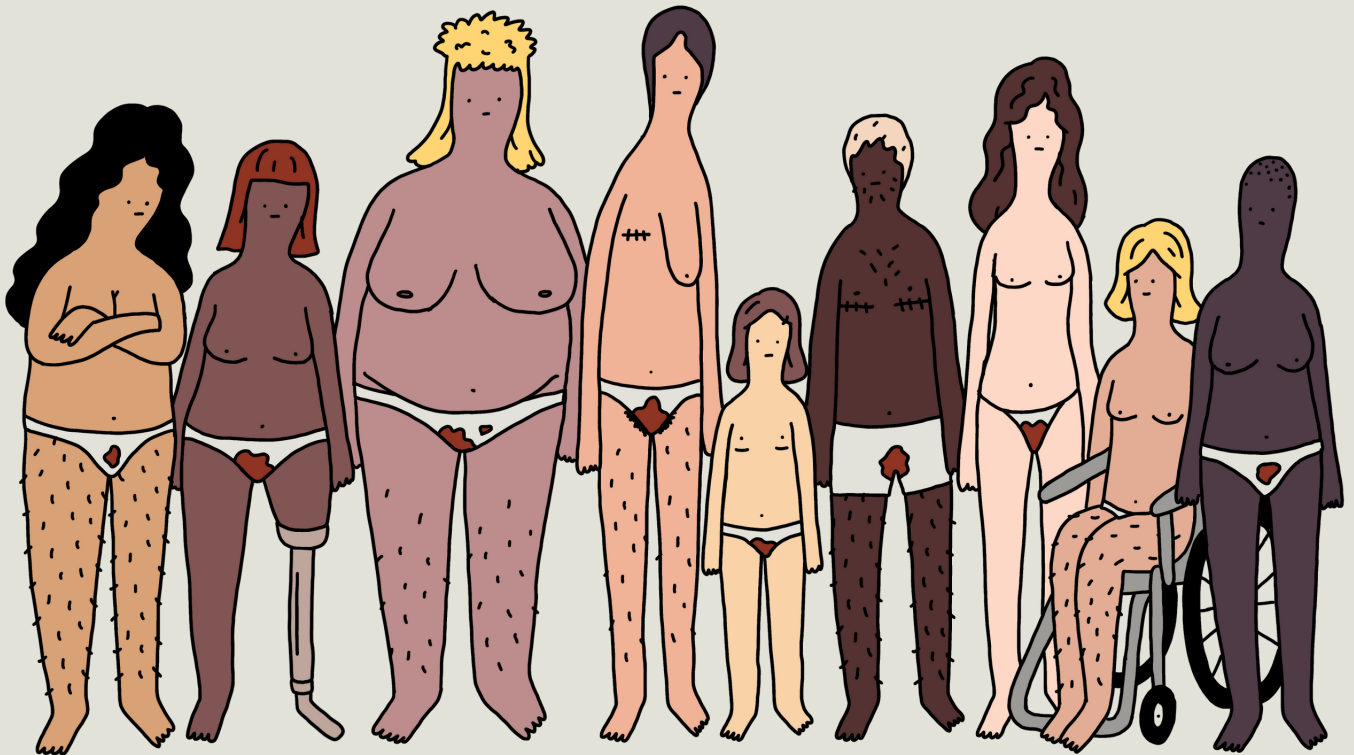


Bleeding Love

A CONTEMPRARY EXPLORATION OF MENSTRUATION



people have periods.

We as a group understand the complexities of menstruation and are aware that issues addressed throughout this journal run far deeper than we could ever imagine. We also are aware that whilst we have discussed many topics that this in no way shape or form touches all of the nuanced corners of menstruation. This journal is the voice of the six authors and one illustrator involved only.

Maximilian is a graphic designer and illustrator based in Vienna, Austria. He studies graphic design and advertisement at Vienna's University of Applied Arts and uses his illustrations to inform about social injustices and fight widespread stigmatisation in accessible ways. And he loves a good pun. Period.

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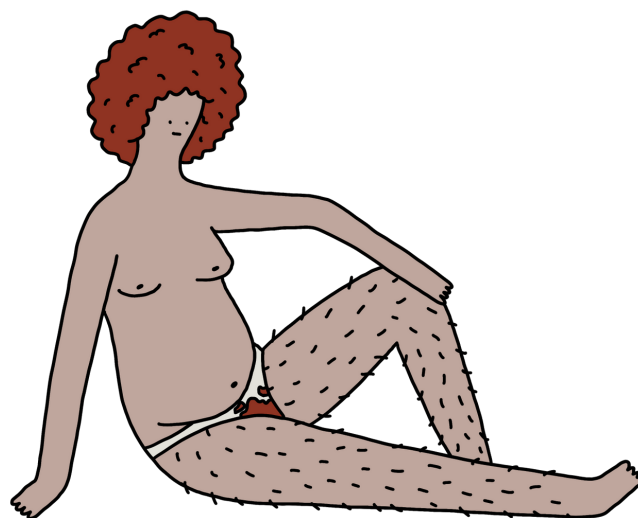
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EDITORIAL

More than half of the world's population experiences menstruation and its many implications on a frequent basis. Yet the subject remains heavily stigmatised, treated with shame and silence, pathologized, or overly beautified. In public and private life, there is little space for nuanced, honest, and open conversation about the period, and all the spheres of life it impacts more, or less directly. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the period perpetuate language and communication, are often rooted in belief systems, and mirrored in advertisement, legislation, and our everyday use and consumption of media. However, unrealistic and harmful discourses about the period are naturalised to a degree that makes them difficult to detect and debunk.

This single-issue journal of Bleeding Love touches upon a number of spheres that reflect the stigmatisation and discrimination faced by people with periods. The deconstruction of harmful narratives goes hand in hand with the focus on more insightful, empathetic, and inclusive representations of the manifold ways in which the period – and everything related to it – influences the lives of bleeders. Bleeding Love lends a stage to these perspectives, reflects and contributes to popular and academic debate surrounding the menstrual stigma, and creates space and incentive for reflection and dialogue about what we all have been taught to think about menstruation. After researching a multitude of subjects

surrounding menstruation, the six authors of this journal have compiled a collection of their outcomes and reflections that seek to acknowledge the complexities and nuances in menstrual realities and point out some of the steps in the path towards menstrual justice, gender equality, and inclusivity.



ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERES:

DO YOU THINK THAT INSTAGRAM AND TWITTER CAN EMPOWER WOMEN TO DEMYSTIFY MENSTRUAL STIGMA?

Social media have become part of our life. We use social networks every day to connect with people, share photos, represent the world, and fight social and political battles. The online platforms do not have just a virtual handshaking purpose, but they can be virtual places where young people politically engage and socially act since they are “valuable communication outlets to mobilise support and resources to bring true community change.”[1] One social issue that the internet has paid attention to recently was the *normalisation of menstruation*. The social matter broke the virtual realm, aiming to reach all the people around the world. Thus, online activism, promoted by young women online, made a substantial positive change for the entire society.

In this research, I will attest the capacity of young girls to fight menstrual taboos and stigma by using social networks. I will assert how *empowerment, remediation and normalisation* are visualised through online posts and hashtags, examining what they visually entail. To do so, I will examine two specific social media, Instagram, and Twitter, to be more specific on *how young, empowered women online resist and normalise social and menstrual conventions*.

What about Instagram?

Instagram is a social media platform that emphasised visual content, the sharing of pictures and videos, allowing the interaction with people at long distances by commenting, liking, and following public or private pages. Similarly, Twitter focuses its properties on text posts, privileging the circulation of current news and events at high virtual speed since they can be retweeted (shared). The affordances that the two networks offer to share political and social news and address societal issues outside the academic realm, is letting cultural beliefs gradually shift to an open-minded society.

“Attitudes towards menstrual stigma are gradually changing since the online discussions are likely to gain a vast media resound.”

Online conversations over menstruation mobilise the participants to reflect on the media narrative that women with menstruation should be ashamed of themselves and manage their period alone. The massive circulation of photos and videos, that visibly show menstruation to mirror the reality of women,

has brought up a massive cultural shift and *solidarity* among young girls. One of such examples is the 22-year-old Indian Poet Rupri Kaur's picture posted on Instagram.[2] In 2015, the young feminist activist posted a photo of herself lying on the bed with her pants stained in menstrual blood. The image was censored and removed twice by Instagram guidelines since it showed 'violence and nudity'. However, the student did not discourage and shared on Facebook a post describing the disappointing event, immediately receiving 36,000 likes and 60,000 shares.[3] The efficacy of the Facebook community in supporting Kaur's activism and cultural scope by letting the photo become viral in a few second, urged Instagram to post her picture on the profile. Kaur's picture not only assumed a more impacting and profound significance after the event but changed the conception of menstruation online. It displays menstrual blood, *showing off its visibility* in a familiar context that allows all women to identify with the student, not hiding a normal bodily female phenomenon that its usually silenced by mainstream media. Further, it indirectly *represents* all the millions of *women* that shared the picture, who along with Kaur, aim to turn *menstruation into an everyday issue*, challenging the way menstruation is socially constructed. Young girls online, from that moment, were encouraged to embrace their menstrual blood despite society preventing their voices from being heard.

Indeed, Instagram started giving voice to women who aimed to raise social awareness and women's consciousness on menstruation, to eventually end period shaming. For instance, I believe that the Instagram page **@pink_bits** embraces *empowerment, solidarity, resistance and remediation of menstruation*, becoming a

virtual space to socially act.[4] Born in 2016, it was created by the Armenian-Australian graphic illustrator Christine Yahya to represent diverse bodies and realities in a heterogeneous society. In collaboration with Intiminia, that is "on a mission to empower women"[5] they created an illustration to raise awareness over social menstrual negative norms. The drawn image, called "A Bathful"[6] shows a naked girl immersed in a menstrual cup full of blood. The picture emphasises the role of a fearless woman, showing her hairy legs and armpits, that resists the female body norms of a woman that should be shaved to be feminine and seductive. Being immersed in menstrual blood without showing a disgusting face, aims to invite girls to acknowledge the positive side of menstruation, which does not mean that pain, cramps, and great amount of blood must be avoided but should proudly embrace. The image, as the other ones published on the account, aim to break the conventional way of looking at menstruation, encouraging its visibility, self-care, love, and mental health. The image received 5,000 likes and was commented with personal experience and supportive comment by young girls stating for instance that they were just started to enjoy their period and they were giving themselves more love than usual. Similar comments promote the celebration of menstruation by sharing confidence in having periods, promoting the message of a positive social idea and perception over menstruation and the female body.

On the digital platform it is now possible to find plenty of accounts that celebrate and normalize the menstrual period, enriching online discussion about menstruation. The Instagram page **@menstrupedia** is a *pedagogical virtual space*, which by sharing medical information and

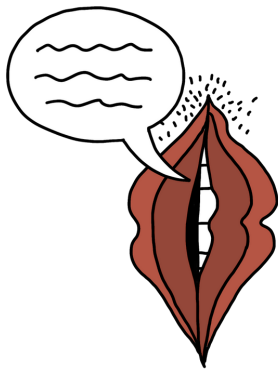
mediatized experiences, challenges the limited knowledge about menstruation.[7] As the caption on the account asserts “World’s most innovative way to teach/learn about #menstruation” the Indian girls, who supervise the page, share post of young Indian girls having periods during sports, funny images of women facing emotional and physical phases during their menstrual cycle and plenty of IGTV (affordance of posting the high-quality video) of Indian women discussing with doctors about menstrual problems. Similarly, other accounts promote projects and campaign to support the *activism, normalisation and remediation aspects of menstruation*, improving its social convention. Thus, the accounts “serve as sites to change the narrative about the body and the experience from virtual images, posts and comments, that invites to reflect the open-minded reality and concern in personal and collective actions from everyday spaces in an offline context.”[8]

...Twitter?

Twitter turned into a global network to exchange social and political information, by using affordances such as the @ or # to address specific people or issues. The digital platform establishes mass conversations that can bring up online protests to impact the offline realm, creating a huge civic engagement that intersects political, social, and economic issues. Such political engagement among young girls was online established in 2015 when, at the time the American president Donald Trump attacked the journalist Megyn Kelly through a sexist comment, claiming “blood coming out of her wherever.”[9] Although the president’s words were perceived unappropriated and discriminatory, his comment did not receive the mainstream attention it deserved. Thus, feminist young women decided to focus the attention on

the sentence by online responding and commenting it through the hashtag #periodsarenotinsult on Twitter. The virtual protest, academically called digital activism,[10] brought to the attention an issue neglected by the real world, permitting the understanding of the ignorance and stigmatization of such assertion over women with period. Creating such a strong virtual community, where the members can exchange opinions on an offline event, privilege the opportunity to socially engage. To make a real social act, women online expressed their opinions on the matter by attaching the created hashtag on the post and forwarding the tweet directly to Donald Trump. Hence, Twitter encouraged young girls to raise social awareness, promoting the cultural protest around the world, directly resisting an important authority such as the President of the United States. The hashtag was initially created by the feminist young women Amber Gordon, a member of the inclusive online feminist community Femsplain, who tweeted: “Hey @realDonaldTrump I just got my period” followed by “Hey @realDonaldTrump, periodsarenotaninsult.com #periodsarenotaninsult.”[11] Afterwards, the tweet was reposted, commented, and spread among the virtual realm, shared among other platforms, being supported by young girls who performed such online activism through ironic comments, personal experiences and disgust, letting their empowerment shine through their words. For instance, some girls were sharing funny pictures of walls’s room stained in menstrual blood claiming that they forgot their tampons and thus writing to Donal Trump to borrow one of his. Others were sharing ironic words since they have the strategic purpose to subvert the demystified reality carried on by society and conservative people. Irony, direct

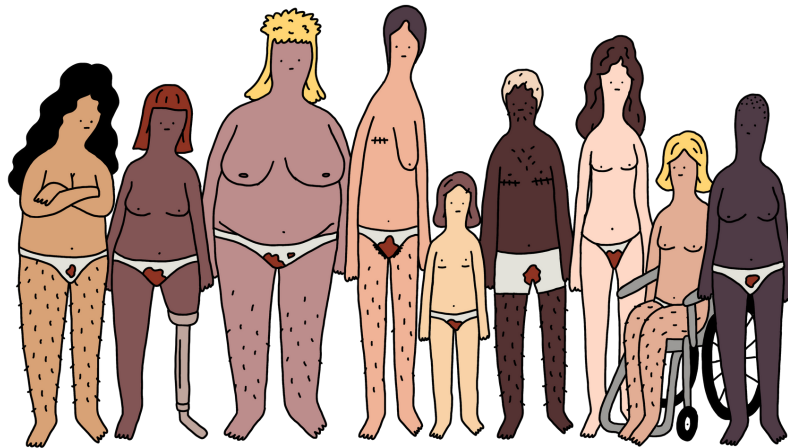
language and funny images are used to present and legitimate menstruation as a normal bodily phenomenon that does not disturb any kind of functions, that is not an issue to be ashamed of but to be proud of.



The capacity allowed by Twitter, through hashtags, empowered so much the participants to create strong solidarity among women, establishing a collective resistance of powerful and fearless women that aimed to resist the general idea of menstrual management and connotations. Thus, Twitter turned into the perfect online stage, due to its affordances, to perform a social act, where the hashtag #periodsarenotaninsult became an effective political assertion, confronting the institution and the period shaming since the activist women aimed to attest that they should not be insulted for their menstrual period. The safe space created by Twitter on this occasion purged the rise of menstrual online conversations sustained by hashtags such as #Tweetyourperiod, #menstruationmatters, #HappytoBleed... Most of these discussions are established by social activists, each of them concerning aspects of the menstrual issue. For instance, the hashtag #Livetweetyourperiod aimed to normalize menstruation in a real and funny way. Created by BuzzFeed's Tracy Clayton, the hashtag encouraged women to talk about their menstruation not in private discussions but among all Twitter's members to break the

silence on menstrual period. The online conversation was fulfilled with diverse posts concerning aspects of the menstrual experience: women were sharing live their emotion through the menstrual cycle, food desire during periods, the management of pain and cramps. As the analysis could attest, Twitter creates cohesion, solidarity, and a sense of community among the people who participate which, through their tweeting and comments, shape social discourse about menstruation just with few characters allowed by the platform. The efficacy of using direct words, concise comments, and funny images, outlines the menstrual issue into a positive frame, promoting social acts and mobilizations both to an online and offline audience. Thus, the digital platform is a valuable source and tool for the circulation of information, that goes at high speed among a diverse audience with precise social scope, particularly for empowered women, who by showing their confidence in tackling about menstruation openly, resist the social discourse.

To conclude, my research gives useful insights to understand how digital platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, turn into the public sphere where women, empowering their agency and the networks' affordances, challenge the social convention over menstruation. By looking at Instagram and Twitter, it is possible to claim that visual images and precise words have a powerful role in calling into real action. Young girls online debating over menstruation pads, blood, cramps, pain..., embracing their body experience, can remediate the old narrative, resisting and eventually breaking down menstrual taboos that made them feel insecure. Thus "Twitter and Instagram have been the platforms that allow the users to tell their experiences with the cup or with the use of menstrual alternatives personally, in their language and through visual forms with photographs, drawings, stories, illustrations, etc., remediating menstruation and allowing for new social ideas that shape the normative discourse around period." [11]



people have periods.

WHEN MEN MENSTRUATE:

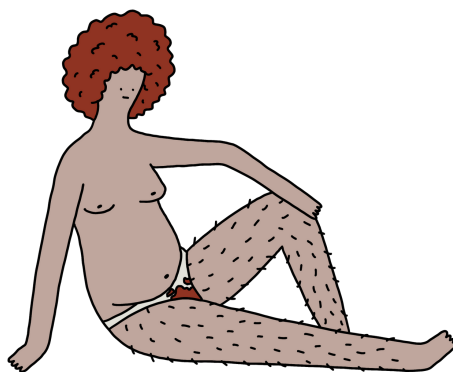
THE GENDERING AND DEGENDERING OF MENSTRUATION.

Perhaps the American feminist activist Gloria Steinem was right: if men could menstruate “menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine event”[12]. Indirectly, her ironic article published in the MS. magazine in 1978, was shouting out to the world that the human perception of women’s bodies and menstruation is socially constructed, establishing fixed categories with specific characteristics. She imagined that if men menstruated then menstruation would have been a sign of strength, vigour, masculinity, something to be proud of since “men would brag about how long and how much.”[12]

If we think about her portrayal of the world, the truth is not far from that. We still live in a society where male dominate, and women must fight every single day to gain their rights just

because being a woman means not being worth it as much as being considered a man. It is not surprising that when we think about men the most common associations are blue and power while women are connotated with pink, submission and subservience. Or when it comes to certain jobs, men have more chances to get the positions than women.

Taking Gloria Steinem’s essay as a starting point, in this contribution we will discuss how menstruation is gendered, primarily based on the work of gender theorist Judith Butler. Thereafter we will discuss the degendering of menstruation, with Gloria Steinem’s point in mind, namely that the stigmatization of menstruation arises from the gendering of menstruation as female, as well as with trans and genderqueer menstruators in mind.



This second part of this contribution is based on literature that relies on interviews with trans and genderqueer menstruators as well as transgender theory. This section is not an exhaustive list of trans and genderqueer experiences and ways in which to degender menstruation. It rather touches upon some important points that should be kept in mind when thinking about menstruation.

The gender discrimination discussed above arises from the social construct, which tends to keep the male and female categories binary opposite, establishing fixed stereotypes that particularly for women are damaging in terms of value. In this way, it is possible to understand why menstruation is stigmatized when associated with women while menstrual blood would be celebrated when related to men. The American gender theorist Judith Butler has theorized that gender is socially constructed since people repeatedly perform what society imposes to be the norms [13]:

“**Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.**”



People are invited to adjust to the social norms by repeating certain actions so that society can accept them and establish them in categories. In this way, they can match with the social appearance constructed. Certain behaviours, attitudes, language, costumes become the norms since they are normalised by society. As a consequence, doing what society imposes to act leads to rigid cultural perceptions and practice that sometimes undermines the representation of reality since these gender attitudes are just socially artefacts. That is why Gloria Steinem stated “the truth is that, if men could menstruate, the power justifications would go on and on”[12] when imagining a world where men could have menstruation and their blood would have been considered powerful just because it comes from a male body.

Menstruation would become a celebratory event not a shameful, disappointing, and powerless phenomenon when it is associated with women. Hence, the way we think about menstruation and how society portrays it depends on the gender connection to it. However, her provoking essay, should invite all menstruators to think how much power we have through menstruation and because cisgender men do not menstruate, we should embrace the capacity we have. We need to subvert the reality we live in.

In addition, we could take it a step further. As Gloria Steinem showed in her essay, menstruation is constructed as female and this shapes how we perceive and represent

menstruation. However not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women. Because of this fact, the degendering of menstruation is necessary in order to approach menstruation in a gender-inclusive way.

Menstruation is not a uniform phenomenon, it is experienced and perceived in a multitude of ways. An example of this is the way in which menstruators perceive their menstrual blood. As stated before, menstrual blood is gendered and is commonly seen as a way to tell women and men apart. For many menstruators this gendered blood is perceived as shameful and gross. For some trans menstruators menstrual blood may also be a reminder of a body they do not identify with.[14] Thus, for some menstruators, menstrual products can 'save' them from their blood, as promised by many companies selling these products. Other menstruators change what menstrual blood means to them, subverting the reality they live in. For example, some menstruators think about their periods as a source of natural power or as a sign of physical health. Some trans menstruators visualize their menstrual blood as something manly or as something that makes them special (in a positive sense) compared to other men. This illustrates how menstrual realities vary greatly, not just between cisgender, transgender and genderqueer menstruators, but also within these groups.[15]

Having said this, how can we go about degendering menstruation? A first well known space in which menstruation can be degendered is the public bathroom. Seeing as some people who use the 'men's room' menstruate, it is important for their health and hygiene that there are bins to dispose of menstrual products in the 'men's room' (as well as other things like products and sinks ideally). This also manifests the reality that not all menstruators are women. [14] Another important development is of

course the efforts to create more gender-inclusive public toilets.[16]

Another way in which menstruation can be degendered is in the depiction of menstrual products, for example in advertising and packaging. Many of these products are framed as 'feminine hygiene products' and target people who identify with femininity through colours, patterns and such. The products are also often designed for cisgender women, for example pads which are made to fit panties.[14]

As Gloria Steinem pointed out in her influential essay from 1978, menstruation is gendered as female. Steinem argues that this has led to menstruation being stigmatized as something shameful, dirty and taboo to name a few. She does so by exploring a thought experiment: how would menstruation be represented and perceived in a world in which (cisgender)men menstruated instead of women? With this argument in mind, a case can be made for the degendering of menstruation as a way to counter its stigmatization. Another important argument for a degendering of menstruation is that not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are men. There are concrete steps that can be taken to degender menstruation. The first step you can take is to be aware of what has been discussed in this contribution and to think critically when consuming information and when talking about menstruation, always bearing in mind that menstruation does not just affect women but the society as a whole. Last but not least, to the readers of this essay, we are inviting them to read Gloria Steinem's article online In this way, you can make your own ideas on the subject and likely provide with more solution to degender menstruation in order to end a distressing and unbiased situation that for a long a time women have experienced.

30 Tampons
ORGANIC, FAIR TRADE COTTON

**all blood
is equal**

period.

only 12% of menstruators in India have access to proper menstrual products

menstruators spend upwards of €18500 a life time of menstrual products

• FOR THE HEAVIER DAYS •
10 HEAVY • 10 SUPER
100% ORGANIC

PRODUCTS

PERIOD.

[illegible]

**BACTERIAL
VAGINOSIS**

you?

FRESH BLOOD

FRESH BLOOD

vaginal

your blood telling you?

END

START OR END
OF PERIOD

D MIXED WITH
CERVICAL FLUID

WHY WE BLEED THE WAY WE DO

A BROAD TIMELINE OF THE MENSTRUATION PERCEPTIONS OF FOUR DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

CHRISTIANITY & JUDAISM

In the Bible, menstrual rags were not only seen as contaminated, they were used as symbols for anything loathsome or to be discarded. Leviticus includes the most references to menstruation. Here, it is described that the menstruating woman must be put away for seven days, and that everything that she touches, and anyone that touches something that she has touched will be unclean for seven days. On the eighth day, the menstruator must bring two turtles or two pigeons to the priest who will then declare her pure again. Menstruation therefore forced women out of the political and economic life of their times.[17]

~400 BC: Aristotle believed women to be inferior because of menstruation, relating it to their "passive" role in reproduction. [18]

~600 BC: Pope Gregory the Great said menstruating women should still be allowed in churches and receive communion because it is "not their fault, because nature causes them" to be impure.[18]

1970s: Women were not allowed to be lecturers or commentators during mass. This is said to be derived from the fact that, in the Bible, even Mary had to leave church and marry Josef when she turned 12 and started menstruating.

However, here we also see some contestation: in 1973 the play *The Prodigal Daughter*, set in a Catholic rectory in England, introduced the concept of the androgynous Jesus, one who could experience the entirety of the human experience.[18]

Today: Menstruation is made invisible, it is privatized. Menstruation is socially conceived as messy and disgusting, and letting others know you are menstruating is seen as a social failure. This is said to have developed from the Judeo-Christian association of menstruation with impurity.

Judaism: Same roots, different outcomes. An orthodox Jewish menstruator has to abstain from sex for seven days after their menstruation has ended, and after they have cleansed themselves in a ritual bath called mikveh. However, many today argue that the menstruator is not considered unclean, and they may also still enter a synagogue, yet many still choose to abide by this rule to not have sex for seven days. Not every Jewish menstruator practices this, some practice it only at times, some do not at all.[18]

BUDDHISM

In Buddhism, menstruation is viewed widely as a "natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less".[19] However, Hindu beliefs have partly carried over into Buddhism over time.

Buddhism places emphasis on the idea that all human bodies, male, female or other, have vast flaws and leak a multitude of filthy substances. These 'filthy' substances involve menstrual blood. As a result, women are commonly banned from participating in rituals and attending temple. Furthermore, they are not allowed to meditate, as they would become 'too' connected to the mind and body causing an imbalance.[19]

Buddhism places vast importance on the notion of *Qi* (the spiritual energy of a being or object) during menstruation it is believed that one loses *Qi* as a result of their impurity and filth. Often when one is suspected to have lost *Qi* they are guided by a priest however, when menstruating women are not allowed within the vicinity of a priest due to the belief that it would make him 'impure'. [19]

Menopause in Buddhism is referred to as *arhatship* when one reaches this stage they enter level one. It is at this stage only that women are believed to have gained control of their bodies, allowing them to transcend into enlightenment.

Many Buddhist monks in Taiwan believe that one must "let it flow to prevent getting sick" however, they also believe at the same time that it comes with a sense of impurity and shamefulness. [19]



HINDUISM

Origins within the Rig Verda:

Menstruation has not always been considered 'dirty' within Hinduism. It was believed to be an auspicious act which dates back to the Vedic period, 1500-1000 BCE, of Indian society. The myth which still surrounds the stigma of menstruation is associated with Indra's, king of gods, assassination of Vritra, an evil being who withheld water and was known as the demon of droughts.[20] It is believed among many, due to its appearance in the Veda, that the guilt which Indra felt after the assassination is menstrual flow as all menstruators have to take on her guilt each month.[20]

At some point a shift took place within beliefs away from the image that menstruation was a gift often presented to the goddesses towards the idea that it was a burden placed on women as a result of Vritra's murder.[20]

Modern day beliefs:

In recent studies of Indian menstruators this ancestral ideology, passed down and warped through generations, is still controlling women in the uterus in present day. Many stated that their bodies emit a smell or ray that has the power to turn food bad. A representation of the association of menstrual blood with impurity and pollution. This association led to women within Hindu households being removed from the kitchen, and temple. Removal from the kitchen in this case is a drastic punishment as Hindu society places value and agency of women on the spirituality of the home. But during menstruation, these women are unable to tend to their home and care for their families spirituality.[20]

Further existing examples of association to impurity in the modern day lay in the sacred being of cows. When menstruating menstruators are not allowed to go near or touch cows, female or male, due to the belief that they will become infertile.[20]

Celebrations of a first period are often common throughout Hinduism, but there are celebrating the menstruators fertility and the idea that they are now able to begin reproducing, 'fulfilling' their duties.[20]

NATIVE AMERICAN

Pre Colonization:

Menstruation was seen as a link between humanity and spirituality. It was linked to the cycles of the moon and seen as an honorable moment in life. Therefore, women kept to themselves and went to a sacred lodge to experience their empowerment and connection to Earth privately and securely. Red was seen as a sacred color and a symbol for life, while white was seen as the color of death, since human bodies go white when their blood (life) has drained. Blood was therefore a link between women and nature. Upon menarche, young women would sit on the Earth and let the blood flow freely down to form this special connection. Lest this power get contaminated, the young women would eat and drink special foods during the first year of menstruation.[21] It was seen as a natural purification, associated with cleansing and spirituality, not with impurity or dirtiness. In some cultures, menarche is marked not only with this voluntary seclusion, but with deliberate physical changes such as a new hair arrangement, one that differs from a pre-menarcheal child. The woman acquires a new status and dresses and behaves differently.[22]

Colonialism:

"The Indigenous woman's menstruating body had to be reinterpreted in the textual record so that the supernatural power that most North American cultures ascribed to menstruating women could be subsumed to European ideologies of patriarchy and Christianity in which the menstruating body is unclean, unhealthy and shrouded in euphemism." Colonists ascribed onto the indigenous woman the European ideal of femininity, thus quiet, uninvolved, secondary to males, pure, chaste and reserved. This was influenced by the Biblical interpretations of menstruations (see previous column) which caused Europeans a certain discomfort with the female body, leading them to regulating femininity this way. The colonizers therefore mis-read the many traditional practices described above. They believed women were forced to seclude themselves to "limit the spread of the pollution of the menstruous female body." This seclusion was interpreted by them as a sign that the menstruator was degraded and impure and therefore needed to be kept away, when, in fact, they chose this segregation to maintain the power and connection to nature and the spiritual world. This patriarchal Christian rhetoric was forced onto native American peoples, justified by the colonizer's conviction that these "savage, natural" peoples needed to be educated on the true nature of the shameful and weak woman as described in the Bible. It was part of the colonial mission.[23]

NINNOC WOUTERS

BLOODY FEMINISTS:

MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM AND THE CHALLENGING OF MENSTRUAL STIGMA THROUGH ART DURING THE 1960S AND 1970S

"Menstruation is a normal, usual, healthy occurrence for many years of a woman's life'.[24] This might seem an obvious statement, something a mother could say to her daughter during her first period. However, when this sentence was printed as the first line of a feminist brochure in 1977, it was not necessarily obvious. Before and during the 1960's and 1970's many women got little to no education about menstruation.[24] Menstruation was, and to an extent still is, socially constructed as something to be hidden and managed. However, during this period, feminist activists started breaking the taboo and challenging the dominant ideas about menstruation.[24] In this contribution this 'menstrual activism' and its history will be discussed. After this some interesting art made to break the taboo and challenge the stigma's surrounding menstruation will be analyzed in order to examine how feminists tried to change the perception of menstruation through art in the US during the 1960's and 1970's. Menstrual activism agitates against the cultural representations and narratives of menstruation in which menstruation is constructed as dirty, taboo, a crisis to be managed, a nuisance, a curse and more. Therefore, menstrual activism often has the goal of breaking the taboo and representing menstruation explicitly. A great example of this activism in practice is described by Chris Bobel in her book on menstrual activism. Bobel describes her experience at a feminist festival, where women held signs with slogans such as 'Tampax evil', 'Join the Red Revolution' and my personal favorite: 'Get Corporations Out of Our Cunts'.



In the 1960's menstrual activism was pioneered by feminists with a spiritualist view of menstruation. To them, menstruation was a source of female power. Menstrual activism is also rooted in the women's health movement. This movement criticized the biases in the medical sector that lead to a misunderstanding of women's bodies, such as perceptions of women's bodies as abnormal, shameful and polluted.[24] Because of this lack of understanding of women's bodies, feminists started writing books about female bodies and organized workshops for women to understand their own bodies better. These workshops included the examination of women's own

bodies, producing an alternative kind of knowledge about women, 'body knowledge', as opposed to the clinical knowledge produced by the biased medical sector. In this context, women were the experts of their own bodies, instead of (mainly) male doctors. One important aspect of these self-examinations to produce body knowledge was the examining of one's own cervix by using mirrors. For many women this was the first time anyone aside from a male doctor had seen their cervix and it was exciting to see something that before this had been perceived as something that was hidden from themselves. Some of these self-examinations also focused on menstruation. There were menstruation workshops that included women keeping track of their menstrual cycles and discussing personal experiences.[25] Part of the women's health movement was also focused on consumer products aimed at women. These women called into question the safety of menstrual products and the objectivity of the corporations producing these products. Some started to work with corporations to produce safer menstrual products and others used art and writing to raise consciousness and make women aware of the harmful misrepresentations of menstruation and the taboo surrounding the subject.[24] These are the women I will be focusing on.

Art historian Ruth Green-Cole explains in her article on menstrual blood in art that, while blood is not gendered biologically, it is gendered culturally. This means blood has connotations of being female, dirty and shameful and therefore it must be concealed. Green-Cole states: 'The continuous concealment of the reproductive body from society (for example, the practice of menstrual etiquette, homebound pregnant women, and the sexualized breast) has created the false assumption that a leaky body is unnatural, and only when it is concealed is the body acting

normally.' This echoes the ideas postulated in the women's health movement that the female body is perceived as abnormal. Through such practices as concealing menstruation (or the 'leaky body'), menstrual blood is gendered.[26]

In the 1960's menstruation started emerging in feminist art. Art dealing with the subject of menstruation was and is often meant to shock people and to work against the harmful perceptions of menstruation.

“ These artworks revalue the gendered blood by painting it in a different light, giving it a more positive, defiant or ambiguous meaning. ”

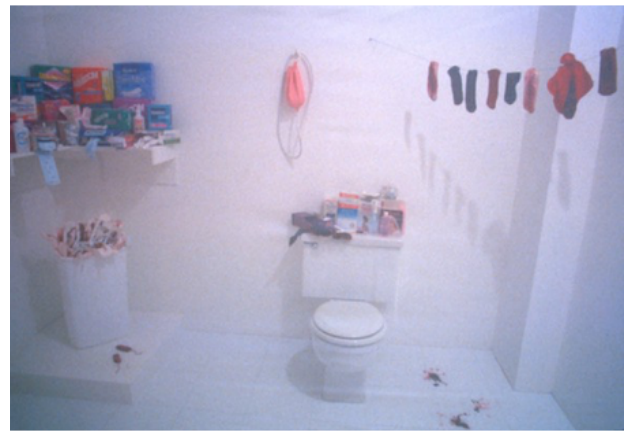
Menstrual blood was often shown in very physical and visceral ways in art forms such as photographs, video art and performance art. Some feminist artists used their own bodies in their art, transforming their bodies into an artistic expression of nonconformity and activism.[26]

Probably the most famous work of menstrual activist art from this period is Judy Chicago's Red Flag, a photolithograph made in 1971. It shows Chicago's spread legs as she extracts a bloody tampon from her vagina. The red of the blood and the positioning makes the tampon the focus of the lithograph. The bloody tampon is an ironic opposition to the advertisements for tampons, which often emphasized the cleanness of tampons, especially those with applicators. The tampon was advertised as a means to

contain the leaky body and avoid blood but is shown here by Chicago soaked in blood and touched by the hand extracting it. The women's health movement's critique of the producers of menstrual products is thus reflected in this work, as well as the efforts to break the taboo by explicitly showing the menstrual blood. The name of the piece, Red Flag, can also be symbolic for a number of things, such as the red flags used in socialist revolutions and the expression of a 'red flag', meaning a signal for concern.[27]



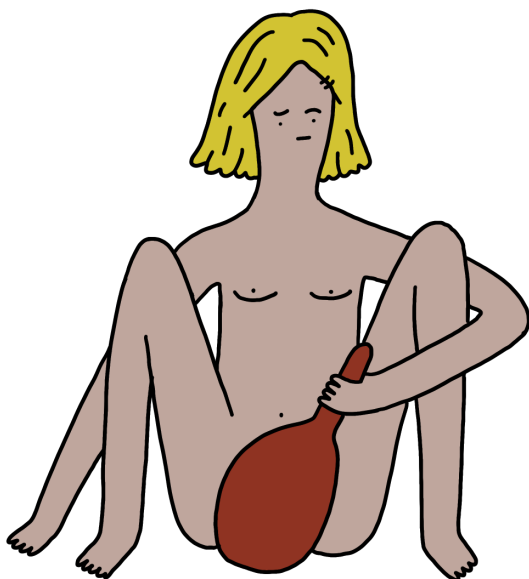
Another interesting piece by Chicago is her 1972 installation 'Menstruation Bathroom', which was part of a larger feminist installation called 'Womanhouse'. Chicago's installation was a white bathroom with menstrual products, both used and unused, strewn about on the floor, the sink, the toilet, the bins and the shelves. Here the irony can be seen again in Chicago showing the messiness of the menstrual products, a reality for all menstruators, in opposition to the sterile cleanliness propagated by the producers of these menstrual products, whose brand names are clearly shown in the installation, perhaps emphasizing Chicago's critique of them. [27]



One of the earliest feminist artists who created art depicting menstruation was Shigeko Kubota. She was a Japanese artist who moved from Japan to New York in 1965. That same year Kubota performed a piece of performance art called 'Vagina Painting' at an art festival in New York. Kubota attached a large paintbrush to her underwear in such a way that it looked like she was painting with her vagina and told her audience that this was the case. She dipped the brush in red paint, symbolizing menstrual blood, and squatted over large rolls of white paper to create red marks. She used her body as her art and used red paint to symbolize the gendered blood of menstruation.[26] Another interesting factor in this piece is the messiness of the work, which can also be seen in Chicago's works discussed above.[28] This messiness is an interesting contrast to the ways in which menstruators are taught to 'manage' and conceal their menstruation.



The last piece of art I would like to discuss is a film called *Period Piece ... of Women's History* (1974). This film was made by Emily Culpepper, who was active in the Women's Health Movement in the Boston area. In her film, Culpepper tried to revalue menstrual blood: 'I wanted passionately to contribute something directly positive, something female focused, something that would be a catalyst for the great rethinking and push for change to which we were committed.' [29] She used images from the Women's Liberation Movement, drawings of women's bodies in nature, menstrual product advertisements, blood swirling in water and a day in the life of a menstruator, going about her business and then changing a tampon. Meanwhile voiceovers from menstruators with different backgrounds and experiences could be heard. For example, they told the stories of their first menstruation. At the end of the film Culpepper is shown performing her first vaginal self-exam while menstruating. She was highly influenced by the women who performed self-examinations in feminist clinics. The film shows Culpepper's bleeding vagina reflected in the mirror with which she is looking at herself. More importantly, it shows her own amazement at seeing her own vulva.



In this piece again her body is the art, and the blood is shown explicitly and is thereby revalued to be a symbol of defiance, and, in seeing Culpepper's expression, wonder. [25]

During the 1960's and 1970's feminist artists started to introduce menstruation as the subject of their art. These artworks can be placed in the context of the menstrual activism that started to emerge during this time. The focus of this menstrual activism was on the breaking of taboos surrounding periods and challenging stigmas and misconceptions of menstruation. The influence of the women's health movement, which more broadly aimed to challenge the biases in the medical sector and corporations like tampon manufacturers, can also be seen in the artworks discussed in this contribution. A great example is the self-examination which was included in Emily Culpepper's film, but more subtly the focus on the artists own bodies can be seen as an example of this influence as well.

Today menstrual activism is still active, for example on online platforms and in some contemporary art. The art discussed in this contribution, and other art like it, was often groundbreaking and paved the way for current day menstrual activists. It is important to keep in mind their influences and the strides they made toward a revaluing of menstruation. [24]

THERESA RAUCH

EVERYTHING YOU CAN DO, I CAN DO BLEEDING I MIGHT JUST NOT WANT TO

AN OPINION PIECE ON THE HYPOCRISY OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENT

I'm on my period.

It does not significantly impact my life – it's just a few drops of transparent liquid with a light blue tint to it. So I get up from my bed, and my bedsheets look exactly the way they did when I went to sleep the night before: white and dry. What else would they be.

I'm on my period.

I choose to wear a pair of white, tight pants. What else would I wear? My belly is not bloated, my flow is light, my confidence is peaking. I have no concerns whatsoever about my clothes. White pants it is.

I'm on my period.

I'm going swimming. Or DJ-ing. I'm walking on the beach in a long white dress. I'm winking at a camera secretively. I'm exceeding in competitive sport. I'm having a blast. I'm not in pain. My uterus is not being stabbed by a million needles. It does not make me curl up. Does not make me dizzy, or nauseous, or faint.

I am every bleeder. I bleed blue. I bleed invisibly. My period is simple. It's clean, painless, joyful. I am represented adequately. My period is empowering. And most importantly, it can be resolved by consumption.



It took me a painfully long time to realise something was off with menstrual product advertisement. Not that it wasn't in front of me. Not that my period ever looked anything like what I saw on TV. There were never any flowers, the blood was always dark red, I never shot a heroic goal in a football match, and the emotional and physical constrain was pervasive. But the way menstrual products have been advertised to me seemed so perfectly normal, that for the longest time I had no intention or incentive to question the conspicuous discrepancy between what I had been sold as "the period," and what I felt, thought, and experienced on a monthly basis.

It is so easy not to talk about the period. It is so naturalised to speak of it in embellishments and cover-ups, not to mention the p-word, not to show blood, not to speak of frustration, pain, or reality. To talk about that time of the month. About Shark Week. About the Crimson Tide. Critically, menstrual product advertisement, with its beautification, feminisation, and hyper-sanitisation of the period, reflects and reinforces the framework society allows us to conceptualise menstruation in. Over the years, menstrual product advertising has learned not to treat our periods as "hygienic crisis" in desperate need of "security systems" anymore. At some stage, it seems, unhampered stigmatising stops selling. Instead, advertising has moved on toward a new paradigm. And it's a treacherous one.

Period product ads have appropriated feminist discourses of empowerment, ownership, and menstrual positivity. Rather than being a threat to femininity and confidence, the new woman's period is a source of empowerment. A reason for pride, and emancipation. An emblem of

womanhood. The new commercial consensus on menstruation is that bleeders must embrace it, that it is glorious, inspiring, and that it most certainly should not keep us from pursuing, achieving, exceeding in whatever we are doing.

“Empowering” menstrual product ads serve the obliteration of how capitalist corporations have contributed to notions of menstruation as embarrassing, shameful, and unsanitary before they hopped on the feminist train.

Such strategies – framing a corporation as age-old fighters for social justice and emancipation – must be understood in the emerging and hugely successful marketing scheme of Purple-washing, in which feminist discourses and activism are co-opted for enhancing company reputation, and thus for increasing profits. Purportedly progressive and liberating messages – corporate menstrual positivity – seek to position companies alongside (white, middle-class, Western, cis-gendered, and able-bodied) feminists in the fight for the destigmatisation of the period. However, the parentheses here reveal central groups of bleeders that capitalist recycling of feminist ideas disregards consistently. Such pseudo-feminist advertising fails to address the multiplicity and complexity



that determine how bleeders experience individual menstrual experiences – such as emotional stress, physical discomfort, and dysphoria – on the one hand, and the intersections of different bases of discrimination on the other.

Corporate narratives of menstrual positivity tend to tell the stories of affluent, cis-gendered, able-bodied, mainly white women who do not allow their period to get in the way of their success. These ads show no confrontations with issues of emotional or physical implications of bleeding, nor do they discuss matters of social justice, such as accessibility and affordability of menstrual products. This omission – not unusual for Purple-washing campaigns – leaves out a vast array of menstruators, none of them represented in what advertising deems a suitable (selling) portrayal of the period.

Telling stories of athletic and professional achievement, or idealising the beauty and naturalness of menstruation potentially reflects some (positive) menstrual realities, but it concomitantly obscures the many irritating, painful, and dysphoric dimensions that accompany the period. Advertisements depicting “happy bleeding,” or “fit bleeding” forego the financial and psychological constraints a socio-economically disadvantaged or impoverished bleeder might go through, as well as the bodily and emotional alienation a non-binary or

transgender bleeder might experience. In other words, if cramps, sores and bloating leaves you tied to your bed; if emotional distress or depression aggravate your mental health and stability; if gender dysphoria renders you alienated with your body and identity; if the cost of menstrual products forces you to anxiously recalculate your expenses; if you have to fight for access to basic period items with every cycle; You might just not want to *celebrate* your period.

Instead, we need space for addressing the painful aspects of menstruation in an honest and healing manner. A discourse that acknowledges frustrations and predicaments without being dismissive or pathologizing. It won't come as a surprise that current commercial representations of menstruation are completely antithetical to this endeavour. “Empowering” marketing in the form of Purple-washing perpetuates a glamorised and idealised portrayal of the period, rather than recognising menstruation as something complex and diverse – something nuanced that can take a lot of shapes and affects every menstruator differently.

Understanding that commercial depictions of menstruation – seeking to make profit off menstruating bodies – have little to do with the manifold menstrual realities bleeders encounter, we can deconstruct, scrutinise, and challenge the former in order to popularise more representative and healthy understandings of what it means to be a menstruator. By producing narratives that address social stigmatisation, period poverty, body dysphoria, PMS, menstrual health, product accessibility... we can get closer to more insightful and healthy representations of menstruation – in all its complexity, specificity, and nuance – and pave our way towards menstrual justice.





period.

period.

period.

period.

period.

period.

MADELEINE WALKER

CRAMPING OUR STYLE:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DESIGN OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCT PACKAGING

When I think of menstrual packaging, I typically think of one thing. Pain. I'm never buying it ahead of time; it's always the first day of my period. I'm tired, bent over in back pain and looking my worse. But when I step back out of this state and approach it from a more nuanced approach, the design is more often than not 'quiet'—allowing products to blend in with their surroundings and not make a scene when purchased. To remain hidden in plain sight.

Always, an American based menstrual product manufacturer owned by *Procter & Gamble* is a direct representation of the distasteful, patronising design. Their products not only use in your face 'feminine' colours but up until 2019, utilised the female 'Venus' symbol ♀ [30] A design choice that is not only poor taste but additionally alienates a large portion of the menstruating community as not all menstruators are female. *Always* is, however, not alone. Hundreds of brands focus their marketing on slogans, imagery and even names that ostracise and alienate community members. Take the slogan "You go, girl" not only non-inclusive but also comes across in a passive-aggressive 'were all in this together' mentality, which, although on the surface, comes across as being sweet and endearing, instead overlooks so many of the stigmatisations of menstruation—completely ignoring the nuances of period poverty, taxation and even down to the horrible experience of menstruation. In 2021, there is no 'were all in this together' mentality. For that to be achieved, period poverty, taxation and taboos need to be

addressed and demolished. Then we can have massive corporations 'cheer' us along and pretend to care about us.

Furthermore, the brand *DivaCup* is a direct representation of attempted 'woke' marketing that fails to reach the mark. A Diva is defined by google as a:

“self-important person who is temperamental and difficult to please (typically used of a woman).”

The use of this in the brand name perpetuates stigmas that are seen throughout all cultures, such as that of a period causing a menstruator to become 'crazy' and 'out of control'. Additionally, it holds the connotation of the product being a 'ladies-product' again like so much design and marketing, alienating a proportion of the market.

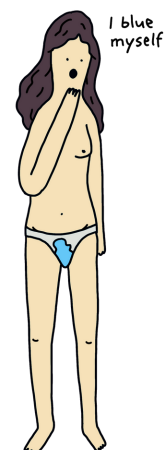
But steps are being taken to change this. Analysis of the early 2005 product design of the *Moon Cup* represents this. The first medical-grade silicone menstrual cup to grace the shelves of the British market entered the shelves with a muted 'clean' design. This allowed the product to blend in with existing menstrual products and not cause a disturbance to the market. 'Fitting-in' in this manner caused the Moon Cup to go vastly unnoticed, and it

remained overlooked as the product collected dust 'quietly' next to more 'traditional' products. However, a rebrand in the early 2010s of the brands' design away from 'quiet' and towards a more stylish, lifestyle-driven design turned the public opinion around. The bold colours, modern curves and matte texture drew attention from customers, with google searches for 'menstrual cups' quadrupling between the decade of 2010 and 2019.[31] This demonstrates that with an adjustment from quiet design to loud, stylistic focused products, consumers and products alike are no longer hiding and remaining shameful of the period. With the help of design, confidence has grown within the community.



Design should be used to draw the attention of a consumer and educate, impact, and help better the world. Design, after all, is a cyclical representation of the public's perception. Whilst there are brands that are doing a fantastic job of this, *Thinx*, *TOTM*, there are still significant

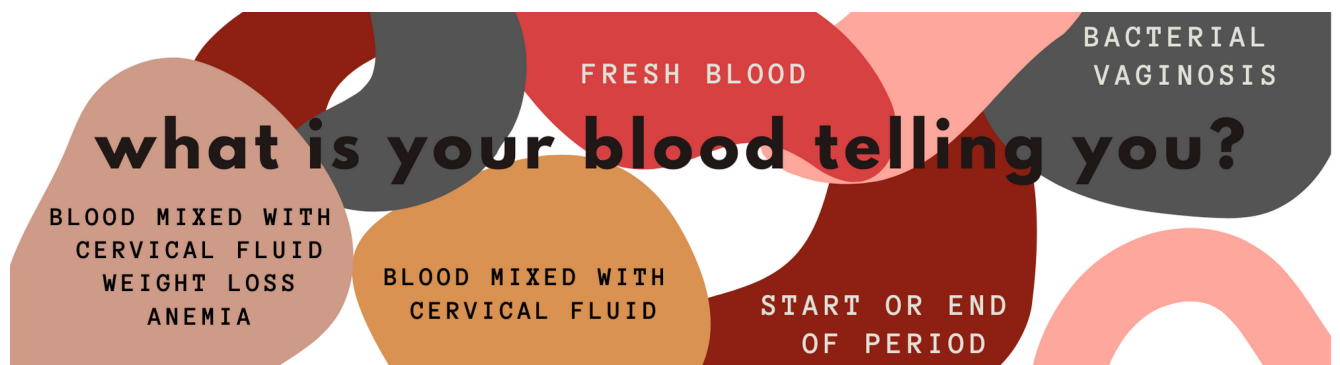
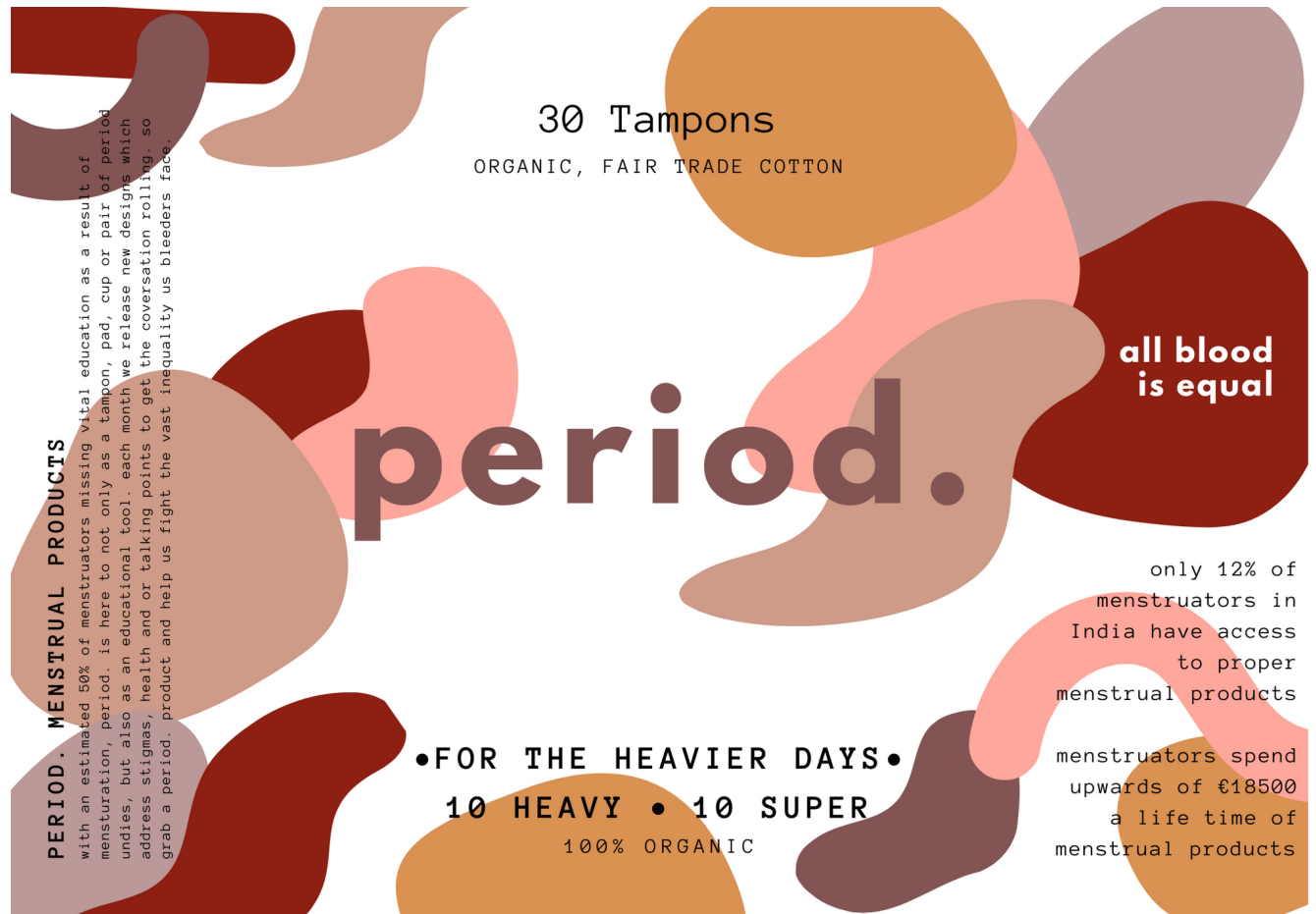
strides to be taken. We have seen a movement towards more modern design that speaks out against previous design faults through bold colours, gender-neutrality, and stylish, sleek packaging. There is yet a market for brands that tick each of the three main design characteristics that need to be seen – information-led, eye-catching and contextual design. A brand that has achieved this is *NH1*, a design consultancy that created the *Don't Hide It. Period.* campaign for the Indian market. The design choice fights against “over-dressing [of products] in florals, butterflies, cursive typography and stereotypical graphics.” Focusing on Red as the primary colours and slogans such as “basic biology”. The brand hopes that prolonged exposure and confident design will hopefully help debunk much of the manifold stigmas surrounding menstruation in India, starting with removing the need to be discreet.



A REINVENTION OF MENSTRUAL PRODUCT PACKAGING DESIGN

Text Reads:

With an estimated 50% of menstruators missing vital education as a result of menstruation, period. is here to not only as a tampon, pad, cup or pair of period undies, but also as an educational tool. each month we release new designs which address stigmas, health and or talking points to get the conversation rolling. so grab a period. product and help us fight the vast inequality us bleeders face.



BLOODY MONEY

ABOUT THE NUANCED AND STRUCTURAL NATURE OF PERIOD POVERTY

PERIOD POVERTY

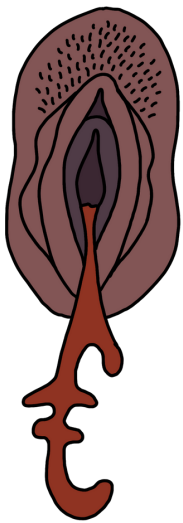
Period poverty describes the state in which menstruators find themselves without the financial resources to access adequate period products. Affecting a wide range of menstruators in a variety of different socio-economic and geographical circumstances, period poverty represents a more widespread issue than is commonly acknowledged.[32]

Common tax classifications of menstrual products categorise them as “non-essential goods,” thus resulting in their high prices and rendering them less affordable to many bleeders. This categorisation of pads, tampons, etc. as non-necessities results in a missing impetus for institutions like schools, the workplace, but also prisons and detainment centres to facilitate access to them.[33] This lack of access to menstrual products can be considered a violation of the human right to dignity, and the right to be free from gendered discrimination.

Due to its systematic and institutional nature, period poverty affects marginalised groups in a pervasive and intricate way, perpetuated by an ecosystem of fear and vulnerability that comes with the stigmatisation of the period.[34] To counter this specific form of discrimination, there is thus a need for systematic solutions that combat menstrual stigma, structural inequality and poverty in a broader scheme.

POVERTY

When it comes to affordability, taxes on menstrual products not only target menstruators but specifically menstruators living in poverty. This is largely due to the regressive nature of what is referred to as the 'Tampon Tax'. The 'Tampon Tax', whether it be the VAT or sales taxes depending on where you are, is perhaps the most detrimental aspect to affordability and accessibility that is quantifiable. How does regressivity work? Sales taxes are the same rate for all consumers, they do not differ based on one's ability to pay.[35] Consequentially, this means that people who earn less have to pay a greater percentage of their



budget compared to people who earn more. For the menstruator living in poverty this means a more frugal balancing of the books, severely limiting their choice in product.

[36] Though the solution is not entirely clear, progress could begin simply by making menstrual products exempt from taxation by repealing the tax, a process which has been successful in several state in the U.S as well as some European countries.[36] The 'Tampon Tax' is discriminatory, its regressivity even more so. Not only targeting menstruators, but specifically menstruators who are already disadvantaged by poverty.

Millions of menstruators globally live in poverty, the added financial burden of menstruation forces menstruators to make difficult decisions when it comes to what should be prioritized.[36]

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a complex, multi-faceted issue, interwoven with health, trauma, and abuse. Menstruators experiencing homelessness furthermore have to negotiate their periods within this context of limited material and financial resources. The menstruator in this context embodies a doubly stigmatised position: cast as dirty, deviant and transgressive, homeless bleeders are marginalised by a culture that rejects manifestations of poverty on the one hand, and menstruation on the other. The constant exposure of a homeless person to the public gaze stands in conflict with the need and want for privacy, comfort, and rest that mark the menstrual experience for many bleeders. Having to be constantly mobile due to one's insecure housing and sustenance situation undermines a menstruator's ability to manage their menstruation emotionally, and physically. Thus, the corporeal vulnerability of bleeding is exacerbated by the reality of homelessness: the lack of stable accommodation and sanitary facilities, limited access to menstrual products, emotional isolation, fear and physical uncertainty in urban public spaces.[32]

Homelessness organisations and shelters are crucial in providing safety, warmth, comfort, as well as period products to homeless menstruators, mainly relying on donations. While donations are welcome by most homelessness services and vital to fighting this level of period poverty, they remain reliant on the benevolence of donors, and fail to address the deeper, structural problems linked to the accessibility and affordability of menstrual products to vulnerable bleeders.

INCARCERATION

Like many institutions detainment and penal systems are designed for the male body, in turn marginalising female and menstruating bodies. Menstruators incarcerated in prisons, police custody, mental health facilities, or immigration detention centres are likely to experience heightened gendered discrimination, manifested in part in the accessibility of menstrual products.[37] Access to period products can be denied, or rendered extremely difficult, or humiliating as means of control or display of power. Bleeders have to go out of their way to obtain tampons and pads – often without having a choice in products, and/or having to address male officers.[38] Moreover, incarceration exacerbates existing financial burdens of obtaining menstrual products, causes potential medical risks, and may have detrimental effects on rehabilitation after a bleeder's release from detainment.[39]

It is crucial to understand the intersectional as well as the structural nature of this discrimination. On the one hand, menstruators outside of the normative construct of cis-gendered, white, able, and middle-class individuals are systematically positioned at the intersection of different axes of discrimination due to their gender identity, sexuality, physical and mental abilities, race, religion, etc. Bleeders of marginalised population groups not only face multi-faceted discrimination but are also more likely to be incarcerated due to their greater exposure to poverty and criminalisation and systemic discrimination within the criminal justice system.[38] The systemic societal conditions – structural poverty, inadequate housing, restrictive immigration laws, poor healthcare, racialisation and criminalisation – that result in certain population groups being more likely to be incarcerated or detained are central to the discrimination related to menstruation experienced by incarcerated bleeders.

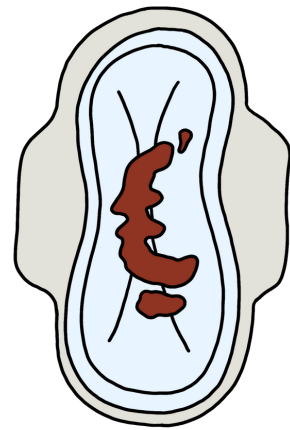
WORK & EDUCATION

When it comes to accessibility and affordability of menstrual products, the realm of work and education lends to both. Affordability and accessibility are in many ways directly linked. In the case of the workplace and schools, accessibility refers to the availability of menstrual products in bathrooms which is detrimentally affected by the affordability of menstrual products.[40] Their consideration as a 'non-necessity' in the tax laws of many countries leads to many occupational and educational institutions not providing menstrual products for the menstruators among them. The result of this is the 'Bring your own tampon' policy by which many public bathrooms force menstruators to bring their own menstrual products all the while freely providing toilet paper, soap, and in some cases condoms.[36] The availability of these products lies in their consideration as a 'necessity' and so they are not taxed. Menstrual products, however, are taxed, making educational and occupational institutions less likely to pay the additional tax cost. This is a particular form of discrimination which some scholars have tantamounted to a violation of universal basic human rights.[40]

Specifically, the human rights to health, work, education, sanitation, and equality. Inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products impacts the ability to go to school, work, and earn money either due to stress impacting work performance or needing to leave school/work in order to get a menstrual product.[40] The solution lies in tax reform, by repealing sales tax these institutions will have no reason to not pay for free access to menstrual products in their bathrooms. Beyond tax reform, menstrual taboos need to be challenged in order to end the awkward silence among tax legislators and the administrators of these institutions.

CONFLICT & WAR

Menstruators in situations of conflict, natural disasters, war, or displacement face dire conditions, as their access to menstrual products is reduced significantly (and often suddenly) with the destruction of infrastructure, while their placement within camps, informal settlements, or during transit does not ensure them a continuous or adequate supply of period products. Displaced bleeders likely have to alter their menstrual practices in the face of conflict due to availability and practicality, navigating situations without safe and private spaces for managing their periods. The distribution of menstrual products from aid organisation is often irregular, and the management of the products provided is often difficult to reconcile with bad sanitation, a shortage of disposal options, or cultural practices and preferences. The emergency staff employed in camps hosting displaced people are often ill-equipped and ill-informed about cultural and local complexities surrounding menstruation, rendering them unable to help with menstrual health management. The menstruators' physical safety is equally compromised, as menstruators are more exposed to violence and exploitation in the search for secluded spaces to manage their menstruation, which bleeders often feel compelled to do at night to obtain some privacy.[41] Constraints surrounding menstrual realities likely persist in post-conflict situations, yet these issues remain almost entirely excluded from popular, and until recently, academic discourse, contributing to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of bleeders in situations that are dreadful enough even without pervading concerns about one's menstruation.[34]



COVID - 19

Nothing puts 'necessity' into perspective like a global pandemic. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unfairness and regressivity of taxes on menstrual products has become abundantly clear, exacerbating an already frustrating issue for menstruators. The negative toll the pandemic has had on economies globally exerts further pressure on menstruators who incur the additional cost of the sales tax on top of general economic downturn.[42] COVID-19 has also disproportionately impacted menstruators in the workplace. Menstruators make up the vast majority of frontline workers in healthcare, childcare, and other essential services.[42] The service industry has been hit particularly hard especially in hospitality and restaurants where the employment of menstruators is always high. Nationally, women made 49% of the overall workforce but accounted for 55% of job losses in April 2020.[42] These women, making up the vast majority of menstruators, need relief from as many sources as possible, this includes the tampon tax. Shortages of menstrual products were frequent during the pandemic with menstruators who could no longer access menstrual products in shops relying on donations and charity to manage their menstruation.[42] The pandemic has made clear to tax legislators the necessity of menstrual products leading many, especially in the U.S to denounce the tax. What this reveals is that it was institutional ignorance that was hindering tax reform rather than anything else.

THERESA RAUCH

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE:

A QUICK GUIDE ON HOW TO USE LANGUAGE TO DESTIGMATISE THE PERIOD

"Menstruation/The Period"

Euphemisms and metaphors – “shark week” or “that time of the month” – make it easy to avoid the words “period,” or “menstruation.” But that’s exactly what it is. Using the adequate terms will help normalise and destigmatise everything surrounding the period in everyday conversation, removing the protective layer of humour many feel compelled to use when addressing the period.

"Menstruators/Bleeders"

Not every menstruator is a woman. And not every woman menstruates. By exchanging the term “woman” with “menstruator” or “bleeder” we can dissociate menstruation from femininity, and, in turn, build narratives that rightfully include trans and gender queer people, constructing a more inclusive AND ACCURATE understanding of the period.

"Menstrual Products"

Though “feminine hygiene” is a pretty standardised way of describing menstrual products, it contributes to the forceful feminisation of the period, as well as denoting it as “dirty” and in need of hygienic solutions. Using “menstrual products” instead is totally on the spot and does not carry either of these stigmatising implications. It decouples menstruation from “dirtiness,” and the need for “sanitation” while equally countering the forceful linkage between womanhood and the period.

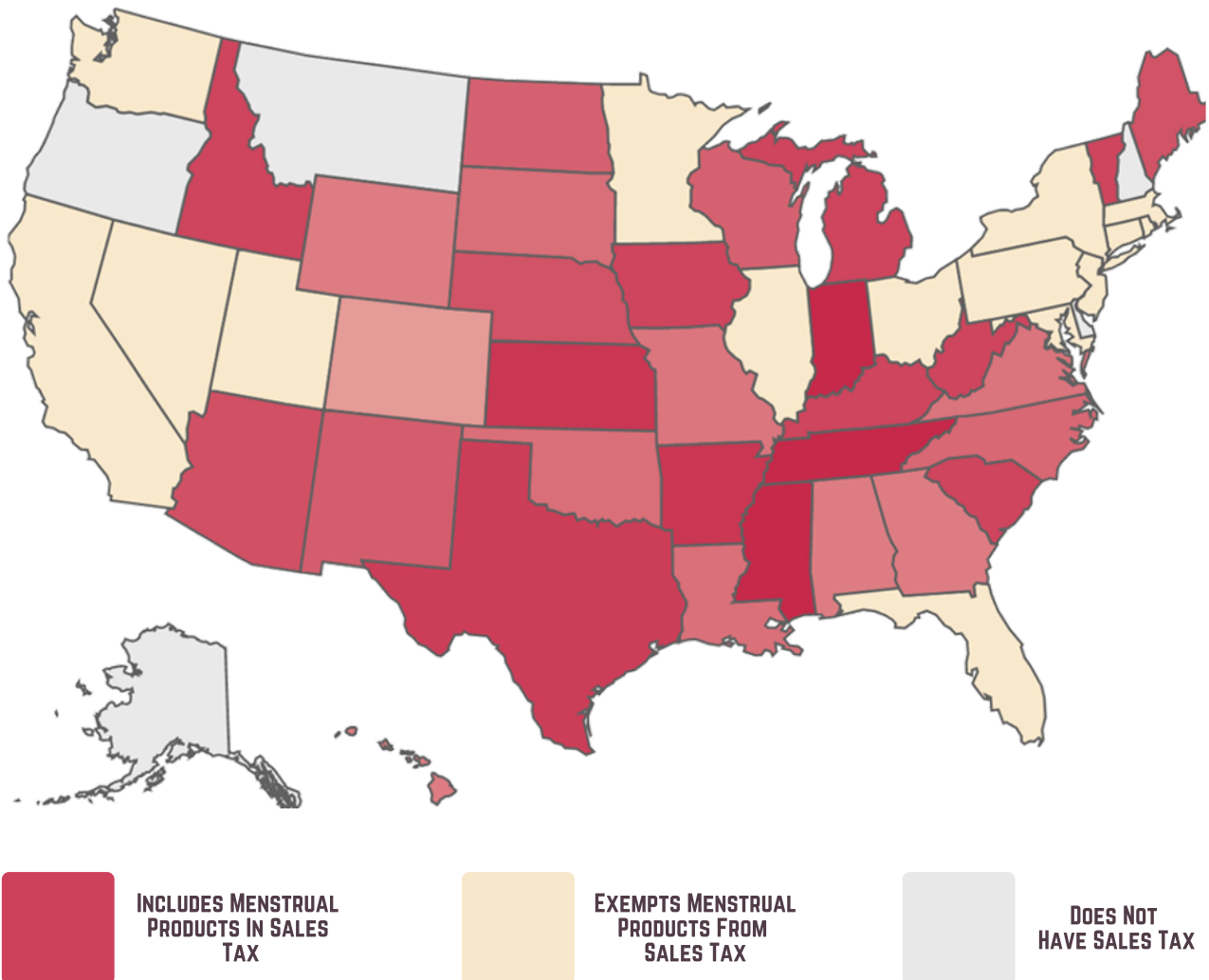


MATTHEW RACKE

BREAKING THE BLOOD BANK

A MAP OF THE U.S VISUALIZING THE STATUS OF THE TAMPON TAX AS IT EXISTS TODAY
AND HOW IT'S BEING REPEALED

Over the past six years, various states in the United States of America have eliminated the Tampon Tax from their sales tax base, meaning that menstrual products such as tampons, pads, pantyliners, menstrual cups etc. are exempt from the sales tax and thus are considered as necessities. There remain, however, thirty states which still include menstrual products in their sales tax, thereby illustrating that in these states, menstrual products are judged non-necessities and luxury items similar to cosmetic goods. This research piece visualizes in an infographic the current state of affairs regarding the Tampon Tax in the fifty U.S states. For the states which do no tax menstrual products, a brief explanation of how this came to be is included. The infographic builds on information obtained in the months leading up to the final product and makes use of official government documents from the various states. The objective of this piece is to identify trends in U.S tax law and how these laws are being amended in order to achieve gender equity in the tax base and so more broadly to remediate stigmatized perceptions of menstruation by government institutions.



ALASKA (AK)

Alaska does not impose sales taxes of any kind and therefore menstrual products are not taxed by extension.[43]

CALIFORNIA (CA)

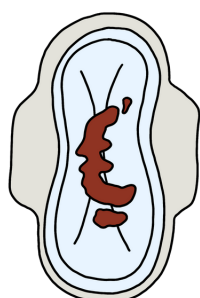
The California Department of Tax and Fee Administration passed a bill which signed into law that as of January 2020 menstrual products (specifically tampons, sanitary napkins, menstrual sponges, and menstrual cups) were to be exempt from the California state sales tax of 7.25% until December of 2021. The law will be reviewed and evaluated in January of 2022 when the state budget needs to be decided. [43,44]

CONNECTICUT (CO)

The Connecticut state senate passed a bill in June of 2017 which made “feminine hygiene products” exempt for the sales tax of 6.35%. This came into effect as of the first of July 2018. The senate introduced a specific legislative exemption for menstrual products to avoid issues associated with categorization as is the norm with most repeal acts, in which menstrual products are not put in the same category as other medical devices.[43,45,46]

DELAWARE (DE)

Like Alaska, Delaware does not impose sales taxes of any kind and therefore menstrual products are not taxed by extension.[43]



FLORIDA (FL)

As part of a tax cut package signed by the governor of Florida in May of 2017, menstrual products became exempt from the state sales tax of 6%. The exemption of menstrual products came into effect in January of 2018 making Florida the fourteenth state to exempt them from the sales tax (this includes the five states who have no sales taxes at all).[43,47]

ILLINOIS [IL]

In 2016, the Illinois General Assembly passed a law that made all menstrual products exempt from its sales tax of 6.25% making Illinois the third state to do so. Illinois is a good example of the invalidity of the “maintaining the tax base argument” as only 0.02% of the revenue generated by the state sales tax is from menstrual products.[43,48,49]

MARYLAND [MD]

As of 2017, Maryland has made menstrual products exempt from its sales tax of 6.00% by changing its tax code and categorizing them as “hygienic aids”. Maryland already had tax exempt categories of “medicine” and “disposable medical supplies” but instead of bringing menstrual products into these categories the Maryland legislators introduced them as a tax exempt category separate from medical ones.[43,45,50]

MASSACHUSETTS (MA)

State government exempts menstrual products from its state sales tax of 6.25%. Menstrual products are included in their “sales of medicine” category. Interestingly, from the list of various items mentioned in the statute, menstrual products are omitted even though they are made exempt by the statute. This perhaps suggests that the legislature was uncomfortable with explicitly referring to menstruation and its associated products. [45,51]

MONTANA (MT)

As is becoming the trend with states beginning with 'M', Montana does not tax menstrual products, in fact it does not impose a sales tax at all and thus menstrual products also remain tax free.[43]

MINNESOTA (MN)

The Minnesotan state government has included "feminine hygiene products" as exempt from its sales tax of 6.875% as according to its 2017 statute. It is also interesting to mention that the Minnesotan statute distinguishes between "medical devices" and "feminine hygiene products" as to separate categories of consumer good.[45,52]

NEVADA (NV)

Nevada is a more unique case in terms of repealing its sales tax on menstrual products. The tax legislation that originally introduced the taxation of menstrual products was done so via a referendum. Consequentially, this tax law can only be repealed by another referendum under the Constitution of Nevada. This came to fruition in November 2018, when a referendum result favoured repealing the tax on menstrual hygiene products. The result of this referendum spared menstrual products from being included in the base of the Nevadan sales tax of 6.85%. [43,45,53]

NEW HAMPSHIRE (NH)

New Hampshire has no sales tax and so menstrual products are also tax free.[43]

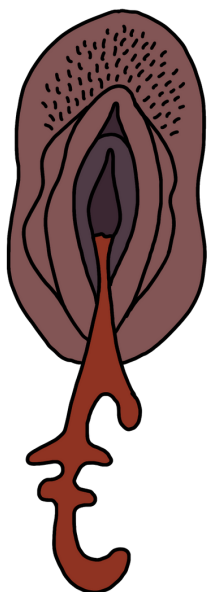


NEW JERSEY (NJ)

New Jersey revised its statute on taxation in 2013 to include "tampons or like products" in its list of items that are exempt from its sales tax of 6.625%. Unlike some other state statutes, the New Jersey statute lists menstrual products under "Exemption for certain medical supplies" thereby acknowledging the medical necessity of menstrual products.[43,54]

NEW YORK (NY)

The case of New York is exemplary of the impact of activism and social pressure on state governments to repeal the Tampon Tax. In 2016, A class action lawsuit against the state of New York by five plaintiffs sought its repeal on the basis that the tax violated the fourteenth amendment Equal Protection Clause. Three months after the lawsuit was filed, the tax was repealed making menstrual products exempt from the New York sales tax of 4.00%. Menstrual products were placed in a exempt category of their own instead of being added to the "medical products" category.[43,45,55]



OHIO (OH)

The Ohio legislature voted unanimously to repeal the taxation of menstrual products in October of 2019 freeing them from the state sales tax of 5.75%. The repeal of the Tampon Tax in Ohio followed three years after a failed class action lawsuit by four plaintiffs against the Ohio Department of Taxation and the Tax commissioner.[43,45,56]

OREGON (OR)

Oregon is another sales tax free state which also means that menstrual products are not taxed.[43]

PENNSYLVANIA (PA)

Pennsylvania included menstrual products such as “sanitary napkins, tampons or similar items used for feminine hygiene” as non-taxable products (so exempt from the state sales tax of 6.00%) in its 2017 Retail Guide. Menstrual products fall under the category of “Paper Goods” instead of “Medicine, Drugs, and Medical Supplies”. [43,57]

RHODE ISLAND (RI)

In Rhode Island, state senators had previously attempted to repeal the Tampon Tax in 2016 but to no avail. In October 2019, the exemption of menstrual products was included in the 2020 state Fiscal Year Budget. This made menstrual products exempt from the state sales tax of 7.00%. The government website acknowledges that menstrual products “are certainly anything but a luxury”, and that it was “sex-based tax” and “discriminatory”. [43,58]

UTAH (UT)

Utah exempted menstrual products from the state sales tax of 4.85% in December of 2019. Utah is one of the more surprising states to have repealed the tax considering its terrible track record in terms of policies that support women and thus menstruators. [43,59]

WASHINGTON (WA)

Since July 2020, the state of Washington eliminated its tax on menstrual products thus making them exempt from the state’s sales tax of 6.50%. Senate Bill 5147 which officially repealed the tax acknowledges that the tax “adds an additional tax burden on females” but also mentions that the tax is regressive and specifically targets low-income menstruators. The Bill also refers to menstrual products as a “necessity” for maintaining “proper health and hygiene”. [43,60]

TALK, WRITE AND FIGHT THE STIGMA!

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND WRITING IN MENSTRUAL STIGMATISATION

Elsewhere in this booklet you have or will read about the experiences of menstruators who are severely affected by stigmatization, the finances surrounding MHM (menstrual health management) and the role of media and advertisements. Maybe you have realized that you were not aware of the gravity of the situation in these cases, maybe it made you grateful that you do not have to face such realities, that you are privileged enough not to worry about the financial aspects of MHM, that menstruation is not tabooed, silenced, or otherwise stigmatized in your country/community of origin/residence. Yet, the stigma persists everywhere (though to different degrees) because it is manifested in the very words we speak.

This piece focuses on what I consider to be a crucial factor in the perpetuation of and simultaneously the fight against period stigmatization, namely language and writing. Such an analysis is of global relevance, as even countries that first and foremost require physical aid (such as period products, better WASH facilities, and education on the biological process of menstruation) can also profit from it. For instance, informational books and YA novels may be used as educational material in schools or in private in an attempt to normalize menstruation and educate menstruators as well as non-menstruators.

I will first discuss the role of language in

perpetuating negative conceptions of menstruation, followed by a review of how the language of human rights has been used to fight the stigma. Secondly, I will discuss how writing and, specifically, sharing stories about menstruation experiences contests the privatization and feelings of shame associated with menstruation.

Language

As all languages have different words and phrases to refer to menstruation, I will focus on the English language to remain concise and to ensure a comprehensive analysis to the international, anglophone readership of this booklet. In her thesis, Kathryn Lese regards the, in her words, “patriarchal menstruation discourse” built on the case study of Rupī Kaur’s instagram post in 2015 featuring a menstruating woman.[61] Kaur’s image was censored by Instagram, causing an international discussion on the censorship of menstruation, which leads Lese to an analysis of how menstruation is generally talked of in public. Lese frames her research on the contemporary discourse on menstruation by drawing back on theories of poststructural feminism. She paraphrases Buzzanell and Liu’s explanation of poststructural feminism as “attempts to destabilize institutionalized knowledge through inquiring how language and meaning are enforced as the norm through sources of power”[61] Concerning menstruation then, various sets of vocabulary as well as the

silencing, privatization and stigmatization of menstruation make up the discourse surrounding this subject.

“

This discourse perpetuates the negative perceptions and connotations of menstruation, and, in turn, disparages menstruators themselves. Feelings of shame supported by this discourse are most prevalent and are said to have the most acute psychological effect on menstruators.

”

In fact, shame is in a symbiotic relationship with the discourse on menstruation: shame causes some menstruators to avoid talking about or hide their periods, a privatization which has been normalized to the extent that menstruation is seen as something that should not be discussed publicly with just anyone. This privatization caused by shame then leads menstruators to believe they should hide their menstruation, re-starting this vicious cycle. (This rationale does not apply to all menstruators, but mainly to those from the West, since menstruators from other countries may be forced to privatize their period on account of cultural myths and taboos other than shame.) Another example of the stigmatization around menstruation is the vocabulary used, often consisting of euphemisms and metaphors (Lady business, that-time-of-the-month, Aunt Flo ...), which, according to Lese, “hide the shame of periods” by avoiding words such as “blood” or “menstruation”.[61] . In fact, such indirectly harmful language can be found in all layers of menstrual management, as for instance names of menstrual products. Lese refers to Charlesworth (2001) when arguing that “the language of ‘sanitary pads’ even reinforces product use to remove ‘the unsanitary aspects’ of menstruation, as if menstruation is a

problem that needs to be extracted”.[61] Poststructural feminist theory asserts that “language constructs reality”.[61] Therefore, the portrayal of menstruation in all media, but especially those reaching the wide public such as advertisements, crucially influences the way we talk about and perceive menstruation, namely, currently as so problematic that we require euphemisms to refer to it. Lese even goes as far as claiming that the words “staining” and “leaking” are negatively connotated and cause menstruators to feel dirty. Furthermore, such vocabulary “makes menstruation appear as if it is uncontrollable, suggesting women’s bodies cannot be managed into normative expectations of femininity”.[61] Though I think this argument is debatable as I consider a “stain” not necessarily judgemental or negative but rather descriptive and factual, I do agree with the fact that euphemisms add to the stigma surrounding menstruation: it is somehow unclean and unhygienic, and it must remain hidden, both in its physical and in its conceptual form. In sum, Lese importantly summarizes how the language we currently use in reference to menstruation “reinforces normative expectations of period shame”[61]

While it is crucial to discuss language used in reference to menstruation, it is further interesting to examine what language is used when discussing menstruators and the realities they face on account of their menstruation. For instance, Karen Zivi uses the language of Human Rights in her piece “Hiding in Public or Going With the Flow”.[62] She specifically addresses the “WASH human rights,” thus how, for example, lack of water and appropriate bathroom facilities rob menstruators of human dignity.[62] . Additionally, she argues that negative associations with menstruation lead to gender inequality, for instance because young girls do not attend school during their menses for fear of leaking and being bullied.[62]

Analyzing the issue with the language of human rights highlights the fact that menstruators are treated as the inferior Other: “less rational, less capable, less entitled to appearing in public”. [62] Moreover, the article provides scholars and activists with the ground and inspiration for research and academic work on the subject.

The importance of language is thus evident in both the analysis of current vocabulary that perpetuates the stigma, as well as in the contestation of that stigma with the language of human rights. It follows, then, that writing should have an equally critical impact.



Writing

Literature plays an important role in the circulation of discourse and can thus be used to contest old norms by introducing or circulating new expressions (e.g. to avoid using words such as “stain”). Additionally, stories that readers relate to or learn from can help them cope with their own experiences. Story-telling is thus not only a means to express oneself and let go of an event or thought that tortured one on the inside, it can also empower and help others to let go of such feelings. Period stories (of menarche, or a particularly memorable menstruation experience) are written and collected to raise awareness about the realities that menstruators face, bringing to light the effects of the stigma. This is the goal of multiple blogs, organizations, video channels, social media communities and influencers in recent decades. For instance, Vonny LeClerc started a Twitter thread collecting multiple stories to highlight the fact that almost every menstruator is negatively affected by the stigma.[63] It is truly shocking to read just

snippets of what these menstruators experience. A few examples: lack of education of male classmates, lack of education of menstruators themselves leaving them terrified when they got their first period, lack of understanding and even bullying by teachers who thought they were just pretending to have severe menstrual pain; lack of products that left them bleeding through their pads, clothes and onto chairs; using rags, old cloths, and newspapers to catch blood; a mother yelling at her daughter for leaving a pad in the bathroom for her brother to see.[63] There are also websites created solely for collecting period stories: *First Period Stories*[64] is simply an archive of such stories, *Female Forward Together*[65] collects period stories and is invested in education for women’s health and created *Voices of Periods*, a youtube channel consisting of interviews with menstruators from all over the world. All these organizations have the same intention: to contest the stigma surrounding menstruation. Many highlight the necessity for such projects, for instance *Female Forward Together* determined that “about 1 in 5 female respondents do not feel comfortable talking about menstruation with healthcare providers, and about 1 in 10 male respondents do not feel comfortable talking about menstruation with anyone.”[65] Collecting period stories not only emphasizes the fact that almost all menstruators are affected by the stigma, it is also a step toward fighting it by normalizing open conversations about menstruation. Unfortunately, such groups and collections are only available to people with certain privileges such as an internet connection, highlighting the importance of openly talking about menstruation in all media and contexts.

As many of you readers have probably already realized, menstruation is also missing from literature and films that describe the daily life of a menstruator for several months or years. Some

may not consider this worthy of debate or change since other bodily secretions are not talked of in such stories either: a visit to the bathroom does not contribute to the plot or character development (though it is curious to note that masturbation is often featured as part of a plotline). Yet menstruation differs from urine and excrement since it significantly impairs the daily behaviour of most menstruators during menstruation. Additionally, many menstruators are treated differently on a daily basis on account of their menstruation. For instance, menstruators in different communities in Nigeria are banned from communal gatherings, are not allowed to cook, and at times not allowed to touch a man, lest they infect him with uncleanness. Arguably, the mention of menstruation in any form can help contest this silencing and stigmatization. Specifically, the inclusion of menstrual practices in YA novels can educate young people (menstruators and non-menstruators alike) on the normalcy of menstruation, that it is not something dirty and not a ground for discrimination. Even if menstruation is not portrayed as something positive or if the menstruators in such novels are not particularly enthusiastic about their periods, the mere mention of menstruation can help contest the stigma.

I will briefly outline two scenes from two novels that mention menstruation, arguing that they exemplify two potential ways in which menstruation can be included in (YA) novels. Additionally, these novels describe (fictitious yet plausible) examples of how menstruation is managed and thought of in Zimbabwe and Nigeria respectively.

The first case study is *Nervous Conditions* by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga, which features the growing up of protagonist Tambudzai (Tambu for short) in Zimbabwe in the 1960s.[66] Tambu is born into a family that

struggles to earn enough money to send all their children to school. The family relies on a wealthy, highly educated uncle who chooses to take Tambu's older brother with him to be properly educated in a private school. However, when her brother dies of mumps, it is Tambu's responsibility to become educated to be able to support her family. Arriving at her uncle's house, Tambu is perplexed by how other-worldly wealthy her uncle really is. She is particularly astounded by the impeccable cleanliness of the place, which is surreal to her as she has come to know the world as a fundamentally dirty place. In her enumeration of why "living was dirty," she explicitly mentions menstruation:

"It was common knowledge among the younger girls at school that the older girls menstruated into sun-dry old rags which they washed and reused and washed again. I knew, too, that the fact of menstruation was a shamefully unclean secret that should not be allowed to contaminate immaculate male ears by indiscreet reference to this type of dirt in their presence."



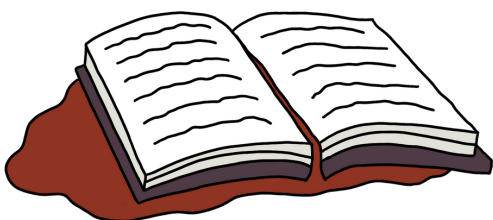
Not only does this scene exemplify the type of material used by girls to catch their menstrual blood, it also reveals what seems to be a common interpretation of menstruation: it is not only dirty, but a specific "type of dirt" which should never be so much as heard of by men. It is strictly privatized and silenced. A few months into her stay at her uncle's mansion, Tambu begins to menstruate herself. She is prepared for the event, having been educated on it by the women of her larger family and is told by her mother "to keep the napkins and myself particularly clean at that time of the month." However, she also relates negative emotions about "the mess in the toilet" in her uncle's white and clean bathroom, becoming "morose and moody" about "the business" of menstruation. She anxiously attempts to be

discreet about her menses, and therefore “died of embarrassment” when her cousin offers her tampons. At this point, the reader finds out that Tambu has not had any education about reproduction at her school (“Did it really look like that inside?”) and considers the tampon “an offensively shaped object,” however she does end up using them out of need for comfort and practicality. This novel reveals the menstruation experience of a young girl in Zimbabwe, implying that this is a common way to manage menstruation for a menstruator in her position. The novel thereby normalizes experiences of this sort, and acknowledges the importance of menarche in relating the life of a young menstruator. Using this book in an educational setting could teach young menstruators (and non-menstruators for that matter) that such feelings about menstruation are normal but that one does not have to be ashamed or embarrassed by menstruation. The novel also brings the importance of education on the biological aspects to the fore.

The second case study is a scene from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. [67] The novel revolves around the life of young Kambili growing up under the strict guidance of her abusive father, the most respected preacher in the featured area of Nigeria. It is a Sunday and the family is about to attend Sunday mass, before which it is considered sinful to consume any type of food or drink (known as the Eucharistic fast). Kambili awakens with a red stain on her sheets and painful period cramps. Her mother advises her to take Panadol, but this painkiller should not be taken on an empty stomach, so Kambili’s brother quickly pours some water and adds powdered milk and cereal to a bowl, which must be consumed hurriedly

and secretly, lest their father walks in. Kambili and Jaja’s father is a strict Catholic and has raised his children according to his beliefs, punishing them and his wife physically when they commit sins. He does not take pleasure in abusing his family, in fact he cries and laments his own behaviour, but he is convinced that such punishment is necessary, crucial even. When he catches Kambili eating the last bites of cereal, he is shocked and will not listen to any sort of explanation that Kambili’s mother starts to voice. Instead, he unbuckles his belt, which hits all three of his family painfully on the back and arms. After this, he hugs his children close and asks them why they “like sin” and if “the belt hurt you? Did it break your sin?” In this novel, menstruation is not silenced or privatized but simply portrayed as another aspect of life that is subordinate to religion, no matter what. Nevertheless, the fact that menstruation is mentioned at all contributes to the normalization of including such an event in the chronicle of a woman, thus fighting the stigma in a slightly different yet similar way to *Nervous Conditions*. Though neither novel portrays menstruation in a positive way, they both imply that such experiences are common and indirectly criticize how menstruation is perceived by the respective characters.

Though these two novels do not primarily revolve around a menstruation experience as the period stories mentioned above do, they are examples of how menstruation can be included in the public discourse, thus fighting the stigma and raising awareness in another way. They further illustrate that language and writing can be used as a tool by menstruators of all sorts. I strongly believe that such contestations of the stigma with both spoken and written language has the potential to significantly impact the way society perceives menstruation. To conclude, I implore you to Talk, Write and Fight the Stigma!



SHARED TERMINOLOGY

Menstruators/people who menstruate/people with periods

- Gender neutral and inclusive terms for any person that experiences menstruation, regardless of their gender identity (thus includes transgender men and non-binary people)
- Saying that women by default are menstruators delegitimises trans-women, and non-menstruating cis-women, while also placing periods at the centre of their identity as women
- Decouples menstruation from *womanhood*
- Separation of gender identity from menstruation ensures it is seen simply as a biological process and dismantles its gendered myths

Managing menstruation

- The process of dealing with one's menstruation
- Includes access to menstrual hygiene products, privacy to change these materials, access to facilities to dispose of them

Tension

- ...between the portrayal of menstruation and the reception, i.e. (psychological) effects on the audience
- ...between the way menstruation is discussed in the different feminist waves
- ...between economic discussions on period products
- ...between the portrayal of menstruation in different cultures

Nuance

- Recognising that social (and menstrual) realities are complex, thus difficult to categorise, and schematise
- Acknowledging the subtleties that complicate/complexify certain topics, impeding a simple/simplified "black-or-white" vision

Remediation and Representation

- Conscious efforts to re-evaluate popular and traditional portrayals of menstruation...
- ...in a more "realistic," healthy, representative way
- Can occur in a number of frameworks and forms, including but not limited to education, protest, artwork, social media representation, film and television, etc.

Normalizing

- Challenging the misconception and stigmatization of menstruation since the issue does not concern just menstruators, commonly summarised in "cis-women," but everybody.
- No more disparities between women and men--- stigmatization menstruation, portraying it as inappropriate and disgusting, let women believe they must keep secret menstruation as it was an issue concerning just themselves.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) or Menstrual Hygiene and Health (MHH)

- The practical/physical side of managing menstruation, so product use, facilities, everything surrounding hygiene and health, whereas "managing menstruation" also includes the mental management

WASH – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

- Often in reference to the facilities available and how they influence the management of menstruation. For instance, a lack of WASH-facilities (not only toilets, but the quality thereof and the water availability) leads to poor MHM.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE AUTHORS

Ninnoc Wouters

I've never been one to shy away from talking about taboo subjects. When I was in secondary school I would talk to my friends, whichever gender, about my period regularly. Often boys would tell me it was gross and not to talk about it. But I never understood why they thought it was so gross. Doing this project has given me a much better understanding of why these ideas about menstruation are so prevalent and what steps could be taken to change this. For me personally it has changed my perspective on my period as well. When I talk to others about it, I feel like I'm doing a good thing by openly discussing it, more than I feel like I'm bothering others with it. I also feel more positive about my menstrual blood, I think because I read a lot about the positive meanings it can have, like how it is a sign of health and something natural and beautiful.

Madeleine Walker

I went into this project confident in my grasp of the complexities of menstruation, after all I was taught ALL about it in school, but the Period Project has truly demonstrated to me just how nuanced of a topic menstruation is and how there will always be work to be done. I am proud of my colleagues and myself for taking a stance and taking a step in the direction of change. Menstruation is a topic I have always been fascinated in, especially growing up in an Asian society where the stigma seems endless, so to be given the opportunity to turn thoughts, to discussions to paper has greatly impacted me. This project has pushed me to grow my attention to language, grasp a critical understanding of the societal, economic and cultural implications of being a bleeder, develop creativity through my subtopic and designing the journal and my confidence in discussing my personal experiences as a bleeder. Each of these qualities I have developed is just as important as the next, but seeing my growth in confidence as a result of my amazing team is irreplaceable.

Matthew Racke

My primary motivation for joining this specific research group was because I knew so little about the subject matter, menstruation. Before conducting my own research and following the research of my peers my knowledge of menstruation was minimal at best. Any knowledge I had about menstruation I would have gotten from my two sisters, but it wasn't exactly a lengthy and detailed conversation, and it gave me very little insight into the realities of menstruation and the experience of menstruators. Though I make no claims of being an expert on the subject (I still have much to learn) my own research taught me how stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation can be so harmful to menstruators and pose a serious discriminatory economic disadvantage. The project also taught me that the education and engagement of non-menstruators in this type of research is a crucial factor to overcoming stigma. Menstruation (re)education is by no means a closed club and I am greatly appreciative for the help and guidance I received from my peers on a topic completely new to me.

Veronica Granito

Me and my colleagues started the Period project in mid-February to spread awareness regarding menstrual taboos, stigma, and myths since we all agreed that it is time to break the silence for all the future girls that will likely live in a society where saying to be on period and make visible a tampon in public are not anymore actions considered shameful and disgusting. Not only the project helped the readers gaining knowledge about a tabooed subject, but it allowed me to be a free young girl. Expressing my ideas on my body, my menstrual blood, and femininity without shame enormously encourage me to empower my period. I have always been taught by my parents to consider menstruation as an important phenomenon that will accompany me for half of my life, and I should be grateful for it because it makes my body working. However, I could learn that not all menstruators are comfortable in sharing this kind of personal experience.

Through the project, we have discovered that cultural background, lack of education, social myths, language, euphemism... prevented the free debate over period, turning menstruation into a global stigma and taboo that affects every country. Analysing them through diverse perspectives invited me to know that menstruators are ashamed and uncomfortable in talking about periods. In this way, the Period Project allowed me to open my eyes, seeing other menstruators' realities, giving voice to them through my papers, and perhaps it gave me the chance to make some changes in real communities because we are all fighting to normalise menstruation.

Theresa Rauch

One of the biggest values of this project for my personal attitude towards the period was that it acknowledged and recognised my own menstrual experience – the pain and frustrations, the physicalness of it all, the emotional hardship – while equally teaching me about the varieties of other bleeders' narratives. I have a much more comprehensive and critical understanding of the cultural and societal implications of menstruation now, yet I feel like I still have a lot to uncover. The period project motivates me to keep digging deeper, understand more of the intricacies and complexities that we are taught to overlook about menstruation. This project – my favourite group project of all time – taught me how much complexity and nuance there is in period blood, how educational and validating it is to learn and talk about it in an open, critical, and empathetic way, and how healthy it is to create space for discussion and learn from one another.

Johanna Eichler

Since I researched the management of menstruation in countries and cultures outside the modern West, this project has opened my eyes to how vastly different menstruation is managed in other cultures. Yet, at the same time, it led to me discover that the perception of menstruation is nevertheless similar in most parts of the world, namely shrouded in negativity in one way or another.

Consequently, it has inspired me to not only think and talk about menstruation more frequently in general, but to bring it up in everyday conversation, especially with non-menstruators. Lastly, and most importantly, it has led me to question the ways in which society perceives and portrays the female body as a whole. Previously, I thought the body was mainly idealized, specifically in unrealistic and toxic displays of commodified femininity. Consequently, society circulates expectations and what the female body should look like and what it should accomplish. Now, I realize it goes even deeper than that. The female body is not only commodified, it is artificialized, torn away from nature. We are made to hide and treat as disgusting everything within and part of us that has to do with nature - menstrual blood, body hair in all places, the fat tissues that protect and maintain us. In sum, the project has not only caused me to critically analyze menstruation, but the management of the female body in general, particularly in the Western society I am currently part of.

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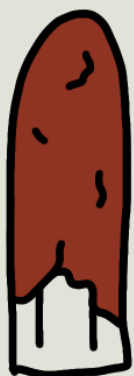
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Bleeding Love

Humanities Honours



What comes to your mind when you think of the period? Many associations are probably based on misrepresentations of menstruation. The period is heavily stigmatised, but it is also inherent to human life. That is why in this journal six students have come together to write about how the period is portrayed and perceived. By discussing different perspectives on menstruation, we hope to show the tensions between the cultural framings and the social realities of menstruation and the real effects these tensions have on people. The topics discussed range from the tampon tax to feminist movements in art and on social media. The realities of menstruators outside the west are discussed, period product packaging is redesigned and much more. We want to encourage you to challenge your ideas about the period, and take a critical look at how you can engage with menstruation in a healthier way.

