

Menstrual poverty's invisibility in the academic context: an experience report

EXPERIENCE REPORT

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*A invisibilidade da pobreza menstrual no contexto
acadêmico: um relato de experiência*

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The term menstrual poverty is related to the lack of access to essential items for women during the menstrual period, encompassing the lack of sanitary pads, basic hygiene products, infrastructure, and sanitation. In Brazil, the context is closely related to social inequality, preventing women from having full access to their rights. **Objective:** To report the experience of the project “Ser Mulher” at Faculdade de Ciências Médicas de Minas Gerais about awareness actions on menstrual poverty. **Experience report:** Experience reports of academics from the Nursing, Medicine, and Psychology courses on holding a conversation circle on menstrual poverty in a civil entity of an educational and social nature in Belo Horizonte. Participants were 21 adolescents of both sexes, aged between 10 and 17 years, in situations of vulnerability and violence. There was a lack of knowledge on the subject and women’s health, such as the concept and basic physiology of menstruation. There was an emphasis on questions about intimate hygiene and sex education. **Final considerations:** The promotion of health education for adolescents about menstruation is necessary, as it affects the quality of life and school perfor-

mance. The extension was a space for exchanges with the community and a great learning experience for academics.

Key words: Women's health; Public health; Menstruation; menstrual hygiene products;

foi espaço de trocas com a comunidade e de grande aprendizado para as acadêmicas.

Palavras-Chave: Saúde da mulher; Saúde pública; Menstruação; Produtos de higiene menstrual.

RESUMO

Introdução: O termo pobreza menstrual está relacionado à falta de acesso a itens essenciais para mulheres durante o período menstrual, englobando a falta de absorventes, produtos de higiene básicos, infraestrutura e saneamento básico. No Brasil, o contexto relaciona-se intimamente com a desigualdade social, impedindo que mulheres tenham acesso completo a seus direitos. **Objetivo:** Relatar a experiência do projeto “Ser Mulher” da Faculdade de Ciências Médicas de Minas Gerais sobre ações de conscientização sobre pobreza menstrual. **Relato da experiência:** Relato de experiência de acadêmicas dos cursos de Enfermagem, Medicina e Psicologia sobre a realização de roda de conversa sobre pobreza menstrual em uma entidade civil de caráter educacional e social de Belo Horizonte. Participaram 21 adolescentes de ambos os sexos, entre 10 e 17 anos, em situação de vulnerabilidade social e vítimas de violência. Percebeu-se a falta de conhecimento sobre o tema e saúde feminina, como o conceito e fisiologia básica da menstruação. Houve destaque para dúvidas sobre higiene íntima e educação sexual. **Considerações finais:** A promoção da educação em saúde para adolescentes sobre a menstruação é necessária, tal que impacta na qualidade de vida e no desempenho escolar. A extensão

The term menstrual poverty is related to the lack of access to essential items for women during the menstrual period. Thus, it encompasses not only the lack of pads, but also basic hygiene products, infrastructure, and basic sanitation¹.

In Brazil, menstrual poverty is closely related to social inequality, preventing women from having full access to their rights, such as health and education, a fact that affects their daily lives¹.

In this context, it is understood that people who experience menstrual poverty are people in social vulnerability, and this concept, according to Castel², it is understood as “[...] a social space of instability, of turbulence, populated by individuals in situation precarious” (p.26).

The menstruation process is closely linked to basic hygiene conditions, to maintain the health of girls and women³. The lack of access to menstrual products, information, and basic sanitation items, added to the price of pads, leads people who menstruate to resort to unsafe methods to control menstruation, such as using newspapers, breadcrumbs, socks, plastic and several other items that can compromise health¹.

Under this bias, the lack of pads, or even limited access, which implies the use of the same pad for long periods, can lead to health problems such as changes in vaginal pH, urinary infections, and toxic shock syndrome (TSS)⁴.

Individual preferences, available resources, economic status, local traditions, cultural beliefs, and level of knowledge and education^{5, 6} will directly influence the way each individual deals with their own cycle.

With the intensification of health problems, in 2014, the United Nations (UN) recognized that the right to menstrual hygiene is a global public health and human rights issue⁷. However, globally, at least 500 million women and girls still lack adequate facilities to manage menstrual hygiene.

Therefore, it is a matter of high importance, most countries have not yet taken sufficient measures to really minimize menstrual poverty, which keeps it a public health issue^{8,9}.

When it comes to Brazil, around 13.6 million inhabitants live in conditions of extreme poverty, and around 51.5 million below the poverty line, which highlights the need for the term menstrual poverty, which is related to the lack of access to essential items for wom-

en during the menstrual period. Thus, it encompasses not only the lack of pads but also basic hygiene products, infrastructure, and basic sanitation¹.

According to the report "Menstrual poverty in Brazil - Inequalities and violations of rights"¹, prepared by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), around 321,000 students, 3% of all girls in schools, do not have a bathroom in proper conditions for use in the schools where they study.

In Brazil, 1.24 million girls (11.6%) do not have toilet paper available in school bathrooms. Among these girls, 66.1% are black/brown. In this perspective, black girls are even more vulnerable, since the risk of them attending schools without toilet paper is 51% higher than for white girls⁵.

The lack of information about the female and male reproductive cycle has a direct impact on coping with menstrual poverty since many girls do not understand the menstrual cycle and the consecutive physiological changes they face in their bodies¹¹.

Therefore, these girls become vulnerable to misinformation and lack of access to decent health conditions, still facing increased gender inequality¹². Thus, the need for health education measures is evident, with consequent construction of knowledge and appropriation of the theme by the population¹³.

This study aims to report the experience of the extension project “*Ser Mulher*” at Faculdade Ciências Médicas de Minas Gerais, promoting awareness actions about menstrual poverty.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

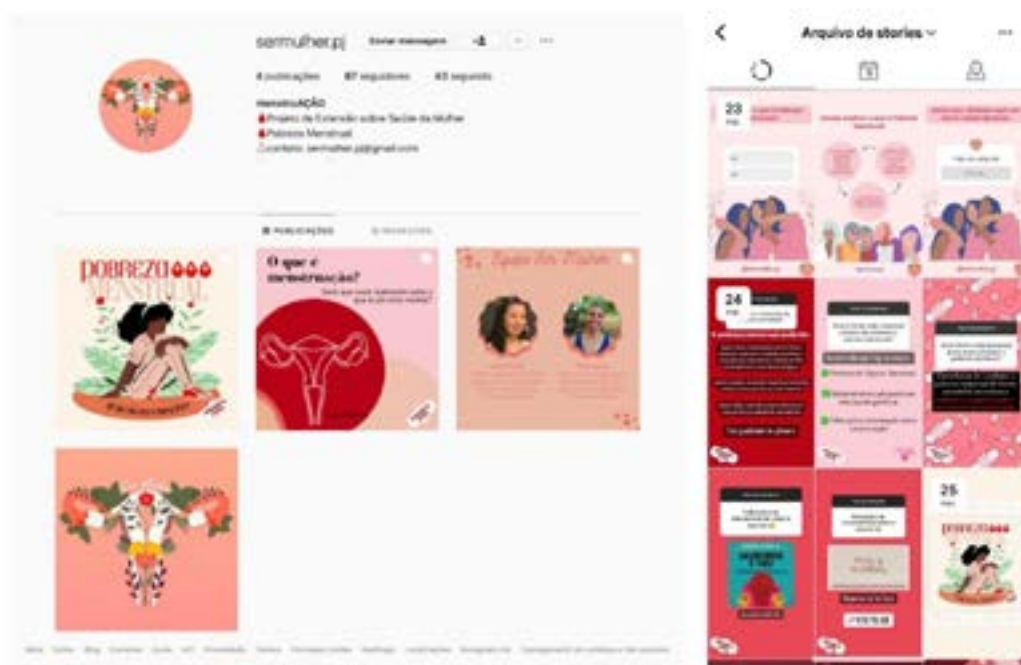
This is a qualitative and descriptive study of the experience report type, carried out by six academics from the Nursing, Medicine, and Psychology courses at a private college in Belo Horizonte.

The students were part of the extension project “*Ser Mulher*”, which began activities on March 2022, and participation ended in September of the same year. The present work is an experience report and does not expose any adolescent or professional, this report was not submitted to the Ethics and Research Committee.

Five initial meetings were held for theoretical deepening, where the project’s objectives and possible awareness actions were established. Reflections were made on the impact of menstrual poverty on women’s health, places more prone to the problem and what means to overcome the lack of basic hygiene items.

With the aim of contemplating the best strategies for raising awareness on the subject, the extension agents were willing to talk to the academic community, made up of professors and students of health courses, and society through the profile of a social network, which made it possible to increase the reach and visibility of the project, ensuring that the information went beyond territorial boundaries (IMAGE 1).

IMAGE 1: EXTENSION PROJECT ON SOCIAL NETWORK



SOURCE: PRINT SCREEN OF THE PROJECT'S PROFILE ON THE SOCIAL NETWORK INSTAGRAM

At the same time, there was a movement to collect menstrual hygiene products, encouraging the donation of sanitary pads, through the strategic distribution of decorated and informative boxes throughout the entire structure of the faculty, as well as leafleting for students and employees of the institution (IMAGE 2).

The disclosure was also made in WhatsApp groups, addressing menstrual poverty and donation collection points. Simultaneously, the extensionists made contact with private institutions to establish partnerships, encouraging participation in the donation and in the project.

In addition to the awareness actions carried out for the academic environment, two conversation circles were promoted in July and September 2022 with twenty-nine children and adolescents between 9 and 17 years from a philanthropic educational institution in Belo Horizonte, who were instructed to leave questions about the human body, menstruation, and body development at puberty.

At the request of the institution, gender and age groups separated the participants. There were guidelines on body care, personal hygiene, menstru-

IMAGE 2: COLLECTION POINT FOR DONATIONS AND PUBLICITY PAMPHLET



SOURCE: IMAGE PREPARED BY THE AUTHORS

al cycle, menstrual poverty, and subjects considered taboo (IMAGE 3). After receiving the questions, the extensionists planned an active methodology to discuss the themes with the young people, in order to promote the emancipation of the individual and a better relationship with his body.

The academics realized the need for adapting the language to the target audience, in addition to using attractive and informative methods, such as the use of images of the menstrual cycle and female anatomy. A booklet on parts of the human body and their main phenomena were elaborated.

IMAGE 3: CONVERSATION CIRCLE WITH TEENAGERS



SOURCE: IMAGE PREPARED BY THE AUTHORS

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

It was observed that, both in the academic and school settings, menstruation is a discussed and understood phenomenon. On the other hand, menstrual poverty proved to be an unknown and socially silenced theme.

It is worth mentioning that the initial moments of the project were extremely important for discussions and reflections on what it is to be a woman, with historical, social, and scientific resumption about menstrual poverty.

The multidisciplinary of theme made the extensionists have contact with studies from different areas, consolidating a realistic perspective of menstrual poverty and its consequences.

There was some difficulty in establishing contact with non-governmental institutions for partnerships with the project, making it necessary for the extensionists themselves to develop dissemination strategies for the collection of hygiene products for menstruation.

Thus, exclusively the academic community and personal contacts of the extensionists, without donations from companies, donated pads. Approximately 200 pads were collected and donated to people who menstruate and are in a situation of social vulnerability, mainly in shelters and homeless people.

It is worth mentioning that, according to Torossian¹⁴, “social vulnerability is not defined by the poverty index” (p.56), but by the inclusion and access of a population to public policies and services.

Regarding the school context, the experience was remarkable and necessary to elucidate the theoretical content learned, in addition to being impactful by requiring the academics to create strategies to make the subject interesting and understandable for adolescents.

Through the conversation circles, the extension workers were surprised by the lack of information and knowledge about human anatomy and physiology.

It also observed the need for activities related to sexual and reproductive education, themes experienced by adolescents. Regarding menstruation, it was identified that, in the school setting, it is seen as a subject that should not be talked about, in addition to being shameful.

Thus, in addition to the repercussions on mental health, menstrual poverty corroborates with the increase in inequality between genders, given that these adolescents do not attend school during their menstrual period, a factor that increases school dropout^{4,15}.

It is understood that, according to De Paula¹⁶, “university extension needs to be seen as a culture, a practice, an indispensable commitment to the full realization of the university as an emancipatory instrument” (p.22).

Thus, it is concluded that the experience provided by the extension project “*Ser Mulher*” plays a fundamental role in the professional and social development of the extension workers, enabling consolidation and sensitivity to the issue of menstrual poverty.

It is a fact that menstruation is seen socially and culturally as taboo, being a neglected and silenced topic by society¹⁷. However, it is currently observed that this view also exists in the field of health, education, and politics.

Menstrual precariousness is a public health problem, making it necessary to better value and approach the subject¹⁸. In this sense, there is a need for educational and social clarification about menstruation, its possible disorders, and intimate hygiene, since it directly affects health, quality of life, and school performance¹⁹.

It is necessary to carry out joint planning, and governmental and non-governmental policies, in order to reduce the statistics of menstrual poverty, being a way to start the resolution of the scenario in question and promote equity between genders^{10,14,20}.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the extension project “*Ser Mulher*”, it was possible to start the discussion about menstrual poverty, highlighting content that is socially ignored and made invisible. Through experiences of routines, it was observed that children and adolescents lack valid and true information about their own bodies and menstruation.

Thus, the need for social transformation is evident, which enables the discussion about menstruation and the creation of public policies that guarantee assistance to people who menstruate and lack hygiene products.

The experience marked the professional trajectory of the extensionists, fulfilling the fundamental role of the extension of creating spaces and opportunities for the student to give back their knowledge to society.

From the project, it is observed that the academics have extensive knowledge about menstrual poverty, being able to identify the consequences and contribute to the creation of awareness and health education strategies.

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