

Q&A: Jennifer Weiss-Wolf takes periods public in 'menstrual equity' fight

By Jessie Opoien
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Jennifer Weiss-Wolf can talk about periods for hours. And she does.

Weiss-Wolf, an attorney and vice president for development at New York University's Brennan Center for Justice, is at the forefront of a national movement to increase access to menstrual products — a movement that has made its way to Wisconsin, with the introduction of legislation by Rep. Melissa Sargent, D-Madison.



She spoke with the Cap Times on a recent stop in Madison to promote her new book, "Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity."

"Menstrual equity" is a phrase that didn't really exist until you started using it.

Until somebody made it up.

The idea of menstrual access and menstruation, the ability to manage menstruation as a policy matter, this is happening throughout the world, but it's very much looked at through a public health frame or a human rights frame. An equity frame is very different, and it actually speaks to participation, engagement. It's not just a matter of free tampons, it's about the ability to contribute fully to society, which is something we all benefit from.

How does this look as a policy discussion?

A couple years ago menstruation just wasn't on the table as a matter of discourse. In fact the only time menstruation had ever really had a political agenda was back in the early '90s around product safety, after the spate of toxic shock syndrome deaths in the '80s. The outcome is embarrassing for all of us because basically nothing has happened. Legislation was put forward by U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney of New York in 1997 to require more transparency in our products. That legislation has gone nowhere. It's been reintroduced 10 times since 1997.

This whole new attention to the issue of menstruation, particularly around the issue of access and affordability, is new for the United States. Wisconsin's been a leader, both Rep. Sargent and local legislators have been leaders in this national movement. Other states have managed to get certain things done more quickly.





What do you hope this national discussion will accomplish?

It's not just about what people need, although that's part of it, but it's about the values we express through our laws and about the norms we create through our laws. I don't think any of us would ever refer to the government-funded toilet paper they use. They would go into a restroom with the expectation of what would be in there for their comfort and use. It's not because anyone had their interests at heart, it's public hygiene. We treat that as normal. Imagine once we have passage of these laws continuing to proliferate across the country — there will be a generation that will just deem this to be normal.

We agree that access to menstrual products, there's an immediate need for that. And then there's sort of the forward looking visionary piece of it about normalizing menstruation more broadly so another generation will grow up talking about it differently in ways that are more open, more healthy, more productive. But there's even another layer, which is I think something we're seeing in our culture and discourse writ large right now, with sexual assault and the #metoo hashtag, people feeling like there's more of a space right now for women to demand that their perspective and their stories and their narrative be heard. There's a huge parallel to menstruation, which is the idea that our bodies and our experiences are just treated as "the other," even in the most benign administrations and times let alone these very extreme circumstances under which we're all existing right now.

Where does it go from here?

I would love to come to a point in time where we could look at all the laws under which we live through the lens of — if we considered menstruation or the fact that the bodies of the people who live by these laws go through this process, maybe we would consider those laws differently. Maybe we could do better.

For example, the way the federal tax code classifies menstrual products — the outcome of that technical term is that menstrual products aren't eligible for flexible spending account purchases the way other items are. So if you changed the coding of them, you could make them eligible.

How comfortable were you talking about this, when you started? And what's made it easier to discuss periods publicly?

Well, once you start, you discover it's like you cross over to the other side. I can't imagine a time where I didn't do this anymore. I'm aware of the fact that I catch people off guard often, who aren't expecting it or aren't as comfortable or versed in doing it. I try to be empathetic, I don't want to be mean to people. But I use those moments where they're getting their bearings to further empower myself. I have the upper hand because I am not uncomfortable and they are. I just let them take their space and I claim it as best I can. They sort of have no choice but to continue the conversation on my terms, so I've found it to be actually empowering.

I remember when the issue first came to me and the idea of this activism and advocacy began to emerge and I wrote my first essay about it, I would prepare people around me: "I wrote this thing and it's about periods." I did tiptoe a little at first. But I don't even remember what it was like to be that person. It's a whole new frontier.