

## Fighting for Access to Menstrual Products in Jail By Cassidy Moskowitz

At 24, Christine was arrested and immediately brought to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, which is a maximum-security women's prison in Westchester County. After being informed that she was getting transferred to another prison, her father came to visit her one last time. Christine had her period but was denied access to menstrual products. Christine expresses the unforgettable horror she felt during that moment to an NYT reporter: the guard escorting her to the visit with her dad "...was telling me how disgusting I was [with blood on my uniform and legs]...I was so embarrassed."

Menstrual products are perceived as luxury items everywhere, including prison. There are approximately 219,000 imprisoned women in the US according to the Prison Policy Initiative. A recent headline from The Guardian states: "Prisons that withhold menstrual pads humiliate women and violate basic rights". Not only do prisons minimize the importance of menstrual products by not purchasing them as part of the legal requirement to provide basic necessities, but they also deny access to prisoners as punishment, even when the products are available.

Prisons withholding access to menstrual hygiene products might seem like a slight inconvenience to some but it is quite the opposite. An article from the NYT states that "Last year, a formerly incarcerated woman in Maryland told lawmakers she got toxic shock syndrome in prison after using toilet paper as a makeshift tampon; she ended up needing an emergency hysterectomy." Toxic shock syndrome is a life-threatening condition caused by bacterial toxins. Menstruators are judged and criticized for bleeding but deprived of any products to prevent the flow. An article from the magazine Mother Jones states, "...the free pads from the facility didn't stick properly to the papery underwear [the woman] had been issued. And she didn't have the \$6.99 that the box of tampons would cost her at the commissary, the jail's version of a corner store." This is but one example of a lack of access to proper period products in prison. Prisons must be held accountable for not providing women their basic necessities, including free menstrual products .

To take action to support the needs of incarcerated women everywhere, we can all begin to normalize talking about periods with our friends and family. Write letters to your state representative urging them to pass legislation requiring prisons to provide menstrual products as a basic necessity. Donate menstrual products to organizations. One excellent organization to donate to is PERIOD, founded by menstrual activist, Nadya Okamoto. Lawmakers should be flooded with mail on this topic as it is a basic human rights violation to withhold menstrual products. We must prevent prisons from denying menstruators access to menstrual products by every means necessary.

Work Cited:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/nyregion/pads-tampons-new-york-womens-prisons.html>

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