

Playing Politics with Periods

Why the abolition of the 'tampon tax' is spreading across the world

Maisie-Rose Byrne

From pet food to sunscreen, proposals to cut value-added tax (VAT) on a range of products and services are ever-increasing. One of the best-known and far-reaching campaigns of this type has been the fight to abolish VAT on feminine hygiene products. More popularly known as the 'tampon tax', this issue has united campaigners from across to globe, contributing to policymakers in up to 25 countries removing or reducing taxes on menstrual products since Kenya's landmark decision in 2004.

Framed through a simple and evocative lens of fairness and equality, the campaign to end the 'tampon tax' has caught the attention of the public, press and policymakers alike, catapulting the oft-taboo issue of menstrual health to the top of the political agenda. Whilst social, economic, and menstrual health contexts vary per adopting country, the core message of the political announcements has stayed the same: abolishing the 'tampon tax' will address gender equality by resulting in more accessible and affordable menstrual products for women and girls.

However, despite these meritorious aims, there is little evidence that removing or reducing VAT is the most effective policy instrument to achieve them. Just like VAT cuts on other products, tax policy specialists are increasingly concluding that any savings are very rarely passed onto consumers. Nonetheless, the momentum behind the abolition of the 'tampon tax' continues to build, with limited analysis of why a seemingly ineffective policy decision continues to spread so far and wide.

Specifically, whilst there are indications that policymakers have been influenced by debates and actions beyond their borders, there has been no attempt to understand the relationship between similar policy decisions at similar times, in multiple countries of varying contexts.

Research design and data

This research gap has been explored through a mixed-method approach. I conducted nine key informant interviews (KII), which have been triangulated with secondary sources including academic literature, governmental documents, newspaper articles, and political and non-governmental organisation (NGO) / civil

society organisation (CSO) documents. In conjunction with an analysis of Tanzania, as the only known country to eliminate and then reintroduce the tax, I most frequently analyse actions in UK, South Africa, Australia, India and Canada, both to ensure global North and South representation and due to the adequacy of secondary data available. The sparse available literature and low number of KII is noted as a limitation of this study.

In pursuit of praise and popular acclaim

Firstly, I find that policymakers are replicating this policy instrument in pursuit of the praise and popular acclaim being received elsewhere. The fairness and equality narrative at its centre has created a level of social acceptance that abolishing the 'tampon tax' is simply the right thing to do, with policymakers echoing this language in their announcements to claim virtue, and garner public support. Conversely, there is no evidence that political decision-making has been based on a review of adequate data and research related to the stated aims of menstrual and gender equality.

Versatility in varying contexts

Secondly, I find that policymakers have successfully manoeuvred the 'tampon tax' abolition as a versatile and ready-made solution to fit their objectives in varying contexts, including as a proxy for unrelated political issues. In Tanzania, its political prioritisation followed a high-profile campaign highlighting the lack of affordability of sanitary products for schoolgirls, whilst in the UK it was elevated up the political agenda as a salient figurehead of the EU's role in national decision-making during Brexit debates.

With policymakers often dealing with issues perceived as complicated, expensive, and complex for the public to understand, the simplicity of the 'tampon tax' narrative has become a strategic entry point for gaining support on wider and even unrelated political objectives. This echoes examples of how other VAT-product exemption debates have been used to connect with the voting public, such as a political storm over the so-called 'pasty tax' in the UK.

Crisp campaigning focus

Finally, it is clear that civil society groups have significantly contributed to the international spread of this issue with a dogged commitment to amplifying the core message of fairness and equality, in turn winning widespread support for their campaigning aim. The global nature of social media, which has almost universally been at the centre of national campaigning tactics, has resulted in clear and simple messages being rapidly spread beyond borders. Whilst some campaigning tactics have been creatively contextualised in each country, I find that both formal and informal learning mechanisms have supported campaigners to share learnings and support the effectiveness of their counterparts' efforts.

Implications

This paper contributes to the limited specific research on the 'tampon tax' and adds a case study to the wider research on the motivations behind wider VAT exemption decision-making.

I find that the abolition of the 'tampon tax' has spread so far and wide due to policymakers pursuing the praise and popular acclaim received in other countries, and its versatility as a ready-made solution to fit varying political objectives (including as a proxy for unrelated issues). Enabling both has been the social acceptance of a core fairness and equality narrative, which has been bolstered by strong and consistent campaigning.

That my findings show that policymakers are not necessarily motivated to make progress towards their proclaimed objectives is an important lesson for civil society groups and campaigners. Civil society groups in Tanzania reflect that their lack of accountability pressure on the government to successfully implement the tax cuts enabled the government to reserve their decision more easily. By better understanding the motivations of policymakers, groups can adapt their campaigning strategies to include calls to action for more effective and sustained policy actions.

Whilst there is mounting evidence that abolishing the 'tampon tax' is not achieving redistributive aims, it is unclear what impact this will have on the efficacy of the fairness narrative. It is necessary to build on findings from existing evaluations, and further consider whether there have been any additional secondary impacts from gender and menstrual health issues being elevated up the political agenda. Campaigners can then use these lessons to effectively advocate for more impactful policy choices to address the needs of the poorest and most marginalised women.

“The simplicity of the ‘fairness and equality’ narrative has become a strategic entry point for policymakers to gain public support on wider political objectives.”

Further reading

Crawford, B. J., & Spivack, C. (2017). Tampon Taxes, Discrimination, and Human Rights. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 61. Available at <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2068&context=lawfaculty>

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Citation: Byrne, M. (2023) *Playing Politics with Periods: Why the abolition of the 'tampon tax' is spreading across the world*. ICTD Research in Brief 86, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. DOI: [10.19088/ICTD.2023.025](https://doi.org/10.19088/ICTD.2023.025)

Credits

The author would like to thank Martin Hearson for his valuable input throughout this research study, and all key informant interviewees for sharing their knowledge.

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The ICTD is funded with UK aid from the UK Government, Norad and by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; however, the views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies, nor those of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material from the series. In return, ICTD requests due acknowledgment and quotes to be referenced as listed.



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DOI: [10.19088/ICTD.2023.025](https://doi.org/10.19088/ICTD.2023.025)

ICTD is proudly funded by

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