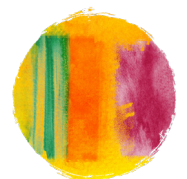
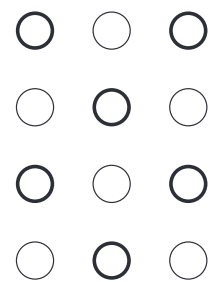




ADVOCATA:

Challenging unjust cultural stigmas and tax issues with authenticity, research, and compassion



Breaking the silence: How a visionary group of thought leaders is fighting for fairness on behalf of Sri Lankan women

The Sri Lankan government taxed feminine sanitary products at over 100 percent, making a basic necessity unaffordable for most women in the country. In spite of a culture of silence and scorn surrounding the female cycle, the Advocata Institute bravely stepped up to become the voice for the voiceless when no one else would. Advocata's work not only started an important conversation, but it also led to a drastic reduction to the sanitary napkin tax, which stripped women of their dignity by preventing access to a basic necessity.



Key Takeaways

Advocata's voice was essential to effecting change for marginalized women in Sri Lanka.

Advocata's story offers lessons on how to:

- Move the needle on economic reforms that may seem off limits because of cultural stigmas
- Be an authentic voice for change
- Advocata's success was a win for free markets and women alike in Sri Lanka. Read on to learn more.

About the Advocata Institute

Advocata Institute's vision for Sri Lanka is that the country becomes more free, open, and prosperous. The organization's work aims to create a Sri Lanka with an abundance of opportunity for anyone to work hard and succeed.

Becoming a voice for change: Advocata deftly steps into a sensitive policy fight

In a country with 4.2 million menstruating women, only 30 percent of them use sanitary napkins. That's because, until recently, Sri Lanka taxed sanitary napkins at over 100 percent, making it unaffordable for many poor women to afford this basic need. Because most women cannot afford sanitary napkins, they resort to using cloth rags instead, which present sanitary and health concerns. This injustice went unchallenged for years because the female menstrual cycle is considered "unclean" and off limits by many in Sri Lanka. Many women are unwelcome in their homes and at school while menstruating. The Advocata Institute took on Sri Lanka's culture of silence with a microphone, disseminating groundbreaking research on unjust taxation until government officials were forced to take action. Thanks to Advocata's efforts, the 30 percent import tariff on feminine products in Sri Lanka was eliminated. The total tax on feminine products has been reduced to about 63 percent from the previous 101.2 percent, and Sri Lanka's finance minister, Mangala Samaraweera, [told the Thomson Reuters Foundation he was looking into how taxes on sanitary products could be reduced further.](#)

Here's how Advocata's work inspired change in Sri Lanka:

- The Advocata Institute succeeded in making sanitary napkins more affordable by ending the 30 percent import tariff on these products.
- Advocata's research exposed the barriers many women face in Sri Lanka, shining light on the issue and starting an important conversation on the need for change.

THE CONTEXT: Being a girl in Sri Lanka isn't just challenging—it's expensive

On the island nation of Sri Lanka, girls and women face cultural stigmas because of their periods.

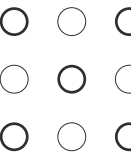
A U.N. study found 60 percent of teachers in Sri Lanka think menstrual blood is impure. Because of this, 60 percent of girls are absent from school once a month during their cycle. Women are often forced from their homes during their period—some die, others face illness. All are subject to isolation and discrimination.

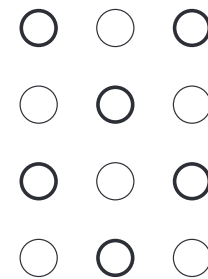
In short, women are stripped of their dignity because their culture does not like to deal with the natural female menstrual cycle.

This obtuse view on femininity is not only prevalent in the Sri Lankan society, but also permeates the way government levies taxes on feminine products.

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“Women in South Asia generally face a culture of silence dictated by injustice and misogyny,” said Anuki Premachandra, research communications manager at Advocata. “[As a nation], we are far from where we once were, but we have a long way to go. The role of a woman is still widely seen and confined to the role of a caregiver and the battle to defy this norm is one that we fight daily. Although the country was first to have a female prime minister, women are not seen as often as they should be in leadership and political roles. This is quite possibly also why high taxes on an essential like sanitary napkins exist and haven't been challenged by anyone until the Advocata Institute shed light on the numbers.”





Armed with the facts and more detailed insight into the issues plaguing Sri Lankan women, Advocata was able to zero in on effective messaging and a persuasive argument on why the country needed to reform the way it taxes feminine products.”

HOW WE DID IT: Ripening urgent policy reforms related to culturally sensitive issues

Advocata knew that limited access to sanitary napkins was harmful, but they needed to know why and how it was affecting women.

Because of the sensitive nature of the feminine tax reform fight, the group wasn't able to leverage human stories to explain why the issue is so important. They had access to data on girls missing school because of their periods and general attitudes toward the female cycle from UNICEF and other groups—but they knew they needed more.

To that end, Advocata commissioned a consumer survey to learn more about how limited access to sanitary napkins was affecting women in Sri Lanka. What they learned was that at least up to 50 percent of low-income women did not use sanitary napkins.

Alternatives to sanitary napkins, such as rag cloths, are unsanitary and unsafe. But because of the cultural stigma surrounding women's reproductive health, policymakers are unaware of how this unhealthy alternative affects women. Poor hygiene caused by the use of rag cloths can lead to cervical cancer, which is the second-most common type of cancer among Sri Lankan women. According to the HPV Information Center, current estimates indicate that every year 1,721 Sri Lankan women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 690 die from the disease.

“The mere fact that a necessity as this is taxed so high goes to show how misrepresented women are in the real world here,” Premachandra said. “We grow up in a culture where the topic of menstruation and womanhood is hidden and not embraced. A tax burden like this only does more injustice to a woman's dignity.”

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HOW WE DID IT: Internal diversity and female representation is invaluable when fighting for women's rights

Sri Lankan cultural oppression of women goes beyond taxes on feminine products, and this affects the country's overall economy in addition to impairing female upward mobility. For example, it is illegal for women to work later than 8 p.m. Restricting women's freedom and right to earn a living is incredibly harmful to half of the Sri Lankan population, and Advocata has stepped up as a voice for this population.

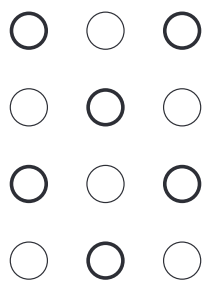
They're able to put their money where their mouth is because they have skin in the game. The entirety of Advocata's paid staff is female.

"I think having women on our staff has probably helped sustaining the issue long term," said Deane Jayamanne, co-founder and director of

Advocata. Because of the diversity of the team's staff, they think differently. For example, Advocata came across the problem of high taxes on feminine products while researching taxes on diapers. "I became a father almost two years ago and noticed that diapers in Sri Lanka were more expensive than the United States," Jayamanne said. "It's so expensive there's an 'underground' mommy network of diaper smugglers. The researcher who was looking into tariff reform already did some digging and found out that there was a 62 percent tax on diapers, while doing that we also discovered there was a 100 percent tax on sanitary napkins. We released the data to some media organizations and the issue shot up from there."

With female leadership like Premachandra championing women's economic issues, it became a natural fit for Advocata to take the lead in the fight for reform externally as well. Jayamanne says he has learned the when the issues his group champions have a "personal resonance," the chance of success is much higher.

"I do really think having diverse people in the room really makes a difference and opens up new areas and ways of thinking," he said.





HOW WE DID IT: Evolving what a “think tank” does through trial and error

Spreading the word on Sri Lanka’s extreme taxation of feminine products created a monsoon of outrage on social media.

Attempting to harness and grow digital reach to spread the word on Advocata’s campaign was new territory for the organization. The team did not have an exact science or understanding on how to leverage a new medium at first—one major challenge was identifying their target audience so their efforts on social media weren’t aimed at a black hole.

Social media became important in this fight because other, more traditional, efforts based on research were not fruitful. But when Advocata took the issue to the people, things changed. Once Advocata was able to tap into an audience that cared about the feminine products tax, they found they were able to fuel the fire for change by providing that audience with information and

The tax reduction on sanitary napkins is an important step in a longer fight Advocata plans to tackle related to economic freedoms in their country.

graphics that allowed the people to advocate for themselves. Advocata used graphics, short posts, and videos to amplify their message.

Public outcry caused the government official in charge of tax policy to examine the issue. Ultimately, he ended up cutting the tax.

Celebrating impact, leveraging momentum

“Freedom of trade will make goods and services related to female hygiene more available through this single reform,” said Dhananath Fernando, COO of Advocata Institute. “Importantly, this will provide the opportunity for better the menstrual hygiene behaviors of females, who make up 52 percent of the population in Sri Lanka.”

The tax reduction on sanitary napkins is an important step in a longer fight Advocata plans to tackle related to economic freedoms in their country.

Points to Ponder

1. Are there minority populations in your country that are disproportionately harmed by bad government policy? What opportunities do you have to become a credible voice on their behalf?
2. How would you prepare a compelling message around that issue?
3. How can you ensure your team is benefiting from a variety of perspectives representing different walks of life in your country?

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