

# Perception of Period Poverty and Menstrual Products across TTU Communities

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## Abstract

Period poverty, the lack of resources and knowledge regarding feminine hygiene products, introduces undue stress in the struggle to afford menstrual products and the personal well being of women, not only in developing countries across the world but in local communities as well. We surveyed over 250 students in the Texas Tech University Health Science Center and over 300 women from Texas Tech University.

Assessing several metrics, results ranged from one-fifth to over half of participants struggling with aspects of period poverty, including but not limited to: lacking access to menstrual products, struggling to finance menstrual products, lacking knowledge about free local resources for menstrual products, and a general need to know more about menstrual products. We conclude based on our data that there is a pressing need for greater awareness and education regarding different types of feminine hygiene products and resource centers. Further studies are required to assess socioeconomic determinants of period poverty, as well as to introduce public health initiatives aimed at increasing public awareness about local resources.

## Background and Study Question

The average woman spends \$6,360 on menstrual products in her lifetime<sup>2</sup>. This culminates in US women spending over \$2 billion per year on feminine hygiene products, including tampons and pads<sup>3</sup>. This financial demand is one factor, among others, contributing to period poverty.

A 2019 study conducted on female medical students at TTUHSC found that 43% of the participants reported having to miss school due to menstruation, 3%, 23%<sup>a</sup> reported having been in a situation in which she or someone she knew had to choose between paying for basic necessities or feminine products, 46%, 51%<sup>a</sup> reported having been in a situation in which she or someone she knew did not have access to feminine products, 72%, 57%<sup>a</sup> reported having been in a situation in which she or someone she knew used something other than feminine products due to a lack of access, and 5%, 29%<sup>a</sup> reported having experienced or knew of someone who experienced health issues due to complications from a lack of access to hygiene products<sup>4</sup>. Although most medical students from this study were not affected by period poverty, it remains a concern for low-income communities. In Missouri, a study surveying low-income women showed that 64% of participants were unable to afford essential hygiene products in the previous year<sup>1</sup>. It may be possible that a lack of knowledge and normalcy around menstrual products could be hindering improvement of period poverty. Our study will focus on the collective awareness of TTU communities regarding period poverty and how we can use this data to meet the needs of menstruating students.

<sup>a</sup> The first value indicates the percentage of women who have been in the situation and the second value indicates the percentage of women who know of someone who has been in that situation.

## Study Population

The study population includes male and female individuals from the TTU system. One person identified as non-binary, and one identified as trans-female. Responses to the surveys came from undergraduate and graduate students, medical and pharmacy students, and faculty members. The average age was 24.

## Data Collection Methods

This project used the TTUHSC School of Medicine P3-1 Honors Project Omnibus Survey, an anonymous online survey instrument sent to all TTUHSC School of Medicine medical students as well as medical residents/fellows, graduate students and School of Medicine faculty. The survey, which included 17 question sets that branched according to respondent groups, received a total of 333 responses. The questions that our group submitted received 254 responses. This project also used the TTUHSC School of Medicine P3-1 Women's Night at the Rec Survey, an online survey instrument available to women who participated in the Texas Tech Recreation Center's Women's Night at the Rec event on February 28, 2020. The event was open to all female members of the Texas Tech community, including undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and staff. The survey, which included 6 question sets, received a total of 305 responses. The questions that our group submitted received 218 responses. This project was approved for exempt review by the TTUHSC Institutional Review Board.

## Results

Only data sets excluding "N/A" responses were used to represent the target demographic - averaging about 140 responses from Omnibus, and 200 responses from WNR.

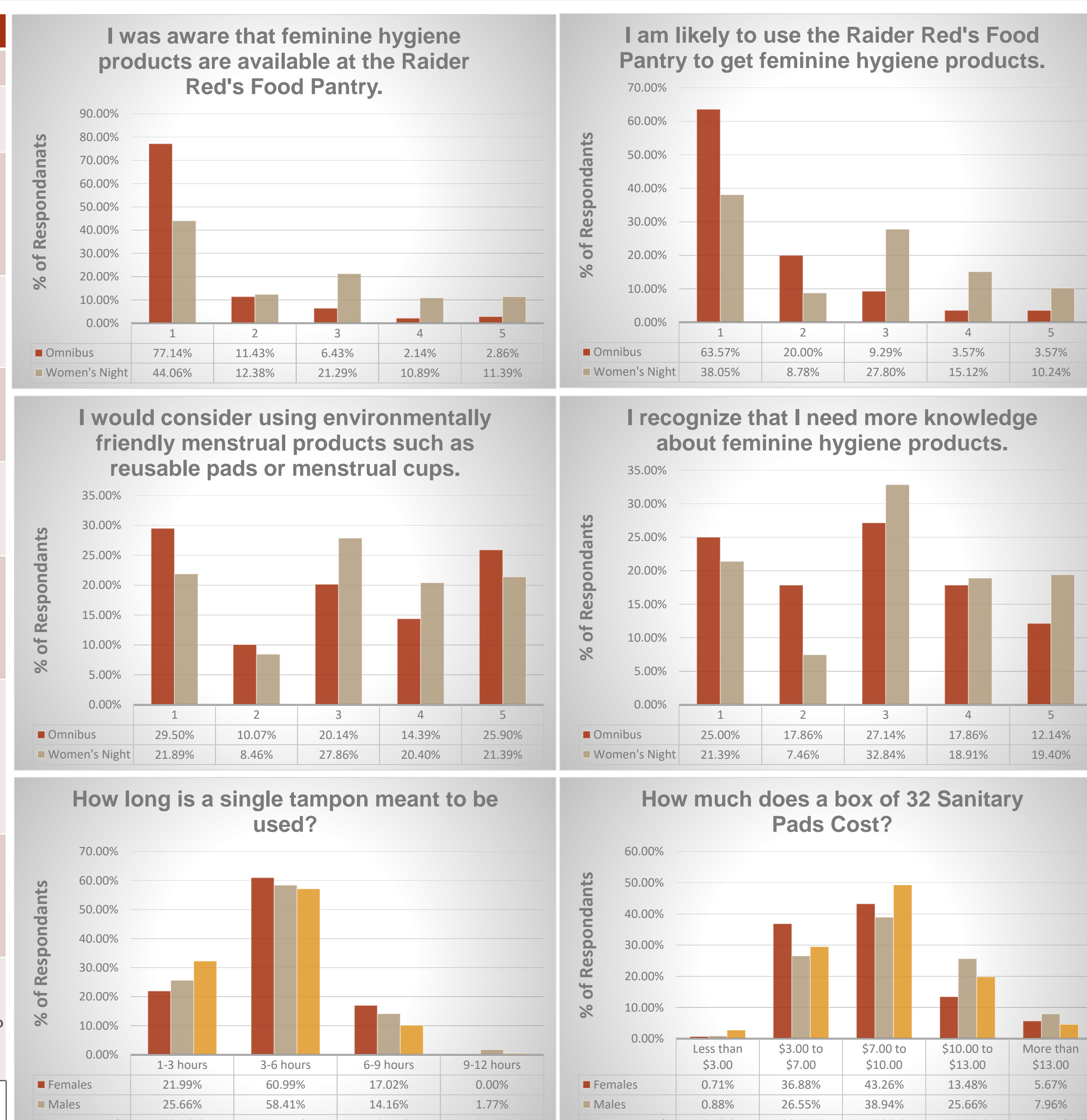
The largest cohort strongly disagreed that they were aware Raider Red's Food Pantry offered feminine hygiene products (77.14%, 44.06%) and strongly disagreed they would access these resources (77.14%, 44.06%). When asked if they would use environmentally friendly menstrual products like reusable pads or cups, 29.50%, 21.39% strongly disagreed, 20.14%, 27.86% were neutral, 25.90%, 21.39% strongly agreed; in total, Omnibus presented 39.57% agreement, 40.29% disagreement, WNR presented 41.79% agreement, 30.35% disagreement. When asked if they needed more knowledge on feminine hygiene products, 30.00%, 38.31% agreed while 42.86%, 28.85% disagreed. Generally, males and females of the Omnibus survey reported similarly when estimating 32 sanitary pads cost and tampon use duration, the largest cohort selecting the correct answer. Slightly more males estimated higher pad costs. Data followed a similar trend in the WNR survey.

Metrics analyzed in past studies were reassessed in Table 1.

<sup>a</sup> Unless specified, the first value indicates the result from the Omnibus Survey, while the second value indicates the results of the Women's Night Survey.

Prompt	OMNIBUS		WNR	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Missed school and/or work due to your menstrual cycle?	36.88%	63.12%	38.99%	61.01%
Been in a situation where you had to choose between paying for basic necessities (i.e. food, rent, utilities, etc.) and feminine products during your menstrual cycle?	2.13%	97.87%	20.18%	79.82%
Been in a situation where you did not have access to feminine products during your menstrual cycle?	40.43%	59.57%	34.86%	65.14%
Used something other than feminine products (i.e. toilet tissue, dish rags, etc.) during your menstrual cycle?	63.83%	36.17%	55.05%	44.95%
Experienced health related issues due to an inability to have access to feminine products during your menstrual cycle?	3.55%	96.45%	20.18%	79.82%
Experienced or known of someone who has been in a situation where they did not have access to feminine products during their menstrual cycle?	33.07%	66.93%	39.91%	60.09%
Experienced or known of someone who has been in a situation where they had to choose between paying for basic necessities (i.e. food, rent, utilities, etc.) and feminine products during their menstrual cycle?	14.57%	85.43%	32.11%	67.89%
Experienced or known of someone who has ever used something other than feminine products (i.e. toilet tissue, dish rags, etc.) during their menstrual cycle?	37.80%	62.20%	43.58%	56.42%
Experienced or known of someone who has experienced health related issues due to an inability to have access to feminine products during their menstrual cycle?	17.72%	82.28%	33.94%	66.06%

TABLE 1. Metrics analyzed in past studies were reassessed for the 2020 sample.



## Discussion

Concurring with the 2019 study, Period Poverty continues to strain the finances and personal health of students in the Lubbock community.

Participants largely lacked awareness of local resources offering free menstrual products (such as Raider Red's Food Pantry). Interestingly, the majority of participants also denied a likelihood to use such resources, despite roughly one-third of women not having access to feminine hygiene products during their cycle. This may be explained by the lack of uniformity in opinions regarding the use of alternative menstrual products like reusable pads or cups, combined with nearly 30-40% of responses indicating a need to know more. Personal hygiene routines are core traditions in peoples' daily lives, and the absence of knowledge or normalization with alternative resources may impose a critical obstacle.

While male and female estimates on cost and duration of feminine hygiene products were similar, differences between the Omnibus (an equally mixed-sex survey) and the WNR survey (almost entirely female) show certain metrics where women hold stronger responses: more women do or know of someone who struggles between spending on feminine hygiene products and basic necessities, as well as experiencing more health related issues. This is to say: the disparity of knowledge is less about technical costs and details, and more about the personal stakes and strains of individuals. More awareness and education should be geared toward this field.

Access to menstrual products is a pressing need for not just women across the globe and in developing communities, but local and well-developed communities as well. With heated disagreement about healthcare measures designed to aid women, it is imperative that novel studies continue to assess public knowledge and struggles, to better inform policies that can advance modern society.

## Next Steps

- Increase knowledge in general population about menstrual products and period poverty to help normalize the topic and inform better decisions
- Create educational materials about cost-effective, environmentally-friendly menstrual products, most notably menstrual cups
- Work with Raider Red's Food Pantry and local donors to have steady supply of menstrual products at the pantry
- Limitation: socioeconomic status was not assessed on the Omnibus survey

## References

<sup>1</sup>Kuhlmann, A. S., Bergquist, E. P., Danjont, D., & Wall, L. L. (2019). Unmet menstrual hygiene needs among low-income women. *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 133(2), 238-244. DOI: 10.1097/AOG.0000000000003060

<sup>2</sup>New Research Reveals How Much the Average Woman Spends per Month on Menstrual Products." *Digitalhub*, US News, 27 Nov. 2019, [www.swnsdigital.com/2019/11/new-research-reveals-how-much-the-average-woman-spends-per-month-on-menstrual-products/](http://www.swnsdigital.com/2019/11/new-research-reveals-how-much-the-average-woman-spends-per-month-on-menstrual-products/).

<sup>3</sup>Nicole, W. "A Question for Women's Health: Chemicals in Feminine Hygiene Products and Personal Lubricants." *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 122, no. 3, 2014, doi:10.1289/ehp.122-a70.

<sup>4</sup>Phillips, T., Drinnon, K., Jeng, V., Vargas, A., Vo, D. Period Poverty in TTUHSC Medical Student Community. Poster presented at: Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center; Gender Symposium; 2019 October 25; Lubbock, Texas.