

Lifting the Burden of the Future: Trialing Access to Long-Lasting Environmentally Sustainable Product in Remote Rural Communities in BC

Outlining the Pilot Project and Why It Matters

With regards to accessing free menstrual products in community, exciting advances are taking place around the province. More municipalities and post-secondary schools are adopting policies to provide free menstrual products in washrooms, and collection and distribution campaigns are making it easier for community organizations supporting some of the most vulnerable populations in our province with free product.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the product is disposable. The environmental impact of disposable product on our planet is substantial, with plastic applicators being one of the most common forms of plastic found in landfills and on beaches around the world. This focus on disposable product solutions also has an impact on community members because it tethers them to whatever source they know of in community where they might be able to access free product, building a relationship of dependence that becomes urgent with every menstrual cycle.

For rural and remote communities these pieces are of a particular area of concern. First, garbage disposal and access to services looks very different in rural and remote communities than it does in urban regions of the province. In many communities there is no public garbage disposal service, and so garbage collection is privatized. Moreover, few rural and remote communities have facilities to support recycling, composting, or repurposing of waste materials. This means the plastics in applicators and the chemicals that are used in many menstrual products become long-term environmental hazards for future generations to consider.

Second, rural and remote communities are less likely to have access points for free menstrual products while also having, in general, lower average incomes than urban centers. There are few charities, non-profits, and food banks that are able to give product out, and the ones that do exist are less likely to have community support in the form of collection drives. Outside of universities and colleges, most policy advances are taking place in urban spaces in the Lower Mainland or on Vancouver Island. Most colleges and universities are themselves in larger, regionally significant communities. All of this within a context of higher travel and product costs themselves; in general, it costs much more to menstruate in rural and remote communities than it does in more urban, centralized parts of the province.

“When we first put out our display we found that some of the clients were reluctant to try the reusable options but the ones who did were the ones who came back to tell us about their experience. We heard several times just how easy to use the reusable pads were to use and that the clients were so happy to know that they would always have something when they needed it.” – *A partnering organization outlining the value of reusable products when supporting their clients.*

Disposable products likely can play a larger role in this work. The United Way's Period Promise Research Project highlighted that access to menstrual products can benefit community organizations and people living with limited access to free menstrual products. Unfortunately, that program focused on distributing disposable products exclusively. This project is an opportunity to try out a different, longer-term, more sustainable and less onerous approach to providing people with product.

I am mindful of placing responsibility for having more environmentally sustainable periods on people who are already made vulnerable by lack of access to menstrual products. Nonetheless, as government's of all shapes and sizes build policies around increased access to free menstrual products I don't think focusing only on disposable product is a sensible solution. Reusable product is helpful to some people; it's a good, viable option for lots of vulnerable people. Studies should be undertaken to test out models that would allow vulnerable people to access high quality reusable products and report back on their value and impact on their health, well-being, and connection to community. This will help ensure that we build policies that are guided by a commitment to increased dignity and an awareness of the environmental impact caused by the products that we use. To my mind, the future of inclusive policy around access to menstrual products includes policy informed by environmental impact data that is reinforced by community knowledge and lived experience.

For this project, I would like to test out a subscription-like model for the distribution of reusable menstrual products, including pads, cups, and reusable tampon applicators, and then assess whether or not they decrease people's anxiety around their menstrual cycle, decrease their dependency on disposable one-time use products, and decrease waste production in their communities.

The distribution model I would like to test out will mail menstrual kits directly to community members who sign up. These kits would contain the type of menstrual product that the person requested in the sign-up process, along with a short brochure outlining how to use the product and how to maintain it. Individuals can ask for more than one product type: each one will be personally constructed to reflect their needs. They will register to be involved in the pilot by scanning a QR code on a poster found in a central point in community, or by e-mailing me directly. With the budget outline provided below I hope to provide support to more than 200 individuals across the communities of Terrace, Kitwanga, Hazelton and Smithers.

This pilot project will increase access to reusable menstrual products in isolated communities and, in the process, track the benefits that they bring to community, the health and wellbeing of individuals, and how the shift in product style and reliable availability shifts people's relationships with their menstrual cycle and bodies. If successful, it could offer a model on how to provide more sustainable products for isolated communities while also reducing the negative impacts on the environment. In a province like British Columbia, where mountains and limited road access means there are hundreds of small, rural,

"Not a free product but I invested in a menstrual cup 20 years ago. I replaced it about a year ago. Having it available has made periods virtually free and mostly ignorable." – *Period Promise Research Project public survey response*

"I've received free products from friends & from a hospital, when I couldn't afford them. I saved up and bought a menstrual cup & reusable underpants, which both help with money issues." – *Period Promise Research Project public survey response*

remote communities with limited transportation, limited accessibility to stores and retail, and reduced access to community organizations where free menstrual products might be more easily attained, testing an approach like this could lead to substantial benefits in our community.

To help assess the impact of the project, three surveys will be developed to assess people's experiences of being involved in community. Surveys will include both qualitative and quantitative data collection. They'll receive links to the surveys via mail. These surveys will be as follow:

1. An intake survey intended to capture people's experiences with accessing menstrual products in their community, the impact that limited access to free menstrual products has on them in their day-to-day, their concerns or curiosities around using reusable product, and their personal relationship with their menstrual cycle.
2. A mid-point survey, after the first three months, when we'll ask people if using the new product has been difficult in any way, if they have found it reliable, and if it has changed their habits. We'll also check into whether or not it has had a beneficial impact on their overall health and well-being.
3. An end-point survey, to be conducted at the 6 month timeline. This will be similar to the midpoint survey, but an additional section around perspectives on potential long-time usage of the product type(s) they have asked for will be included, along with questions on how they believe the program could be expanded to support more people in British Columbia.

For each survey I'm hoping one third of the product recipients will offer their feedback. To add clarity to the results of the surveys, phone or in-person interviews will be conducted with a small number of participants at the end of the pilot project. Across the 3 communities that we will involve in the survey, I hope to interview 9 participants who can speak more specifically to their experience.

If the results indicate a shift in product usage towards more reusable product, and if this shift increases the self-reported health and wellbeing of people who menstruate in these communities, it should be fairly scalable for any level of government or even non-profits looking to produce more sustainable supports for people who menstruate in isolated communities. This is because reusable menstrual products are often a one-time expense, which reduces long-term costs on purchasing product and makes distribution from a central location cheaper than regularly providing disposable product.

Ensuring Beneficial Community Impact

The population in North Western British Columbia is a uniquely local, diverse groupings of people. The vast majority speak English as their primary language, and most people are of European settler heritage. Nonetheless, we have a higher than average Indigenous population in the region; for example, 10% of residents in Smithers indicated that they are Indigenous in the 2016 census.

In the particular corner of the North Western region that I hope to study, there are many very small towns and several First Nations reservations. Many of them use Smithers and Terrace as regional hubs where they can access standard goods and services, including supports from a small number of community organizations and charities. For larger needs community members tend to travel to Prince George or Prince Rupert. Residents in the region are also younger than the BC average. In the 2016 the median age was 39 years old, compared to 43 for the rest of the province; this was driven in large part by a much larger percentage of the population until the age of 15 years. This means that there is a

higher proportion of people who are menstruating and who could make use of accessing free reusable menstrual products.

My plan is to focus my outreach for this pilot project through my connections with the Elizabeth Fry Society in Prince George. As a major point of accessing services for women and non-binary community members in the North West, the Elizabeth Fry Society has an extensive network of clients and partner organizations offering support to vulnerable community members in the smaller communities north west of the city. Most of the people that they offer support to experience some form of poverty, with some of them being homeless, and most of them relying on community organizations to access every day goods that they may need – including food, menstrual products, cleaning supplies, and more. Some of the groups in this network would include First Nations and Indigenous-led community organizations.

On a monthly basis, Elizabeth Fry Society in Prince George offers support to hundreds of people, and meets with other community organizations in the region to find potential methods of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their programming. This includes being part of a round table to support people accessing charitable services in Prince George but who do not reside in Prince George. By leveraging the existing networks held by the Elizabeth Fry Society, and integrating my project into the programs that they offer in and around my target communities, I expect my outreach for finding people interested in participating in the research to be quick and successful.

Many charities and non-profits prefer to distribute disposable products for three reasons: they are a valuable solution for community members who may not have access to secure housing or clean washing options; they usually do not require additional education on how to use the product; and, boxes can be easily broken down into rationed portions for front-line community distribution. This is also true of the Elizabeth Fry Society.

I have already discussed this research project with the staff at Elizabeth Fry Society, and they are keen to test this new model out with some of their clients who live outside of Prince George and are traveling for several hours every month to access a basic need like menstrual products. From their perspective the new data and knowledge might help them offer better supports to their community members.

Planning the Project

Even though the lifespan of reusable menstrual products is much longer than the timeline of this pilot project allows, and a longitudinal study would be quite interesting, I think the results of the research will be illuminating. It might help us better understand where, when, and how reusable products are useful, and how effective they are as a part of the broader effort to increase access to free menstrual products in community.

Below is a timeline of how I foresee this project operating.

Date	Task
December 2022	Purchase of menstrual products, designing and distribution of promotional posters and materials, building the list of participating individuals, design first survey

January 2022	Begin mailing product to participants, including a link to the first survey for completion. Distribution of biodegradable tampons to continue through to end of project, as far as funding allows.
March 2022	Distribute, via letter and e-mail, the second survey
June 2022	Distribute final survey, conduct 1 on 1 phone interviews
July 2022	Collate and review data, begin preparations for final report
August 31, 2022	Submit final report

I think that the above mentioned community based partners could be quickly energized behind this work, and that the relationships with them are strong and in good standing as a result of my volunteering and outreach to them while I've been a post-secondary student. I also think the compressed timespan for conducting the pilot project will allow me to manage much of the work without too much direct support from United Way BC.

That said, I would be interested in getting help in building survey and interview questions that will hopefully result in good and useful responses. United Way BC might already have questions that they would ask community members based on research that they have already done – including their active survey on period poverty in BC – and if possible I would like to ask comparable or similar questions to them or other recipients of the funding. This will help me better situate the results of my pilot project inside the work that they have already done, and we can assess if there are any shifts or changes compared to the broader survey work they have done.

I might need additional support in exploring or explaining the scalability of the project as findings come in from participants. I've never developed broad community-based modelling of a pilot project before, and would benefit from guidance or support, and potentially broader data about the demographics of the four communities I am studying and how representative they are of the rest of the province. My hope is that United Way BC or Dr. Lisa Smith will have access to this data and will be able to offer support in helping to transfer my finding to the broader possibility of the work.

Proposed Budget:

To do this work I am hoping to receive a grant of \$24,000. Funding of this level would allow me to do the following:

1. Purchase a large amount of reusable menstrual products that could be converted into care kits to be mailed to participants
2. Develop the appropriate and necessary collateral to ensure recipients of product know how to use the product type they have requested
3. Develop surveys and conduct the research, including purchasing any additional or new technologies and services that may be needed to support data collection or analysis.
4. Write final report, outlining the impact, successes, and emerging challenges from the program.

Below is an indication of the budgetary spending. Any unused funding allocated to the other item lines would be redirected to the purchase of product.

Budget Item	Budgeted Amount	Budget Note
-------------	-----------------	-------------

Purchasing product	\$10,000	The cost of purchasing reusable menstrual products. My plan is to purchase: 100 reusable menstrual pads, 100 menstrual cups, and 100 reusable menstrual applicator kits.
Distribution of product or other materials	\$2,000	This will cover the cost of mailing the packages and information materials to the recipients of product.
Communications materials, including development and printing	\$1000	Depending on the product type, we may need to develop instructional materials on how to use each new product. Ideally we can leverage existing collateral, including instructional videos, so that our work is building a guide on how to access existing content.
Wages or contract labour costs for the researcher(s)	\$9000	This will cover my time spent devoted to this work, at a rate of approximately \$1000 per month, accounting for approximately 30 hours of work each month.
Research costs	\$1000	I will pay the 9 participants in the interview with an honorarium of \$40/hour for their support. I may have to purchase transcribing software to support the interviews. To support collecting the data, I'll have to purchase a paid account on a surveying website tool. I would like to use Typeform.
Report preparation and submission	\$500	Graphing and results design support technology
Other expenses	\$0	Not applicable
TOTAL	\$23,500	

About the Researcher

I am a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia, where I am completing my final year of studies towards the completion of my Bachelor of Arts. I am working towards a double major in Political Science and Women and Gender Studies, and hope to continue my education by stepping into a Masters Program in Public Policy in the coming years. My intention is to study how to advance conversations about environmentally sustainability and safety for women in small-to-medium sized cities.

As part of my studies at UNBC I have supported the Office of Environmental Sustainability in a research and planning process to assess how current and future students think the university could make changes now to make the school more sustainable in the near future. The report was presented to the Office of the President and the University Senate, and is under review and consideration. I'm proud to say that it

was warmly received. The report did not include a pilot test of a new initiative, but it did include surveying and focus group conversations with groups of current and prospective future students.

As a student I was involved in the campaign, led by the student union, to install free menstrual product dispensers in all women's and gender neutral washrooms on campus. We continue to push administration to install product dispensers in men's washrooms as well.

For the past three years I have been volunteering in the Family Resource Centre at the Elizabeth Fry Society. While helping out in the learning library and offering occasional child care support to parents accessing other programs I have built a good rapport with staff and program directors; I have also seen people come to the center in desperate need of access to free products, and seen staff struggle to find product to give them.

I have attached a copy of my CV to this document. It highlights some of the research I have done in my studies, includes two references to professors who I have worked with and one to the Elizabeth Fry Society. All are willing to vouch for my competence as a researcher and convey their excitement for this project.