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WST3015

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**Honoring My Grandmother's Legacy of Feminist Activism:
A Service Learning Project With Days For Girls**

Project Summary

For my service learning final project, I chose to support Days For Girls (DFG), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving menstrual hygiene for girls in underserved regions. This decision was deeply personal, as my late maternal grandmother, a feminist who raised me and significantly influenced my life, had previously sewn cloth pads for DFG. This project allowed me to honor her legacy while addressing a critical issue affecting girls worldwide.

Days For Girls works to eliminate the barriers that menstruation presents to education and health by providing sustainable menstrual hygiene kits. These kits include cloth pads, discreet bags for pads, soap, washcloths, and underwear—items that are crucial for menstrual management. The organization also provides education on menstrual health, promoting both hygiene and dignity.

Goals and Process

The primary goals of my service-learning project were twofold: first, to contribute to Days For Girls by donating essential items to help girls manage their menstrual health; and second, to commemorate my grandmother's activism and values. I aimed not only to make a

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meaningful contribution to the lives of these girls but also to establish a foundation for ongoing support and awareness about menstrual hygiene.

Given my financial constraints and lack of personal transportation, I faced several logistical challenges. I arranged rides from family members and my partner to assist with the purchase and shipment of the donated items. This included trips to Jo Ann Fabrics and Target to buy washcloths, underwear, and cotton fabric for cloth pads. I found the rising cost of essential products like these was somewhat of a hurdle to providing as many supplies as I'd hoped. To expand the impact, I also coordinated with family members who were willing to contribute to the cause. I ensured all items donated aligned with the most updated guidelines and requests posted on the Days For Girls website. This was especially important because many of these guidelines are laid forth by the charity with cultural sensitivity for donation recipients in mind. After gathering the items, I referred to this website further to properly ship the supplies to the correct DFG resource center in North Salt Lake City, Utah. Altogether, between myself and my paternal grandparents, we purchased and sent 10 washcloths, 8 pairs of underwear in various sizes, and 4 yards of 100% cotton and cotton flannel fabric.

The process had its ups and downs. One major challenge was managing the coordination of resources and transportation without direct access to a vehicle. Additionally, there were times I struggled to coordinate my schedule with those assisting me, as I work full-time in addition to attending college. Guilt often crept up on me as I wished I'd done more to help. After all, the treatment of young women in underprivileged countries is a heavy, but crucial and serious topic.

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However, I felt passionate about making even a small difference, and am glad to have found a way to provide service. Now that I know how to do so, I'm able to continue service to this cause and others in the future. Despite these obstacles, the project was ultimately successful. In the end, I still managed to collect and donate a fairly substantial amount of materials and learned a great deal about global women's health and oppression. The process highlighted the importance of community support in overcoming personal limitations. I am proud to dedicate this service project to the memory of my dear grandmother, and hope to continue to educate others about Days For Girls and their mission .

Research

Menstrual hygiene is a pressing issue with significant implications for girls' education and health. According to the study "A Systematic Review of the Health and Social Effects Menstrual Hygiene Management" by Sumpter and Torondel (2013), inadequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is a major barrier to girls' education in low-income countries. Social attitudes and cultural customs around menstruation may also create severe challenges for these girls and young women. For example, "In the study setting menarche was also 'celebrated' with a 9 to 13 day seclusion period with many behavioural restrictions. Following menarche the social effects of the ineffective management of regular menstruation may include exclusion from everyday tasks including touching water, cooking, cleaning, attending religious ceremonies, socialising, or sleeping in one's own home or bed." (Sumpter and Torondel). Girls without adequate means to keep menstruation discreet are unfortunately often ostracized by others in

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their community, including at school. Additionally, lack of sanitary products, girls' minimal knowledge of their own bodies, and inadequate facilities often leads to absenteeism, which in turn affects academic performance and long-term educational, health, and financial outcomes.

According to Sumpter and Torondel's review, these are some of the common conflicts for menstruating schoolgirls in impoverished areas of the world: "First, they may lack physical provisions for MHM such as lockable, single-sex, private toilets with water and soap for washing, a private open air space to dry wet cloths and a closed bin or incinerator for used pads...Girls have also reported feelings of fear, confusion and shame in class due to: leakage and dropping of sanitary material; smell and staining of clothes; teasing, fears of pregnancy; and experience of harassment by male students and teacher," (Sumpter and Torondel). Lack of education due to inaccessible MHM has proven to produce poorer life outcomes. Therefore, activism to assist in removing as many boundaries to education as possible is crucial.

Another more recent source from the UCF library, "The Influence of School Based Menstrual Hygiene Management Programs on School Attendance among Girls in Public Primary Schools in Kisumu West SubCounty, Kisumu County, Kenya" by Obomgo et al., focuses on the efficacy of MHM programs. This report highlights the stark fact that inadequate MHM can lead to negative health outcomes such as infection. Inaccessibility of hygiene may also result in lower self-confidence, bullying, and increased dropout rates. The study is based on a theory related to MHM, Sanitary Hardware Theory: "This theory was developed by Hennegan and Montgomery (2016). The theory asserts that interventions aimed at enhancing menstrual hygiene should

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prioritize provision of menstrual hygiene products and related facilities. Emphasis is put on distribution of pads, tampons and making of modern menstrual friendly toilets, bins and related infrastructure.” (Obomgo et al.) The research underscores the importance of providing girls with access to proper menstrual hygiene products and puberty education to mitigate these challenges.

Days For Girls’ mission is compatible with Sanitary Hardware Theory. The organization strives to keep girls in school by supplying reusable menstrual products, other hygiene supplies, and most importantly, education. These components can be life-saving, ensuring that girls do not miss school due to menstruation. Their website refers to the negative outcomes faced without access to proper MHM as “period poverty,” as it prevents many girls and women from gaining success through education. According to the website, this is their solution: “Days for Girls provides holistic menstrual health education, increases access to menstrual products, trains Social Entrepreneurs and advances global menstrual equity through partnerships with governments and health coalitions.” (Days For Girls) The organization’s approach is effective in promoting both health and educational equity. By providing sustainable solutions and education, DFG helps to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion caused by menstrual hygiene issues.

Connection and Reflection

This project aligns closely with the themes of gender equality and social justice explored in our Women’s Studies course. The course has emphasized how systemic issues such as gender disparities in access to education and health care are deeply intertwined with socio-economic

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factors. The work of Days For Girls directly addresses these issues by providing essential resources to those in need.

The project connects with our text, *Gendered Voices, Feminist Visions*, and its discussions on gender and health. For example, our readings on gender and education discuss how girls' school attendance and academic success can promote gender equality. I am reminded of "Claiming an Education" by Adrienne Rich, which we read at the very start of this semester. Rich eloquently stated, "The first thing I want to say to you who are students is that you cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one... The difference is that between acting and being acted upon, and for women it can literally mean the difference between life and death," (Rich). Indeed, lack of access to education can result in life threatening consequences for girls and women, including poverty and poor health. By addressing menstrual hygiene, my project contributes to reducing at least one barrier to equal opportunities for girls, thereby supporting gender equity in education.

The course's text also addresses cultural traditions and beliefs surrounding girl's puberty and menstruation. In many parts of the world, rites of passage into womanhood may include restrictions such as isolation from the community. These can often be attributed to long-held religious or cultural customs that deem menstruation unsanitary, impure, or even demonic. Here the text provides one example from the Tukuna people of the Amazon: "The Tukuna of the Amazon initiate girls into womanhood at the onset of menstruation through the Festa das Mocas

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Novas. For several weeks, the girl lives in seclusion in a chamber in her family's home. The Tukuna believe that during this time, the girl is in the underworld and in increasing danger from demons, the Noo. Near the end of the initiation period, the girl is painted with black genipa dye for two days to protect her from the Noo, while guests arrive, some wearing masks to become incarnations of the Noo. On the third day, she leaves the chamber to dance with her family until dawn. The shaman gives her a firebrand to throw at the Noo to break the Noo's power and allow her to enter into womanhood," (Shaw and Lee). Likewise, there are often rites of passage for boys in such cultures, which may force them to enact violence to "prove themselves" as new men. While these practices may seem shocking, and encourage inequality or stereotypes, it is important to understand the nuances around the deep meaning these traditions can hold for members of these communities.

Through this service-learning project, I gained a deeper understanding of some of the practical challenges involved in coordinating/planning activism and community service. I learned the importance of resourcefulness, collaboration, and perseverance. The process also reinforced the significance of honoring personal connections to activism and how individual efforts can contribute to larger social movements.

This experience has inspired me to continue engaging in activism and supporting causes related to gender equality and social justice. I look forward to donating more supplies, or even funds, to Days For Girls as often as possible. I also plan to spread the word about the importance of this cause and use my newfound education on the topic to inform others. This opportunity has

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also highlighted the value of community support and teamwork in enacting change, and has shown the impact of collective action in addressing global issues.

Conclusion

The community service project with Days For Girls provided a valuable opportunity to apply the concepts and principles discussed in our Women's Studies course. By addressing menstrual hygiene, I was able to contribute to a critical issue affecting girls worldwide while honoring my grandmother's legacy of empowering fellow girls and women. I'd like to take a moment to thank her for teaching me all she knew about the reality of being a woman in a patriarchal world, for encouraging me to shine, to always speak up, and for teaching me the value of helping others. I feel inspired having dedicated this humble project to her memory. I have learned the importance of activism, community involvement, and the role of personal connections in driving social change. This experience has been both educational and transformative, reinforcing my commitment to gender equality and social justice.

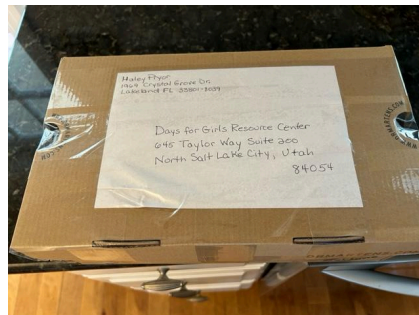
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Photos

- 1) Picture of the bolts of 100% cotton and cotton flannel fabric from Jo Ann Fabrics. I sent 4 yards total for DFG to turn into cloth pads (Not pictured: items from Target including 10 washcloths and 8 pairs of underwear. I forgot to get a photo of those unfortunately, but you can see in the USPS receipt in photo 3 that the weight of the items shipped was 3 pounds.)
- 2) Packed and addressed box with donation items inside
- 3) Shipment receipt from USPS



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Works Cited

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