Menstrual hygiene products are unfairly taxed and unjustly seen as a non-necessity item despite the vast majority of women needing to use these products regularly. I wrote to senator Mark Mullet in support of proposed HB 2863, pushed forward by republican representative Melanie Stambaugh of the 25th district of Washington state. With this bill in place, all technical and community colleges in Washington state would offer menstrual hygiene products in restrooms at no cost to students. What will be covered is the importance of low to no cost hygiene products, the synopsis, importance, and future of HB 2863, and what can be done to support this bill or others like it as well as their advantages and disadvantages.

HB 2863 is a proposed bill first read on January 18th of 2018. The bill states, “Menstrual hygiene products must be available at no cost to students, in restrooms of buildings serving students in any public community or technical college.” (HB. 2863, 2018) Clean water, toilet paper, and a way to dry one’s hands are regular, essential aspects to any restroom and yet menstrual hygiene products are abjectly left out. These costs of everything that goes into any restroom are factored in as regular costs of having that restroom. Menstrual hygiene products are too important for women’s health to be left out of this mix. Amanda Klasing, senior women’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch has said, “People who make policy and run programs … often don’t fully understand the impact a woman’s monthly period may have on her ability to go about her life if she doesn’t have what she needs to manage it” (Human Rights Watch). While this quote by Klasing is not to assume that menstrual cycles makes women any less capable, but if not given the proper tools, the menstrual cycle can by unhygienic and difficult to maneuver. With 37.4% of Washington state legislatures being women in 2018 (NCLS) and 50% of the population being women (USCB), women do not have equal representation in state legislature, making Klasing ring true when talking about those who make the policies and run the programs do not understand the impact of the cycle and the difficulty that many women face during their menstrual cycle. These products are already unjustly taxed as a luxury item(KOMO), however most and nearly all women may agree that this is unjust – which is why equal representation is paramount. The silence of women having free or inexpensive hygiene products readily available needs to be broken.

Technical and community colleges tend to attract those who do not have the funds to go to well-known universities. Bellevue college, while no longer a community college, but having similar pricing, averages $7,729 annually as an undergraduate if living arrangements are with parents or relatives and there are no dependents (BC). Meanwhile, Seattle University averages $53,370 annually as an undergraduate if living with parents or relatives and there are no dependents (Seattle U). While this is not to assume that because one can afford a more expensive tuition that menstrual hygiene costs are of no concern; one can presume that those who have no choice but to attend lower costs schools may find more difficulty in affording such “luxuries” of menstrual hygiene. According to Komo News, lifting this tax would “save women in Washington almost $5 million a year, according to the state Department of Revenue.” (KOMO). It is unjust that women must collectively spend such a large sum of money annually for being female over a bodily function that is uncontrollable.

There are many ways to try to make change to injustice like this. One excellent example is a peaceful group protest. This is a sure-fire way to gain attraction from all, which can offer momentum to the cause. The protest may gain attraction from bystanders who are empathetic to the cause; if they have time, they may join the protest for a bit. If the bystander is not entirely empathetic to the cause, but still curious, they may go home and research the topic a bit more, which is a huge first step to being in-the-know about any topic. Generally, the goal of the protest is to gain attraction from others, but also from the politician to who can make the change. The best places to form the protest are places in which the public and the politician will see it – for example, outside the government building or, if one is protesting something physical (a building, a sermon, a movie release), on the street side of the thing they are protesting. The main point of protesting is attention and momentum. However, there are some downsides to protesting. One that is often suggested by major media is the fear of the protest turning violent. This notion is proportionally blown out of the water – PhD candidate for International Relations and Comparative Politics, Jonathan Pinckney used data from Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) and three case studies to determine three important elements stand out in making a peaceful protest turn violent: repression of peaceful protests, concessions splitting movements between “radicals” and “moderate”, and the protesting organization being too hierarchal (Pinckney). It is not a simple matter of the snowball affect where one radical causes chaos throughout the organization, it is rather a complex mix of these three components. Additional to the possibility of the protest turning violent, there is also the stigma of the protestors being disrupting to the surrounding area and that they cannot focus on their work. While this is an inconvenience, it is also a key point of protesting.

Another great way of reaching out to one’s representative is to make a phone call. Phone calls are a fantastic way to get word to the representative. While the caller probably will not reach the representative directly, the representative’s call handlers often do the job of keeping note of the call and telling the representative or the representative’s intern. There are some important notes about making the call, however. It is important to not use slang and to speak slowly and precisely. The caller does not need to ramble about their point, rather, they need to get their point across in a few phrases so that their point is not lost amidst all the information provided – it also is easier for the call receiver to pass along a short message than a long message, making them more inclined to pass along the message. An advantage to calling representatives is that it is very easy and can be done sitting in the comfort of one’s home on the couch in their pajamas. Additionally, most representatives have a team dedicated to taking these incoming calls and passing along their message if they seem fit (which makes the length and professionalism important). The disadvantage to making these calls is that they can be easily ignored if the representative does not care or wants to ignore it. While they often have a team taking these calls, when the message is presented to the representative, they could ignore it or listen and then do nothing about it. Additionally, the representative’s team receives many calls on a pretty regular basis, so it is easy for the caller’s message to be lost in all the other calls.

Email is also a fantastic way to reach out to one’s representative and how I reached out to mine. The advantage to email is similar to phone calls in that they are easy to make and send and one can do it in the comfort of home – assuming one has access to a computer and internet at home and if this is not the case, then libraries often offer free access to the web at most locations. What is also a great advantage to emails is that it is written word instead of spoken, making it much easier for representatives to refer back to the information the writer provided if they decide to look further into supporting what the writer wanted to support. Similar to phone calls, it is important be professional and concise when writing the email and to address it appropriately. The disadvantage to emails is that, like calls, it is easy to ignore. The senator receives many emails very regularly, making it easy to either ignore or forget about new emails coming in if they are already flooded with other emails. I wrote an email to my senator, Mark Mullet, about HB 2863 because I wanted to be sure that he had a reference point to look back on. The proposed bill is not old and so I wanted to be certain that my senator would have a reference point to look back on if he chose to look into the topic further. While he may only briefly look at it or be told by one of his email receivers, I would hope that he may research the topic a bit further, add his support to the bill, or substitute aspects of the bill and add his support to that.

HB 2863 is a bill that hopefully will make it less expensive to exist as female and ought to have the support of all. Other bills that may substitute or add on are ideas to be rid of the luxury tax on these products, but only so many bills can be added at one time. There are many other ways of reaching out to one’s representative and if there is something that one believes in, it is imperative that they voice their opinion to their representative despite fear of being ignored or said no to. A few months back I had written to my congressperson Dave Reichert who was on the fence about supporting a critical change to online free speech, Net Neutrality. While my email to him may not have been the drop to overflow the bucket, my drop contributed to him supporting my side of the issue. The representatives read the letters and email and they hear the calls, one just has to reach out and change is possible.

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