Introduction

Menstruation is a natural process that most girls will go through at some point in their lives. It is disheartening that something as natural as a period can infringe on the basic human rights of girls and women. The lack of menstrual hygiene products that girls and women face contributes to both their disempowerment and health. For young girls, menstruation is an addition to the heap of gender disparities they have to face in life. The access to menstrual hygiene products is interlinked to other human rights such as the right to education, the right to dignity and the right to good health. In 2011, the President promised free sanitary pads as part of the 10 Point Plan on Health and even made a point to mention this policy objective in his 2011 State of the Nation Address. This goes to show that even the President sees the need. The proposal suggests that the government should intervene and provide menstrual hygiene products in poor communities across South Africa; this shows that this is an issue that needs to be attended.

Aim

There are complex and multiple factors that work against girls’ education in developing countries; the lack of sanitary pads is one of the most leading factors in many poor communities in South Africa. In recent times, there has been various media reports showing that there is a crucial need for a policy that will ensure menstrual hygiene products are available to those that cannot afford it. Many education experts believe that there is a significant negative effect on schooling for school girls in impoverished peri-urban and rural areas, although further research is needed to investigate the full extent of the effects.

To state it bluntly, menstruation is not a burden for many girls and women, but also a burden to society in general because of the health risks that girls and women are exposed to by using things like rags, toilet paper and leaves instead of sanitary products. Because menstruation is largely a private act, there are cultural and social attitudes that make the discussion of menstruation almost impossible. Furthermore, in the instances that it is discussed there is shame attached to it.
**Why is there a need for free pads?**

1. **Affordability**

Sanitary products are not affordable in South Africa. For example, a pack of *Always Maxi Pads* (18) costs around R40. Considering how this is a monthly occurrence and many girls/women come from poorer backgrounds, some may end up using anything from rags, tree leaves, old clothes, toilet paper, newspapers, cotton wool, cloths or anything that can stop them from bleeding out.

2. **The right to education**

The education of girls is a primary focus of development efforts in poor nations because female school achievement is believed to have long-lasting and far-reaching economic effects. This means that girls are more likely to not do as well as they could in school simply because they are menstruating – something that is completely out of their control. According to a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there is an increased absenteeism of schoolgirls from the age of 13. The below study was done in 2003 and looked at nine African countries; Benin, Chad, Nigeria, Zambia, Uganda, Malawi, Mali, Uganda and Mozambique.

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**Figure 1: The number of days girls miss because of their period**

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1 This study was conducted by the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV)/ IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre in 2012. The study was conducted in Uganda, across 7 districts where a total of 20 schools were selected per district.
3. Stigma and human dignity
The subject of menstruation is often taboo, and has many negative cultural attitudes associated with it, including the idea that menstruating women and girls are ‘contaminated’, ‘dirty’ and ‘impure’. For example, in South Africa, some cultures and religious denominations believe that women should not be touched or interacted with during their period.

4. Health Risks
There are some studies that link poor menstrual hygiene with urinary or reproductive tract infections and other illnesses. There is an impact of poor menstrual hygiene on the psychosocial wellbeing of girls and women, such as increased stress levels and anxiety caused by fear of bleeding out and the inability to an adequate supply of sanitary products. This social anxiety is heightened in a classroom setting and affects learning.

Biologically, the risk of infection (including sexually transmitted infection) increases during menstruation because the plug of mucus normally found at the opening of the cervix is dislodged and the cervix opens to allow blood to pass out of the body. In theory this creates a pathway for bacteria to travel back into the uterus and pelvic cavity. Furthermore, the pH of the vagina is less acidic during this time and this makes yeast infections such as Thrush (Candidiasis) more likely. As stated earlier, when girls and women cannot afford menstrual hygiene products, they use things such as rags, toilet paper and newspaper during menstruation. Using unclean rags, especially if they are inserted into the vagina, can introduce or support the growth of unwanted bacteria that could lead to an infection. Some girls and women use the same pad for a longer than required time. Prolonged use of the same pad will also increase the risk of infection.

Menstrual hygiene products are manufactured by large multinationals that thoroughly test their products to ensure they do not cause hypersensitivity reactions. However, girls or women with particularly sensitive skin may experience reactions to some of these products, particularly as a result of friction or prolonged contact of moisture
with the skin. Low-cost sanitary products which many girls and women buy if they have the money to buy pads may cause increased hypersensitivity and rashes.

School social worker Noluthando Kasi, who is based in Langa, Cape Town says many girls use contraceptive injections as a way to control their period because they can’t afford to buy sanitary pads. There are certain health risks that come with the prolonged usage of contraceptives such as bone loss, which is particularly concerning for teenagers because this is the time they should be building bone mass.

Further research must be conducted in order to fully understand the health impacts of menstrual hygiene and the risk to health associated with not having sanitary pads. There is a lack of concrete statistics concerning this problem in South Africa as compared to other African countries. Investment in further research locally will help with finding sustaining and adequate solutions to the problem at hand.

**Departmental Responsibilities**

**Department of Health**

As found in the Bill of Rights (Chapter 2:27) — everyone has the right to have access to health care services including reproductive health. Considering the many health risks described in this paper, the Department of Health therefore has the mandate of making the issue of menstrual hygiene products a priority.

**Department of Basic Education**

Menstrual education should start from an early age. Girls usually start puberty around 10 years old. Proper education should be provided for both girls and boys so as to also break the stigma some may face. Africa Check has since questioned that statistic claiming that on average a pupil would miss one day although further research is needed to investigate the full extent of the effects.
The Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI) makes provision for the implementation of basic sanitation infrastructure in schools, but just how much emphasis is placed on menstrual hygiene products? Primary schools should ensure the availability of water, soap, a basin, emergency material (e.g. menstrual pads), facilities for disposal of used pads and medication (e.g. pain killers). Girls as well as boys should be motivated to participate in school health clubs. The school health clubs and/or girl-education movement (GEM) clubs should in turn also focus the issues around menstrual hygiene and de-stigmatising menstruation. Schoolboys should become aware and sensitized to support girl pupils to cope with the challenges that they face during their period.

This entails that there should be an inclusion of reproductive health education and life skills in the school curriculum targeting both girls and boys.

Menstrual hygiene should be captured in the national education sector performance report. This entails that the Department of Basic Education and Social Development need to incorporate menstrual management indicators in monitoring and evaluation systems for primary schools.

**Department of Social Development**

The mandate of this Department is “to empower communities and engender self-reliance by creating conditions for sustainable livelihoods”; in addition, the mandate states that the department commits itself to “endeavour to create a better life for the poor, vulnerable and excluded people in our society”. For these reasons we feel that the Department of Social Development has a role to play in ensuring girls and women from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas should not have to carry the burden of not having adequate sanitary health products.

**Department of Women in the Presidency**

The department's own mandate states that it exists to “champion the advancement of women's socio-economic empowerment and the promotion of gender equality”. Furthermore, the department commits itself, in its values statement, that “in
delivering our mandate, we will honour the faith that is placed in us as the Ministry and Department responsible for advancing the cause of women”. There are many obstacles in place today that jeopardise the realisation of the department’s mandate and inadequate access to sanitary products is certainly one of them.

**Current Initiatives in South Africa**

There are various initiatives that are happening in across South Africa that are specifically dealing with the issue of lack of sanitary pads for women and girls in poor communities.

1. **Dischem’s One Million Comforts Campaign**

Dis-Chem and the Dis-Chem Foundation launched the ONE MILLION COMFORTS campaign aimed to gather over one million sanitary pads by allocating branded drop-bins in their 88 stores countrywide for customers to donate sanitary towels during the four-week period of the campaign.

2. **CSI projects by various corporates**

Corporates such as Pick n Pay, Vodacom, Alexandra and Forbes, Absa and many others support Dignity Dreams and similar non-profit organisations that make washable and reusable sanitary pads.

3. **Dignity Dreams**

Deputy Minister in the Presidency, Buti Manamela, launched the Dignity Dreams Nelson Mandela Day Campaign in May 2015, which aimed to raise funds to distribute 18 000 sanitary towels to young women. The Deputy Minister then auctioned his 702 t-shirt for R3000, which went to Dignity Dreams and further held a soccer knockout tournament to raise funds for the reusable sanitary packs

4. **Subz Pads and Panties**

The objective of Subz is to empower young girls through education and access to sanitary wear to reach their full potential. The Subz Clubz Program aims to use existing networks of community educators and Life Orientation Teachers in schools to raise awareness and distribute the Subz Pants and Pads product to young girls aged 10-19 years in Kwa-Zulu Natal.
Each young woman will receive face to face awareness raising, educational materials and a Subz Pack consisting of 2 pieces of underwear and 6 Subz Pads.

The Subz Clubz are one hour workshops run in primary and high schools by qualified community educators. Community educators engage pupils in open dialogue on the topics of reproductive health, menstruation, feminine hygiene and sanitary wear with the objective of de-stigmatizing, raising awareness and empowering young girls to remain in school.

The Subz Clubz Program will run bi-monthly in twenty schools over the period of 10 months. The program will reach 1000 girls per month totalling 20 000 young girls per school year.

Livity Africa and Amandla.mobi’s petition for free sanitary products

In April this year, Livity Africa, through the VIP Parliament Challenge campaign, launched a petition in partnership with Amandla.mobi asking South Africans to add their signatures in our call for national government departments to provide free sanitary products for girls and women. We asked South Africans from all walks of life to help us convince national government to realise President Jacob Zuma’s 2011 promise for free sanitary pads to disadvantaged girls and women. So far we’ve
reached over 3,000 signatures and counting. Other media outlets have also come on board to help us amplify the message and call to action of the petition.

Some of the signatures and comments from the petition.

**Recommendations**

1. The parliamentary committee write to the President requesting an update on the 2011 announcement that the sanitary pads would be available soon.

2. An expansion on the various ongoing initiatives such as Dignity Dreams and Subz Pads by various government departments. It is important that government supports the initiatives that are already providing solutions to the problem.

3. For a long lasting and sustainable solution, a national policy must be created and it must be prioritised and added to the National Development Plan 2030.

4. Research into menstrual hygiene be conducted by the committee in order to understand the severity of the problem of lack of sanitary pads.

5. Districts should ensure that all primary schools have established and functional school health clubs and girl-education movement (GEM) clubs.
Each school should have a trained and well-motivated senior teacher to support and advise school girls reaching puberty.

**Conclusion**

The lack of menstrual hygiene products is an issue that can no longer be ignored. Girls and women are already facing various gender equality challenges, menstruation cannot be one of them because there are solutions. The lack of menstrual products infringes on many human rights of girls and women, most importantly health rights which are the most detrimental. In the National Youth Policy, it states that: “The sexual and reproductive health and rights of youth should be supported by both schools and the family to enable youth to have access to necessary information, to seek health care when necessary, and to practice positive behaviours”. In order for all young South Africans to prosper, menstrual hygiene products need to be free and accessible to young girls and women.