

Ethical Viewpoint Paper

Menstruation Myths: That Holds Back Women And Girls

Chitrita Sengupta Chaki

Psychologist and Psychotherapist, Private Practice, Kolkata

Corresponding Author: Chitrita Sengupta Chaki

Email: chitritasengupta@yahoo.com

This viewpoint paper looks at some of the myths that surround menstruation and examines some ethical issues about the same.

Myth1: Periods Are Debilitating for Women

Menstruation taboos are more debilitating than anything menstrual cycles themselves. Lack of access to sanitary napkins and knowledge on managing periods for girls and women is debilitating. But, periods themselves are rarely a cause for necessary sick leave. Yes, every woman experiences menstrual cycles differently, many women complaint of pain, mood swing, apathy, change in appetite, weakness etc again some women do not complain of any debilitating pain or other discomfort. With the proper supplies and knowledge on how to manage periods, girls and women can be empowered to accomplish any task any time of the month.

Myth 2: The pain of a period is ‘just like’ anything you’ve experienced

The pain women get during a period is real and not fake. We are not talking about headaches or sprain. Some of us have to take off from work and curl up in bed, hoping the pinching and disabling cramps will subside because it is that bad. This condition even has a medical name called dysmenorrhea. In fact, around 20 percent of women have dysmenorrhea that is severe enough to interfere with their daily activities. This condition affects women’s ability to concentrate, makes them more anxious, make us downright unpleasant. It is also not anything you have experienced before.

Myth 3: It’s OK to dismiss our feelings when we’re on our period

There is a very real physical change in a woman’s body during this time. Days before the beginning of the menstruation, when she is “PMSing” and her levels of estrogen drops while her levels of progesterone sharply increase. Estrogen is linked to serotonin, the “happy hormone,” and progesterone is linked to that part of the brain which is associated with fear, anxiety, and depression. The effects of these hormones on mood are complicated, and while progesterone may depress some emotions, it has a mood-balancing effect also.

It may be tempting to write off seemingly drastic changes in moods as “just hormones,” but mood changes caused by hormones are still real. It may happen on a more monthly basis for us, but it doesn’t invalidate our feelings.

Myth 4: Hormones define women

Discussing about hormones, women have been accused of being “hormonal” for a long time. Some men have even equated woman’s feelings to hysteria, as if it’s an illness, to explain female behaviour. Every human has hormones, and nobody likes them to be messed with not even men. For instance, a study was conducted on male contraception, which was discontinued because male participants could not handle contraception’s side effects of acne, injection pain, and emotional disorders. But Women are forced to accept these same side effects with their birth control, PMS even if they negatively affect our overall well-being.

Myth 5: Period blood is dirty blood

Period blood is not the rejected body fluids or the body's way of flushing out toxins. It is an excretion from uterus through vaginal secretion — the fluid consists of blood along with cervical mucus, vaginal secretions, and endometrial tissue. Typically, menstrual blood is a little thicker than normal bleeding because of the tissue it contains. The condition is not ideal down there for a woman.

Myth 6: Periods are shameful

This myth is prevailing since ages in every corner of the world. Every girl is taught by her mother or other female members of her family to hide the menstruation hygiene items, not to discuss loudly with other male members of the family or to her male friends, a girl must whisper.

If we stop thinking that periods are shameful and dirty, then perhaps it wouldn't be a humanitarian crisis. But the truth is, we have a long history of embarrassment to overcome. It's so ingrained in our behaviour that being put on blast for having our period does not help.

Myth 7: Period is a personal issue

Still in 21st Century, the concept of period is seen as a personal issue in most of the countries and women during their periods are left in isolation leading to an significant amount of psychological trauma.

Myth 8. Women will contaminate food if they cook when they are having their menses

Mostly in the rural India, there is a myth that women cannot water plants or cook during their period because their "uncleanliness" will spoil the food. In a study done in a random school in rural India, it was found that 55 percent of girls surveyed believed they could not cook or enter the kitchen during and 4 days after menstruation or food would sour. While I am all for more boys and men taking on household chores so that girls in India can get an education, this myth doesn't help with that.

Myth 9. Women cannot enter a temple when having their menstrual cycle

This myth exists in parts of the world ranging from India to Nepal to Indonesia and so on. Women are believed to be "unclean" while menstruating and are thus not allowed to enter "clean" and holy places like temples. This is a form of gender inequality that limits women from the same human rights like freedom to practice religion that men have access to. Girls and women menstruating are not unclean. They are normal, natural, and healthy. The myth that women cannot enter temples and holy ground is culturally controversial, and a sensitive issue. When women are treated differently because of a naturally occurring body cycle it creates shame, taboos, and humiliation towards periods that is deeply embedded into society. And that is the only thing that's ridiculous.

Myth 10. Women have "cooties" will make men ill

The word "cooties" symbolizes slang for women. Cooties, a nickname for body lice or head lice, cooties first appeared as slang in 1915. Later, the word "cooties," came to be used loosely and often humorously as well as disrespectfully to mean imaginary germs or bugs.

As it is believed that women have cooties they cannot interact with or touch men because men will become sick by touching an "unclean" woman. Some 20% of girls in rural India believe they should not talk to a male member of the family during menstruation. And 40% of girls in India learn about menstruation from their mothers. So, if external education is not provided these traditions will persist.

Myth 11: Girls cannot participate in school/class during their periods

The chaupadi tradition is a practice in rural parts of Nepal where women are literally put in isolation during their menstruation. Again, the reason stems back to "being unclean", women cannot be in classrooms with other students while menstruating. The myth goes back to the belief that a woman's uncleanliness will anger Hindu goddesses. This belief is extremely psychologically disabling for girls. Dispelling myths like chaupadi where estimated 16 percent of women in Nepal are forced from their homes into isolation is a task that will take effort, education and awareness.

Myth 12: Showering Will Cause Infertility in women during their periods

In Afghanistan, the word “gazag” means to become infertile. In old Afghan tradition, it is said that during the days of menstruation, she cannot wash or shower or she will become gazag. It is a major risk for infection for women who is menstruating. In many places, including Afghanistan, it's common for women to use cloth as sanitary napkins. The benefit here is that it's relatively inexpensive and a renewable way to manage periods. But the downside is, women are often ashamed to hang to dry clean cloth used during menstruation outside with other clean clothes. So, women hide and wear sanitary napkins for too long which causes infections that is deadly to reproductive health. This can all be fixed if social taboos over periods are eliminated.

Facts Of Menstruation

- On average a woman menstruates for about 20-25 years during their lifetime.
- The first period can be met with either celebration, fear or concern. For every girl, this signifies an important transition to womanhood - a time when they would benefit from the support of family and friends. This will lead to a psychologically healthy human being.
- Many girls do not have complete and accurate understanding of menstruation as a normal biological process. Educating girls before their first period, and most importantly, boys on menstruation, builds their confidence, contributes to social solidarity and encourages healthy habits. These information must be provided at home primarily as well as at school. The community and Society as a whole has a responsibility to build a menstrual friendly and mentally healthy individual.
- Poor menstrual hygiene can pose physical health risks and has been linked to reproductive and urinary tract infections. Many girls and women have limited options for affordable menstrual materials. Providing access to private facilities with water and safer low-cost menstrual materials could reduce urogenital diseases.
- Girls and women with disabilities and special needs face additional challenges with menstrual hygiene and are affected disproportionately with lack of access to toilets with water and sanitary materials to manage their period.
- Many women and girls do not have access to menstruation materials to manage their menstruation, especially in times of emergency -- natural disasters and conflicts.
- Globally, 2.3 billion people lack basic sanitation services in under developed and developing countries, and only 27 per cent of the population has a handwashing facility with water and soap at home. Managing periods at home in these situations is a major challenge for women and adolescent girls who lack these basic facilities at home.

Ethical Issues in Menstrual Education

Human rights are rights that every human being has by virtue of his or her human dignity. Menstruation is intrinsically related to human dignity – when people cannot access safe bathing facilities and safe and effective means of managing their menstrual hygiene, they are not able to manage their menstruation with dignity. Menstruation-related teasing, exclusion and shame also undermine the principle of human dignity.

Gender inequality, extreme poverty, humanitarian crises and harmful traditions can all turn menstruation into a time of deprivation and stigma, which can undermine their enjoyment of fundamental human rights. This is true for women and girls, as well as for transgender men and nonbinary persons who menstruate.

Over the lifetime of a person who menstruates, they could easily spend three to eight years menstruating, during which they might face menstruation-related exclusion, neglect or discrimination.

A variety of factors affect how people are treated during menstruation (and other times when they experience vaginal bleeding, such as during post-partum recovery).

Exclusion from public life: One of these factors is the perception that menstruation is dirty or shameful. This view contributes to restrictions women and girls face during vaginal bleeding, which exist in many, if not most, countries. Some restrictions are cultural, such as prohibitions on handling

food or entering religious spaces, or the requirement that women and girls isolate themselves. (See examples of menstruation taboos and discrimination here.) Some restrictions are self-imposed; women or girls may fear participating in activities like school, athletics or social gatherings. Together, these practices can reinforce the idea that women and girls have less claim to public spaces, and that they are less able to participate in public life.

Barriers to opportunities: Another common misconception is that women and girls have diminished capacities, whether physical or emotional, due to their menstrual cycles. These ideas can create barriers to opportunities, reinforcing gender inequality. In truth, most women and girls do not have their abilities hindered in any way by menstruation.

Barriers to sanitation and health: Poverty and humanitarian crises can limit women's and girls' access to culturally appropriate, high quality menstrual supplies and safe, private washing facilities.

Vulnerable women and girls in middle- and high-income countries can also face poor access to safe bathing facilities and menstrual supplies – including those in impoverished school systems, prisons and homeless shelters.

Heightened vulnerability

The onset of menstruation, called menarche, can undermine girls' human rights. In many places around the world, menarche is believed to be an indication that girls are ready for marriage or sexual activity. This leaves girls vulnerable to a host of abuses, including child marriage and sexual violence. Deeply impoverished girls have been known to engage in transactional sex to afford menstrual products.

Below is a list of universally agreed human rights that can be undermined by women's and girls' treatment during menstruation:

1. **The right to health** - Women and girls may experience negative health consequences when they lack the supplies and facilities to manage their menstrual health. Menstruation stigma can also prevent women and girls from seeking treatment for menstruation-related disorders or pain, adversely affecting their enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and well-being.
2. **The right to education** - Lack of a safe place or ability to manage menstrual hygiene as well as lack of medication to treat menstruation-related pain can all contribute to higher rates of school absenteeism and poor educational outcomes. Some studies have confirmed that when girls are unable to adequately manage menstruation in school, their school attendance and performance suffer.
3. **The right to work** - Poor access to safe means of managing menstrual hygiene and lack of medication to treat menstruation-related disorders or pain also limit job opportunities for women and girls. They may refrain from taking certain jobs, or they may be forced to forgo working hours and wages. Menstruation-related needs, such as bathroom breaks, may be penalized, leading to unequal working conditions. And women and girls may face workplace discrimination related to menstruation taboos.
4. **The right to non-discrimination and gender equality** - Stigmas and norms related to menstruation can reinforce discriminatory practices. Menstruation-related barriers to school, work, health services and public activities also perpetuate gender inequalities.
5. **The right to water and sanitation** - Water and sanitation facilities, such as bathing facilities, that are private, safe and culturally acceptable, along with a sufficient, safe and affordable water supply are basic prerequisites for managing menstrual health management.

UNFPA and Menstrual Health

UNFPA has four broad approaches to promoting and improving menstrual health around the world.

1. First, UNFPA reaches women and girls directly with menstrual supplies and safe sanitation facilities. In humanitarian emergencies, for example, UNFPA distributes dignity kits, which contain disposable and reusable menstrual pads, underwear, soap and related items. (In 2017, 484,000 dignity kits were distributed in 18 countries.) UNFPA also helps to improve the safety of toilets and bathing facilities in displacement camps by working with camp

officials, distributing flashlights and installing solar lights. UNFPA also promotes menstrual health information and skills-building. For example, some UNFPA programmes teach girls to make reusable menstrual pads. Others raise awareness about menstrual cups.

2. Second, UNFPA works to improve education and information about menstruation and related human rights concerns. Through its youth programmes and comprehensive sexuality education efforts, such as the Y-Peer programme, UNFPA helps both boys and girls understand that menstruation is healthy and normal. UNFPA also help raise awareness that the onset of menstruation (menarche) does not signify a physical or psychological readiness to be married or bear children. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, for instance, teaches girls and communities about reproductive health and the harms caused by child marriage. Programmes to end female genital mutilation, including the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate FGM, raise awareness of the negative consequences the practice can have on menstrual health.
3. Third, UNFPA supports national health systems, which can promote menstrual health and provide treatment to girls and women suffering from menstrual disorders. This includes promoting adolescent- and youth-friendly health services, which can help girls and young women better understand and care for their bodies. UNFPA also supports the hiring and training of health workers, particularly midwives, who can provide care for, and information about, menstrual health complaints. UNFPA also procures reproductive health commodities that can be useful for treating menstruation-related disorders. For instance, hormonal contraceptive methods can be used to treat symptoms of endometriosis and reduce excess menstrual bleeding.
4. Last, UNFPA is helping to gather data and evidence about menstrual health and its connection to global development – a long overlooked topic of research. For instance, UNFPA-supported surveys provide critical insight into girls' and women's knowledge about their menstrual cycles, health and access to sanitation facilities. And a recent UNFPA publication provides a critical overview of the menstrual health needs of women and girls in the Eastern and Southern Africa region.

Conclusions

The bottom line is menstruation taboos are not only crazy and ridiculous but they have huge obstacle holding women back in many ways. It is hard to believe that these myths still exist all over the world today. But they do, and they need to be busted. The good news is that there are people like Arunachalam Muruganantham in India who are making a difference each day when it comes to eliminating period taboos and who is not afraid of social taboos. His own family ostracized him when he created a sanitary pad that cost \$0.04 (USD). Arunachalam is just one of plenty of other men helping end period taboos. Awareness and education, especially for people of developing and under developed countries, is necessary to empower girls and women everywhere. Together we can create a better world where girls believe periods are powerful and not shameful.

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