



Breaking the Silence: Exploring Menstrual Behaviors and Perceptions Among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Menstruation is a natural physiological process, yet it remains shrouded in silence, stigma, and cultural misconceptions that significantly influence young women's health and quality of life. Undergraduate students, being at a crucial transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, face unique challenges in managing menstruation amidst academic, social, and cultural pressures. This paper explores menstrual behaviors and perceptions among undergraduate students, with emphasis on menstrual hygiene practices, cultural taboos, academic implications, and psychological well-being. Drawing on existing research and contemporary discourse, this article underscores the urgent need to normalize menstrual discussions, strengthen menstrual health education, and improve accessibility to resources. By breaking the silence and addressing these concerns, universities and policymakers can foster a supportive environment that enhances both the health and academic success of female students.

Keywords: Menstruation, Undergraduate students, Perceptions, Menstrual hygiene, Stigma, Education

Introduction

Menstruation is a biological milestone in a woman's reproductive life, yet it is consistently framed in secrecy and discomfort across cultures (Sommer et al., 2016). Despite its universality, menstruation is often stigmatized, leading to negative perceptions and poor management behaviors among young women. Undergraduate students, in particular, straddle a sensitive phase of independence and social exposure, which influences how they perceive and manage menstruation (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017).

While there have been growing initiatives to improve menstrual hygiene management (MHM) globally, many undergraduate women continue to experience inadequate facilities, lack of accurate knowledge, and internalized stigma. This not only affects their physical health but also undermines their psychological well-being and academic performance (Garg & Anand, 2015).



This article seeks to examine menstrual behaviors and perceptions among undergraduate students. It focuses on hygiene practices, cultural taboos, social perceptions, and the intersection of menstruation with education and mental health. By breaking the silence surrounding menstruation, the discussion highlights pathways to normalize menstruation, enhance supportive structures, and improve overall quality of life for female students.

Menstruation as a Natural Yet Stigmatized Process

Although menstruation is an essential biological process, it is still treated as impure and shameful in many societies (UNICEF, 2020). Undergraduate students, despite being more educated and socially aware, are not immune to these cultural imprints. Stigma manifests in multiple ways: hiding sanitary products, avoiding participation in religious or cultural activities, or withdrawing from social interactions during menstruation (Patkar, 2020).

This social conditioning often begins in adolescence but is reinforced during university life, where young women may struggle to balance their menstrual needs with the demands of academic schedules. The secrecy perpetuates poor health-seeking behavior, misinformation, and reluctance to discuss menstruation openly (Kaur et al., 2018).

Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Undergraduate Students

Access to Sanitary Products

The use of sanitary pads is predominant among college students, yet affordability and accessibility remain challenges, especially for students from rural or low-income backgrounds (Balamurugan & Bendigeri, 2012). Some rely on reusable cloth pads, which, if not properly washed and dried, increase the risk of infections (Dasgupta & Sarkar, 2008).

Knowledge and Practices

Studies reveal that knowledge about menstrual hygiene is often incomplete, even among university students (Thakur et al., 2014). While many understand the importance of cleanliness and hygiene, misconceptions persist regarding dietary restrictions, physical activity, and social interactions during menstruation.

Infrastructure and Support

The availability of clean toilets, water, and disposal facilities is integral to menstrual hygiene management. However, many educational institutions, including universities, fail to provide adequate support systems, forcing students to resort to unhygienic practices or miss classes during menstruation (Sommer et al., 2016).



Cultural Beliefs and Perceptions

Menstrual perceptions are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, many of which perpetuate negative stereotypes. Restrictions on temple visits, cooking, or participation in social functions during menstruation are still practiced among many undergraduate students (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011).

These beliefs not only alienate young women but also reinforce feelings of shame and inferiority. The internalization of such stigma influences students' confidence, body image, and social participation. Furthermore, the lack of male awareness contributes to discriminatory behaviors and exclusionary practices in academic and social settings (Hennegan et al., 2019).

Academic Implications of Menstrual Health

Menstruation has direct and indirect effects on the academic performance of undergraduate students. Dysmenorrhea (menstrual pain) is a leading cause of absenteeism, poor concentration, and reduced productivity among female students (Kamalifard et al., 2018).

Students may avoid attending classes, clinical rotations, or extracurricular activities due to pain, discomfort, or fear of staining. In competitive academic environments, repeated absenteeism translates into lower grades and reduced participation in academic opportunities (Garg & Anand, 2015).

Moreover, inadequate menstrual hygiene infrastructure in universities—such as lack of disposal bins, emergency supplies, and clean restrooms—contributes to absenteeism and psychological stress (UNICEF, 2020).

Psychological and Emotional Dimensions

Menstrual experiences are not limited to physical discomfort; they also carry significant emotional and psychological burdens. Shame, embarrassment, and fear of ridicule lead to anxiety and low self-esteem among undergraduate women (Patkar, 2020).

The normalization of menstrual pain often prevents students from seeking medical help, thereby exacerbating conditions like endometriosis or polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). Additionally, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) contributes to mood swings, irritability, and emotional distress, further affecting academic and social functioning (Kamalifard et al., 2018).

By treating menstruation as a private or taboo subject, society silences the emotional struggles of young women, denying them necessary empathy and support.



Role of Education in Shaping Perceptions

Education plays a pivotal role in reshaping menstrual perceptions. Universities, as centers of knowledge and social development, have the responsibility to provide comprehensive menstrual health education that goes beyond biology and hygiene.

Workshops, awareness campaigns, and peer discussions can help dismantle myths and normalize conversations around menstruation (Hennegan et al., 2019). Inclusion of male students in these initiatives is equally crucial, as it reduces stigma and fosters gender-sensitive understanding of menstruation.

When young women are empowered with accurate information, they adopt healthier behaviors, challenge restrictive cultural norms, and develop positive attitudes toward their bodies (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017).

Breaking the Silence: Policy and Institutional Interventions

Breaking the silence around menstruation requires systemic interventions at multiple levels:

1. **Policy Level** – Government and educational policies should prioritize menstrual health as a key component of reproductive health. Subsidizing sanitary products, ensuring menstrual leave, and mandating menstrual-friendly infrastructure in universities are important measures.
2. **Institutional Level** – Universities should ensure the availability of menstrual hygiene products, disposal facilities, and safe, clean toilets. Health centers on campuses must provide counseling, medical consultation, and educational materials.
3. **Community Engagement** – Creating safe spaces where students can share their experiences, ask questions, and support each other fosters empowerment and reduces stigma.
4. **Awareness Campaigns** – Public health campaigns that normalize menstruation through media, art, and discussions play a significant role in dismantling taboos and creating inclusive environments (UNICEF, 2020).

Toward a Future of Menstrual Equity

The movement toward menstrual equity seeks to ensure that every individual who menstruates has access to products, education, and supportive environments. Undergraduate students, being future professionals and leaders, represent a crucial group for intervention.

By fostering openness, challenging stigma, and institutionalizing menstrual health support, we can transform menstruation from a silent struggle into a celebrated aspect of womanhood. Empowering students with dignity and confidence not only improves their health but also contributes to academic excellence and gender equality.



Conclusion

Menstruation, while universal, continues to be treated as taboo, leaving undergraduate students to navigate a complex interplay of stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and misinformation. This article highlights that menstrual behaviors and perceptions are shaped not only by biology but also by cultural norms, academic structures, and psychological well-being.

Breaking the silence is not merely a health concern—it is a social justice imperative. By integrating education, policy reforms, and institutional support, we can normalize menstruation, improve menstrual hygiene management, and enhance the overall quality of life for undergraduate students.

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