

Unveiling the Veil: Exploring the Origin, Effects, and Coping Strategies of Menstrual Stigma

Yueran Jia^{1,a,*}

¹*Ulink College of Suzhou Industrial Park, Public Academy, Suzhou, 215123, China*

a. yueran.jia@SZ-ALEVEL.COM

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Menstruation, also referred to as “the period,” faces pervasive stigmatization globally despite being a natural female biological process. This stigma, rooted in historical gender inequalities and fueled by misconceptions, holds significant implications. This study investigates period stigma comprehensively, exploring its origins, impacts, and potential solutions. The stigma originates from patriarchal structures and gender inequality, reinforcing harmful biases and impeding women’s career growth, exemplified by the glass ceiling effect. The resulting psychological toll on women is considerable. Efforts to combat period stigma include policy interventions, feminist movements, and NGO initiatives like United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. This paper enhances understanding of the stigma and its consequences, proposing practical strategies to counteract it. However, limitations include the lack of qualitative and quantitative methods due to data constraints and insufficient historical sources, impacting the portrayal of its inception. In conclusion, this study illuminates the enduring complexity of period stigma, raising awareness about its harm. Synthesizing existing literature provides valuable insights into its origins, consequences, and coping mechanisms.

Keywords: period stigma, coping strategies, menstrual stigma

1. Introduction

Just as Goffman said, Stigma is a trait that is highly discreditable [1]. Concerning females, one of the most common stigmas against them is always about their biological differences from males and the period stigma is just one of the most significant examples. For instance, the UK’s YouGov showed that a recent YouGov poll commissioned by the charity ActionAid has shown that one-quarter of British women have experienced period shaming or harsh remarks from others. One in ten women have heard unfavourable remarks about their period from a partner, present or former [2]. Moreover, as for the definition of menstruation, the national library of Medicine defines it as the typical vaginal bleeding that is a natural component of a woman’s monthly cycle [3]. According to the data illustrated by UNICEF, there are approximately 1.8 billion people who menstruate every month [4].

In terms of the definition of period stigma, it is also called menstruation stigma, Ariane Resnick The discrimination that menstruating people experience is widespread [5]. The performance of this kind of stigma in the real world can be the ignorance of menstrual hygiene and the problem of lack of access to sanitation supplies such as pads or menstrual cups. Another example of this stigma is

verbal shaming such as referring to this as the mark of “dirty” or deliberately using words such as taboo to substitute it. For instance, Over one-third (37%) of schools across the globe, according to UNICEF’s statistics, lack clean, single-sex restrooms. Moreover, One out of every four of the globe’s female population of fertile age, or at least 500 million girls and women, lack the resources they require to manage their periods, including feminine hygiene products and access to a hygienic restroom [6]. Apart from that, in some countries with deeper religious beliefs, such as India and Nepal, women cannot sleep inside their houses when they are menstruating such as the tradition of Chhaupadi [7]. In addition, According to statistics, more than one-third (37%) of boys believe periods ought to be maintained confidential, which is supported by a recent poll by Plan International. Based on a poll of 4,127 boys and young males from countries like Brazil, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and Uganda, the most common reason cited for avoiding the subject was that menstruation is a “private affair” for girls and females [8]. Furthermore, the participants, who ranged in age from 16 to 25, stated that they frequently link periods with words such as ‘filthy’ (55%), ‘embarrassing’ (31%), and ‘disgusting’ (38%) [9]. Although there have been numerous pieces of research about period stigma, there are still a significant number of issues of the stigma that exists nowadays. As a result, it is necessary to conduct more research to figure out more effective coping approaches. This article will explore the approaches to resolving the problem of period stigma based on the analysis of the common phenomena, causes, and influences of period stigma.

2. History of Period Stigma

The historical trajectory of menstrual stigma spans a significant period, with its earliest traces discernible in the annals of ancient literature. A noteworthy mention is found within the pages of the first Latin encyclopedia dating back to 73 AD. Within this historical context, a curious belief emerged that linked women’s menstrual blood with unsettling consequences. Specifically, the encyclopedic text posited that the introduction of menstrual blood could sour new wine, render crops barren, desiccate seeds, corrode steel, and dull ivory. This perspective effectively portrayed women’s menstrual blood as a potent and pernicious agent, characterized as an unparalleled global poison.

However, the genesis and underlying rationale of the negative menstrual taboo, which subsequently manifested as the manifestation of period stigma, remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Sigmund Freud attributed its origin to a primal fear of blood [10], while Allan Court contended that early humans regarded menstrual blood as a contaminant, yielding what he termed a “depressive effect on organic materials” in 1963 [11]. Alternatively, anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum in 1972 proposed that this taboo could have served as a mechanism for natural population control, curtailing sexual contact through the imposition of a “pollution” stigma [12].

In the year 2000, a further progression of ideas produced the concept of “non-menstrual syndrome” (NMS). This concept encompassed the concept of reproductive envy, in which males attempted to stigmatize menstruation in order to assert social authority over women. McElvaine proposed that this stigma could be regarded as a type of psychological compensation for what males are naturally incapable of doing [13].

Furthermore, a research initiative conducted by the New York City Department has presumably contributed valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of menstrual stigma. As this historical examination demonstrates, the evolution of menstrual stigma has undergone a complex interplay of cultural, psychological, and societal influences, shaping perceptions and attitudes across various epochs.

2.1. Factors Contribute to Period Stigma

On top of that, in terms of the main factors that contribute to period stigma, lack of education may play an important role. A significant number of boys and girls can't achieve quality education about menstruation. The information they gain about menstruation is insufficient and inaccurate, which may lead to misunderstanding and ignorance of menstruation. Access to information from doctors is also poor. Additionally, a 2020 research by American Academy of Physicians members revealed that 24% of the physicians polled do not consistently provide care before the first period. In addition, 33% of doctors don't talk to their patients who are on their period about periods [14].

Besides, religious beliefs and cultural norms are also essential factors of this kind of stigma. Some religions and traditional beliefs prefer to associate menstruation with impurity and obviously, these beliefs reinforce the menstruation stigma against females. The Indian traditional myth called Rig Veda is a good example of this issue since menstruation was a sort of eternal punishment for women to wash their guilt in this myth. Aside from this, concerning the realm of Christianity, a significant element influencing the choices to exclude women from positions of authority or accountability within the religion has been rooted in the historical practice surrounding the stigma of menstruation. [15]. Additionally, a number of Orthodox Church officials and several Christian groups exclude women from receiving communion while they are menstruating [16]. In light of menstruation taboos, numerous Catholics think that a woman should refrain from sex while going through her menstrual cycle [17]. Catholic canonical doctrine prohibits girls or women from serving as servants of the altar or other semi-sacerdotal occupations [15]. Furthermore, Buddhism also refers to menstrual blood as impure and toxic. Buddhists also believe that ghosts feed on blood; as a result, they believe that menstruating women attract spirits and pose a hazard to both themselves and other people [18]. In conclusion, the three main religions in the world all have an attitude of exclusion toward menstruation which reinforces the period stigma to some degree since the conception that menstrual blood is impure is fundamentally a kind of performance of period stigma.

Last but not least, gender inequality and the patriarchal society is always the hidden force behind period stigma. With regard to the explanation of this term, According to the Dictionary of Cambridge, a community where the most senior male is the head of the household or a society run by men with a culture where males take advantage of their position of authority [19]. The period stigma is deeply rooted in the patriarchal society when there is prejudice toward women and the bodies of women, which reinforces the repulsion of menstruating women. Some researchers also pinpoint that the period stigma to menstrual blood may result from women's capability to create new lives. Through demands for sanitation and disguise, which foster the belief that menstruation is humiliating and ought to be obscured, regulated, and managed, sociocultural norms strengthen the stigma associated with menstruation. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the misogynist mindset typically finds comfortable self-defense for women's inferior social conditions by surrounding them with bodies that are portrayed, even constructed, as weak, imperfect, unstable, and unreliable [20]. Iris Marion Young claims that a proper body is always described as a man's physique, devoid of menstrual bleed. She continues by stating that a body that is not bleeding from the womb is the correct physique, the supposed physique, and the body that everyone is presumed to have. The advertisements of the products for menstruation hygiene always hint that menstruation blood is a kind of impure and taboo that should be concealed.

2.2. Effect of Period Stigma

The profound impact of menstrual stigma on females encompasses both physical and psychological dimensions. The marginalization of menstruation due to societal stigma contributes to the emergence of period poverty among women, stemming from a lack of awareness regarding the

significance of proper menstrual hygiene. Lack of access to menstruation products, educational materials, sanitation services, waste management, or an amalgam of these, constitutes period poverty, as outlined by a study published in BMC Women's Health in 2021 [21].

This phenomenon is notably exemplified by the persistence of luxury taxes on menstrual essentials like pads and tampons in various countries, irrespective of their developmental status. Pertinent to this context, it is noteworthy that UNICEF presents compelling data indicating that merely 12% of menstruators in India have access to sanitary products, compelling the remainder to resort to hazardous substitutes such as rags and sawdust [6].

From a physiological standpoint, the ramifications of inadequate menstrual hygiene are notable, leading to heightened health risks including reproductive and urinary tract infections, a perspective endorsed by UNICEF. On the psychological front, a comprehensive study conducted by BMC reveals a distressing reality: A startling 68.1% of college-going women who experienced period poverty said they had symptoms of moderate-to-severe depression [21].

Furthermore, the insidious nature of menstrual stigma perpetuates a vicious cycle, fostering amplified discrimination and entrenched stereotypes against women. This cyclic process inadvertently reinforces prevailing power imbalances, impeding fundamental human rights realisation.

2.2.1. Coping Strategies for Period Stigma

In contemporary times, a surge of initiatives has been instated to address the pervasive issue of period stigma effectively. The legislative actions made by Scotland with the passing of the Menstrual Products (Free Supply) (Scotland) Act 2021, which sets a ground-breaking worldwide precedent, serve as an example instance of this. This landmark act enshrines the universal entitlement to complimentary menstrual products, thereby ensuring their ready availability within public establishments without financial barriers. Furthermore, a growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are proactively mobilizing efforts to secure funding and advocate for the establishment of dedicated facilities catering to menstrual hygiene, particularly within educational institutions and public domains. A notable example of this endeavor is the UNICEF-backed initiative.

Parallely, a noteworthy trend is observed in the digital realm, where an increasing proliferation of health-oriented websites disseminates comprehensive insights on menstruation. These digital platforms play a pivotal role in fostering a comprehensive and informed understanding of menstruation among both females and males, thereby challenging the entrenched norms that have historically treated menstruation as a source of shame. A salient facet of this educational outreach is cultivating a nuanced awareness among boys, who occupy a significant role in the patriarchal societal framework. Engaging non-menstruating individuals, particularly boys, in these educational initiatives magnifies the potential for their transformation into advocates and allies, effectively contributing to mitigating period stigma. This shift is especially paramount within a patriarchal society, where males traditionally hold positions of influence and power, making their inclusion in dismantling period stigma a vital stride toward substantive change.

3. Conclusions

In summary, this study has systematically examined the multifaceted dimensions of period stigma, encompassing its underlying causative factors, consequential impacts, and viable strategies for mitigation. The causal underpinnings of this stigma are rooted in the framework of gender inequality perpetuated within patriarchal societal structures, compounded by widespread societal misconceptions regarding menstruation, and the entrenched persistence of traditional norms. The

ramifications of period stigma extend to perpetuating the glass ceiling phenomenon, wherein female career advancement is curtailed. This pervasive stigma, seemingly entrenched as a normative societal attitude, also substantially engenders various psychological challenges among women.

In the realm of counteractive measures, diverse policy interventions have been introduced, concurrently supported by concerted endeavors from feminist movements and non-governmental organizations, notably including the efforts of UNICEF. These initiatives collectively strive to dismantle the edifice of period stigma. In conclusion, this paper has markedly enriched readers' comprehension of period stigma, concurrently eliciting a heightened cognizance of its pernicious implications. Moreover, the study culminates in presenting a repertoire of pragmatic coping strategies to effectively combat period stigma. It is essential, however, to acknowledge a limitation within this work; the absence of qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as surveys or interviews, attributable to the constraints of data collection within a confined timeframe. Additionally, the scarcity of historical source materials attenuates the precision with which the inception of period stigma is depicted.

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