: 4	Breaking taboo: 1
	Against removal of tax: 0	Degendered: 0	Taboo present: 0
Canada 276	For removal of tax: 43	Gendered: 39	Breaking taboo: 1
	Against removal of tax: 13	Degendered: 3	Taboo present: 0
UK 52	For removal of tax: 23	Gendered: 10	Breaking taboo: 1
	Against removal of tax: 0	Degendered: 0	Taboo present: 1

In fact, this discussion was the most sophisticated and well-rounded argument revealed through the analysis. Similar to the news sources, comparisons of degendered products emerged as an important technique to emphasize the ridiculousness of the taxation policy. The legislators compared feminine hygiene products to cocktail cherries, wedding cakes, chocolate chips, perfume, and Viagra as well as “necessities,” such as diapers, incontinence products, and STD testing kits. The argument from those opposing the motion was limited to political grandstanding and criticism of Mathysen’s party’s previous taxation policies. It would be unpopular to explicitly oppose the motion, so the issue turned instead to a complete opposition of political ideologies. Here again, gendered and nuanced arguments were used to fight for removal of the tax, while sanitized and unspecific arguments were presented on the opposing side.

It is noteworthy that both the news sources and the parliamentary debates made reference to popular social movements and informal discourse arenas including the Canadian Menstruator community and discussion of the “tampon tax” in YouTube videos and on Twitter. Clearly, informal discourse is influential and salient in discussion of the issue.

Informal Discourse

Of the 591 tweets coded, 54% were identified with Canada. This is largely because the analysis took place when the tampon tax removal passed in the parliament. Many Tweets criticized the prime minister for promising to incorporate the removal in a future budget. He was unspecific and many perceived that as shirking his commitment. This shows that informal discourse is hugely influenced by current events and is extremely sensitive to new developments. One news article can change the content of Tweets within minutes. Eighty percent of the Tweets included a link to an outside source, illustrating how Twitter is often used to share other sources. Many of these Tweets were either news stories or links to petitions.

Based on this research, the majority of Tweets (70%) were neutral in their stance for or against removal largely because so many Tweets were sharing objectively titled news stories. However, the Tweets with

an explicit stance were greatly skewed with 25% of the total Tweets for removal of the tax and only four percent against removal. This means the informal discourse arena was a space for activists who support the movement and was much less likely to attract opposition.

Arguments for removal of the tax were 14 times more likely to be gendered (22%) than degendered (1.5%). Four and a half percent of Tweets for removal used techniques to break menstrual taboo. None of the arguments for removal fed into taboo. Arguments supporting the tax were twice as likely to use gendered discussion, which was different from how arguments were formed in formal discourse. Similar to how the activists spoke in the news reports, emotions and personal experience were prevalent as evidenced in the following representative Tweets:



Similarly, the technique of breaking taboo happened through images, often of menstrual products. As illustrated in Figure 2 and Figure 3, these images are meant to shock the viewer, catch their attention, and break taboo by emphasizing the stigma of a certain product. Figure 2, for example, shows a large tampon billboard and activists dressed as tampons offering free hugs. Likewise, the image in Figure 3 serves to normalize the tampons by juxtaposing unstigmatized objects with feminine hygiene products. Incorporating blood into the image is also effective at catching attention. In Figure 4, for example, five female activists pose out front of a government building with representations of highly stigmatized menstrual blood staining their exposed underwear. In Figure 5, a cartoon of anthropomorphic feminine hygiene products covered in menstrual blood breaks taboo by protesting the tax.

As Figure 6 illustrates, not even politicians are immune. This image attempts to force politicians to acknowledge the stigmatization of feminine hygiene products by drawing what appears to be Australian politician Joe Hockey's face onto a tampon. Another notable trend in the Tweets was the difference between the link to poverty, which was prevalent in the parliamentary debates but was only brought up 11 times out of all 519 Tweets. Four of these references were made by the same user

@CanadaWithoutPoverty, who emphasizes the stress the tax places on people in positions of poverty and homelessness. While the link to poverty was prevalent throughout the formal discourse, it appears the connection in the informal arena was either unimportant or those participating were unaware of these intersections.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research is concerned with answering questions about menstrual taboo and its role in both the existence of gendered public policies like the tampon tax and the public discourse in the movement to repeal those



Figure 2. From Sharaz & SBS (2015)



Figure 4. From AAP (2015)



Figure 5. From Bee (2015)

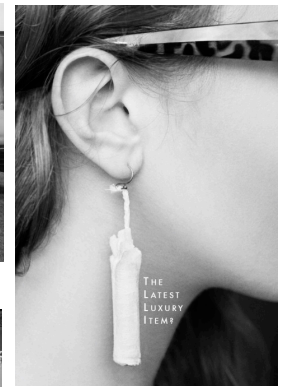


Figure 3. From Bell (2015)

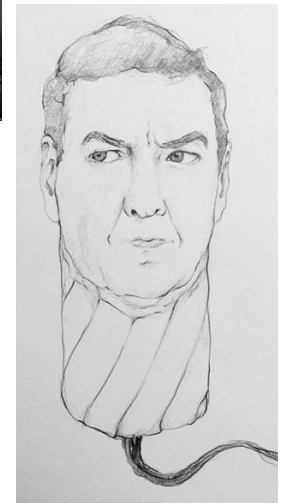


Figure 6. From "Politician Drawn onto Tampon" (2015)

policies. Past literature establishes that menstrual blood falls into all three categories of stigma defined in Erving Goffman's (1963) seminal work. Activists in the fight to dismantle the tampon tax acknowledge the taboo surrounding menstruation plays an important role in its continued existence. Because the movement to change these gendered public policies has been successful in some countries and is still raging in others, it is important to closely examine techniques being used on all sides of the movement to motivate change, to improve effectiveness, and to replicate or avoid specific socially motivated public policies.

The focus of this analysis was on public discourse in both the formal (e.g. news, parliamentary debates) and informal (social media, Twitter) arenas. News reports were a central source of information about the policies and opinions of politicians on an international scale as well as a primer on the most influential activists. Several news reports took a more formal view of informal sources by summarizing trends in Twitter discussions in certain countries and interviewing prominent activists who would otherwise be relegated to YouTube and Twitter. These views took a more nuanced and well-rounded approach to the discussion than the limited 140 character conversation on Twitter. However, the most sophisticated discussions were by far those that took place in parliamentary debates. Canadian parliamentarian Irene Mathysen was the only voice that adequately captured the complications associated with this policy. Mathysen acknowledged the layering of marginalizing identities including sexuality, poverty, and race in access to necessities like feminine hygiene products, as well as making one of the most explicit connections between the tampon tax and gender discrimination (41st Parliament, 2nd Session, 2015).

The trends uncovered in analysis of the informal discourse were important for understanding the functionality of discussions of public policies on social media. Twitter became an international forum for menstruators and all subjects of tampon tax policies to engage with each other. In short, Twitter solved the collective action problem and enabled such actors to show solidarity and be unified in their actions. For instance, Twitter was used to share links to news results and widen the reach of the formal discourse sources like BBC News. Additionally, Twitter was a tool to distribute links to petitions in an effort to encourage more people to sign and add their voice to a movement within their own country.

As Goffman (1963) originally discussed, possessors of stigmatized identities engage in common conversation through publications which give voice to shared feelings. “Here the ideology of the members is formulated—their complaints, their aspirations, their politics...a forum for presenting some division of opinion as to how the situation of the stigmatized person ought best to be handled” (Goffman 1963, p. 25). While this forum used to be found in books or magazines, society has progressed to increasingly accessible platforms for discourse like Twitter. As many posts made clear, even those who are uneducated about the issue or who are relatively uninvested are able to participate. The conversation is no longer limited to those purposefully seeking it. Now the discourse comes to many, popping up in Twitter feed and email inboxes. Whereas in the past the exchange was largely only the position of the stigmatized present in their “publications,” this discourse now includes any layperson who wants to engage. The development in technology shifts the conversation to include confrontation between those with differing opinions on the topic and greater opportunities to engage with policy makers themselves.

One of the most prominent techniques used to attack the tampon tax policies was to break menstrual taboo, or use language and visual techniques to discuss things traditionally avoided in public discourse, such as menstrual blood, pads and tampons, sexual organs, and the physical symptoms of menstruation. While these techniques were present in both formal and informal discourse, their presence in the formal discourse arena was limited to engagement with activists and examples from Twitter. In other words, breaks in taboo in the formal discourse were only achieved by pulling examples from informal discourse. Other than cursory reference to menstruation, the most confrontational methods of breaking taboo were entirely absent from parliamentary debate and almost all reported discussion from politicians.

The most influential moments in the movement—those that received the most attention in both informal and formal arenas—were direct and confrontational in the breaking of taboo. This often included reference to or the actual presence of menstrual blood. For example, a website called “Bloody Disgrace” is a hub for movements against the tampon tax worldwide and houses a petition to the United Nations to outlaw taxation “on our monthly cycles” as well as links to petitions in the UK, Canada, Australia, France, and Malaysia (“Sign the Bloody Petition,” n.d.). All of their marketing materials include a bloody tampon: a stigmatized and taboo object.

Several protest movements have begun “free bleeding” in front of government buildings or during prominent events. Charlie Edge and Ruth Howarth stood outside the UK’s parliaments building without menstrual products while on their periods to bring attention to the tampon tax issue and to raise money for menstrual products for homeless shelters (Mercedes Lara, 2015). Kiran Ghandi ran the London Marathon in April of 2015 without menstrual products to bring attention to what she calls “period-shaming” and to promote the opportunity for menstruators to bond over their common experience (Sanghani, 2015). These activists were interviewed in news articles that were analyzed as part of the formal discourse. The activists acknowledge that they broke taboo in protest. Vimilarajah and Lethbridge, too, gained attention through prominent sources like BBC News because

of their protest techniques. Clearly this technique is effective enough to gain international attention (Vimilarah, 2015 and Wong and Jones, 2015).

An interesting consequence of the technique of breaking taboo is it almost instantly genders the discussion. Bringing attention to menstruation and menstrual blood provides attention for the gendered nature of the experience. The gendering of the discussion was the most important difference between politicians in favor of removal of the tax and politicians against policy change. Politicians who wanted to remove the tax acknowledged that the tax is discriminatory based on gender whereas the politicians who did not support removal ignored gender and sterilized the topic to taxation policies that they did not have the power to change. They refused to acknowledge the role gender plays in the policy.

Interestingly, when Representative Susan Duckworth brought the Hygiene Tax Act to committee in Utah, she took great pains to avoid gender in the discussion; a calculated decision based on the conservative supermajority in the Utah State Legislature and the all-male committee hearing her presentation. She began her presentation by making jokes about not using props for her presentation and not turning the debate into a biology lesson. The taboo around menstruation hung heavy in the room and she intentionally emphasized that her original aim was to remove the tax on diapers and incontinence products, not on feminine hygiene products. However, the gender binary, while obvious throughout the debate, was not openly discussed. Many members of the committee who voted against the bill passing out of committee made condescending comments about Representative Duckworth’s kind-heartedness, which almost surely would not have occurred if a male legislator had been presenting. While it would have risked support for the bill, perhaps if Representative Duckworth had been more explicit in acknowledging the role of gender, the discussion would have been different. It is more difficult to argue against gendered public policy, and politicians are forced to identify the consequences of the policies for real people. Breaking taboo demands attention, although further research is required to understand if that attention is always positive or what consequences this technique will have in the future of fighting for socially just public policy.

Future Implications

In the future, it will be important to further examine the role taboo plays in public policy discussions, especially in gendered policies, such as abortion, workplace discrimination (e.g. wage gap and the glass ceiling), and domestic violence. Research in this area will hold implications for other taboo aspects of identity in public policy including race and religion as well. Identity is taking the main stage with the rise of ISIS and subsequent persecution of Islam, as well as Black Lives Matter and the increasing public discourse surrounding transgender people. These issues can translate into public policies written by governments everywhere in the world. This research could influence how those policies are written and how people will choose to fight for or against them in the future. There is a clear and significant interplay between formal and informal discourse in these discussions that can be leveraged. Social media is used as the common forum for stigmatized communities, which means their voices can be prevalent in the conversation when the technology is used correctly. Breaking taboo is one way to bring attention to an issue although it is also open to intense scrutiny and by no means removes the stigma from the actors.

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