Inserting informed choice into global menstrual product use and provision

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Each day millions of girls and women experience menstruation. Despite this ubiquity, menstrual experiences have received little attention as a public health and equity issue.[1] A growing evidence base has reported that menstruation is a negative experience, beset with challenges for many in low-income and middle-income countries,[2] as well as for those in high income countries.[3] In addition to the stigma surrounding menstruation and deficiencies in education and support, a prominent issue is the struggle to afford sufficient menstrual materials.[2,4] Women and adolescent girls have described discomfort, irritation, odour, and fears of leaking that contribute to avoidance of school and social settings.[2]

Growing advocacy to address menstrual needs has urged governments and non-governmental organisations to act. Many responses have focused on providing free products.[5] In 2018, the Scottish Government committed £5·2 million to provide free menstrual products in schools,[6] and similar policies have been implemented across the globe (eg, New York, NY, USA; South Africa; Kenya; and India[7]). Disposable pads have been the main product distributed; however, product alternatives include tampons, reusable pads, reusable menstrual underwear, and menstrual cups.

In *The Lancet Public Health*, Anne Maria van Eijk and colleagues[8] provide the first systematic review and meta-analysis of acceptability, safety, and experiences of using menstrual cups; a lesser known alternative product. The authors found that menstrual cups are effective at collecting menses, with similar or lower leakage compared with disposable pads or tampons. They listed the low frequency of adverse events associated with cup use, compiling possible harms for future monitoring. The report also highlighted the likely lower cost of menstrual cups over their lifespan and lower plastic and non-plastic waste generated compared with use of disposable pads or tampons, although the authors did not include production waste in their assessments.

For consumers purchasing menstrual products, the results highlight that menstrual cups are a safe and cost-effective option. Crucially, their findings indicate that menstrual education resources are not providing a comprehensive overview of products to support informed choices. The authors found that awareness of menstrual cups was low, and that only 30% of websites with educational materials on menarche included information about menstrual cups.[8]

The findings of van Eijk and colleagues[8] raises more complex questions for free or subsidised menstrual product distribution policies and programmes, including what is the best product to provide? How do providers balance cost and sustainability with informed choices and maximise benefits for recipients? The authors found a pooled estimate of 73% (95% CI 59–84) of women and girls reported willingness to continue menstrual cup use after familiarisation. With many brands of cups lasting up to 10 years, the product is a cost-effective option and could reduce distribution challenges inherent in providing monthly supplies of disposable products and waste management issues from single-use products.[9] However, the pooled estimate of 27% of users who might not find cups acceptable would not be aided by their provision and might feel pressured to continue use despite insertion difficulties and pain.

In development and humanitarian response, 2019 UNICEF guidance on menstrual hygiene materials provides information on the range of menstrual material options and emphasises community engagement to identify preferred products for distribution.[10] Positively, this strategy places community preferences at the centre of distribution. Findings from van Eijk and colleagues[8] complicate this strategy, highlighting that menstrual cup uptake might be slower than other products and require a learning curve of 2–5 months, assisted by education. In the absence of exposure or opportunities to learn to use menstrual cups, these products are less likely to be selected by communities than alternative products despite their potential long-term benefits. How to truly support informed choice in the community in settings where many people have not been exposed to the full range of products and when commercial interests might provide unbalanced marketing information about particular products is unclear.[11]

The answers to these questions might not be simple and more high-quality studies are needed to support

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For more on **menstrual product policies in Kenya** see https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40365691

community decision making. van Eijk and colleagues found the overall quality of existing studies to be low.[8] They showed the value of integrating evidence from both high-income countries and low-income and middle-income countries to accelerate learning. The authors noted the rich information described by users, which could be explored in further rigorous studies.

All those who menstruate need access to their choice of menstrual materials that are safe, comfortable, and support sustainable production and use. To achieve this end, researchers and policy makers need to tackle the complexity of what informed choice means for product distribution and how menstrual experiences can be improved considering the range of factors involved, beyond products,[2] and van Eijk and colleagues' Article offers an important step in this process.

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