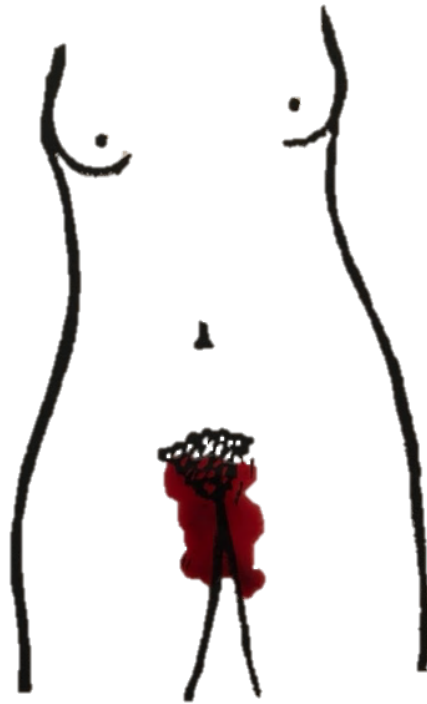




SCHWEIZER JUGEND FORSCHT  
SCIENCE ET JEUNESSE  
SCIENZA E GIOVENTÙ



# The Stain

The Role of Menstruation in U.S. American Society  
at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Today

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Project of the National contest for Swiss Youth in Science  
Worb, March 2023

### *Note on the Cover Image*

The cover image was created by myself, using a linoleum print and my menstrual blood as an art project in my art class in high school. I made this artwork to address the stigmatization of menstrual blood and the shame I felt about it. It was challenging for me to present and explain the artwork, even to the small group of people in my class. I did not create it to become the cover image of this paper, but it seemed fitting when I reworked the paper for the Youth in Science competition. For me, it challenges the menstruation stigma by using menstrual blood, a substance otherwise reduced to embarrassment and secrecy, and at the same time represents this stigma with the blood being a stain in both the literal and figurative sense, instantly recognizable and stigmatizing.

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**Abstract**

Menstruation is a topic confined to shame and secrecy. This paper aims at finding the impact of menstruation's perception in U.S. society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today. It was found that menstruation's representation and its effects on women's role in society reflect, reinforce, and create patriarchal structures. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, menstruation was instrumentalized and used as a basis for discrimination against women. By pathologizing menstruation if combined with physical or intellectual work, a rationale was provided to restrict women to the spheres of wife- and motherhood. Today, menstruators are faced with a menstruation stigma, causing shame and negative social reactions if a woman is revealed to be menstruating. A concealment imperative is experienced. As concealing menstruation presents an effort, it is made a disadvantage based on the social (dis)regard of menstruation. Menstruation is thus part of and contributes to gender inequality. The findings were used to create a video series published on social media with dual aims of raising awareness and verifying the findings from the literature analysis. The reactions to the videos support these, with viewers describing the effects of menstruation stigma despite having a positive attitude towards menstruation. The stigma is transmitted and experienced separately from individual beliefs, thus being part of patriarchal structures.

## Preface

As a menstruator, I am forcefully faced with matters surrounding menstruation. This of course includes managing my menstruation including blood, pain, acne, emotional changes, and fatigue. But since my menarche at 12 years old, I have thought a lot about menstruation's place in a social context. Despite being an essential part of my monthly life, menstruation often seems invisible. Additionally, I sensed a deep feeling of shame, negativity, and ignorance due to the silence surrounding menstruation. This made me question what impact society's view of menstruation has on women in general and created a desire to put words to this vague feeling I had. In other words: are women discriminated against because of their menstruation? If so, how does this discrimination manifest itself? In addition, I wondered how women experienced menstruation in the past and what place menstruation had in past societies.

These thoughts and questions led me to what started as my Matura paper for the Kirchenfeld Gymnasium in Berne and became the competition paper for the 2023 National contest for Swiss Youth in Science (Schweizer Jugend forscht). In my paper, I try to provide evidence for how menstruation has served and still serves as a basis for discrimination and inequality, and how menstruation-based discrimination and stigma are embedded in patriarchal structures. Furthermore, I created a video series about my findings on menstruation stigma to raise awareness on the topic and gather feelings, reactions, and experiences.

With this paper, I wish to inform myself and others about the unconscious impact menstruation has on society and make aware of its symptoms. My interest in the impact of menstruation stigma on my person has been and is a great motivator for this paper. It is also the reason for the choice of the researched location (USA) and group (white girls and women). Living in western Europe, being white and a young 'actively' menstruating woman myself, I can identify most easily with white girls and women in Western society.

Feminism (understood as the recognition that women and men are institutionally in different positions due to constructed gender inequality, and the belief that gender is and should not create unequal outcomes) is an essential part of my life. Personally, I think feminism and equal chances for all are simply common sense. By making knowledge of menstruation's part in a patriarchally structured society available and raising awareness about it, I hope to contribute a small part to the fight for gender equality. Thus, although this paper is focused on the impact of menstruation's image on women, it is intended to be available to all, whether man or woman, menstruator or non-menstruator. I firmly believe that making knowledge available and spreading awareness on the topic of menstruation stigma can help reduce said stigma. Accordingly, this paper has an activist connotation, as menstruation stigma is an inseparable part of women's image and place in the patriarchally structured society and must be addressed when aiming for gender equity.

## *Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank my family for being an academic and mental support during these two years of work, for your interest and willingness to discuss, read, and review this paper again and again, and for putting up with my ups and downs during this time. I also thank my friends for providing motivation, ideas, encouragement, as well as wonderful distractions when needed. Furthermore, I want to thank Suzanne Schibig, my supervisor at the Gymnasium Kirchenfeld, who accompanied me for the first stage of this paper. Finally, I express my gratitude to Dr Christina Maria Kunz, my coach for the Swiss Science and Youth competition, who assisted and encouraged me to make something more of this paper. Thank you for your relentless motivation and commitment during this short but very intense period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> No pun indented.

## 1. Introduction

1.8 billion people, about one-quarter of the world population, menstruate regularly.<sup>2</sup> 49.6% of the world's population has once menstruated, is a menstruator<sup>3</sup> or will menstruate in the future.<sup>4</sup> Yet menstruation is a topic heavily stigmatized and virtually absent from the popular discourse. Tampons are made to “fit into your pocket”<sup>5</sup> – so that no one can see them. Menstruation is considered shameful, disgusting, something to be hidden,<sup>6</sup> and 58% of women in the USA feel ashamed when they menstruate.<sup>7</sup> This invites the question of the impact of menstruation's invisibility and stigmatization on women's place in society, as well as menstruation's role in patriarchal structures today and in the past.

The central questions of this paper are the following: Are women currently faced with discrimination because of their menstruation? Have they been in the past? How was this discrimination expressed? What role does menstruation play in general patriarchal structures? How are prejudices and perceptions of menstruation transmitted, and what effect do they have?

In a first part, this paper aims to present how menstruation has led to discrimination or inequality in two time periods: today (from the 1990s to 2023) and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (from the 1870s to 1910). This with a focus on the USA.

The research is made with the hypotheses that

(1) menstruation has been a basis for discrimination in the past (i.e., at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); and

(2) menstruation is a basis for discrimination today.

The research is conducted to support these theses, primarily to identify the manner of discrimination (and inequality). Focus is laid on three main topics: (1) the prejudice and theories causing discrimination and inequality; (2) the transmission of these prejudices and theories; and (3) indications for effects, i.e., the manner of discrimination and inequality. As effects are difficult to verify and attribute to a certain cause, this paper analyses and presents *indications* of effects.

In a second part, the acquired knowledge about the situation today is used to create a video series published on two social media platforms, encouraging viewers to provide their feelings, thoughts, reactions, and experiences as comments. These comments are analysed qualitatively to gather knowledge on opinions of, and experiences with, menstruation and menstruation stigma.

The time periods, location, researched groups, and focus topics were chosen based on the availability of sources, the limited scope of this paper and personal preference (i.e., identification with researched groups and topics). Especially for the historical part, the analysed group is limited to white middle- and upper-class girls and women. Difficulties arising from intersectional inequality or discrimination (such as sexism in addition to racism) are not considered. The circumstances are assessed for premenstrual girls and individuals, as well as ‘active’ menstruators. The menopause is not discussed.

The literary review is based on secondary sources, with primary sources being analysed and serving as examples and illustrations. The sources are U.S. American or about the USA, although a few representative sources from the United Kingdom are used. Many of the secondary sources are relatively old (1980s-2000s), as there are few newer ones available covering the topic broadly. Fundamental terms are defined and explained at the beginning of the paper. A glossary can be found at the end of the paper, whereas definitions and information are included in the footnotes.

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. 2021. *Menstrual Hygiene*

<sup>3</sup> *menstruator*: person with a uterus and experiencing menstruation

<sup>4</sup> Our World in Data. 2019. *Gender Ratio*

<sup>5</sup> Tampax. 2021. *How to Decide Between Pads and Tampons*

<sup>6</sup> Johnston-Robledo, Ingrid, and Joan C. Chrisler. 2020. ‘The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 17, pp. 181-199.

<sup>7</sup> Petter, Olivia. 2018. *More than half of women feel ashamed of their periods, finds survey* in Independent (online)

The outline of the paper is as follows: The paper begins with definitions and a theoretical background on terms and concepts essential for the understanding of the paper. After providing some additional context, the situation is presented at the turn of the century, with a focus on the topics mentioned above (i.e., causes, transmission, and indications of effects), and the findings are discussed. Thereafter, the situation today is presented considering the same three perspectives. The structure of causes, theories, and effects are not in the same order for both periods, as they intertwine and cannot easily be separated.

After discussing the results and comparing the two periods, the video production is presented, and its reactions are analysed. Finally, a conclusion from the three parts is drawn.

This paper is part of the 2023 National contest for Swiss Youth in Science (Schweizer Jugend forscht) and is exhibited at the finale taking place in St. Gall (Switzerland) from the 20.-22. April 2023.<sup>8</sup> For this, a poster summarizing and presenting the paper and its conclusions is created. It aims at making the found knowledge available and raising awareness about the topic. With this, the author hopes to make a small contribution to the reduction of the menstruation stigma and resulting inequalities.

### *Note on Inclusive Language*

The topic of queer menstruators<sup>9</sup> and menstrual experiences is big and important, and awareness of the diversity of genders and consequent experiences with menstruation has spread in recent times. Yet it finds only little room in this paper. This paper focuses on discrimination against women in a patriarchally structured society. As described below (see Patriarchy), patriarchally structured societies are built on the binary separation in two genders: men and women. However, sexism is directed towards individuals that are read or *perceived* as, without necessarily being, females. Furthermore, not all women are menstruators nor are all menstruators women,<sup>10</sup> and are thus impacted by their (inexistent) menstruation. Thus, in the part on today, the term ‘menstruator’ is used whenever gender is not of importance or mentioned explicitly in the sources to make this text as gender-neutral and inclusive as possible. For the historical part, ‘women’ and ‘girls’ is used.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information, see <https://sjf.ch/>

<sup>9</sup> i.e., individuals experiencing menstruation without identifying as women, such as trans men or non-binary individuals

<sup>10</sup> Such as trans men and women, gender-fluid, or gender-less individuals.

## 2. Definitions: Patriarchy, Discrimination, (In)equality, Equity

In the following section, terms essential for the understanding of this paper are defined. Furthermore, important concepts which can improve the general understanding of gender inequality and discrimination are explained.

### *Patriarchy*

The technical term of *patriarchy* means the domestic structure wherein a man (typically the oldest man) is head of the family, with legal, financial, and moral power over the whole family, especially women. However, today patriarchy has become a term used (by feminists) for a structure in society, affecting not only the private but even more so the public sphere through politics, including education, economics, science, employment, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Including several important aspects of the way patriarchy exists and persists, Alda Facio<sup>12</sup> defines patriarchy as follows:

Patriarchy is a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalization of sex-based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles. These institutions interconnect not only with each other to strengthen the structures of domination of men over women, but also with other systems of exclusion, oppression and/or domination based on real or perceived differences between humans, creating States that respond only to the needs and interests of a few powerful men.<sup>13</sup>

Important regarding this definition is the interconnection of different patriarchal structures and other systems of exclusion. Furthermore, the verbs *create*, *maintain*, and *reinforce* are to be pointed out. To be added is that the patriarchy is based on the binary separation into two genders: women and men. Gender is a social construct referring to the characteristics of men and women and defining norms, behaviours, and roles and is to be separated from the biological sex.<sup>14</sup> To note is that while men are generally in more powerful positions than women, not all men are advantaged by this structure nor support it.

Patriarchy and its ‘conservation’ are by no means solely male affairs. Gerda Lerner (*The Origins of Patriarchy*) uses the phrase *subordination of woman* to describe the consequence of the patriarchy for women. It leaves open the possibility of *paternalistic dominance*, “the voluntary acceptance of subordinate status in exchange for protection or privilege”.<sup>15</sup> This is an important point to show that patriarchy does not necessarily manifest itself in the situation ‘man over woman’ but also impacts women when not directly influenced by men. Patriarchal structures are embedded in society, affecting all spheres, public and private, and all people living in it.<sup>16</sup>

In this paper, the terms ‘patriarchal structures’ in a ‘patriarchally structured society’ are used to allow a more inclusive application to a wider range of societies.

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<sup>11</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2021a; Lexico Oxford Online Dictionary. 2021a; Cambridge Online Dictionary. 2021. *Definition of Patriarchy*

<sup>12</sup> Founder of the Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice at the International Criminal Court and one of the UN Special Rapporteurs for the Working Group against Discrimination against Women and Girls (Wikipedia. 2021. *Alda Facio*)

<sup>13</sup> Facia, Aldo. 2013. ‘What is Patriarchy?’. Translated by Michael Solis.

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organization. 2021. *Gender and health*

<sup>15</sup> Lerner, Gerda. 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press. 234

<sup>16</sup> Soman, Uthara. 2009. ‘Patriarchy: Theoretical Postulates and Empirical Findings’. 254



### *Discrimination*

*Discrimination* is the “practice of treating somebody or a particular group in society less fairly than others.”<sup>17</sup> In this paper, the term discrimination is used presuming a difference in treatment. Identical treatment, albeit it might result in inequality, cannot be labelled as discrimination. Prejudice (also see Sexism) is an inseparable part of discrimination, as individuals are judged and accordingly treated on (wrong) beliefs about an entire group. Discrimination can be conscious as well as unconscious, depending on if the discriminator is aware of prejudices and resulting unequal treatment or not.

### *Sexism*

*Sexism* is treatment and attitude with the (unconscious) goal to uphold gendered stereotypes and patriarchal structures through prejudice, oppression, discrimination, control etc.<sup>18</sup> As such, sexism can cause discrimination but does not necessarily do so. Sexism is not the only behaviour which upholds patriarchal structures, but a significant one. While sexism is mainly directed towards women, it can also target men.

As defined by Susan T. Fiske and Peter Glick, sexism is ambivalent. Sexism can be expressed as open or aggressive antipathy towards women (hostile sexism), or as subjectively seen ‘helping’ and ‘protecting’ (benevolent sexism). The latter implies views on women in stereotypical and traditional roles such as wife and mother. Both types of sexism serve to justify men’s structural power in patriarchy. These two forms of sexism can coexist (hence the term ambivalent sexism), and often one involves the other.<sup>19</sup> To note is that sexism is expressed towards individuals that are *read* as female and thus *assumed* to be women, without this necessarily being the case.<sup>20</sup>

### *Gender (In)equality and Equity*

*Equality* is the state of being equal or uniform.<sup>21</sup> In society, this means that individuals are treated without being discriminated against. To be separated from equality is the concept of *equity*. Equity considers the differences of individuals to offer *equal chances* for all,<sup>22</sup> in contrast to equality, where individuals are merely treated identically (i.e., without discrimination). Thus, equality in treatment can still lead to unequal outcomes due to unequal chances. When speaking of gender equality, the matter is on the one hand of removing discriminatory practices, and on the other hand promoting equal chances, that is, equity. As such, when the term gender (in)equality is used in this paper, it refers to (in)equal chances and outcomes based on gender differences.

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<sup>17</sup> Lexico Oxford Online Dictionary. 2023a. *Definition of Discrimination*

<sup>18</sup> Lexico Oxford Online Dictionary. 2021b; Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2021b. *Definition of Sexism*

<sup>19</sup> Glick, Peter, and Susan T. Fiske. 1996. ‘The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(3), pp. 491-512

<sup>20</sup> For instance, trans men can be perceived as women and experience sexism directed at women despite not identifying as women.

<sup>21</sup> Lexico Oxford Online Dictionary. 2023b. *Definition of Equality*

<sup>22</sup> Lexico Oxford Online Dictionary. 2023c. *Definition of Equity*

### 3. The Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1870s-1910)

Marking the end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the turn of the century was a period of change and emancipation still influenced by Victorian ideas. This in the setting of emerging feminism and at the height of colonialism, preceding the First World War.

Beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, first-wave feminism demanded that white upper- and middle-class women be seen as full citizens.<sup>23</sup> They argued that women could be made equal citizens through education and training, as differences between men and women were more social than natural.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the century, the ‘New Women’ had made great advances in getting higher education, working in industry, or simply outside of the home. Some of these women remained unwed, rejected a domestic life, and encouraged other women to do the same.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, there was pressure on women to be in domestic roles favouring motherhood, i.e., wives working in the home. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Theodore Roosevelt warned of the danger of ‘Race Suicide’. White Anglo-Saxon middle- and upper-class birth rates were declining, while ‘inferior’ races, such as immigrant or non-white groups, were reproducing in higher numbers. There was fear that the upper, ‘fitter’ part of American society would be diluted, run over by those from the bottom of society. Lower birth rates were the result of several influencing factors, two such factors being fewer marriages and more divorces. This was partly due (and believed to be due) to the above-mentioned New Women.<sup>26 27</sup>

#### 3.1. Cause: Theories of Menstrual Madness and Hysteria

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a general medical consensus that women were dominated both physically and psychologically by their reproductive organs and therefore had diseases no man could have.<sup>28</sup> The idea dominated that women’s psychology was greatly affected by menstruation.<sup>29</sup>

According to Henry Maudsley in *Body and Mind* (1873), in addition to general irritability, susceptibility and capriciousness during menstruation, women were at risk of experiencing an “explosion of insanity” in the case of menstrual suppression.<sup>30 31</sup> In 1874, the British physicians John C. Bucknill and Daniel H. Tuke found that 10 per cent of all female admissions to asylums<sup>32</sup> were due to uterine<sup>33</sup> disorders or suppressed or irregular menstruation.<sup>34</sup> Dr Azel Ames observed the same in American asylums.<sup>35</sup> The idea that menstrual suppression caused by a cold, physical or mental

<sup>23</sup> See e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman* (1792), or Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843)

<sup>24</sup> Arneil, Barbara. 1999. *Politics and Feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell. 156

<sup>25</sup> Freedman, Estelle B., and John D’Emilio. 1997. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 189-190

<sup>26</sup> Moran, Jeffrey P. 2000. *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 28-29

<sup>27</sup> Estelle B. Freedman et al. 1997. 189-190

<sup>28</sup> King, Sally. 2020. ‘Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) and the Myth of the Irrational Female’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 23, pp. 287-302. 288

<sup>29</sup> Walker, Anne E. 1997. *The Menstrual Cycle*. London: Routledge. 34-35

<sup>30</sup> *menstrual suppression*: idea in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century that the menstrual flow could be stopped by a chill, a shock, or mental or physical exercise, and that this could lead to physical or psychological troubles

<sup>31</sup> Maudsley, Henry. 1873. *Body and Mind*. London: Macmillan and Co. Extract reprinted in Walker, Anne E. 1997. *The Menstrual Cycle*. London: Routledge. 36

<sup>32</sup> *asylum*: old word for psychiatric hospital or clinic

<sup>33</sup> *uterine*: relating to the uterus

<sup>34</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 36-37

<sup>35</sup> Ames, Azel. 1885. *Sex in Industry; A Plea for the Working-Girl*. Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company. 27-28

exercise, or mental shock could give rise to a variety of illnesses, was a millennia-old concern of Western medical tradition. Yet at the turn of the century, it was not scientifically explainable. Doctors' worries and their corresponding 'observations' – and instructions – were likely instead influenced by politics related to women's education and involvement in the professions.<sup>36</sup>

Other than menstrual madness, menstruation was also seen as a cause of hysteria.<sup>37</sup> First described by the Greeks (*hysteria* derives from the Greek *hysterá*, womb)<sup>38</sup> with the theory of “the wandering womb”, at the turn of the century, hysteria was thought to be caused by, among other things,<sup>39</sup> menstruation, menopause, menstrual pain or irregularity,<sup>40</sup> and was commonly diagnosed. When looking at the list of symptoms, this commonness is not surprising: nervousness, insomnia, cold hands, cold feet, upset stomach, shortness of breath, irritability, depression, unexplained laughter or crying, anxiety, fatigue, or loss of sexual interest, to name a few.<sup>41</sup> By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hysteria was a general – and vague – diagnosis for all diseases considered female, serving as a “shorthand for aberrations of idealistic femininity.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.2. Indications of Effects: Work and Educational Possibilities

#### Sex in Education *and* Sex in Industry

In 1873, Dr Edward Clarke, a prominent faculty member at Harvard Medical School<sup>43</sup> published *Sex in Education; or, a Fair Chance for the Girls*. He used the idea of Race Suicide to claim that women and men could not have the same education, as that, in the words of Janice Delaney et al., “would mean the end of the human race.”<sup>44</sup> *Sex in Education* was very influential and popular, going into second printing a week after publication,<sup>45</sup> and through seventeen editions in thirteen years.<sup>46</sup>

According to Clarke, simultaneous study and menstruation were endangering women's health and fertility. A girl risked “neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangement of the nervous system, if she follows the same method that boys are trained in.”<sup>47</sup> To preserve young women's health (and the health of their reproductive organs), Clarke maintained they could not get the same education as men. Instead, he advised rest. Clarke relied on a theory of the body having a limited supply of ‘vital force’.<sup>48</sup> This force would be used up by intensive study so that there would not be enough left for menstruation. Consequently, precautions to protect the female reproductive system, at the cost of equal education, had to be taken. If a girl underwent a (college) education, she would inevitably damage her health and reproductive organs, mostly in a lasting way. “Doubtless the evil of her education will

<sup>36</sup> Freidenfels, Lara. 2009. *The Modern Period: Menstruation in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 89-90

<sup>37</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, hysteria was a medical diagnosis for women. Today, it has become a term to describe emotional excess.

<sup>38</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2021c. Etymology of Hysteria.

<sup>39</sup> Such as masturbation (as a solution, physicians removed clitorises) or reduced sexual activity (as a solution, physicians stimulated patients' genitals by hand)

<sup>40</sup> Ussher, Jane M. 2011. *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*. London: Routledge. 18-19

<sup>41</sup> Stein, Elissa, and Susan Kim. 2009. *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*. St. Martin's Publishing Group. 50-51

<sup>42</sup> Cleghorn, Elinor. 2021. *Unwell Women: A Journey Through Medicine and Myth in a Man-Made World*. 156

<sup>43</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 75

<sup>44</sup> Delaney, Janice, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth. 1986. *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press. 57

<sup>45</sup> Elinor Cleghorn 2021. 144

<sup>46</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 39

<sup>47</sup> Clarke, Edward H. 1873. *Sex in Education; or, a Fair Chance for Girls*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company

<sup>48</sup> Theory from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that bodies had a limited supply of ‘vital force’, which was used up by bodily as well as mental activities.

infect her whole life,” he wrote on a case.<sup>49</sup> Clarke argued that “female operatives”, such as women working at home, in stores, or factories, would suffer less from ongoing work than female students. Clarke’s explanation for that was that “the former work their brains less.”<sup>50</sup> For Clarke, it was intellectual work that could not coexist with menstruation, and thus with women. According to Anne E. Walker, it has been argued that Clarke published his theory specifically to hinder women from getting medical qualifications.<sup>51</sup>

As a response to *Sex in Education* the physician Dr Azel Ames published *Sex in Industry* in 1875. In it, he asserted that the ‘female operatives’ mentioned by Clarke were not fit to work either. He argued that women’s work in industry combined with menstruation led to disorders, such as sickness, insanity, or death. This was not because of the working conditions, which incidentally were utterly insufficient according to feminist researchers of the time, but because he found that women could not work and menstruate at the same time.<sup>52</sup> Women working made them go mad. As proof, Ames mentioned that “laborers” held the second place among patients of the Massachusetts insane asylums, that most of them were female and that their insanity was caused by menstrual disorders or uterine diseases, which in turn were caused by their work in industry.<sup>53</sup> According to Ames, this had several negative consequences. On the one hand for the woman herself, including her health, comfort, time, money, employability, and fertility. On the other, he laid great importance on the implications – and costs – for society. In addition to the leaves from work of the woman would come the lost working hours of persons that would have to care for her. Furthermore, the woman could not contribute to “keeping the good strength of the race” and would produce “non-vigorous and non-productive offspring”, if any at all. Ames argued with money and working hours rather than purely the health of women, as “the maintenance of broken-down workers is a greater drain upon the community than their actual deaths at an early period.”<sup>54</sup>

Pioneer feminist researchers such as Mary Putnam Jacobi or Clelia Duel Mosher worked to rebut the ideas described above through empirical research. Unlike Clarke, who based his essays on a few clinical studies, generalizing them to all women, Putnam Jacobi and Mosher gathered data on thousands of cycles from hundreds of women. They found evidence that most women were not incapacitated by menstruation, nor did mental exertion have any distinctive impact on menstrual health. Instead, their research proved that menstruation was “as normal a periodic function as sleep, digestion, defecation and urination.”<sup>55</sup>

Girls and women would not feel sick or weak during their menses because of a female defect, but because they had been taught to expect sickness or weakness. For example, rest was not necessarily physiologically helpful in the case of dysmenorrhea,<sup>56</sup> but was seen as and told to be the only solution. Hence, *all* women experiencing dysmenorrhea were supposed to stay in bed, despite evidence showing that exercise could on the contrary ease pain. Mosher even developed a method known as ‘Moshering’, designed to relieve pain and heavy bleeding through abdominal training.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Edward H. Clarke 1873

<sup>50</sup> Edward H. Clarke 1873

<sup>51</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 41

<sup>52</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 43

<sup>53</sup> Azel Ames 1885.

<sup>54</sup> Azel Ames 1885.

<sup>55</sup> Elinor Cleghorn 2021. 149, 248

<sup>56</sup> *dysmenorrhea*: painful menstruation

<sup>57</sup> Elinor Cleghorn 2021. 249

### *Indication of Effects*

Despite empirical findings suggesting differently, ideas and attitudes like Clarke's or Ames' can be seen in later publications. John Harvey Kellogg recommended in 1891 that girls should be relieved of "taxing duties of every description" and spend their time "lounging on the sofa" from the first premenstrual symptoms to the end of menstruation. In 1898, Henry M. Lyman proposed that girls be taken completely out of school during menstruation, or even for all of puberty.<sup>58</sup> The following generation of scientists such as G. Stanley Hall or Sigmund Freud were also influenced by the opinions of conservative physicians of the past century rather than the evidence of female researchers.<sup>59</sup>

The idea of using menstruation as a justification for limiting women's access to work and education was further used in 1908 when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a law restricting specifically women from working more than ten hours a day. The argument was that women endangered the "vigor of the race"<sup>60</sup> as they were too weakened by their menstruation to work and keep their fertility intact at the same time. Due to the law, women were excluded from working in certain jobs. Women were fired because jobs such as printers or streetcar conductors required longer working hours. These occupations had higher salaries than the ones women were forced to fall back upon. Furthermore, women had trouble joining unions and had a disadvantage in terms of employability.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.3. Transmission: Education on Menstruation

#### *Sex Education*

Sex education for young people at school did not exist in the turn-of-the-century United States. When Dr Helen Putnam, a pioneer in promoting sex education, investigated schools in some twenty cities in 1907, she found few indications of any form of sex education. It was only in the 1910s, when a relationship between 'epidemics' of venereal diseases,<sup>62</sup> prostitution, and general 'immoral' behaviour started to become visible, that the idea of sex education at school as a form of regulation of youth's sexuality came up. The named issues were concerning the white Anglo-Saxon upper- and middle-classes; there was a sense of 'decay' of morality, health, and reproduction. All the while, the lower classes were reproducing at higher rates, leading to the discussed concept of Race Suicide. In 1912 the American Federation for Sex Hygiene created a committee with educators to account for new forms of sex education. Widespread education was hoped to civilize the upper classes, prevent the spread of venereal diseases, and promote a lifestyle of early marriage (and no other than marital sex).<sup>63</sup> Lara Freidenfels describes these first programs as "scaring teens into abstinence by showing graphic examples of the ravages of sexually transmitted diseases."<sup>64</sup>

However, education for young women included some menstrual advice. Such menstrual education was for late adolescents, that is, those older than sixteen.<sup>65</sup> This means that girls experiencing menarche<sup>66</sup> as early as at twelve or thirteen years old (the average age at menarche was of about fourteen around 1910)<sup>67</sup> were not prepared by any school program. The interviews Freidenfels conducted support this thesis. She found that few young women knew about menstruation before menarche. The

<sup>58</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 78

<sup>59</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 41-44

<sup>60</sup> Muller v. Oregon, 208 U.S. 412, 421 (1908)

<sup>61</sup> Cushman, Clare, and the Supreme Court Historical Society. 2001. *Supreme Court decisions and women's rights: milestones to equality*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. 17-19

<sup>62</sup> *venereal diseases*: sexually transmittable diseases, such as syphilis or gonorrhoea

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey P. Moran 2000. 28-36, 55

<sup>64</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 48

<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey P. Moran 2000. 57-60

<sup>66</sup> *menarche*: first menstruation

<sup>67</sup> Boaz, Noel T. 1999. *Essentials of biological anthropology*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall. 312

presence of women in the household, such as mothers or elder sisters, did not imply explanations of what to expect. Mostly, their only access to information was overhearing older girls at school. This way of learning about menstruation gave the young women the feeling that the topic was something to be embarrassed about and should be kept secret.<sup>68</sup>

### *Advice Literature*

Another way to learn about menstruation was through literature. Books explaining the menstrual process existed, but before the mid-1890s, these were aimed at adult married women. The idea was to get mothers to educate their daughters. Yet, parents were very reluctant to do so. Adults often did not have a scientific understanding of menstruation and theories were confusing and contradictory, connections were made to the heat and rut of animals. This did not encourage parents to sit down and explain menarche or menstruation to their daughters.<sup>69</sup>

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some educational and advice books targeting girls and young women were published. They aimed to educate girls through trustworthy adults such as doctors, teachers, or parents to prevent discussions between uninformed girls on the matter.<sup>70</sup>

An example is *Confidences: Talks with A Young Girl Concerning Herself* (1904) by Edith B. Lowry. In accordance with the discussed problems of venereal diseases and ‘immoral’ behaviour, Lowry asserted that “knowledge of the right sort will prevent many wrecked lives.”<sup>71</sup> Menstruation was explained as the extra amount of blood sent to the womb together with the ovule, to then be sent out of the body because the “womb is not strong enough yet to hold a healthy baby”. According to Lowry, “most girls, naturally, desire children”.<sup>72</sup>

Caroline Wormeley Latimer in *The Changing Girl: A Little Book for the Girl of Ten to Fifteen* (1913) laid more importance on marriage than on motherhood. Concerning the ovum, she wrote, “in married women it may be fertilized”, excluding any possibility of unmarried women having sex.<sup>73</sup>

For the remaining part of the booklet, Latimer focused on health during menstruation. Latimer stressed that girls did not need to be “an invalid” and could keep going to school and doing sports. Yet there were some restrictions. It was believed that a stop of the menstrual flow (i.e., menstrual suppression) could have a severe impact, i.e., lead to madness. Based on this idea, Latimer advised girls not to get wet or cold. A chill could stop the flow. Furthermore, girls should not strain themselves too much, neither physically nor psychologically. For example, writing exams during menstruation was advised against.<sup>74</sup> Latimer also mentioned that women doing hard labour were less susceptible to pain than women “leading leisure lives” or doing intellectual work. Contradicting her statement that girls need not be “invalids”, Latimer wrote that in the case of dysmenorrhea “the one great remedy” was to rest in bed.<sup>75</sup> This idea had been criticized some 25 years earlier by Jacobi.

<sup>68</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 13-22

<sup>69</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 44-47

<sup>70</sup> Ansley, Laura M. 2012. ‘The Changing Girl: Sex Education and Prescriptions of White Girlhood’, *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539626694. 2-3

<sup>71</sup> Lowry, E.B. 1904. *Confidences: Talks with a Young Girl Concerning Herself*. Project Gutenberg. Preface

<sup>72</sup> E.B. Lowry 1904. Chapter IV

<sup>73</sup> Latimer, Caroline Wormeley. 1913. *The Changing Girl: A Little Book for the Girl of Ten to Fifteen*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.

<sup>74</sup> Caroline Wormeley Latimer 1913.

<sup>75</sup> Caroline Wormeley Latimer 1913.



### 3.4. Discussion of the Turn of the Century

At the turn of the century, menstruation was used as a tool to create and reinforce patriarchal structures. In these, women were attributed the roles of wives and mothers. Menstruation was used as a justification for this attribution, as well as an argument to hinder women from leaving these roles.

Important to note is that menstruation was mentioned explicitly and seen as one of the major differences between the sexes and the resulting social, moral, intellectual etc. differences. Convenient with menstruation is that all women experience it sooner or later, as Barbara Trompeter writes: “whilst not every woman bore children and lactated, none would escape her monthly uterine upheavals.”<sup>76</sup>

#### *Menstrual Madness and Hysteria*

The use of diseases such as menstrual madness or hysteria was a convenient way to control women as it was based on nature, and nature “by its very essence was eternal and final.”<sup>77</sup> Walker describes the situation in which menstruation put women: on the one hand, the absence of menstruation could make women hysterical or drive them mad. On the other, ‘normal’ menstruation made women weak and vulnerable to insanity, following the theory of a limited ‘vital force’.<sup>78</sup> Hence, whether women were menstruating<sup>79</sup> or not, they were at risk of being – and could thus be labelled as – insane because of their (absent) menstruation. Consequently, *all* women were influenced by menstruation. Women were diagnosed with hysteria to remove an inconvenient factor. In the words of Jane M. Ussher, “if [a] hysteric was mad because she was ultra-feminine (or too feminine), many women were positioned as mad for not being feminine enough: for inappropriate self-expression, not being a ‘paragon of domestic virtue’, or for failing in the role of wife and mother.”<sup>80</sup>

#### *Education and Work Possibilities*

Illustrating what roles women were expected to be in is the lack of mention of domestic work. Neither the existence nor the health implications of domestic or household work are mentioned in any of the sources, despite being a “full-time job”<sup>81</sup> which summed up to an average of 58 hours of work a week in 1900.<sup>82</sup> This work included meal-preparing, cleaning, laundering, heating, and other chores, all without access to electricity, processed food, mechanical washing machines, or running hot or cold water.

Women working, getting a higher education, or demanding political power did not fit into the ideal set up for women. This ideal was one of a domestic life, focusing on wife- and motherhood, in a patriarchal structure with men holding financial, political, and moral power. Women had the responsibility to “produce productive offspring”. A woman gaining more independence through education, work, or political involvement was perceived as rejecting the assigned roles. Thus, women were presented as being at risk of illness, madness, infertility, or death if they challenged the patriarchal structure and their place in it. The findings of physicians and researchers such as Edward Clarke or Azel Ames were subjective and heavily influenced by gender politics and society, i.e., patriarchy.<sup>83</sup> The questions asked by society were if women were fit to work during their menstruation; and if they would

<sup>76</sup> Trompeter, Barbara. 2007. ‘Victorian medical men and their understanding of the female condition, 1859-1900’. (Doctoral Thesis) ProQuest. 41

<sup>77</sup> Barbara Trompeter. 13

<sup>78</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 36

<sup>79</sup> *menstruating*: to be in the part of the menstrual cycle when bleeding (menstruation) occurs

<sup>80</sup> Jane M. Ussher 2011. 68

<sup>81</sup> University of Houston Digital History. *Housework in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*

<sup>82</sup> Berger, Michele W. 2019. *How the appliance boom moved more women into the workforce* in PennToday (online), January 30, 2019

<sup>83</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 41

get mad because of their menstruation. The answers best supporting the patriarchal system were that work caused menstrual difficulties, madness, and infertility. Scientists provided rationales for these answers in their research, presenting women as unable to work in industry or get a higher education. This is further illustrated by the contradiction with the evidence presented by researchers such as Mary Putnam Jacobi and Clelia Duel Mosher, which empirically proved otherwise.

### *Education on Menstruation*

Educational materials reflect how menstruation was viewed in society. Thus, education on menstruation communicated which roles women were to be in. For example, the focus on reproduction and motherhood in *Confidences* linked menstruation inseparably to motherhood and menarche meant that a girl became a potential mother. This is an illustration of how reformers used education as a conduit to establish the necessity for and duty of women to reproduce. There are some winds of change visible in *The Changing Girl*, yet Latimer's advice mirrors the theories Clarke published in 1873 that women should not follow a secondary education because of their menstruation. One thing that had changed was Latimer stating explicitly that not all girls had to be invalids during menstruation. This was one step forward from Mosher's findings that girls were told to, and thus did, feel miserable while menstruating.

Limited or non-existent education and preparation for menarche contributed to the mystery and secrecy surrounding menstruation.<sup>84</sup> For instance, based on the research for this paper, it can be assumed that menstruation was not mentioned in sex education directed at boys and young men. Freidenfels found that men and boys, if at all, learned about menstruation from male peers. The information was mostly based on rumours and myths.<sup>85</sup> Sex education served to transmit discriminatory ideas on menstruation and its effects. With that, education was part of building and upholding patriarchal structures and the resulting discrimination.

### *Summary*

The examples presented above illustrate how women were discriminated against based on their menstruation. With respect to the definition of discrimination for this paper, women were treated differently than men based on their ability to menstruate. Menstruation was pathologized (despite feminist researchers finding data showing this to be unfounded) and women were reduced to their ability to menstruate and bear children. Women were limited in their working hours, were not supposed to get the same education as men nor work in industry and were at risk of getting diseases no man could get. There was possibly some genuine concern about protecting fertility. Yet, this attitude can be seen as benevolent sexism, as in men telling women what is best for them. Most important to point out is the lack of mention of household work in any of the sources. By arguing that menstruation and work are incompatible without considering domestic work, women were restricted to the spheres of wife- and motherhood without any other options, and thus discriminated against.

As shown and discussed above, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, menstruation was used as a basis for discrimination against women. But what is the situation today? Menstruation has shifted from being a matter of fertility to being one of hygiene and concealment.<sup>86</sup> It has become a stigmatized topic with little visibility. However, recent accounts of period poverty<sup>87</sup> on all continents and its devastating

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<sup>84</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 13-22

<sup>85</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 13-22

<sup>86</sup> Bobel, Chris. 2010. *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press. 39

<sup>87</sup> Such as Capatides, Christina. 2019. *Period. Half the Population Has One. But No One Talks About It*. CBSN Originals.



effects on girls' education, most importantly in Asia and Africa,<sup>88</sup> has put this feminist issue into the spotlight.

But what of the impact of menstruation on women's social status in U.S. society today? What detectable effect does menstruation stigma have on women's place in society? Are women in the USA faced with discrimination because of menstruation?

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<sup>88</sup> See e.g., Dahlqvist, Anna. 2018. *It's Only Blood: Shattering the taboo of menstruation*. Translated by Alice E. Olsson. London: Zed.

#### 4. Today (1990s-2023)

As explained above, menstruation has shifted from being a topic of public importance to one stigmatized and made invisible. The following section discusses the nature of menstruation stigma, its transmission, indications of its effects, and its role in patriarchal structures.

##### 4.1. Cause: Menstruation Stigma

*Stigma* is a stain or a mark setting an individual apart from others. The concept derives from the ancient Greeks when criminals or slaves would be branded to mark their status. These brandings in association with traitors or thieves evoked disgust and citizens would avoid social interactions with said criminals and slaves.<sup>89</sup> According to Erving Goffman (1963), stigmas can be divided into three categories:

- (1) abominations of the body (burns, scars, deformities);
- (2) blemishes of individual character (criminality, addiction); and
- (3) tribal identities or social markers associated with marginalized groups (gender, race, sexuality, nationality).

Ingrid Johnston-Robledo et al. argue that menstruation is considered a stigma under all three categories. Firstly, blood is considered an abomination. Secondly, physical and mental aspects of menstruation are seen as a ‘disorder’, and menstruating women are marked as ill or out-of-control. Thirdly, menstruation is a marker of femaleness, the Other, marking “girls and women as different from the normative and privileged male body.” This is a reminder of and contribution to women’s lower social status; menstruation is only a ‘problem’ because women do it.<sup>90 91</sup>

A further part of the menstruation stigma is the language (or silence) used for discussing menstruation, with a menstrual etiquette of “who can say what to whom about menstruation, what sort of language is appropriate, and what should not be spoken.”<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, the topic of menstruation is expected not to be mentioned in certain contexts and accepted in others. For example, a poll conducted with a U.S. American sample in 2018 found that 51% of the male participants thought it inappropriate to discuss menstruation in the workplace.<sup>93</sup> When discussing the topic, the large number of euphemisms used illustrate the taboo around menstruation. Most of those are negative: “the curse”, “weeping womb”, “bloody scourge”, or “the red plague.”<sup>94</sup>

A possible cause and effect of menstruation stigma can be found in scientific research, with evidence of a gender bias. One example is the disregard for research and funding on topics concerning women. For instance, chemical substances in menstrual products are weakly regulated and not enough research is done to detect what substances can be found or the effects they have on the user.<sup>95</sup> Another is the androcentric (i.e., male-centred) bias. Men’s behaviour is seen as standard, ‘representing humans’. Women’s lives and experiences are neglected. Thus, different (i.e., non-male) behaviour is

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<sup>89</sup> Johnston-Robledo et al. 2020. 182

<sup>90</sup> Johnston-Robledo et al. 2020. 182-183

<sup>91</sup> Gloria Steinem’s essay ‘If Men Could Menstruate’ illustrates this situation masterfully.

Young, Iris M. 2005. ‘Menstrual Meditations’ in *On Female Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays*. Chapter 6, pp. 97-122. 111

<sup>93</sup> Daily Mail. 2018. *Have YOU been a victim of period shaming? Nearly half of women say they have been shamed about menstruating – with many blaming their own families and male partners* in Daily Mail UK (online), January 4, 2018

<sup>94</sup> Costos, Dary, Ruthie Ackerman, and Lisa Paradis. 2002. ‘Recollections of Menarche: Communication Between Mothers and Daughters Regarding Menstruation’, *Sex Roles*, 46(1/2), pp. 49-59. 49

<sup>95</sup> The Economist. 2022. *Not enough is known about the science of pads and tampons* in The Economist (online), December 14, 2022

deemed inferior or defective.<sup>96</sup> This bias can also affect female and feminist researchers. The patriarchal structures are deeply rooted in society, affecting most, if not all, individuals, consciously or unconsciously.

#### 4.2. Transmission: Education and Advertisement

##### *(Insufficient) Education*

Most menstruators learn about menstruation from their mothers. Research with a mostly American sample has found that more than half of menstruators receive negative messages from their mothers at menarche. This involves only talking about products (and no other aspects), talking about how to keep menstruation hidden, referring to negative labels such as “the curse”, linking menstruation to sexuality, prohibiting the use of tampons, or prescribing a “grin-and-bear-it” attitude to menstrual discomfort.<sup>97</sup> Girls are faced with a paradox when learning about menstruation: they are congratulated on entering womanhood, to then be told to keep it secret.<sup>98</sup>

Another important source of information on menstruation and menarche is sex education. However, sex education is not prioritized in the curriculum. For instance, 76% of students in the USA are taught more about frogs than the female body.<sup>99</sup> As of February 2023, 38 out of 50 States in the U.S. mandate sex education, and there is no evidence-based menstrual curriculum. Only 17 States require the education to be medically accurate.<sup>100</sup>

Sex educators often rely on menstrual product manufacturers such as Always for their educational content. The Always Changing and Growing Up program is reaching more than 2 million girls in the USA, being used in more than 20'000 elementary schools – about a quarter of all public elementary schools in the country.<sup>101</sup> The Always program begins in 5<sup>th</sup> grade,<sup>102</sup> when students are about 11 years old, yet some States only require sex education from 6<sup>th</sup> grade on, such as New York State.<sup>103</sup> The average age at menarche in the U.S. in 2013-2017 was 12 years,<sup>104</sup> it is considered ‘normal’ between 9 and 16 years.<sup>105</sup> Hence, some menstruators might not get any information before menarche, with girls reporting not having been ready for menarche.<sup>106</sup> This lack of knowledge makes the event frightening and confusing.<sup>107</sup> A 2021 survey found that at the time of menarche, 60% of participants thought their period was scary and 55% thought it was gross.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> McHugh, Maureen. 2017. “Gender Bias in Research” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender* edited by Kevin L. Nadal.

<sup>97</sup> Costos et al. 2002. 51-53

<sup>98</sup> Chris Bobel 2010. 31

<sup>99</sup> Thinx. 2021. *State of the Period 2021*

<sup>100</sup> Guttmacher Institute. 2023a. *Sex and HIV Education*

<sup>101</sup> Greenfield Beth. 2018. *What's the state of menstruation in U.S. schools? 'Significantly lacking,' say experts* in yahoo!life (online), November 10, 2018

<sup>102</sup> P&G School Programs. 2021. *Our Programs*

<sup>103</sup> Beth Greenfield 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Martinez, Gladys M. 2020. ‘Trends and Patterns in Menarche in the United States: 1995 through 2013-2017’, *National Health Statistic Reports*, 146, September 10, 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Pal, Lubna, and Hugh S. Taylor. 2018. ‘Role in Reproductive Biology and Reproductive Dysfunction in Women’, *Vitamin D*.

<sup>106</sup> Erchull, Mindy J. 2020. “‘You Will Find Out When the Time Is Right’: Boys, Men and Menstruation’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 31, pp. 395-407. 396

<sup>107</sup> DeMaria, Andrea L., Cara Delay, Beth Sundstrom, Audrey L. Wakefield, Zeina Naoum, Jaziel Ramos-Ortiz, Stephanie Meier, and Kristin Brig. 2020. “‘My mama told me it would happen’: menarche and menstruation experiences across generations’, *Women and Health*, 60(1), pp. 87-98.

<sup>108</sup> Thinx 2021.

### *Language used in Content on Menstruation*

Menstruation stigma can be seen in educational and advertising content. For long, menstruation has been invisible and absent in advertisements for menstrual products. It was first in 1985 that the word “period” was mentioned in an ad for menstrual products,<sup>109</sup> and up to 2017, blue liquid instead of red was used to demonstrate the absorbency of menstrual products in advertisements.<sup>110</sup>

The narrative of silence and concealment is visible in expressions used when describing menstruation and products: A 1995 *Always Changing* pamphlet answers the question “Can anyone tell when I have my period?”, saying that no one can know, adding that pads are made to be invisible and “prevent embarrassing leaks.”<sup>111</sup> A 2001 Tampax Satin Learner’s Kit stresses that tampons are the best choice for activities requiring tight-fitting outfits “since no one will notice that you are menstruating.”<sup>112</sup> When presenting the advantages and disadvantages of pads and tampons, Tampax writes on their website (2023) that the former can imply “stress of constantly checking for leaks,” and describes the latter as “full-size protection that fits into your pocket,” implying that tampons are something that has to be kept out of view.<sup>113</sup> In 2015, Tampax boasted “know[ing] how to be quiet” when advertising “the most silent wrapper ever”<sup>114</sup> and tampons with “discreet” wrapping are still available in 2023.<sup>115</sup> An Always Changing and Growing Up educational video (shown to about 2 million girls) answers the question if anyone can “tell” if a girl is on her period. The “important” answer is “NO”, menstruation being explicitly expected to be kept secret. “Here’s a hint: don’t tell them, and they won’t know.”<sup>116</sup>

Medical textbooks and educational pamphlets often link menstruation to reproduction, referring to it with vocabulary implying “failed reproduction” or uselessness, describing deficiency and loss.<sup>117 118</sup> According to Freidenfels, the reproductive focus of menstrual education has been criticized by interviewed women.<sup>119</sup>

### *Boys and Men*

As boys and girls are generally separated for sex education,<sup>120 121</sup> there is no clearly defined source of information about menstruation for boys. In an analysis of young American men’s narrative about menstruation, they report “piecing together” bits of information from school, family, peers, and the media like a “puzzle”. This gave them an incomplete and often negative understanding of menstruation: “Girls just do it and it’s gross.”<sup>122</sup> Some were also left with questions about the process, which mostly remained unanswered because of the communication taboo: menstruation is not to be discussed, and neither are questions concerning it. In some cases, mostly older girls used menstruation to embarrass younger boys. This contributed to the notion that menstruation is something shameful and dirty. As a reaction, boys reportedly used menstruation to tease and embarrass girls, especially of

<sup>109</sup> Tampax. 1985. *Tampax commercial*

<sup>110</sup> BBC News. 2017. *Bodyform replaces blue liquid with red ‘blood’* in BBC News (online), October 18, 2017

<sup>111</sup> Procter and Gamble. 1995. *Always Changing*. 22

<sup>112</sup> Tampax. 2001. *Tampax Satin Learner’s Kit*. 18

<sup>113</sup> Tampax 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Tampax UK and Ireland. 2015. *Facebook post*

<sup>115</sup> Tampax. 2023. *Tampax radiant box*

<sup>116</sup> P&G School Programs. 2016. *Always Changing and Growing Up: Girls Puberty Educational Video*

<sup>117</sup> Allen, Katherine R., Christine E. Kaestle, and Abbie E. Goldberg. 2011. ‘More Than Just a Punctuation Mark: How Boys and Young Men Learn About Menstruation’, *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(2), pp. 129-156. 135

<sup>118</sup> Charlesworth, Dacia. 2001. ‘Paradoxical constructions of self: Educating young women about menstruation’, *Women and Language*, 24(2)

<sup>119</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 61-69

<sup>120</sup> Dacia Charlesworth 2001.

<sup>121</sup> Lara Freidenfels 2009. 61

<sup>122</sup> Mindy J. Erchull 2020. 399

the same age.<sup>123</sup> The image changed for most in the process of maturing, learning from partners and with sexual experience, getting more comfortable discussing the topic. Yet some reported still avoiding the topic and anything relating to it altogether, presenting this as “the norm for most of the male race.”<sup>124</sup> Research has shown that menstruation is regarded more negatively by men than women and that men confirm more strongly than women that menstruation is to be kept secret.<sup>125</sup> As mentioned above (see page 18), 51% of men think it is inappropriate to talk about menstruation in the workplace.<sup>126</sup> Menstruation is used for teasing and ridiculing women, jokes mostly implying that menstruation is disgusting and unclean.<sup>127</sup> Men also use menstruation or premenstrual changes to dismiss behaviour considered irrational.<sup>128</sup>

The behaviour, representation and understanding of menstruation described above are at the same time part of and contribute to the menstruation stigma. In the following section, indications of the impact of menstruation and menstruation stigma on women and menstruators is presented.

### 4.3. Indications of Effects: Perception, Concealment, Unawareness, and Prejudice

#### *Perception of Menstruating Women*

A study with an American sample has shown that if menstruating individuals’ status is revealed, they will feel less confident in an interview than non-menstruating individuals or menstruators with hidden status.<sup>129</sup> Menstruation also impacts the perception of women, as shown by the results of a study conducted by Tomi-Ann Roberts et al. In their experiment, they asked the participants (mainly white young American men and women) to evaluate a female stranger after she accidentally dropped either a tampon or a hair clip. Roberts et al. found that a woman who dropped a tampon, i.e., was perceived as menstruating, would be rated less likeable and less competent than a woman with unknown menstrual status<sup>130</sup> by both men and women. In addition, a menstruating woman would be avoided physically.<sup>131</sup> Other studies have found that women not hiding their status are perceived as incompetent, emotional, unattractive, and unclean.<sup>132</sup>

Menstruation is additionally a cause for open negative social reactions (which can be labelled as hostile sexist), as can be seen with the phenomenon of “period-shaming”: menstruators get laughed at, picked at, or bullied because of their menstruation.<sup>133</sup> 48% of a poll of 1’500 U.S. American women report having experienced period-shaming.<sup>134</sup>

#### *The Menstrual Concealment Imperative and Blood Work*

The consequence of menstruation stigma is that menstruators will show self-consciousness and hypervigilance during menstruation in effort to hide their menstrual status. Because of negative (both open and unconscious) reactions in a social context as described above, women experience a

<sup>123</sup> Mindy J. Erchull 2020. 399

<sup>124</sup> Katherine R. Allen et al. 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Mindy J. Erchull 2020. 398-399

<sup>126</sup> Daily Mail 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Mindy J. Erchull 2020. 398-399

<sup>128</sup> Alma Gottlieb 2020. 144-145

<sup>129</sup> Ingrid Johnston-Robledo et al. 2020. 187-190

<sup>130</sup> *menstrual status*: where a menstruator is in their cycle, i.e., bleeding or not

<sup>131</sup> Roberts, Tomi-Ann, Jamie L. Goldenberg, Cathleen Power, and Tom Pyszczynski. 2002. ‘“Feminine Protection”: The Effects of Menstruation on Attitudes Towards Women’, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26, pp. 131-139

<sup>132</sup> Wood, Jill M. 2020. ‘(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 25, pp. 319-336. 328

<sup>133</sup> Saunders, Simon. 2022. *Period Shaming – Parents Can Help Stop This Kind of Bullying* in Parential (online)

<sup>134</sup> Olivia Petter 2018.

menstrual concealment imperative, that is, to control their body and make it into one less stigmatized than a menstruating body.<sup>135</sup> They will change their day-to-day activities and behaviour to “pass” as non-menstruating. For example, 83% of female students in the USA hide their menstrual products in public.<sup>136</sup>

The menstrual concealment imperative and managing of menstruation presents additional physical and emotional labour. In addition to shame stemming from stigma and physical discomfort, the lacking awareness of the menstrual experience increases the effort of managing menstruation. This is addressed by Katherine Sang et al. with what they have named ‘blood work’.<sup>137</sup> They analyse it in four facets in academic workplaces, namely

- (1) managing workload (such as difficulties with pain, inflexible attendance expectations and presenteeism);
- (2) managing the leaky, messy, painful body (such as fatigue, leakage of menstrual blood, working through pain);
- (3) managing stigma (such as shame, concealment of menstruation, fear of detection, fear of being laughed at); and
- (4) managing (lack of) access to facilities (such as insufficient toilet facilities, no private access to toilets/disposal bins, no universal provision of menstrual products).

Isabelle Côté et al. have found that women with what they consider a heavy flow are likely to work 28% less than women with a light or normal flow. They conclude that this sums up to 3.6 weeks less work a year, and \$1692 less income per year. In addition, and not included in the study, comes the cost of medical resources used, such as physician office visits or surgical procedures.<sup>138</sup> The study does not discuss the reasons for its findings. Based on the research for this paper, it can be assumed that menstruation stigma, lacking or faulty research due to gender bias, and insufficient awareness of the menstrual experience contribute to the described inequality.

A 2021 poll found that 38% of participants could not do their best schoolwork due to a lack of access to menstrual products.<sup>139</sup> This is a symptom of period poverty, when menstruators cannot afford (sufficient) menstrual products. This can lead to poor menstrual hygiene, decreased professional activity and general low quality of life.<sup>140</sup> A contributor to period poverty is an additional sales tax on menstrual products which can rate from 4% to 7%. As of September 2022, 22 US States tax menstrual products with this “luxury tax”.<sup>141</sup>

### *PMS*

Another indication of an effect of menstruation stigma can be seen in prejudices regarding the premenstrual syndrome (PMS). PMS is the term for all physical (pain, swellings, bloatedness) and mental (anxiety, irritability, mood swings, depression) symptoms experienced before and during

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<sup>135</sup> Jill M. Wood 2020. 328

<sup>136</sup> Thinx 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Sang, Katherine, Jen Remnant, Thomas Calvard, and Katriona Myhill. 2021. ‘Blood Work: Managing Menstruation, Menopause and Gynaecological Health Conditions in the Workplace’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(4). 2-11

<sup>138</sup> Côté, Isabelle, Philip Jacobs, and David Cumming. 2002. ‘Work Loss Associated With Increased Menstrual Loss in the United States’, *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 100(4), pp. 683-687.

<sup>139</sup> Thinx 2021

<sup>140</sup> Singh, Bhuchitra, Jiahui Zhang, and James Segars. 2020. “Period Poverty and the Menstrual Product Tax in the United States”, *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 135()

<sup>141</sup> Alliance for Period Suppliers. 2023. *Tampon Tax*



menstruation. PMS is real, can cause serious psychological and physiological difficulties and is to be taken seriously.

However, in a social context, PMS is often misunderstood, prejudiced, and used generally. Despite some 150 symptoms being associated with PMS, in popular context, PMS is often understood as “the supposed tendency for a menstruating woman to lose control of her emotions in general, and to express annoyance, critique, or anger in particular”.<sup>142</sup> As experiments have shown, menstruating women are seen as generally less competent, and more irrational or irritable than non-menstruating women.<sup>143</sup> Because of such prejudices, PMS can serve to discredit women and their emotions. This especially when there is no knowledge of a woman’s status or her premenstrual experiences (i.e., if she is indeed in the premenstrual phase of the cycle and if she does indeed experience PMS). “PMS has the potential to disempower all women, regardless of their actual premenstrual experiences,” Walker writes.<sup>144</sup> For instance, Liv Strömquist argues that the premenstrual part of the cycle is experienced as a phase of “intense sensitivity and lucidity” that can e.g., stimulate creativity. Therefore, PMS can be considered an asset.<sup>145</sup> By generalizing PMS to a few symptoms supposedly experienced by all women (which is not the case – not all women experience PMS or the same symptoms) women can be dismissed as “PMS-ing” instead of taking emotions and the reasons for them seriously.<sup>146</sup>

#### 4.4. Discussion of Today

In contrast to the situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, today menstruation has disappeared from public discourse. Menstruation is a matter of shame and concealment caused by and reinforcing a menstruation stigma. An indication of an effect of this stigma is on the one hand on menstruators’ perception of their body and menstruation. On the other, menstruation impacts how women are perceived socially and thus what place they have in society.

#### *Representation of Menstruation: Language, Advertisement, and Education*

The representation of menstruation through silence and language used in popular discourse and content on menstruation creates and transmits the menstruation stigma. Especially in the case of education, this is already the case for the young, with insufficient or non-existent education (in the case of too-late education for menarche or non-existent education for boys and men). Education plays an important role in conveying menstrual etiquette and the concealment imperative. Menstruation is not prioritized in teaching. The responsibility is given to external actors, such as menstrual products manufacturers, who are major contributors to educational content about menstruation in the USA. To make their products attractive, the message is that their products protect from leaks and keep fresh. Thus, menstruation is something that must be concealed and is considered gross and embarrassing. These manufacturers have an immense influence on young menstruators’ views on menstruation and their early menstrual experiences.

Lacking education contributes to the mystery around menstruation and the resulting negativity. On the one hand with negative experiences at menarche, on the other with a generally negative image of menstruation. This leads to menstruation shame and period shaming already at a young age. As Mindy J. Erchull writes, “menstrual ideologies do both reflect and reinforce patriarchal social

<sup>142</sup> Gottlieb, Alma. 2020. ‘Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 14, pp. 143-162. 144-145

<sup>143</sup> Levitt, Rachel B., and Jessica L. Barnack-Tavlaris. 2020. ‘Addressing Menstruation in the Workplace: The Menstrual Leave Debate’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 43, pp. 561-575. 567-568

<sup>144</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 170

<sup>145</sup> Strömquist, Liv. 2014. *Kunskapens frukt*. Stockholm: Galago. 119-120

<sup>146</sup> Alma Gottlieb 2020. 144-145

structures privileging men and boys, and research shows that boys start using menstruation as a means of asserting dominance when they are young.”<sup>147</sup>

### *The Concealment Imperative and Blood Work*

The menstrual concealment imperative leads to menstruators investing considerable time and effort to hide menstrual blood and their status (by for example trying to find a toilet at the right time). The norm of the non-menstruating (i.e., male) body and the related fear of having menstruation seen as a weakness will have workers work through menstrual difficulties and not discuss menstruation, as described with the concept of blood work. Additionally, the menstruation stigma makes it difficult to address problems in managing menstruation. Resulting inequalities regarding working conditions are further reinforced by the menstrual experience not being included in the design of public space, with the consequence that menstruators do not have access to adequate facilities, must reorganize their day to go to the toilet or be present at times they feel unwell. This lacking awareness is part of a gender bias in society, politics, and scientific research. The tampon tax and period poverty further illustrate the gender bias, as in not prioritising access to safe menstrual products as a basic biological necessity. To point out is the distinctive negative effect on women’s health.

### *PMS*

PMS is an example of how menstruation and the menstrual cycle are used to discredit women (with the scenario that the menstrual status is unknown, and a woman is assumed to be in the premenstrual phase and thus PMS-ing). When PMS is used to dismiss certain behaviour (i.e., “los[ing] control of her emotions in general, and to express annoyance, critique, or anger in particular”<sup>148</sup>), an “ideal” woman is constructed. The message is that the behaviour named above is not accepted in women and can only be explained by PMS. As Walker puts it, “the concept of PMS taps into powerful cultural ideas about good and bad behaviour.”<sup>149</sup>

### *Summary*

On the one hand, menstruation is not represented or represented negatively, reflecting and creating a menstruation stigma. Negative attitudes and behaviour cause a concealment imperative: women face negative reactions if they are revealed to be menstruating, and thus hide menstruation, experiencing it as shameful. On the other, menstruation is not considered, resulting in missing infrastructure and awareness of the menstrual experience. The effort to hide one’s menstrual status presents significant emotional and physical labour, which puts menstruators at a disadvantage to non-menstruators. Menstruation is not a tool used consciously to discriminate against women but is part of creating and reinforcing patriarchal structures. The prejudices regarding menstruation’s impact on women’s emotions and capabilities (as with PMS or shown in the experiment by Roberts et al.) form an exception. Women are treated differently (if consciously or unconsciously) because they are revealed or assumed to be menstruating. However, unlike at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this discrimination is not embedded in laws or justified with scientific theories. It is sexist treatment that is provoked by menstruation. Thus, it is another example of how menstruation is stigmatized as described by Johnston-Robledo et al. (see *Cause: Menstruation Stigma*), as being a “marker for marginalized groups”, i.e., femaleness. Menstruation causes sexism because *women* menstruate.

<sup>147</sup> Mindy J. Erchull 2020. 399

<sup>148</sup> Gottlieb, Alma. 2020. ‘Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chapter 14, pp. 143-162. 144-145

<sup>149</sup> Anne E. Walker 1997. 171



## 5. Comparison Between the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Today

If compared to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's situation and place in society have changed drastically. In many ways, women have gained a better social standing and more equal access to society. This is due to social and political emancipation regarding women's rights such as women's suffrage (earned in 1920), *Reed v. Reed* which prohibited different treatment based on sex in 1971,<sup>150</sup> or the right to abortion with *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.<sup>151</sup>

Concomitant with the emancipation in women's image and role in society, menstruation's image is no longer the same. At the turn of the century, menstruation was seen as a defining part of womanhood. According to the role women were assigned, menstruation was considered inseparably linked to fertility and reproduction. Today, menstruation is more of a matter of shame and concealment, with a norm of a non-menstruating body. This implies that menstruation must be concealed, while the menstrual experience is not considered in society. Although the focus when looking at menstruation is no longer on fertility and reproduction, women's reproductive responsibility is still a major social and political topic. In June 2022, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, removing the right to abortion from the U.S.' constitution. As of February 2023, 12 States ban abortion from conception (with only a few exceptions, i.e., if the mother's life is endangered), and 24 others restrict or attempt to restrict abortion on other grounds than viability.<sup>152</sup>

However, menstruation is not used as an instrument to confine and restrict women to the sphere of motherhood as it was in the last century. The situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of explicit discrimination, with menstruation used to justify women's assigned role in society and why women should not leave these assigned spheres. To this end, menstruation was pathologized and presented as debilitating throughout the cycle. This allowed discrimination based on menstruation against *all* women, justified not by their factual menstruation, but by the *ability* to menstruate. As such, the situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century serves as an example of how menstruation can be instrumentalized and be a basis for discrimination.

Today, menstruation's stigmatization causes negative attitudes and behaviour, and a lack of awareness of the menstrual experience. This results in preventable difficulties (as with for example no access to adequate facilities or menstrual products) and unequal chances. In contrast to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the resulting disadvantage/inequality is more periodical, when women and menstruators are in the menstruating part of the cycle. An exception can be seen when considering prejudice towards PMS, when the menstrual status and menstrual experience are mostly unknown.

However, similarities in menstruation's image, its detectable effect on women's role in society, and its place in the patriarchally structured society can be seen. Then as now, menstruation illustrates and reflects general patriarchal structures and women's place in society.

This is exemplified by the gender data gap. Due to the gender bias in research, female topics (including menstruation, the menstrual cycle, and difficulties caused by menstruation), and female researchers are disregarded and not prioritized, or researched with a biased view of women. Despite a better understanding of menstruation than at the turn of the century due to advances in science, this knowledge is not sufficiently spread, which contributes to the stigma and prejudices. Education on menstruation was and still is insufficient and biased. For instance, today as at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, men often do not have access to education on menstruation and thus have a prejudiced understanding of menstruation. Girls and young women and menstruators are not educated in time for

<sup>150</sup> Wikipedia. 2023a. *Reed v. Reed*

<sup>151</sup> Wikipedia. 2023b. *Roe v. Wade*

<sup>152</sup> Guttmacher Institute. 2023b. *State Bans on Abortion Throughout Pregnancy*

menarche. (Insufficient) education mirrors the view of society on menstruation and thus perpetuates discriminatory and stigmatizing images. Today and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, menstruation has an impact on women's place in society and the workplace. To have the ability to menstruate presents a disadvantage. Not because of the physical effects of menstruation, but because of how menstruation was and is (dis)regarded.

Menstruation is an illustration of women's (expected) role in the patriarchally structured society then and now. At the turn of the century, women were restricted to the spheres of wife- and motherhood, with their ability to menstruate presented as a justification. Today, women are formally treated equally. However, this equality is measured against non-menstruating (i.e., male) standards. Thus, the menstrual experience is not considered, instead being stigmatized. Because of the menstruation stigma, a gender data gap, and a lack of awareness, being a menstruator means unequal chances in society. When aiming for gender equality, menstruation, menstruation stigma, and their impact on women's place and chances in society must be considered.

## 6. Experimental Part: Current Views on Menstruation

### 6.1. Creation of Videos

To gather experiences with menstruation in society and verify the findings presented above, a video series was created. The videos aim to spread knowledge about the topic of menstruation's role in society, raise awareness about menstruation stigma, encourage critical views on menstruation stigma, and gather and verify experiences with menstruation and menstruation stigma through comments.

The videos were published on two platforms, YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>) and TikTok (<https://www.tiktok.com/>). For this, a channel on each platform was created with the username @talkingaboutmens.<sup>153</sup> The videos were published from 21 February 2023 to 13 March 2023. A total of 8 videos were created, with different focus topics based on the findings presented above (Menarche, Education, Men and Menstruation, Menstruation Stigma, Period Stains, Product Access, Language, and Menstrual Blood). The content is presented in the form of the author's personal experience, findings from research, and questions directed at the viewer. The videos are all one to two minutes long. The YouTube videos include a title and credits encouraging viewers to comment and share the videos, as well as a short introduction presenting the project. Furthermore, the description includes an explanation of the videos and the project as a part of the Swiss Science and Youth foundation. For the TikTok videos, the titles, introduction, and credits are omitted to better fit the platform and audience. As no description can be added, hashtags were included to increase the visibility of the videos. Additionally, some videos were split into two parts to make them shorter. The video title is visible above each video.

The video links and scripts including the introduction, description, and used hashtags can be found in the appendix. Screenshots of the comments are also included.

### 6.2. Reactions to Videos

By 19 March 2023, the YouTube videos received a total of 223 views and 3.3 hours of watching time. The TikTok videos obtained an average of 71 views each, and a total of 781. A total of 16 comments, 12 on YouTube and 4 on TikTok, were published. These are summarized in the following section.

#### *Discussing Menstruation*

A non-menstruating person describes not having the opportunity to discuss the topic often, as menstruating friends do not mention it except as “a note on the side”. However, the person would “not feel uncomfortable” discussing the topic, and some of their menstruating friends discuss the “pain, feelings etc.” openly. A menstruator reports discussing the topic freely in “informal settings” with friends and family, being met with curiosity and naivety by non-menstruating people. They see this as an “evident” lack of education. The person further describes experiencing explicit negative reactions (such as rudeness) and a lack of understanding in “formal settings (e.g., school or workplace)” by “invalidating [their] pain/needs”, the person consequently feeling uncomfortable bringing up the topic, such as when being in discomfort. Another menstruator reports discussing menstruation and getting “sorry” reactions. A non-menstruating person describes menstruating friends “whispering” when asking for menstrual products, adding that “some also talk about it more openly”. A menstruator states they “will not lie” about such a “normal” reason for discomfort. However, they have earned “weird glances”, and report not bringing up the topic “without” context, as they feel this would be “weird” and “people would think more negatively” of them.

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<sup>153</sup> YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@period.5735/about>; TikTok: [https://www.tiktok.com/@talking-aboutmens?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&sender\\_device=pc](https://www.tiktok.com/@talking-aboutmens?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc)

### *Education and Preparation for Menarche*

When asked about their education on menstruation and their experiences with menarche commentators report an insufficient or late education about menstruation. For the menstruators, this meant not being prepared for menarche, not understanding it, and feeling “unsure and lost” or “confused”. One person says having been afraid to be pregnant, despite being sexually inactive at 12 years old because they did not know about the irregularity of the cycle. The person also highlights lacking education on other topics relevant to the menstrual cycle, such as PMS symptoms or vaginal discharge. Two menstruators say they turned to their mothers for advice. One had a positive experience, made to “feel comfortable”. The other felt uncomfortable addressing the topic and too embarrassed to ask their mother for menstrual products. A commentator describes feeling “mature” when going through menarche. A non-menstruator recalls not “learn[ing] a lot about it” in their “education”, and “forget[ting] almost all of it”. The commentator later informed themselves about menstruation, and states that sex education should be improved and “repeated at multiple stages in one’s school career”. A man describes only being faced with menstruation in their “late teenies” through menstruating friends, only having a “vague idea” of what it was before that.

### *Menstruation in Public*

Two menstruators report having used or using the ‘period fist’.<sup>154</sup> One of them tells “forcing [them]selves out of [their] comfort zone” to stop hiding menstrual products for a limited time in which they were in a “safe bubble”. Not being in this protected area anymore, they began “hiding any signs that [they are] menstruating”. When faced with questions on menstrual blood and stains, a non-menstruator states thinking “it’s just blood”. A menstruator describes how, despite considering menstruation as “something normal” and discussing them openly, they feel that menstrual blood and stains are “something [they] should be ashamed of” despite never having had a stain themselves. They recall helping a friend to conceal a period stain, the option of not concealing it “never even [being] considered”. The friend continued their day with soaked pants “on a day when the temperatures dropped below zero.” One non-menstruator expresses their amusement at ads about menstrual products, as they present an “idealized picture of menstruation”, while “menstruation can’t always be hidden”. When asked about the responsibility of schools or workplaces to provide menstrual products, a menstruator explains appreciating free products as a “way of showing that they care” but not thinking it is the institutions’ responsibility to provide free products. They do think, however, that it is the institutions’ responsibility to provide the infrastructure to dispose of menstrual products easily. The commentator also addresses the potential difficulties of providing free menstrual products state-wide, having discussed the matter with non-menstruators.

### 6.3. Discussion of Videos

The experiences of both menstruators and non-menstruators show a positive attitude towards menstruation, while still experiencing the impact of menstruation stigma.

The menstrual etiquette of who can say what to whom about menstruation is apparent in the comments relating to the discussion of menstruation: Menstruating people “whispering” when asking for menstrual products or describing receiving “weird glances” when breaching the topic. However, menstruation is said to be discussed openly by several commentators, and a non-menstruator says explicitly they would “not feel uncomfortable” discussing the topic. Still, their menstruating friends seldom breach the topic, or mention it as “a note on the side”. Another convenience is to mention menstruation exclusively to discuss negative aspects such as pain, with people “react[ing] sorry”.

<sup>154</sup> *period fist*: hiding a tampon in one’s fist to hide it (on e.g., the way to the toilet)

Most comments on education and menarche describe an insufficient education at a younger age. This results in menstruators being unprepared for menarche and not understanding menstruation and its causes. Menstruators describe feeling “unsure and lost” or “confused”. There are two accounts of positive experiences at menarche, being “comfortable” and feeling “mature”. For non-menstruators, it is primarily through menstruating peers that they come into closer contact with menstruation. Several commentators, both menstruators and non-menstruators, have been educated or have informed themselves privately about menstruation at later times. This is either stated explicitly or can be seen implicitly by the topics mentioned, terms used, or opinions expressed.

The concealment imperative can be seen in the described experiences: commentators describe using the ‘period fist’, fearing people “thinking more negatively” of them if the topic is mentioned, or “hiding all signs” that they are menstruating. A menstruator has experienced hostile sexism (which could be considered period-shaming depending on the context) in the form of “rudeness” when mentioning menstruation and “invalidating” their pain and needs. There are accounts of disregarding the concealment imperative by not concealing menstrual products and discussing menstruation openly. The intensity of the concealment imperative seems to depend on the environment and how safe the menstruator feels in it (i.e., “safe bubble”). Even so, it is still an effort to challenge the concealment imperative (i.e., “forcing [them]selves out of [their] comfort zone”).

Despite a non-menstruator considering menstrual blood as “just blood”, menstrual stains are described as something one “should be ashamed of”. To note is the verb *should*. The commentator implies that shame about menstrual blood is something imposed by the outside and that the person not necessarily *is* ashamed. This said, when in the situation of a menstrual stain, the option of not concealing the blood is “never even considered”. The reported consequence of putting one’s health at risk by continuing a day with negative temperatures with soaked pants can be considered blood work. Another description of blood work is that of a commentator working through their pain and not demanding breaks due to discomfort with bringing up the subject.

Apparent is that most commentators have a certain literacy regarding topics with menstruation, such as using the terms menstruator/non-menstruator or mentioning other topics relating to the menstrual cycle. The addition of opinions on ads, sex education, or access to menstrual products and potential improvements further illustrates the awareness of the topic. In two instances, commentators express their perplexity and amusement about menstruation stigma and its effects.

The reactions to the videos show that the menstruation stigma and indication of its effects (i.e., concealment imperative, period-shaming, and blood work) are apparent in society. Most commentators appear to be positively disposed towards menstruation, reporting to discuss it openly or to be willing to, and informing themselves about the topic and its implications. However, the detectable effect of menstruation stigma is visible in form of discomfort with the topic, silence, concealment, blood work, and in one instance period-shaming. Interesting is that the effects of menstruation stigma are described as detached from individual reactions, such as a menstruator saying they “should” be ashamed of menstrual stains, while never having experienced a stain or negative reactions to it. Furthermore, although a non-menstruator describes being positively disposed to discuss menstruation, their friends treat it as a “note on the side”. And despite being in a “safe bubble”, it still presents an effort not to conceal menstrual products in public. It can be concluded that the menstruation stigma and concealment imperative are unconsciously transmitted and internalized. To be emphasized is the importance of the direct social environment for the comfortability of menstruators and the awareness of non-menstruators.

The results of the video-based study must be considered in light of the study’s limitations. The positivity towards menstruation shows a potential bias of this form of data gathering; as the videos are

publicly available and the topic (i.e., menstruation and menstruation stigma) is visible and a factor for browsing and finding the videos, it is more likely for people with a prior interest for the topic to watch the videos. Additionally, very few viewers commented on the videos (16 out of a total of 1004 views). It can be assumed that the commentators are amongst the most motivated and interested in the topic, and thus the most positively inclined. The content of the videos is subjective (including the author's personal experience and opinions), which also influences the reactions. Furthermore, the public access to the videos makes it impossible to know the viewers' and commentators' demographics. These factors make for a biased data set, which cannot be considered representative. Nonetheless, it offers insight into experiences with menstruation, and accounts of how menstruation is perceived, where and how menstruation stigma is expressed, and indications of what effect the stigma has.

## 7. Summary and Conclusion

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, menstruation was pathologized and argued to lead to mental and physical illness, as well as infertility. Menstruation was instrumentalized to restrict women to the spheres of wife- and motherhood, and to reinforce women's reproductive responsibility to society. Women were limited in their working hours, not supposed to get the same education as men nor to work in industry and were at risk of getting diseases no man could get. This argumentation was based on old beliefs and social motives, with little evidence and despite empirical research finding otherwise. Another point which illustrates the social and political motives in the argumentation is the lack of mention of household labour. Educational literature reflected and transmitted the ideas of menstruation as something weakening and the expected roles for girls and young women. This was partly a response to women's emancipation movement beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, menstruation has vanished from society. The standard body is an unchanging, non-bleeding one, and menstruation is a topic confined to silence and concealment. Menstruators are expected to hide all signs of menstruation. First, due to menstruation stigma, menstruators face negative reactions if they are revealed to be menstruating, consequently experiencing a concealment imperative. Second, this menstrual concealment imperative is present in all aspects of society, being transmitted through advertisement, media, language, and (limited) education. Third, concealing menstruation requires an effort due to insufficient consideration of the menstrual experience and inadequate infrastructure. The effort to hide one's menstrual status represents significant emotional and physical labour, which puts menstruators at a disadvantage to non-menstruators. To be emphasized is the manner of disadvantage which is not caused by the physical impact of menstruation but by how menstruation is (dis)regarded socially.

The reactions to the videos support the findings regarding the situation today: menstruation stigma is present in society and has the detectable effect of a concealment imperative, being a mental and physical effort to conceal. This despite commentators having a positive attitude regarding menstruation.

This paper started with the hypotheses that (1) menstruation has been a basis for discrimination in the past; and (2) menstruation is a basis for discrimination today.

The first hypothesis can be confirmed: At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, menstruation was used as a basis for discrimination against women. Menstruation served to justify which roles women were expected to be in and corresponding efforts to prevent escape or deviation from these prescribed roles. Thus, women were treated differently (and "less fairly") than men because of their menstruation.

The second hypothesis can be refuted: Menstruation stigma and the indications for its effects cannot be considered discrimination as defined for this paper. Women are not treated differently because of their menstruation, but rather 'equally'. However, as this 'equality' is measured against non-menstruating (i.e., male) standards, the menstrual experience is not considered, which is expressed through insufficient education, inadequate facilities, no universal access to products, and a tampon tax. This leads to unequal chances and accordingly to unequal outcomes. Menstruation is thus not a basis for discrimination, but a basis for inequality.

The reactions to the videos show that menstruation stigma impacts individuals separately from their personal experience and attitude, being dependent on the social environment and reactions to menstruation. This illustrates how menstruation stigma, and its detectable effects, are part of the patriarchally structured society as a whole and must be considered in its entirety to understand and change it. However, these results must be considered cautiously, as they are based on limited and potentially unrepresentative data. The method of data gathering through commented videos is imprecise and biased. Nevertheless, it provides qualitative insight into individuals' experiences with and perception of menstruation.

In conclusion, menstruation's impact on women reflects, creates, and reinforces patriarchal structures, today as at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially for the situation today, this impact is independent of individuals' attitudes and experiences, the menstruation stigma being transmitted and internalized unconsciously, resulting in the menstrual concealment imperative and blood work.



## 8. Perspectives for the Future

As presented in this paper, the detectable effects of menstruation stigma go well beyond menstruators' comfort and self-acceptance. Menstruation and menstruation stigma reflect and create gender inequality in the patriarchally structured society and are thus simultaneously a cause and a symptom of these patriarchal structures. Consequently, when aiming for equity (i.e., gender equality) as discussed in the Preface, menstruation stigma must be addressed. However, menstruation stigma cannot be eliminated if patriarchal structures persist, the former being a symptom of the latter.

Gender equality is not part of the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution does not guarantee equal protection regardless of gender, and the Equal Rights Amendment is still in the ratification process.<sup>155</sup> However, equality and non-discrimination are inscribed in the United Nations Human Rights Declaration. More precisely, the aim is to “transform discriminatory social norms and harmful gender stereotypes.”<sup>156</sup> Being a UN member, the USA has a “very strong commitment” to the declaration.<sup>157</sup> Thus, the USA commit to aiming for gender equality. As discussed, addressing menstruation and menstruation stigma is an essential part of the process to achieve such equality. This said, current approaches to reducing menstruation stigma focus on menstruation and its hygienic implications, by for example promoting access to menstrual products in prisons.<sup>158</sup> While this is a crucial step which must be continued, it fails to recognize and address the root cause of the problem. By making menstruation stigma a matter of health and hygiene, the cause of menstruation stigma (i.e., patriarchal structures) and its role in upholding these same structures are ignored.

The research for this paper is incomplete and limited by the few sources available, and further research on menstruation, the menstruation stigma, and their effects is needed. The recreation of experiments such as the Roberts et al. tampon/hairclip study could provide valuable data on the role of menstruation on the perception of women, especially by taking into consideration individual's social environment (a potential influence being hinted at in one of the comments, i.e., “safe bubble”) and demographics. Crucial in the examination of menstruation stigma and its effects is the role of intersectional discrimination (such as racism, disability, or age discrimination). In a further step, methods to reduce the menstruation stigma must be investigated (through e.g., sex education or social media). The possibility of explicitly educating men and non-menstruators about menstruation stigma, its effects, and their role in transmission should be considered.

What is certain is that gender equality cannot be reached if a menstruation stigma remains. However, to fully eliminate the menstruation stigma, gender inequalities overall must be reduced.

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<sup>155</sup> Equal Rights Amendment 2023.

<sup>156</sup> United Nations. 2023a. *OHCRC and women's rights and gender equality*

<sup>157</sup> United Nations. 2023b. *Declaration on human rights defenders*

<sup>158</sup> Olson, Mary M., Nay Alhelou, Purvaja S. Kavattur, Lillian Rountree, and Inga T. Winkler. 2022. “The persistent power of stigma: A critical review of policy initiatives to break the menstrual silence and advance menstrual literacy”, *PLOS Global Public Health*, 2(7).

## Glossary

- *asylum*: old word for psychiatric hospital or clinic
- *dysmenorrhea*: painful menstruation
- *discrimination*: practice of treating individuals or particular groups in society differently, in particular less fairly than others
- *equality*: treating groups or individuals in society equally, without discrimination
- *equity*: the state of having equal chances, regardless of individual pre-conditions
- *hysteria*: In the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, hysteria was a medical diagnosis for women. Today, it has become a term to describe emotional excess.
- *menarche*: first menstruation
- *menstrual status*: where a menstruator is in their cycle, i.e., bleeding or not
- *menstrual suppression*: idea in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century that the menstrual flow could be stopped by a chill, a shock, or mental or physical exercise, and that this could lead to physical or psychological troubles
- *menstruating*: to be in the part of the menstrual cycle when bleeding (menstruation) occurs
- *menstruator*: person with a uterus and experiencing menstruation
- *New Women*: Women in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century that, as a follow-up to first-wave feminism, demanded more equal participation in society, politics, education, and employability.
- *patriarchy*: a social structure divided into two genders (men and women), where men are generally in more powerful positions
- *PMS*: physical (pain, swellings, bloatedness) and mental (anxiety, irritability, mood swings, depression) symptoms experienced before and during menstruation.
- *Race Suicide*: notion in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century that a race would wipe itself out by reproducing less than other races
- *sexism*: treatment and attitude with the (unconscious) goal to uphold gendered stereotypes and patriarchal structures through prejudice, oppression, discrimination, control etc.
- *stigma*: stain or a mark setting an individual apart from others
- *uterine*: relating to the uterus
- *vital force*: theory from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that bodies had a limited supply of 'vital force', which was used up by bodily as well as mental activities
- *venereal diseases*: sexually transmittable diseases, such as syphilis or gonorrhoea

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## 10. Appendix

### 10.1. Video Scripts, Descriptions, Hashtags, and Links

#### *Video 1: Menarche*

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

When started menstruating, wasn't really ready. Knew of existence, but didn't know what it really was or what it looked like. First reaction was shock, stress. Knew this was something important. I did feel excited, but also had the feeling that I could not talk openly about this experience. For instance, did not tell my brother or father about my menarche. Felt like menstruation was something to be kept secret.

What were your experiences with first menstruations? Did you feel prepared (if experienced menarche yourself)? Did you know about menstruation? What were your feelings when you started menstruating? Who did you tell it to?

Were you faced with a person around you, daughter, sister, friend who just experienced menarche? Did they tell you, maybe ask for help? Were you able to help them? What was your reaction to them telling you about menstruation?

Please comment your emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Love to read all about it.

#### Video description:

What do you remember about your menarche? What do you know about menstruation and menarche generally (without necessarily experiencing menstruation yourself)? How do you feel about menstruation and menarche?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and menarche as possible. This video is part of a research project of the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

#### Hashtags:

#menstruation

#menarche

#endperiodstigma

#### Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDHgKhxUmf&t=8s&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDHgKhxUmf&t=8s&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

Part 1: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7203633068429577477?lang=en>

Part 2: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7203633068429561093?lang=en>

*Video 2: Education*

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

As mentioned in last video, at the time of first menstruation **did not understand what menstruation was**. Yes, blood, but what causes it and what is it for? **Was educated about** it in school, but that was only quite **some time after my menarche**. Even then, did not get a **real scientific explanation** of menstruation. **Only in high school** got taught about the hormones, menstrual cycle and the actual reason for menstruation.

Did you know that in US only **38 out of 50 states mandate sex education**, and out of these **only 17 require it to be scientifically accurate**? To that, many programs educating on **menstruation start only in sixth grade**, when students are **about 12 years old**, despite the **normal age to start menstruating ranges down to nine years old**.

How do or did you experience it? Do you know what menstruation is and how it works biologically? Did you know at the time of menarche (if you have it?)

Did you get educated about it in school? Did this education, if it existed, come before your menarche? Have you found other ways to educate yourself?

What effect did (not) understanding menstruation have? On experience of menarche? On your image of menstruation generally?

Please comment your emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Love to read all about it.

Video description:

How much do you know about the workings of and reasons for menstruation and the menstruation cycle? Were you ever taught about menstruation in school? How does this (lack of) knowledge shape your image of menstruation?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and education on menstruation as possible. This video is part of a research project of the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

Hashtags:

#menstruation

#endperiodstigma

#menstruationeducation

#education

Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XytskP\\_C4aQ&t=2s&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XytskP_C4aQ&t=2s&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

Part 1: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7203772441166908678?lang=en>

Part 2: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7203772441166892294?lang=en>

*Video 3: Men and Menstruation*

## Part 1:

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

Do you as a man talk about menstruation often? Do you think it is appropriate to do so? If not, why?

In my experience, when talking about menstruation with male friends faced with a lot of ignorance, but also curiosity. Most men around me never had chance or motivation to learn about menstruation.

## Part:2

Boys and girls often separated for sex ed and boys don't get educated about mens or mens cycle. Research found that men regard mens more negatively than women and think more strongly that should be kept secret. For instance, pool form 2018 found that 51% of men think it inappropriate to talk about mens cycle in the workplace.

How much do you as a man know about mens? Get taught about it in school? Think it's important to know about and talk about?

Do you as a woman or menstruator talk with men about menstruation? Feel comfortable doing so? What reactions do you get when you do?

Please comment.

## Description:

Do you as a man know a lot about menstruation? Do you feel like it is something you should know and talk about? How comfortable do you feel talking about it?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and men as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation

## Hashtags:

#menstruation

#endperiodstigma

#menandmenstruation

## Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1og-m5teEDw&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1og-m5teEDw&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

<https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7204516745225243909?lang=en>

*Video 4: Menstruation Stigma*

## Part 1:

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

Do you know that thing called a period fist? When you hide a tampon inside your fist so that it is invisible. A 2021 poll found that more than 80% of female students in the US hide their menstrual products. Do you?

When you are menstruating, do people around you know? Do you feel comfortable letting people know? What reactions do you get if people know or notice that you are menstruating?

## Part 2:

Would like to tell you about an amazing experiment made by Roberts and others in 2002: participants were asked to rate a female interviewee. During the interview, she would drop either a tampon or a hair clip. The experiment found that if the woman dropped a tampon, she would be rated as less likeable and less competent than if she dropped the hairclip. This just to show what effect menstruation has on our perception of women.

Can you relate to this? How does this make you feel?

What have your experiences with menstruation in public been?

Please comment your thoughts and reactions. Love to read all about it

## Video description:

How do you feel when people find out that you are on your period? Do people around you even know that you are menstruating? What effect does it have if they do know?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and men as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

## Hashtags:

#menstruation

#endperiodstigma

#periodstigma

#menstruationstigma

## Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcwwLc0Vu\\_0&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcwwLc0Vu_0&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

Part 1: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7204002575748844805?lang=en>

Part 2: <https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7204002575748828421?lang=en>

### *Video 5: Stains*

#### Part 1:

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

#### Part 2:

Let's say you're sitting on a bench with a bad nosebleed because the air is really dry or for some other reason. You suddenly get distracted by some cute cat or whatever and forget about your nosebleed and as you bend down to pet the cat some blood drips onto your pants. Not really nice, but not the end of the world, either. You can still go about your day and wash your pants when you get home, right?

Now how would you feel if that stain was menstrual blood? For me, despite talking a lot about menstruation to everyone, I still feel very uncomfortable if I have a period stain and do a lot to prevent such stains. There is something about menstrual blood in public which makes me uncomfortable.

Have you ever had a period stain? What did you do? How did you feel about it? Did you go about your day and wash your pants later?

Have you ever even seen a period stain? What did you think of that person? How do you feel about menstrual blood generally?

Please comment your reactions, thoughts, and experiences. Love to read all about it.

#### Video description:

How do you feel about menstrual blood? Do you sometimes have or see period stains? What do you think of them?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and men as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

#### Hashtags:

#menstruation  
#endperiodstigma  
#periodstains  
#menstruationblood  
#periodblood  
#periodshame

#### Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXpjmPq9IWQ&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXpjmPq9IWQ&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

<https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7204931970206354694?lang=en>

### *Video 6: Access to Menstrual Products*

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

Does your school or workplace offer free access to menstruation products? Can you always dispose of used products adequately if you need to? Do you think it is their responsibility to offer access to menstrual products, as they offer access for toilet paper, for example?

Does an eventual lack of access to products make your day-to-day activities more difficult? Does having to buy menstrual products cause you financial difficulties?

Are menstrual products something that should be freely available? Or is it a private matter everyone should handle for themselves?

Please comment thoughts, reactions and experiences. Love to read all about it.

Video description:

Does your school or workplace offer free access to menstrual products? DO you think it is their responsibility?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and men as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation

Hashtags:

#menstruation

#endperiodstigma

#periodpoverty

#periodproducts

Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbuCm0pMM1s&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbuCm0pMM1s&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

<https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7206612082609917189?lang=en>

## *Video 7: Language*

### Part 1:

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

### Part2:

Have you ever paid attention to the language that is used in content about menstruation: educational materials, in ads. expressions such as (and I'm quoting) "discreet", "no one will notice that you are menstruating", "no one will know you're on your period" or "protection that fits into your pocket" all imply that menstruation is to be kept out of view. it is less than five years ago that Tampax advertised the "most silent wrapping ever".

It might seem absurd that it took till 1985 for the word "period" to even be mentioned in an ad about menstrual products, but is the situation today that different?

What do you think of this? How does content on menstruation make you feel about menstruation? What image does it convey for you? What have been your experiences?

Please comment your thoughts, reactions and experiences. Love to read all about it

### Video description:

It was only in 1985 that the word "period" was mentioned in an ad about menstrual products for the first time. How is menstruation represented in ads and educational materials today? What image does that convey? How do ads and educational materials make you feel about menstruation?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation and men as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

### Hashtags:

#menstruation  
#endperiodstigma  
#period  
#menstruationads  
#menstruationstigma

### Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtQUa8M2gpo&t=1s&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtQUa8M2gpo&t=1s&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

<https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7206257555968920837?lang=en>



### *Video 8: Menstrual Blood*

Name is Marika, doing research on menstruation's place in society as a project for the Swiss Science and youth foundation. For this I want to gather as many thoughts, reactions and experiences about menstruation as possible. So let's talk about it!

When you think about menstruation, what is the first thing that pops into your mind? Blood, probably. But how do you feel about this blood, menstruation blood, specifically? This question is of course directed at all people, whether you menstruate yourself or not.

For me for a long time, menstrual blood was something weird, a bit gross, which smelled weirdly, and was sucked up by my pad so that I could throw it away as fast as possible. Then I started using a menstrual cup. this is not a video to preach that everyone should use menstrual cups. I'd just like to tell you about how my menstrual cup completely changed my attitude towards menstrual blood. That gross, weird-smelling stuff that belonged in the bin suddenly became something tangible. I could see it, touch it, smell it. I could see it's different colours throughout menstruation. By gathering it and having to empty my cup, my menstrual blood is something I can see, and by that, it has become much more normal to me. I even mostly think it looks pretty.

What are your experiences with menstrual blood? How do you feel about it?

Please comment your thoughts, reactions, and experiences. I'd love to read all about it.

Video description:

How do you feel about menstrual blood? Are those feelings negative or positive? Do you even think about menstruation blood?

With this video, I want to gather as many experiences, thoughts and feelings about menstruation as possible. This video is part of a research project for the Swiss Science and Youth foundation.

Hashtags:

#menstruation

#endperiodstigma

#menstruationblood

#periodstigma

#periodblood

Link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbVp0IYXLp0&ab\\_channel=talkingaboutmens](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbVp0IYXLp0&ab_channel=talkingaboutmens)

<https://www.tiktok.com/@talkingaboutmens/video/7210049116703919365?lang=en>

## 10.2. Video Comments

### *Menarche*

What I remember most about my menarche is how incredibly grown up and mature I suddenly felt 😊 and how much it hurt 😊

When I got my period for the first time I felt a unsure and lost. I turned to my mother for advice that day but later felt uncomfortable talking about it with her. I don't know why. I also found it embarassing to ask her to buy me tampons, so I secretly used some of hers. I later found out that they were meant for menstruators who had gone through childbirth. So that explained my rather unpleasent experience with them 😊

I was confused abt menstruation bc i didn't understand why it happened but my mom was very helpful and made sure i felt comfortable

### *Education*

When I was educated on menstruation I hadn't started mine yet. Still, I was not prepared a bit. I wasn't even sure whether or not I had really started my period when I got my first. I didn't know about the pain, nausea, mood swings, cravings, headaches, apathy, and outbreaks of acne that can accompany a menstruator throughout their cycle. The cycle by itself wasn't really mentioned anyway. Just that you have an ovulation and a period. I also would have been very grateful to be thought more about how irregular your cycle can be in the first few years. When I was 12 I was worried I was pregnant, although I wasn't sexually active at all, because I was late on my period for three months. All these subjects were then eventually covered in high school, at a time when I had been menstruating for a third of my life.

Something that never came up at all though in formal education was vaginal discharge. It is also closely linked to hormones and thus the cycle, so I think it should also be brought up in the discussion around periods. It's a tell-tale sign of vaginal or ovarian health and occurs throughout the cycle as it also helps with cleaning. I felt disgusted by myself for having it for a long time, because I didn't know how normal it is, that almost all people who menstruate have it, and that it can also be discharged in large amounts at times.

In my education (I'm a non-menstruator), I didn't learn a lot about it, and I forgot almost all of it. It was only later, after high school, that I informed myself (also thanks to you haha) about menstruation on my own. I think that sex ed should be way more in-depth and be repeated at multiple stages in ones school career. And every kid should have at least some teaching about all the aspects, even those not influencing them directly.

I was not properly educated abt Menstruation and I had started very early so I knew it was a normal thing I just didn't understand biologically

*Men and Menstruation*

I'm a person who menstruates. To me, it feels easy and natural to talk about my cycle with friends and family or in an informal setting. Reactions of people who do not menstruate are often, as you also mentioned from your own experiences, curious and sometimes a bit naive. The lack of equal education on this subject is evident in my experience.

In formal settings (e.g school or workplace) I've been confronted with many more negative reactions concerning the topic (invalidating my pain/needs, rudeness, etc.). I do not feel comfortable bringing up the issue of menstruation, and even have a hard time asking to go outside/take a little break/go take some painkillers if the cause for my asking is my cycle.

as a man & non-menstruator, I wasn't often confronted with menstruation in my childhood and early adolescence. Of course, I knew it existed, and I had a vague idea of what it was. But it was only in my late teenies that I got in touch with it a bit more - having menstruating friends talking openly about their pain, feelings etc. Some other menstruating friends kept it rather quiet. And I've rarely talked about it openly with friends - it's often more of a note on the side. But personally, I wouldn't feel uncomfortable talking about it.

*Menstruation Stigma*

Yes, I do hide menstruation products. Only in the last year of high school, I forced myself out of my comfort zone by not hiding pads or tampons when going to the toilet. I felt that I was in a somewhat safe bubble. Now that I'm no longer in said safe bubble I've returned to hiding any signs that I'm menstruating.

I have no issue though with letting other people know. I've gotten some weird glances sometimes but I will not lie to friends, classmates, or family as to why I have a stomach ache when the reason is something so normal. I do not bring it up without any context though, I feel like that would be a bit weird and that other people would think more negatively of me.

As a non-menstruator, my experiences with menstruation are based on those I've made with other people. I sometimes observe menstruating friends who, when asking for a tampon/pad, are almost whispering. I interpret that as a sort of hiding it? But some also talk about it more openly

A tampon and hair clip is such a normal thing for women why does it play a role in perception :(

I used to period fist but not anymore 😊, i tell ppl im Menstruating and they react sorry for me

### *Language on Menstruation*

These ads often make me laugh, as they show such an idealized picture of menstruation (as do many other merchandisings, for beauty products f.ex.) - as a non-menstruator, I feel that menstruation can't always be hidden, and that these ads ignore huge parts of it. And if it wasn't for the brand name in the ads, you sometimes wouldn't even know that it promoted menstrual products. And the blue liquid! And in an ad for bandages/gaze, the blood won't be blue? Jesus

### *Stains*

I feel the same way as you about having a period stain on my own. While I take periods as something very natural and talk openly about them, menstrual blood and stains still feel like something I should be ashamed of. I've never experienced a period stain that would have shown on my pants in public but have helped out a friend with one. The option of just going about your day normally was never even considered. It was all about covering up and washing it out right away. To such an extreme that said friend rather went on with her day, jeans completely soaked. On a day when the temperatures dropped below zero.

### *Access to Menstrual Products*

While I don't think that it's the responsibility of schools or workplaces to offer pads or such for free, I certainly appreciate it, if they do. It's a way of showing that they care for the hygiene of menstruators, and understand that sometimes menstruation can come out of the blue with little or no physical signs beforehand.

I've been in situations where I was very grateful that an institution offered products. There is also the alternative to offering products for free by having a "take one, bring one" system. This could work well for both schools and workplaces.

What I do think is an absolute must for any event or institution that expects visitors who menstruate are ways to dispose of used products fast and comfortably. Speaking from experience: There are nicer things to do than carrying around a bloodied tampon wrapped up in some toilet paper and desperately searching for a trashcan because there weren't any in close proximity to the toilets.

And, in my opinion, it's an absolute must for institutions that do have toilets to also offer free toilet paper.

Although I wouldn't complain about menstrual products being free or provided for by the government, I can see that this would be difficult to see through politically in Switzerland and have also had discussions with non-menstruators who think that this would be unfair. One could argue that it's also unfair that menstruators have a period without having chosen to have them and need to pay for this to upkeep basic hygiene. My opinion on that matter isn't fully formed though. However, I'm convinced that menstruation products should be free of tax at the very least.

*Menstrual Blood*

I don't have lots of contact with menstrual blood (I don't menstruate). But I'd just say that for me, it's just blood.