

Mutual Aid in Menstrual Products: Retaliation Against Stigmatization and Misogyny

Kexin Zhou

*Shandong University, Jinan, China
1109834419@qq.com*

Abstract: *This paper centers on the phenomenon widely known as period shaming, and aims at vocalizing the significance of menstrual products and destigmatization of menstruation for the sake of women's rights. The author presents a program called mutual aid in menstrual products and related opinions.*

Keywords: *Women's rights, Menstrual Products, Period Shaming, Misogyny*

1. Introduction

One of the most desperate things for a female student: stuck in the restroom with no menstrual products, while all the classmates are rushing to the next lecture. To help eradicate similar embarrassing moments, a series of mutual aid movements are being launched in nearly 500 Chinese universities and middle schools to install containers with menstrual products for free or exchange, putting menstrual issues to the forefront of a national conversation. This essay reviews the development of this cause including its motivation, progress and obstacles, then addresses its social significance and shortcomings. Finally, outlook and countermeasures will be discussed. The author argues that the socio-psychological impact rather than corporeal benefit is the focus of this innovative campaign.

2. Panorama of menstrual problems

Menstruation, also known as period or monthly, is the regular discharge of blood from the uterus through the vagina, a normal physiological phenomenon of mammalian females, and a long-time stigmatized concept notwithstanding its importance in feminine well-being and reproduction. Once worshipped in ancient China, menstruation is often deemed taboo by prejudiced modern and contemporary patriarchal society. Females are afflicted by both biological discomfort and man-made hardship, deprived of legitimate interests and rights (the right to dignity, economy, development, etc.). Analogous biases are hence taken into account by progressives. The pioneering grass-root movement *Stand by Her* is believed to have been initiated in Hong Kong, and then Shanghai and other first-tier cities in coastal areas followed its lead. An incisive dispute was sparked by donations of menstrual products to female medical staff fighting the Coronavirus outbreak: the male-dominated consensus accused enthusiasts of being frantic feminists disturbing social order and provoking gender antagonism by "that thing in women's crotch". These scornful ideas aroused nationwide resistance, and therefore mutual aid measures promptly came into the public view as a result of the oppressed longing to vocalize this controversial global imperative.

3. Dilemma faced by women in terms of menstruation

Physically, feminine hygiene is threatened by dysmenorrhea and menopathy. Financially, it's estimated that menstruation costs females roughly seven years and 1604.52 pounds; besides, jobless circumstances, depressed economy and elevated prices due to high taxes and pink tax in profit-driven markets add insult to injury. Forty million women suffer from menstrual poverty and inequality, more than 50% of whom are left with self-made, mostly inferior substitutes such as toilet paper, rags, and even ash, causing gynecological diseases, sterility and even death. Some even went so far as to submit to child marriage and prostitution to attain menstrual products. According to Plan UK, 49% of young women aged 14 to 21 in the UK were absent from school because of their menstruation in 2017, so it's not merely about development but also the allocation of resources. Even in wealthy countries and regions, the gap between the rich and the poor and the government's indifference to people's welfare can also cause

menstrual problems.

Psychologically, period shaming dissimilates female images to toxic lesser beings, which expels them from various occasions, relationships and opportunities -- sometimes taboo rituals literally banish them to the outskirts of residential areas, where women young and old can encounter and die of frost, sunstroke, suffocation, animal attacks, infection, abuse or rape. Deeply ingrained superstitions and phobias insist menstrual etiquette like concealment, taunting, isolation and contempt, also known as period shaming. Typical attributes of misogyny against menstruation are discrediting ideal femininity to bring about learned helplessness and self-deprecation of particularly young women. For instance, the author herself was taught to reach the bottom of a filthy garbage can to hide used pads. Numerous public communication, journalism and influencers sexualize menstruation by comparing it to luxury, excretion and masturbation, or undervalue it to be a private affair of the minority. Fraud in advertisements presenting blue liquid and carefree girls contribute to misconceptions, conflict-prone myths and gender barriers in heterosexual contexts along with the absence or incompleteness of physical education. Loopholes are ubiquitous. China National Knowledge Infrastructure provides access to only 5 pieces of writing on the menstrual product and period shaming. Related topics on celebrated platforms such as Bilibili, Zhihu and Weibo attract minor attention, among which skepticism accounts for a considerable proportion. Weibo even canceled the hashtag "refuse period shaming" as if it's a content violation, instead of shouldering the responsibility to create an open online platform. When activists in the author's university asked school officials for permission to mutual aid movements, they received indifferent, submissive and delayed responses to "mind their own business" in order to "protect mental stability of students". Such internal and external distress deteriorates menstrual experience for many, but when the idea of *menstrual leave* is put forward, women then risk being doubted their mentality and competence. In all, when the conservative perceives menstruation as negative, this spite spreads to the female body and correlated matters, even defames their images and makes an issue of their callings.

4. Reflections of current actions

Judging by present feedback, there exist scoops of alteration for mutual aid actions. In terms of operation, not only should we consider the strategy to sustain mutual aid boxes, but also how to strike a balance between efficiency and voluntariness in order not to trigger antipathy. Combining charity and commerce or abiding by a business model is feasible to build a long-lasting program, or participants might find themselves paying out of their own pockets for selfish acts of taking without returning.

We may take advantage of corporate sponsorship, government funding and public subsidies for fund-raising, also strengthen the collective power by coalition with trustworthy partners. Ambitious as it may seem, social groups can try advocating policymakers to integrate menstruation-friendly regulations into macro-policy to establish a reliable support structure of reciprocity and carry out supply-side reforms. To build a sound, scientific and inclusive cultural environment, official media are expected to play a role in convincing community members of forming an understanding and caring social atmosphere. Blanks lie in government procurement, regulatory support and supervised specifications on the way to ensure the quantity, quality, affordability and availability of menstrual products, as well as education without segregation between genders to eradicate ignorance and embed respect. To alleviate the contradiction between the pursuit of equality and unbalanced development, we can adapt viable cases in foreign countries to our specific circumstances, for example, popularize tampon machines. Generally, the author looks forward to social evolution in the foreseeable future by efforts of ordinary people who care about female welfare. Persevering in self-scrutiny when carrying out mutual aid is essential. It's worth noting that individuals' freedom to hide menstruation out of privacy remains respectable.

Participants should also be on guard against over-consumption to avoid opportunistic exploitation of this heated topic, and exerting mild influence is likely to better steer discursive ethos to scientific opinion. Moreover, there exists blind obedience to cater for trending ideologies, so we should forestall overly optimistic estimations and keep working even though currently the general tendency is leaning towards the positive. To conclude, mutual aid in menstrual products is retaliation against toxic social mentality neglecting justifiable human rights and endeavor to alter the mindset of repudiating difficult subjects. These persistent movements are much more than the provision of material assistance. By unveiling brutal truths to mobilize the public and enlighten voluntary evolution for the welfare of human society, our groundbreaking milestone holds the potential to put an end to systematic prejudice that has persecuted female members of our community since a long time ago.

References

- [1] *New York Times*, 'Stand by Her': In China, a Movement Hands Out Free Sanitary Pads in Schools, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/288127676?utm_source=wechat_session
- [2] *BBC*, Nepal woman and children die in banned 'menstruation hut'[EB/OL], <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46823289,2019-1-10>.
- [3] *BBC*, "menstrual expenses calculator", <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-42013239>
- [4] Zhang Lele. Study on menstruation culture of young men. Diss., https://xueshu.baidu.com/usercenter/paper/show?paperid=1p620ju0eb2s0090tx0h02404f171476&site=xueshu_se
- [5] Backe J. Tainted femininity--traces of traditional menstruation myths in product advertising of feminine hygiene products, *Gynakol Geburtshilfliche Rundsch*, 1997, 37(1): 30-38.
- [6] Wu Mengying, Zhou Renlai, Huang yamei, et al. Effects of neurotic Degree and menstrual cycle on subjective Emotion and Physiological Responses of Women [j]. *Journal of Psychology*, 2014, 46(1): 58-68.
- [7] Nayantara Roy, 'Period. End of Sentence': Transforming a Taboo into a Cause, <https://www.documentary.org/online-feature/period-end-sentence-transforming-taboo-cause>
- [8] *The Kathmandu Post*, everything you need to know about Chhaupadi, the taboo ritual of banishing women to period huts, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/12/11/everything-you-need-to-know-about-chhaupadi-the-taboo-ritual-of-banishing-women-to-period-huts>
- [9] UN Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020*, http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women#_Stories_of_change
- [10] Christina Capatides, *CBS News*, what is period poverty, May 28, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-period-poverty/>