

Empowerment Through Diapers

Did you ever wonder what the point of a diaper is? A diaper is so common in America that it is difficult to find sources for why to use diapers. Many people would gravitate to the answer that the diaper is there to hold in a mess until a parent can change the baby. This answer is not necessarily incorrect, however, what if the primary purpose was for something that was even more important—a hidden, more essential reason for using diapers. What if the true reason for using diapers was empowerment?

BACKGROUND

According to New Kids-Center, the average newborn will have approximately 10 diaper changes daily, a baby that is 1 to 5 months old will average 8 to 10 changes and after five months, a baby will average 8 changes daily.¹

Conservatively, this equals 2,790 diaper changes in one year and let's say that one has gotten really good at changing a diaper and he or she averages 1.5 minutes per change. Over the course of the year that equates to 4,185 minutes or 2.9 days and that's if one is really good at changing a diaper. Chances are it is a lot longer than 2.9 days especially depending on the type of mess it is and whether or not the baby is cooperative.

And now imagine that you have to use a worn rag, tied around the baby, acting as a makeshift diaper or even worse, you have no diaper at all. A mother goes from a 1.5 minute change to a lot longer. The mess is no longer contained and the baby needs to be thoroughly washed (and perhaps the mother does too). And let's say this mother is not caring for one baby, but perhaps 10 babies. Suddenly, the time spent changing inadequate diapers becomes overwhelming.

The article “Health, Social, and Economic Outcomes Experienced by Families as a Result of Receiving Assistance from a Community-Based Diaper Bank” by Kelley E. C. Massengale, Jennifer Toller Erausquin, and Michelle Old outlines these issues and more associated with inadequate diapering. Specifically, they found that almost every aspect of the family life: social, economic, emotional, and physical were impacted.² The authors make an argument for everything being connected to diapers. When there are an inadequate amount of diapers, changes happen less even if the diaper is soiled and when that occurs, babies break out into diaper rash resulting in less sleep for babies and of course, less sleep for the parents.³ When parents get less sleep, stress is amplified more than need be.

However, inadequate diapering as it relates to women and not just both parents was analyzed in the article “Examining Material Hardship in Mothers: Associations of Diaper Need and Food Insufficiency with Maternal Depressive Symptoms” by Anna E. Austin and Megan V. Smith. In their article, the authors cited a survey that found that “30% of mothers reported diaper need and that diaper need was significantly associated with high levels of self-reported mental distress in mothers.”⁴

Jake’s Diapers and Real Hope For Haiti are combatting this issue inadequate diapering. Jake’s Diapers’ mission is to provide diapers to those in need, so much so that the people they serve typically in the past had to choose between food and diapers. Real Hope For Haiti has several different goals however one of them is to meet the medical needs of the Haitians.

Real Hope For Haiti operates a rescue center that focuses on children and their medical ailments. Many times these medical issues are illnesses obtained due to the socio-economic backgrounds of the kids. Diseases such as Kwashiorkor and Cholera are very common among the people of Haiti, especially the children. Among other symptoms, both of these diseases for

example are exasperated by poor sanitation and hygiene. If a mother has only inadequate diapers to use or no diapers at all, these diseases can spread easily to other kids or to adults.

As groups try to combat the issue of inadequate diapering. Real Hope For Haiti in conjunction with Jake's Diapers is able to send volunteers to Haiti to assist in the efforts to build community and treat the Haitians for their ailments. Jake's Diapers send kits and packages of diapers with the people it sends to Haiti. To date, Jake's Diapers has sent over 90,000 diapers to Haiti. Besides for the volunteers, local Haitian nannies help tend to the kids daily and each nanny may be responsible for over 10 kids.

EMPOWERMENT

The people who have volunteered on these trips have spoken about the impact of these diapers and what they do for the lives of the Haitian women in particular. They were very honest about the impact of diapers on the lives of the women there.

Katie Meyer who recently visited Haiti for the first time, had a lot to say about the impact of diapers. Katie said that when it came down to it, diapers represented dignity for the mother who was caring for the kids. If a mother had proper diapers to use on her children, it meant that she was not confined to the home. It also meant she (along with the kids) could leave and visit the market or church or even go to the clinic if they had to. The mother could leave knowing that if one of her children did have an accident, it wouldn't equal a mess that would require them to go back home. Katie said this dignity and freedom was very empowering for the women. It was life-changing. For what Katie saw in Haiti, having diapers went beyond simply having something to hold in a mess.

Stephanie Bower, Executive Director of Jake's Diapers, agreed with Katie's comments. Bowers stated when women do not have to worry about an accident occurring without a diaper, it

was a “freeing feeling.” Women could go the market without fear of being embarrassed by a potential mess. The power to move and travel without that fear is empowering according to Bowers.

Holly Mitchener has been traveling to Haiti since 2010 and also had strong feelings on the empowering nature of diapers. She said diapers represented access—a choice a mother never had before. Mothers could now have clean clothes and would have to spend less time on clean up. That time could be used to educate their kids or do other things to better their own lives. Again, empowerment to choose how to spend their time and live their lives.

To be clear the empowering nature of the diaper helps both fathers and mothers who change children, but helps mothers even more so. According to the UN Women, a division of the United Nations that is devoted to gender equality, “women do 2.6 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men.”⁵ The International Center for Research on Women actually has it as high as ten times more.⁶ Additionally, the International Center for Research on Women also surveyed men and women in different countries around the world and found specifically when it comes to diaper changing, women greatly outperformed men.⁷

When you couple this fact with the fact that the nannies who work with Real Hope For Haiti have several children to care for daily, the amount of time diapers can save them is almost impossible to measure. As Katie, Stephanie and Holly argued above, the time spent equals dignity and freedom and this leads to empowerment.

Additionally, the amount of diseases these nannies are susceptible to greatly decreases with sanitary diapers. Where before nannies had to be concerned not just about the babies becoming sick due to poor hygiene but also themselves becoming sick, now with proper diapers, they can worry a little less.

Melinda Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has talked extensively about how important birth control is and in a recent TED Talk—how simple and non-controversial it really is and how empowering it can be for women.⁸ However, as Gates points out, though it should be non-controversial, it remains a topic of scrutiny around the world. In many ways, diapers are similar to birth control. A powerful tool that empowers women, however, the issue of diapering faces different challenges than that of birth control.

Where birth control still carries a stigma with it in different parts of the world as Gates points out, diapering doesn't carry a stigma but more of a supply issue. Getting diapers and supplies to mothers continues to be an issue especially in nations such as Haiti. Using diapers themselves does not seem to be controversial however dedicating funds and supplies seems to be a low priority on the lists of many nations around the world and as a result that negatively impacts the empowerment of women

Governments around the world do not view diapers as a tool of empowerment but as a matter of convenience. Even in the United States, according to the Good+ Foundation, there are no federal or state programs that specifically allocate money to providing diapers.⁹ Good+ Foundation also raises an excellent point that if mothers cannot afford diapers than mothers cannot leave their children at daycare to go to school or to even go to work to pay for diapers. This point was also reaffirmed by the article “Organizational and Health Promotion Benefits of Diaper Bank and Community-Based Organization Partnerships.”¹⁰

Additionally, the authors of “Health, Social, and Economic Outcomes Experienced by Families as a Result of Receiving Assistance from a Community-Based Diaper Bank” make the point that when diapers are provided to families in need this “allowed parents and caregivers to

serve as productive members of society by attending work, and it contributed toward the accomplishment of educational goals by playing a role in parents' school attendance.”¹¹

Nicole Tilot also visited Haiti on behalf of Jake's Diapers and echoed the information stated in the above article. Nicole stated that as many as nine women now have jobs in Haiti because Jake's Diapers provided diapers for their children and these women were now able to go out and get jobs and bring home extra income. Nicole said the diapers empowered these women into careers.

Gates points out that when the idea of birth control and the actual birth control gets introduced to a population, it generally will sweep through the region due to its power. The same could be said about diapers. Katie and Holly both spoke about how in awe the local women in Haiti were of the diapers they were given. In fact, Katie said at one point, a local lady asked Katie with skepticism, “you're not simply going to give us these diapers, are you?” This local woman viewed the diapers as a commodity that was worth its weight in gold. Perhaps has valuable as birth control itself.

Diapers empower mothers as much as birth control and without diapers, mothers are forced to stay inside, use unsanitary methods to diaper and risk disease for themselves and their children. The diaper may appear to be just another cosmetic supply to someone who does not have kids, but to the average mother in Haiti, it is the equivalent of a car, a vaccine and as a washer all-in-one. The empowering nature cannot be overstated.

1 “How Many Diapers Does a Baby Use a Day?” - New Kids Center, www.newkidscenter.com/How-Many-Diapers-A-Day.html.

² Massengale, Kelley, et al. “Health, Social, and Economic Outcomes Experienced by Families as a Result of Receiving Assistance from a Community-Based Diaper Bank.” *Maternal and*

Child Health Journal, vol. 21, no. 10, 17 Oct. 2017, pp. 1985–1994, 1986., doi:10.1007/s10995-017-2317-9.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Austin, Anna E. “Examining Material Hardship in Mothers: Associations of Diaper Need and Food Insufficiency with Maternal Depressive Symptoms.” *Health Equity*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 Sept. 2017, pp. 217–133, 128., doi: 10.1089/heq.2016.0023.

⁵ “Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality.” UN Women, www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality.

⁶ <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Evolving-Men-Initial-Results-from-the-International-Men-and-Gender-Equality-Survey-IMAGES-1.pdf>, page 22.

⁷ <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Evolving-Men-Initial-Results-from-the-International-Men-and-Gender-Equality-Survey-IMAGES-1.pdf>, page 32-33.

⁸ “Let's Put Birth Control Back on the Agenda.” by Melinda Gates, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BOTS9GAjc4&t=604s.

⁹ “The Impact of Diapers on the Health of a Child.”- Goodplusfoundation, www.goodplusfoundation.org/the-impact-of-diapers-on-the-health-of-a-child/.

¹⁰ Massengale, Kelley E.C., et al. “Organizational and Health Promotion Benefits of Diaper Bank and Community-Based Organization Partnerships.” *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 76, 2017, pp. 112–117, 113. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.03.004.

¹¹ Massengale, Kelley, et al. “Health, Social, and Economic Outcomes Experienced by Families as a Result of Receiving Assistance from a Community-Based Diaper Bank,” at 1992.