

Menstrual Practices and Programs in Europe¹

Background

Menstruation (Period) is a natural phenomenon among mature females and transgenders who experience shedding of blood for 1-7 days every month from the age of maturity until menopause. Menstruation cycle varies from person to person but in a healthy menstruator of reproductive age, the normal cycle has been described as having 28 days, combination of different phases including the period of bleeding, the menstrual phase. The gap between needs and service availability for maintaining dignity, good physical and psycho-social well being of the menstruators through proper care during menstruation is the major challenges found everywhere in the world including the all the developed countries. Especially, adolescent girls face stigma, harassment and social exclusion during menstruation because of lack of knowledge at the time their menstruation starts as it's not the topic of discussion in family and most of them don't get adequate information regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene. All of this has far-reaching negative impacts on the lives of those who menstruate; restricting their mobility, freedom and choices; affecting attendance and participation in school, workplaces and community life; compromising their safety; and causing stress and anxiety. The challenges are particularly acute for girls and women in humanitarian crises².

Dignified Menstruation has been extremely popular these days because it doesn't only promote health and dignity of menstruators during menstruation but also brings together the other multidimensional concepts of human right, discrimination and violence issues happening on the basis of gender biasness. It is simply 'menstrual talk, dignity first'. All menstruators deserve the dignity during menstruation no matter whether they are in private or public life, in disaster or with disability or any sexual orientation or anywhere in this world. 'As virtue of human being, each girl, woman or menstruator deserves the dignity during menstruation. It is a state of free from any forms of abuse, discrimination, violence associated with menstruation, no matter where the menstruator lives. In other words, there should not be difference between 25 and 5 days in a month, throughout the clock of 365 days because of menstruation'^{3 4}.

¹ Pandey, Lilanath, RN, BSN, B. ED., MPH (2020) "*Menstrual Practices and Programs in Europe*" (email:lilanathpandey@gmail.com)

² Sommer M., Caruso B.A., Sahin M., Calderon T., Cavill S., Mahon T., et al. (2016) '*A Time for Global Action: Addressing Girls' Menstrual Hygiene Management Needs in Schools*', in PLOS Medicine 13(2): e1001962. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001962>

³ Paudel R. (2019-12-25). *The Urgency for Dignified Menstruation*. Available at <https://www.spotlightnepal.com/2019/12/25/urgency-dignified-menstruation/>

⁴ Paudel R. *Dignified Menstruation in a Global Discourse: An Unseen Topic in Human Rights?* Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KESIMJ-yck>

2. Objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the stigma, taboos and restriction during menstruation in the countries around Europe.
- To explore the program aligning dignified menstruation and the gap on programs for addressing those problems.

3. Methodology:

The study is a desk review search report. Keywords used for searching information were menstruation, menstruation taboos/restriction, menstruation practices, menstrual hygiene management and dignified menstruation. The study was conducted from October 01-November 30, 2020. Secondary source of information such as journals, articles, books, newspaper, blog and organizations report were used to collect the necessary data.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Restrictions/Taboos

Restriction on daily activities

- Restriction from cooking: in the French culture of the nineteenth century, women were restricted from winemaking, mushroom picking, silkworm tending, and sugar refining; so that they did not run the risk of spoiling them.
- Restriction to bathing/grooming: until mid 20s, in Cyprus menstrual women were not allowed to bath thinking that there'd be hemorrhage and might still be prevalent in rural areas.
- Restriction from sweeping or doing household work
- Restriction from touching plants

Restrictions on Mobility or Participation

- Missing schools and work because of fear of leaking and feeling anxious
- Restriction from socializing because of feeling uneasy to be with other people
- Restriction from sports and physical activities due to fear of being unwell/unfit
- Prohibition from religious activities: In Turkey, most did not approve of religious observances such as reciting the Quran, performing the Namaz and fasting when menstruating.

4.2 Initiatives/ Projects on Menstruation:

- Governmental and non-governmental activities are more focused on hygiene during menstruation and availability and accessibility of menstrual products such as tampons,

menstrual cups, pads to school children and marginalized communities, making of reusable menstrual products from local products.

- The menstrual tax varies across Europe, ranging from a high of 27% in Hungary to a low of 0% in Ireland.⁵ After 2000, most of the European countries are focussed on reducing taxes on menstruation care products and some are on providing supply free of cost in public areas. Recently Scotland passed the bill to provide menstrual product free of cost to everyone, being only one country in the universe to do so.
- Awareness creation through formal education and other workshops and trainings.
- Some research studies are done focussing on menstrual hygiene and health but missing cultural barriers and psychosocial well being of menstruators.
- Social Media Campaign such as Young Feminist Europe, is a feminist organization working on raising voice on gender-based discrimination including menstrual issues, across Europe.

(Country specific menstrual cultural practices and program focus are provided in the annex).

5. Recommendations

- More exploratory studies need to be done to find out cultural taboos and discrimination regarding menstruation across every culture.
- Menstruation is the issue of human right, discrimination and maintaining dignity of menstruator, so programs/activities need to be focused on creating awareness on these issues.
- Equitable distribution of resources and activities to promote physical mental wellbeing of menstruators

6. Limitation of the study

This study was performed based on searching the keywords mentioned on the methodology. Hence, it might not incorporate all the taboos and initiatives and works done by government and other sectors for improving status of menstruators on the study area. Especially, the differences in taboos, restrictions and discriminations in different ethnicities, cultures and religions regarding menstruation was missing. Any feedback and additional information regarding the topical issue are highly appreciated.

⁵ [Menstruation is not a Luxury | \(youngfeminist.eu\)](https://www.youngfeminist.eu/)

Annex

S.N.	Country	Understanding and practices: menstruation
1	Austria	Austria more focus on ecological menstrual products, worried on waste and environment
2	Belgium	Following the announcement that Scotland became the first country in the world to make menstrual products free for everyone, several organisations are pleading for the same measure in Belgium. ⁶
3	Bulgaria	There are no legal requirements addressing menstrual hygiene in schools. No data on created special facilities for managing menstrual hygiene. Especially in prisons and detention facilities, there is no room for adequate and respectful human dignity to manage menstrual hygiene. ⁷
4	Croatia	Despite their reputation for applying gender-sensitive budgeting, Croatia apply a shockingly high menstrual tax ⁸
5	Cyprus	Traditionally, no bath was allowed for two-three days during menstruation. Although these ideas seemed to be common until the middle of the 20th century, they might be still met today in some, especially rural, areas. ⁹
6	Czech Republic	No specific cultural aspects available
7	Denmark	No specific cultural aspects available
8	Estonia	No specific cultural aspects available
9	Finland	No specific cultural aspects available
10	France	French make greater use of slang terms and euphemisms when referring to periods than any other people. In France and elsewhere, this failure continues to affect the wellbeing of schoolgirls and women, breeding shame, illness and injustice. ¹⁰ In the French culture of the nineteenth century, women were restricted from winemaking, mushroom picking, silkworm tending, and sugar refining” (Montagu, 1952) so that they did not run the risk of spoiling them.
11	Germany	Menstrual products have long been taxed at a higher rate in Germany than many other everyday necessities — a form of discrimination. Germany has long implemented a 19% tax on menstrual products —

⁶ ['Period poverty': Belgium called on to make menstrual products free \(brusselstimes.com\)](http://brusselstimes.com)

⁷ http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/water/activities/Equitable_access/Situation_analysis_Equitable_Access_Bulgaria_eng.pdf

⁸ <http://www.youngfeminist.eu/2019/09/menstruation-is-not-a-luxury/>

⁹ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0379/796cab5d3fac94960683cd4333cf263f5690.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200214-the-english-have-landed-france-finally-starts-lifting-menstrual-taboo>

		thus nearly an additional one-fifth of the price for tampons, pads, and menstrual cups ¹¹
12	Greece	There is a historical myth about menstruation in Greece; theory of menotoxin—[the idea that women emit] a toxic substance when menstruating. It would explain all those customs around the world by which women don't make jam while they are menstruating because it won't set properly, shouldn't bake bread because it won't rise, shouldn't preserve meat because it will not keep... or shouldn't have a perm put in their hair because it won't take! ¹²
13	Hungary	Women rarely dare to ask for help from social workers or professionals, such as teachers or doctors, as they are ashamed of both poverty and periods. Both topics are taboo. Maybe this is the reason why we know very little about period poverty in Hungary. ¹³
14	Ireland	Nearly half of Irish teenage girls said they struggle to afford menstrual products ¹⁴
15	Italy	Menstrual products are taxed at the rate of 22%, highest in Europe ¹⁵
16	Lithuania	In Lithuania, in the end of the 19th -- the beginning of the 20th c.c., the first menstruation was marked within the family. In most cases only mother and daughter participated in the rite. The mother, having learned about her daughter's first menstruation, would slap her on the face. The ritual practice was intended to predestine the girl's physiological development. It was believed that even the way the act of slapping was performed could determine duration of menstruation. In the period under investigation rites of that type were common in East and South Lithuania, their distribution being subject to gradual change. Bread being baked and a special small loaf of bread being ready, the mother invited all family members and her next-door female neighbour and distribute the bread baked by her daughter among them. The goal of ritual practices that followed was to notify the community about the daughter's readiness to get married, on that occasion the father usually assigned his daughter her share. ¹⁶
17	Macedonia	A recent study on menstrual poverty in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia revealed that 90% of female students in rural areas do not visit school for 4–5 days while they are on their period. In urban areas, this drops to 75% who skip school for 2–3 days while on their period. Inadequate conditions for managing menstrual hygiene at school and the high price of products for MHM were cited as the most common reasons.

¹¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/tampon-tax-germany-menstruation/a-51154597>

¹² <https://helloculture.com/articles/culture/what-was-it-like-to-get-your-period-in-ancient-greece>

¹³ [Reporting on period poverty in Hungary | \(youngfeminist.eu\)](https://www.youngfeminist.eu/reporting-on-period-poverty-in-hungary/)

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-plan-for-plastic-has-period-pains/>

¹⁵ <http://www.youngfeminist.eu/2019/09/menstruation-is-not-a-luxury/>

¹⁶ [Inkc.lt/eknygos/eka/customs/youth_zs2.html](http://inkc.lt/eknygos/eka/customs/youth_zs2.html)

18	Netherlands	Nine percent of girls and young women between the ages of 12 and 25 in the Netherlands sometimes can't afford to buy tampons or sanitary pads. Because the topic is deemed too shameful to talk about, this results in them resorting to paper towels or toilet paper, cutting back on things like fruit or vegetables, or missing school or work. A quarter of the surveyed women said that they do not dare to talk about menstruation at all. Almost half said that they feel dirty while menstruating. Half of the respondents also said that they want menstruation to be discussed more openly in the Netherlands ¹⁷
19	Spain	The attitude of Spanish women towards menstruation seems to be more conservative. When posed the question “What do you like about menstruation?”, up to 35.4% of women associated it spontaneously with statements such as “it's natural,” “it makes me feel good,” “I feel I'm a woman” or “it's a way to get rid of toxins,” ¹⁸
20	Sweden	Swedish job market, menstruators and those suffering from menstrual-cycle-related issues were still affected by stigmas, taboos and adverse norms in various ways. Among the 800 respondents, 96.3 per cent said they currently or previously experienced issues related to their menstruation and 57.5 per cent admitted their menstrual cycle affected their work – 42.8 per cent correspondingly wished their work could be adapted to their cycle. Even when toilets are in place, employees do not always have access to them, because of a heavy workload or inadequate staffing ¹⁹
21	Turkey	It provides an in-depth understanding of the attitude, behaviour, and experiences of the Turkish women about menstruation and menarche. Of the 586 women who took part in the study 64.2% described their menarche as an unfavorable experience. A total of 48.8% of them felt they had to keep their menstruation as a secret, and 2.2% believed that menstruating was a punishment given by God. Most did not approve of religious observances such as reciting the Quran, performing the Namaz, and fasting when menstruating. ²⁰
22	UK	Period poverty is a widespread issue in the UK — with 49 per cent of girls having missed a day of school due to periods and one in 10 women aged 14 to 21 not able to afford period products. 21

¹⁷ <https://nltimes.nl/2019/11/09/one-ten-dutch-girls-cant-afford-tampons-sanitary-pads>

¹⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5624544_Spanish_women's_attitudes_towards_menstruation_and_use_of_a_continuous_daily_use_hormonal_combined_contraceptive_regimen

¹⁹ <https://www.equaltimes.org/it-s-time-to-bring-menstrual?lang=en#.XnridOozbIU>

²⁰ Sayan Cevirme, A., Cevirme, H., Karaoglu, L., Ugurlu, N., & Korkmaz, Y. (2010). The perception of menarche and menstruation among Turkish married women: Attitudes, experiences, and behaviors. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 38(3), 381-394.

²¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/period-poverty-women-miss-school-work-office-money-sexism-a8786146.html>