**Final paper: Menstrual equity: Cascades of stigma**

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Menstrual blood is one of the only circumstances in which blood is not born of violence; yet it is menstrual blood that brings stigmatization that enacts egregious emotional and physical violence upon those who menstruate. Imparting a feminist analysis upon cultural representations and discourse surrounding menstruation, Kissling (1996) posits that menstrual is symbolic of the societal value of the feminine and suggests that how a society deals with menstruation can reveal a great deal about how that society views the female body. As a dimension of gender disparities experienced by menstruators, this research paper will examine the societal indictment of menstruation through what I propose to be a cascade of stigma, encompassing disparities such as lack of education and period poverty. The present research paper provides a discussion of the discourse present within menstrual equity literature, will present an outline of the menstrual equity movement and grassroots organizations involved in the space ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/) & [monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/)), as well as the institutional involvement of Thompson Rivers University and their signing of *United Way’s Period Promise Campaign.*

To begin, I find it appropriate to describe what menstruation is, and why it occurs. Although this is a bodily function that should be easily defined by most all of the adult and adolescent population, this is largely not the case. The lack of education surrounding menstruation and the associated stigma have contributed to a discourse of period ignorance around North America, and much of the world. Mensuration occurs during the first of four phases of the menstrual cycle and is initiated by the body’s preparation for pregnancy; in perpetration, the body has thickened the endometrium lining the uterus. The menstrual phase of the cycle occurs when the egg from the previous cycle has not been fertilized, here, estrogen and progesterone levels fall. Now the thickened lining of the uterus is no longer required, so it is shed through the vaginal canal in a combination of blood, mucus, and other tissue from the uterus—this is a menstruation ([healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com/health/womens-health/stages-of-menstrual-cycle#menstrual), 2019). Proceeding the menstrual cycle, the follicular, ovulation, and luteal phases occur. This cycle of the afore mentioned four phases repeats continuously until menstruation ceases and menopause begins. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The cascade of stigma to which I will refer throughout the present paper can be described by a metaphor based upon menstruation itself. I have imparted the concept of cascades of stigma to the present analysis as I find it pertinent to note the various facets of stigmatization that affect menstruators, and to identity the interconnection of such disparities. Illustratively, menstrual stigma begins with the thickening of the endometrium; the endometrium is representative of common menstrual discourse; *dirty, shameful, private, taboo bodies.* As this discourse builds, the perpetuation of the stigma is unrelenting; the endometrium is shed. With the shedding of the endometrium, there is blood. Blood is lack of menstrual education; blood is barriers to healthcare; blood is economic disparity; blood becomes the cascade of stigma outside of the body. It is due to the cascades of stigma identified within the present analysis that menstruators experience the social and psychological barriers as outlined in the present paper.

It is pertinent to note that the proposed essay will discuss the cascade of stigma experienced by all menstruators, which is terminology that encapsulates the experiences of all individuals who menstruate regardless of gender identity. Thus, the terminology, of *menstruators* is intentional and is utilized with the intention of producing a document which can be applied to all people who menstruate. Further, I propose that it is critical to consider those who have had either a partial or full hysterectomy or oophorectomy (surgical removal of one or both ovaries) when discussing menstrual equity; pertaining to access to healthcare, the perpetuation of stigma is often experienced by female presenting bodies (Lloyd et al., 2020) despite possessing a uterus, ovaries, or the capacity to menstruate.

For analytic purposes, the present research paper will be divided into subsections. The first section will be comprised of a literature review, which will demonstrate the theorizations of feminist scholars pertaining to menstrual stigmatization. The proceeding section will describe grassroots activism addressing the disparities in care, education, and access pervasive within experiences of menstruation and menstrual discourse, as presented in the literature review.

Before beginning a literature review of menstrual discourse, I believe that it is important to ground the present paper within the analytical framework through which I will present menstrual disparities. The following research paper is grounded within a feminist analysis and is centred within a framework of an ethics of care (Tronto, 1993). Through this framework, I contend with discourses of menstruation, its associated disparities, and what it means to care about these disparities. The activism of the grassroots organizations of the present analysis embody what an ethics of care for menstruators may be. Through a discussion of non-profit organizations *PERIOD Monthly Dignity*, and the local engagement of Thompson Rivers University I present the positive effect of engaging in an equitable ethics of care, in which menstruation is discussed and menstruators are supported.

*Literature review: Menstruation and its associated disparities*

Grounding the present research paper, Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2013) propose that menstruation causes both social and intrapersonal stigmatization that pose dire consequences for menstruator’s “…health, sexuality, well-being, and social status” (p. 12). Moreover, the consequences of menstrual stigmatization are devastating to the relationship between the body and the self (Holland et al., 2020), when the discourse surrounding your body is rampant with abhorrence and misconception (Critchley et al., 2020; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007), it becomes arduous to care for, or seek access to healthcare (Holland et al., 2020). Thus, the consequences of menstrual stigma are not limited to societal stigmatization, as Holland et al. suggests, stigmatization affects the intrapersonal relationship between menstruation and the self. Shame, disgust, and fear of one’s own body can present significant mental health challenges for menstruators (Kissling & Bobel, 2011). Thus, the arduous work put forth by menstrual equity activists becomes apparent. Engaging in menstrual equity through activism is incredible emotional labour.

Moreover, the economic precarity induced by the purchasing of menstrual care products and their associated regressive taxation (Simonetto & Urmetzer, 2021) is dire (Durkin, 2017; Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Montano, 2018); period poverty and its consequence are immense. In her book, *Periods gone public: Taking a stand for menstrual equity,* Weiss-Wolf (2017) identifies the nature of the economic uncertainty that impoverished menstruators face in North America. Criticizing the treatment of menstruators, Wiess-Wolf addresses the economic disadvantage associated with the purchasing of menstrual products; the purchase of these necessary products are not eligible for purchase under public benefit, they are not consistently made available in public or crisis shelters, they are not mandated to be provided to inmates in jail or prison, they are largely not exempt from regressive taxation, and they are not readily available in most schools, public restrooms, or workplaces (2017, p. 64). The consequences of this economic uncertainty are pervasive; in British Columbia, half of all menstruators have struggled to purchase the necessary menstrual products that they require at one point in their lives (United Way, 2022).

In response to the afore mentioned cascades of stigma Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2013) and Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs (2013) guide analysis to the resistance of menstrual stigma and the space of menstrual activism, suggesting that the discourse surrounding mensuration must be challenged and changed. The work of menstrual equity activists is in close alignment with the calls to action of both Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2013) and Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs (2013); these scholars posit that change begins by speaking about menstruation and resisting the societal norm of monthly bleeding as taboo. This call to action is further supported by Riley et al. (2020) and their systematic review of menstrual restrictions for North American menstruators. In their review, Riley et al. (2020) cites a lack of discourse surrounding menstruation to be the most prolific societal restriction of menstruation reported within the literature.

*Engaging in an ethics of care: Grassroots activism*

Supported by the feminist menstrual equity literature as outlined herein, the proposed essay will further examine menstrual equity organizations *PERIOD* and *Monthly Dignity* ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/) & [monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/)). *PERIOD* is an international non-profit founded in Portland, Oregon, and is engaged in the menstrual equity movement striving to “eradicate period poverty and stigma through service, education, and advocacy” ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/), 2022). *PERIOD* is a youth-centred movement that distributes menstrual products to menstruators experiencing precarity, advocates for menstrual equity policies, and provides education and menstrual literacy ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/), 2022).The *PERIOD* organization serves the menstrual equity movement through a trilateral approach of education, resource provision, and policy activism. Annually, *PERIOD* distributes millions of menstrual products to menstruators experiencing precarity at no cost ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/who-we-are/about-us), 2022). Further, *PERIOD* has extended their activism to include features in national news coverage to further education and elevate the menstrual equity movement, calling for the installment of period equity policy throughout North America.

*Monthly Dignity* is a Montreal based grassroots organization that has partnered with menstrual product manufacturers to distribute products with outdated branding to menstruators living in poverty ([monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/), 2022). Addressing a vital concern of the menstrual equity movement, *Monthly Dignity* has addressed the unsanitary alternatives that menstruators are forced to use when they do not have access to menstrual products. In conversation with those living in precarious circumstance, the founders of the non-profit found that periods are “[O]ne of the primary, and most burdensome, obstacles they face” ([monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/), 2022). Through community and product partnerships with organizations supporting women’s shelters, *Monthly Dignity* has incited positive change for menstruators in their communities. Broadly, the organization aims to “destigmatize the intersection of menstruation and precarity, to educate on menstrual health, and to advocate for menstrual equity” ([monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/), 2022).

The initiatives of the featured organizations serve the menstrual equity movement through practical and tangible activism, engaging with the calls to action of scholars and menstruators themselves. Both organizations impart a multifaceted approach to the de-stigmatization of menstruation and the promotion of accessibility to menstrual products. As it has been recognized by scholars (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013), and by menstrual equity organizations ([PERIOD.org](https://period.org/who-we-are/about-us) & [monthlydignity.com](https://www.monthlydignity.com/the-project)), the application of a multifaceted approach is necessary for the facilitation of actionable change for menstrual equity. As the stigmatization of female bodies and menstruation has long existed within patriarchal culture, it is not sufficient to address only one facet of the cascades of stigma. Drawing upon the multiplicities of barriers that menstruators face, the reviewed organizations are facilitating tangible change for menstruators in North America.

Moreover, a local approach to menstrual equity has been initiated by Thompson Rivers University’s (TRU) student union (TRUSU) signed the *United Way Period Promise* campaign, guided by the diligence of the TRUSU Equity Committee (Young, 2021). The *United Way Period Promise* campaign is committed to providing menstrual products as well as an organizational platform for organizations and institutions to dedicate to their own Period Promises (United Way, 2022), as TRU has done. Signing the campaign made Thompson Rivers University the first British Columbian university to provide free menstrual products on campus. In a statement speaking to the implementation of the campaign the university stated that they are, “committed to reducing period poverty, de-stigmatizing menstruation and moving toward a future where more people can [access] products” (Young, 2021). Further, speaking to the tangibility of menstrual activism, the university stated that the cost of providing menstrual products costs a mere $1.25 per month per person (Young, 2021). Thus, a failure to provide such products is in that of itself, a failure of morality; the cost of alleviating period poverty is negligible. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The menstrual equity movement is a movement that is by menstruators, for menstruators,

and it is pertinent to note that engaging in grassroots activism for menstrual equity is laborious—as most all activism is. Egregious acts of discrimination and violence are a facet of menstrual stigmatization, all of which have likely been experienced by activists apart of the movement. The stigmatization experienced by menstruators has a unique relationship to the body, as it is the stigmatization of the body itself. Contending with violence against the body, menstrual activists must reckon with the societal disempowerment of their bodies.

Articulating the realities of engaging in emotional labour, Phoebe Bridgers sings poignantly,

“I am not fighting for justice

I am not fighting for freedom

I am fighting for my life

And another day in the world here” (2021).

The use of the preceding excerpt is not to denounce the efforts that the menstrual equity movement has achieved. Rather, Bridgers (2021) gives voice to the deeply personal and emotional materiality of engaging in activism so close to the heart and the body.

The purpose of the present paper was twofold, to demonstrate the dire need for change, and to highlight the organizations instilling change. The efforts of organizations such as *PERIOD, Monthly Dignity,* and *United Way’s Period Promise* are essential, and they have and continue to create actionable change in the menstrual equity space. However, the menstrual equity movement alone cannot alter the societal value of the female body. For this, it is still incredibly necessary to garner the support of policy makers, legislators, and educators.

The current discourse surrounding the female body must continue to change. With consequences spanning from gynaecological disease to poverty, the crisis of menstrual stigmatization is a significant detriment to millions and poses a critical threat to the health, safety, and well-being of menstruators. Menstruation, period, vulva, vagina, and uterus are not taboo words, but are often regarded as such. It is not humorous when men cannot describe what a period is, because it is this lack of knowledge that contributes to the misinformation and underfunding of female health research and discourse (Lloyd et al., 2020). It is not economical to apply regressive taxation (Simonetto & Urmetzer, 2021) to the sale of menstrual products, because it is this tax and the rising cost of menstrual products themselves that contribute to the economic precarity and disadvantage that so many menstruators face (United Way, 2021). We should not have to explain what a period is, and no one should have to make the choice between purchasing menstrual products and feeding their family. We should not have to continue telling you that we’re tired, but we do, and we will persist.

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1. For further, more in-depth explanation of the function and processes of the menstrual cycle and its corresponding phases, please see Owen, J. A., Jr. (1975). Physiology of the menstrual cycle. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 28*(4), 333-338. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/28.4.333>.

   Please note that this is the only journal article that I was able to source through a review of the current literature that functions to describe the physiology of the menstrual cycle, which can only be accessed through payment to the journal. Both the age of the article and inaccessibility speak to the barriers to access and lack of research and literature surrounding menstruation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also note that the menstrual product dispensers that have been placed within the TRU campus washrooms are often empty, which speaks to the need for increased support and increased product provision. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)