

Banning period plastics: the power of informed choice

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

In the UK, advocates have driven several major companies to reduce single-use plastics in their menstrual products. In August 2019, Sainsbury's was the first to "remove own-brand plastic tampon applicators" (Sainsbury's, 2019). Since then, three more — Aldi, Superdrug, and Lil-Lets — have followed (Daish, n.d.; Daish, 2021b). Other companies have also responded by launching eco-friendly product lines. How have activists achieved such great change in such a short time?

The End Period Plastics movement combines strategies from feminist empowerment and sustainability efforts. Through connecting directly with users of menstrual products and leveraging social connections, activists channel smaller individual choices into widespread changes in society, the economy, and government policy. This research examines participants' social media, websites, press releases, and marketing material. I will analyze the End Period Plastics movement with respect to literature on campaigns with similar strategies and the social phenomenon that affect these strategies.

The End Period Plastics movement initiates change from a personal level, namely individual choices in menstrual products. Activists' strategies reflect the interplay between individuals, social networks, and larger institutions. The movement's success provides insight into how other movements in sustainability and social justice can succeed in their agendas. Moving forward, I will refer to people who use menstrual products as women for brevity; however, it is important to acknowledge that not all people who menstruate are women and not all women menstruate.

Analysis

The End Period Products movement is a complex campaign with several major participants and strategies employed. The following sections will analyze the movement's strategies and progress in context of similar campaigns, underlying social phenomena, and specific participants involved.

I. Feminist Empowerment and the Menstrual Equality Movement

The End Period Plastics movement occupies a unique space at the intersection of sustainability and feminist empowerment. Campaigning on feminine hygiene comes with a major problem — periods are taboo. Menstruation is rarely discussed openly in society. Women make great effort to conceal when they are menstruating, and many period products are advertised as discrete. Even among women and girls, they will refer to periods using euphemisms from “the time of month” to “the curse” (Bloody Good Period, 2021). This language perpetuates the stigma surrounding periods, reinforcing the idea that periods should be hidden away. The transition to widespread, open dialogue takes root in a sister movement for menstrual equality.

The culture of shame surrounding periods disadvantages women who cannot afford menstrual products. Many menstruating women will not buy groceries and other basic necessities to purchase period products, and “school-age girls ... will be absent up to 20% of the time due to a lack of access to adequate menstrual products” (The Cup Effect, 2021). Advocacies, including Bloody Good Period and The Cup Effect, combat this issue by offering free menstrual products and campaigning for legislation to support menstrual equality. The Menstrual Equity movement is not only about ensuring health and wellness but also empowering women to live with “dignity, comfort, and confidence” while menstruating. In their publicity, they advocate normalizing

menstruation as a healthy and natural part of life (Bloody Good Period, 2021; The Cup Effect, 2019). By opening the dialogue on periods, this movement paved the way for the End Period Plastics campaign.

II. Education and Informed Choice

In terms of sustainability, the previous sparse discussion on menstruation had a major environmental consequence. Most women are unaware that menstrual products contain plastics at all. Schools often provide girls with samples of conventional sanitary products. As a result, women tend to purchase the same products (Peberdy et al., 2019). The absence of plastic-free options at “4 of the 9 main UK retailers” further solidifies this choice (City to Sea, n.d.). Simply starting conversations about periods empowers women to take charge of their menstrual health. These conversations broaden perspectives about options outside of the traditional tampon or pad. The open dialogue helps women make more informed decisions on their menstrual health. Many women may find that a menstrual cup or period underwear better fits their lifestyle and values.

Research illustrates the benefits of informed choice in selecting sanitary products. Tanya Mahajan concludes that if women can choose a product with unbiased and comprehensive information, this “will automatically ensure that cost to women’s health and the environment is minimised” (2019, p. 65). Many eco-friendly products also benefit users. Jui-Che Tu and co-authors note that many women choose sustainable products for their “inherent strengths . . . such as money-saving, convenience, the ability to be combined with other menstrual products, and the ease of observing menstrual blood” (2021, p. 16). These findings suggest that when women prioritize their own health and well-being, their decisions will inherently be more sustainable. Thus, the missing factor in achieving plastic-free periods is information.

III. Social Media and Social Norms Campaign

The End Period Plastics movement fills this information void primarily through social media. The movement's figurehead, Ella Daish, started the #EndPeriodPlastic which raises awareness about the plastic waste that menstrual products produce (Daish, n.d.). Daish shares statistics on the products' impact and calls women to rethink their periods. The numbers and graphics shared are intended to shock viewers and spark anger. Activists channel this anger into action, urging women to change their period product choices. The hashtag has been used by thousands, ranging from individuals to lawmakers to corporations (fig. 1).

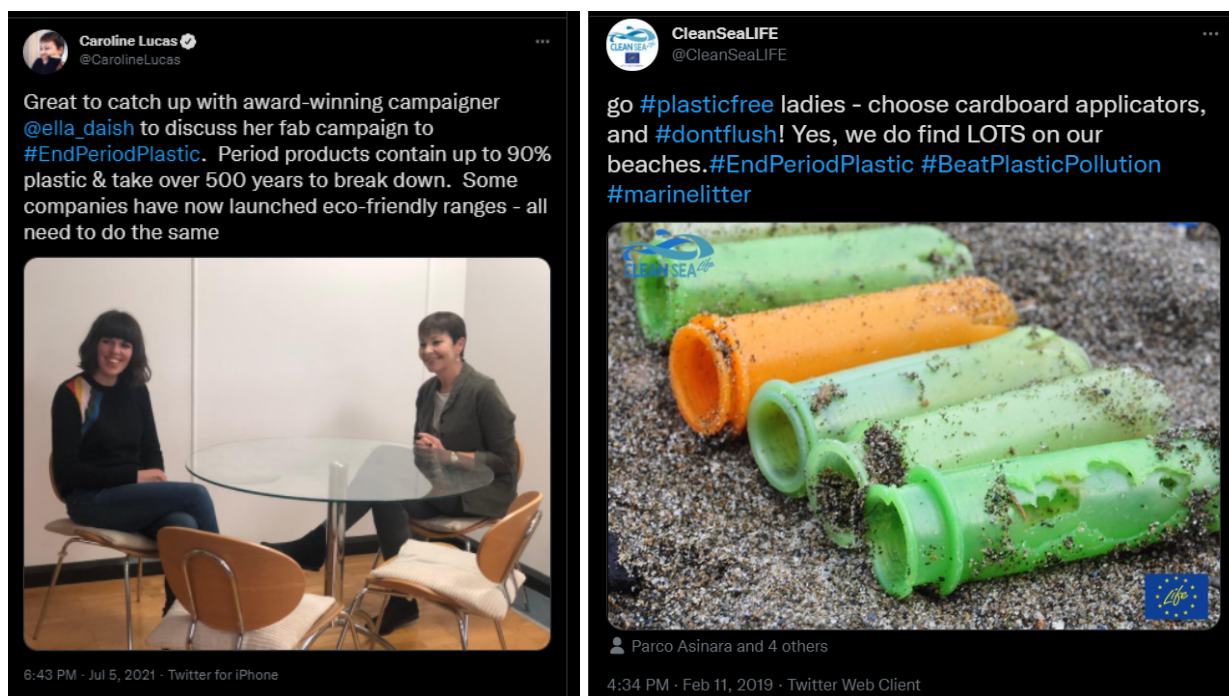


Figure 1. Tweets from British politician Caroline Lucas and organization CleanSeaLife using #EndPeriodPlastic (Lucas, 2021; CleanSeaLIFE, 2019).

The campaign has also garnered support from other advocacy groups. City to Sea is an organization dedicated to reducing plastic pollution. Their Plastic-Free Periods campaign champions the slogan "Better for Your Body, Better for You" (City to Sea, n.d.). They provide

media kits to spread awareness online and locally (fig. 2). The campaign also works to ease the transition to sustainable periods, providing information on eco-friendly options and guides for purchasing these products (City to Sea, 2021). Through coupling a call to action with resources to make these changes, activists gain support from women who may otherwise be reluctant.



Figure 2. Images from City to Sea's Twitter media kit (City to Sea, 2020a; City to Sea 2020b).

These campaigns rapidly spread information by combining social media with word of mouth. Daish encourages starting conversations that will “not only raise awareness and spread the issue to a wider audience but the people closest to us are more likely to listen to what we have to say, especially with a subject like this” (n.d.). Typical talk about sustainability focuses on a global scale, urging people to consider the planet's greater good. The numbers that #EndPeriodPlastic activists cite have a similar effect. However, they also take advantage of menstruation's deeply personal nature, achieving greater impact.

Simply promoting sustainability can have the opposite effect. Ruixia Han and Yali Cheng concluded that “excessively diffusing pro-environment information on traditional media may make people stressful and reduce pro-environmental behavior” (2020, p. 14). Instead, interpersonal communication results in the highest adoption of pro-environmental behaviors, and social media strengthens this effect. By blending “characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication,” social media publicly displays pro-environmental behavior while also encouraging people to scrutinize their own daily lives (Han & Cheng, 2020, p. 14).

This strategy is rooted in the social norms campaign, which changes behavior through shifting perceptions of typical or desirable behavior. Social norms campaigns particularly take advantage of people's innate desire to be part of a collective (Yamin et al., 2019). The approach mirrors that used by the US Department of Transportation's campaign against drunk driving during the 1980s. It had been considered rude to tell an intoxicated friend not to drive. Popularizing the phrase "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" shifted this social norm, established the concept of a designated driver, and reduced drunk driving fatalities by 30% (Glascoff et al., 2013). The accidents were seen as an unavoidable consequence of modern transportation, but the campaign pushed the idea that the deaths were great tragedies. Employing a two-pronged approach, the campaign sparked anger over the injustice of drunk driving fatalities and simultaneously painted looking out for a drunk friend in a positive light.

Like other single-use plastics, menstrual waste is regarded as a by-product of normal life. The End Period Plastics movement uses a similar two-pronged approach to shift this perception. In citing statistics and sharing images of plastic waste, activists label plastic period products as harmful both to the environment and women's health. They emphasize that this waste is unnecessary and avoidable. The campaign also normalizes menstruations, illustrating that all women can and should choose to have clean periods. Activists define distinctive categories of plastic period products as dirty and wasteful but sustainable period products as clean and healthy. By using social media, activists spread these ideas quickly and effectively. This social networking approach amplifies perceptions that these ideas are mainstream and normal, furthering their impact.

IV. Sustainable Period Companies, Marketing, and Accessibility

Daish's movement also receives support from several sustainable period companies, including Natracare, WUKA, and DAME. The End Period Plastics movement directly contributes to sales of their organic tampons and pads, menstrual cups, and period panties. In turn, many companies donate their revenue to support activists. Natracare's 1% for the Planet initiative has given "£330,000 to twenty-five organisations achieving real, positive change" (Natracare, 2021). The companies' marketing campaigns also increase the movement's visibility. While most women view periods as a painful inconvenience, advertisements show an idealized version of menstruation as sustainable, clean, and healthy. This imagery both destigmatizes periods and promotes eco-friendly period products as a new standard. The visuals strongly emphasize body positivity, encouraging women to choose sustainable products out of self-love and appreciation of nature, not guilt (fig, 3).



Figure 3. Advertisement by DAME on a UK bus (DAME, n.d.).

Purchasing sustainable period products, however, is not without difficulty. These products are viewed as luxury items. Organic cotton pads and tampons are significantly more expensive than their plastic counterparts. Reusable options, such as menstrual cups and period pants, have higher up-front costs. To combat this, sustainable period brands also focus on accessibility. A report by DAME emphasizes the phrase "positive periods are not a luxury" and

clarifies that “planet-friendly, sham-free periods mean nothing if only a small percentage of people who menstruate have access to them” (2020, p. 39). The company recognizes that their products’ upfront costs can be a barrier to women with lower incomes; however, the products’ reusability provides long-term savings. A graph by DAME illustrates significant cost savings after five years of use (fig 4). Similar savings are common for other reusable period products, including menstrual cups and period pants.

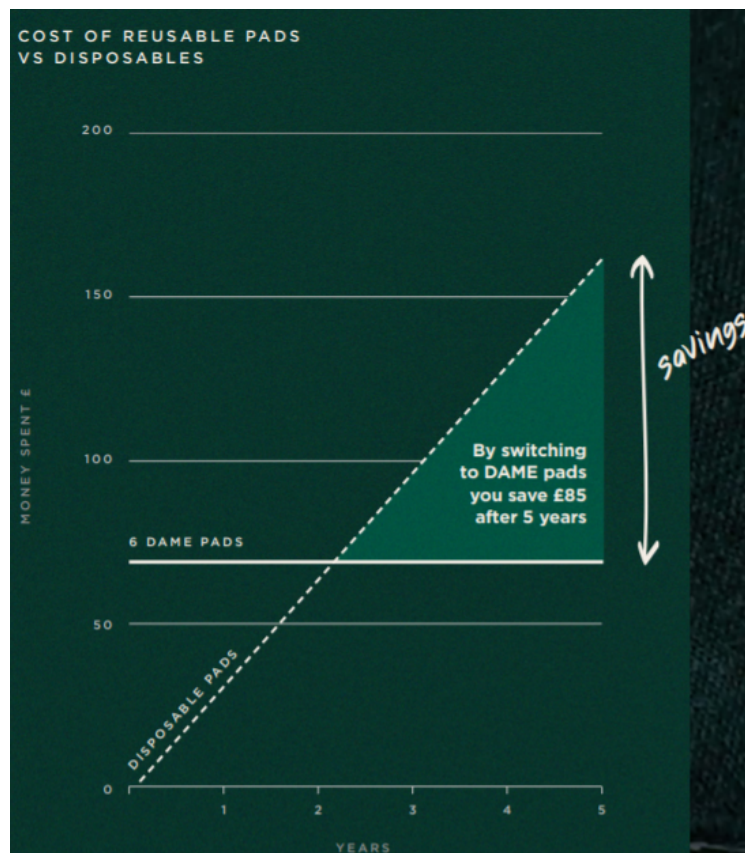


Figure 4. Graph by DAME on savings from reusable pads over time (DAME, 2020).

Although companies cannot economically improve accessibility by lowering prices, their media amplifies the menstrual equity movement and increases the visibility of sustainable options. The goals of accessibility and sustainability directly support each other. As such, sustainable period brands and activists have worked collaboratively. The Cup Effect provides

free menstrual cups, simultaneously increasing access to period products and promoting a sustainable option. For women who cannot afford period products otherwise, menstrual cups are especially helpful since they can be reused for up to ten years (The Cup Effect, 2021). Sustainable period brands have directly partnered with activists on campaigns to make menstrual products more accessible. In January 2021, a campaign to eliminate “the tampon tax” successfully pushed the U.K. Government to abolish the Value-added tax (VAT) on menstrual products. Previously all menstrual products had been taxed at a 20% rate, despite being a medical necessity. The HM Treasury passed the change as “part of wider government action to End Period Poverty” (2021). A sister movement to “Axe The Period Pants Tax” is still ongoing. Period pants are classified as a garment, rather than a menstrual product, and continue to be taxed (Periodpants, n.d.). Sustainable period brands use their marketing, social platforms, and finances to directly support these campaigns. This collaboration amplifies each movement’s messages and widens their respective audiences.

Increasing accessibility to sustainable menstrual products has clear benefits for the End Period Plastics movement: more women switch to sustainable products, so less waste is produced. Further, freedom of choice relies on accessibility. Accessibility does not only include access to products but also access to comprehensive information on all products. In championing accessibility, activists empower women to choose the best period product for their personal use regardless of financial barriers.

V. Petition and Direct Pressure

In choosing sustainable period products, women reduce their personal environmental impact while also sending a message to producers — consumers prefer eco-friendly period products. Combining this momentum with strong support from social media, organized groups,

and sustainable period brands allowed activists to more aggressively target specific big-brand companies. Ella Daish encouraged followers to directly pressure companies by tweeting, writing letters, and signing petitions. Her petition to “Make all Menstrual Products Plastic Free” has gained over 245,000 signatures. Daish also met with company representatives to open a dialogue between businesses and the women that use their products (Daish, 2021a).

Several companies announced plastic bans shortly after these meetings. Lil-Lets explains, “We listened when our customers had concerns about the environmental impact of our plastic applicator products, and, following 12 months of product design and testing, we are thrilled to be in a position to make a difference today” (Smith qtd. in Daish, 2021b). In July 2020, Morrisons became the first to develop an eco-friendly range of pads, tampons, and panty-liners. The company released a statement saying “As one of the original signatories to WRAP’s UK Plastics PACT, Morrisons has committed that by no later than 2025, all of our own-brand plastic packaging will be reusable, recyclable or compostable. We support Ella's campaign and recognise the need for sustainable and plastic-free alternatives, which is why we have created this product range” (2020). These changes in period products have a snowball effect. As more sustainable options are introduced to stores, choosing a sustainable product becomes easier. Sustainable products become more visible and mainstream. Companies can capitalize on this growing market for sustainable period products. As more companies make changes, others are pressured to follow. Supporting sustainability benefits a company's image by demonstrating upstanding morals and environmental responsibility. Companies also preserve a positive relationship with their consumer base, showing that they are receptive to customer feedback. Moving major corporations to take action illustrates the movement’s influence. These

institutional changes in the menstrual product industry itself are essential to completing eliminating plastics from period products.

VI. Government Policy in Menstrual Equity and Sustainability

Activists' greatest win came from the Department for Education. In September 2020, the government agency "committed to providing free period products in English secondary schools and colleges" (DAME, 2019). These free products, however, included only conventional varieties. In response, advocacy groups and sustainable period brands wrote an open letter demanding that "Period products should be given out free-of-charge in schools and they should be plastic-free ... The government has the power to ensure that, for the first time, they can help an entire generation of young people have better periods. We owe this to them, and the planet" (Natracare et. al, 2019). Activists also pointed out The letter was accompanied by 37,188 signatures and successfully pushed the Department for Education to action. They announced that the contracted menstrual product supplier must offer "environmentally-friendly sanitary pads as a minimum, and are encouraged to provide further environmentally-friendly options (such as menstrual cups or eco-friendly tampons)" (Tribe, 2019). This step was a significant win for the movement. Menstrual education starts in schools, so incorporating sustainability in this education eliminates the lack of information at its source.

Discussion and Conclusion

The End Period Plastics movement is still ongoing, continuing to target brands like Tampax and Tesco (Daish, 2021a). Some major companies have failed to make any changes despite direct pressure. Daish met with Proctor and Gamble, the company behind major brands Tampax and Always (2021c). She also encouraged supporters to write letters to the company and

herself sent an open letter backed by over 40 groups, politicians, and activists. Proctor and Gamble responded that “plastic currently plays a necessary role in ensuring product performance for many of our users” (Tampx qtd. in Daish, 2020b). They noted that the company had been making strides to improve its sustainability, including reducing material usage and launching a menstrual cup. The company argued that much of the environmental impact of plastic tampon applicators could be minimised by properly disposing of the waste as their product was designed in line with the U.K.’s waste infrastructure (Daish, 2020b). As one of the largest companies targeted by Daish, it is understandable that Proctor and Gamble would not be as receptive to the campaign. Daish continues to put pressure on the company and has been targeting its locations in other countries across Europe. In November 2021, Daish doorstepped Proctor and Gamble’s Switzerland office. Although unable to speak directly with a decision-maker in the company, the action received substantial media attention (Daish, 2021d). As a leading brand, Proctor and Gamble holds significant power in the menstrual product industry. If Proctor and Gamble does commit to eliminating plastics, their decision will send a statement to the industry and likely pave their path as a leader in the future of sustainable period products.

Despite the pushback from some major companies, the End Period Plastics movement has made great strides thus far. Activists take advantage of the momentum from other movements in menstrual equity, feminist empowerment, and sustainability. The movement differs from typical sustainability campaigns due to menstruation’s personal nature, garnering widespread support from women who use the menstrual products that they fight for. By leveraging interpersonal connections, social media, and education, activists have effectively spread their message and normalized the idea of sustainable menstruation. This progress not only benefits sustainability but also menstrual health. Activists have empowered women to rethink

periods as a healthy, normal, and clean part of life. By influencing individual perceptions and decision-making, activists have gained momentum to enact widespread change throughout the period product industry. Their continued efforts may soon successfully eliminate all plastic from menstrual products in the UK and spark similar movements outside of the country.

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