A Bloody Business: How the Feminine Hygiene Industry Sells Taboos

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Abstract

This research paper explores the connection between the feminine hygiene industry and the prevalence of menstrual taboos in our society. It was discovered that the feminine hygiene industry, while claiming to provide women the confidence to freely take part in social spheres, exploited menstrual taboos for its own profit. By encouraging taboos and stereotypes about menstruation, the feminine hygiene industry impacted women negatively. The impact on women was not only psychological, but physical and emotional as well. Along with the women, the environment also suffered, which resulted in an overall negative impact on the society. Furthermore, it was proposed that to some extent, the attainment of freedom from menstrual taboos lies in the hands of women themselves. It was concluded that in order to protect the society from the negative influence of menstrual taboos, women need to be informed and encouraged to take steps.

"A leak can attract an unwanted attention"(Stubbs, 2008, p. 58). This quote is a caption from a famous American advertisement about menstruation in which a scuba diver is shown a few feet away from a shark. In this particular advertisement, menstrual blood is depicted as dangerous or even life threatening if it leaks. This shows the importance of keeping menstruation a secret, which, as advertised, can be best done through the use of sanitary products. This paper explores the relationship between the feminine hygiene industry and the menstrual taboos attached to women.

A taboo is a term that describes "an action, an object, people or words, prohibited by certain groups or cultures" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). For example, incest is a taboo in many cultures around the world. In the same way, menstruation is also considered a taboo in many cultures, even though it is a natural event. Menstruation is the "periodic discharge of blood and mucosal tissue from the uterus, occurring approximately monthly from puberty to menopause in nonpregnant women and females of other primate species" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Menstruation is a common experience shared by women; it is one of the factors that distinguish women from men, and it serves a role in pregnancy and connects her to other women. Despite the importance of menstruation in a woman's life, it is still considered a taboo in our society. This paper not only includes the taboos related to menstruation, it also states the negative effects of these taboos on women in our society by bringing to surface some of the issues that women face in

their daily lives. In other words, this essay serves as a window through which the public can see what is going on behind the scenes: what the reality is and who is playing what kind of a role. It is a mix of interesting cultural taboos, surprising research results, and the bitter truth around menstrual taboos. This essay will not only benefit women, who will be able to escape the discrimination against them based on menstrual taboos; it will also benefit the society and the environment as well.

One might argue the feminine hygiene industry is benefiting women by manufacturing products that keep menstruation secret. Although it is true that the products manufactured by this industry do serve to keep menstruation hidden, the products actually do more harm than good for women. By portraying menstruation as an event that should be kept a secret at all times, the hygiene industry is actually encouraging negative bias, stereotypes and assumptions about menstruating women. Although it seems that the feminine hygiene industry's main goal is to relieve women of menstrual taboos, the truth is that menstrual taboos are being exploited by that very industry.

Women and the Feminine Hygiene Industry

The feminine hygiene industry claims its main motive is providing women freedom from menstrual taboos, but the reality is the opposite of their claim. It advertises and manufactures various hygiene products for women to use during their menstruation. These products, according to the claim, benefit women by keeping menstruation as hidden as possible. In other words, "they promise women a sanitized, deodorized, and fresh bodily presentation" (Guterman, Mehta, & Gibbs, 2008, p.6). According to the female hygiene industry's standards, a woman can look "clean" only if she uses the industry's products. In our society, where women are self conscious about their image, the need to hide menstruation is a necessity and the feminine hygiene industry claims to fulfill this need through its products. Thus, "menstrual product manufacturers make use of adolescent girls' and young women's self-consciousness when they advise females to act normal and promote their products as the best in keeping menstruation hidden" (Stubbs, 2008, p.64). The messages of keeping menstruation a secret are advertised in every way possible through media, which seem to be portraying menstruation as a natural and widely acceptable event, but in reality do the opposite. The messages delivered through and hidden in the advertisements are actually propaganda about menstruation being a taboo, requiring secrecy.

The feminine hygiene industry promises women a better life by manufacturing products that will allow women to take part in social activities and have more confidence. As Stubbs (2008) states, "some of these products are promoted as a matter of convenience with the potential to improve the

quality of life of all females" (p.63). It can be clearly seen that this industry is trying to spread the idea that not only are its products a convenience measure, they also benefit women in several other ways. The industry claims that its products are easy to use, convenient and good at hiding menstruation. In other words, "the obvious agenda of the marketers of the feminine protection industry is to position themselves as knowing best what women need and want when it comes to managing menstruation" (Bobel, 2006, p. 338). In order to sell their products, the manufacturers of hygiene products demonstrate friendship towards women and show concern for their well being.

The menstrual taboos exploited by the feminine hygiene industry are being used mainly for their own profit. In a consumer economy, where the main motive of the producers is to maximize profit, the motives of the feminine hygiene industry can be easily predicted: nothing more than the maximization of profit. One might wonder what the advertisements are like. Some of the advertisements about menstrual products are demeaning and corrupt the image of menstruation. For example, in one of the ads, a girl claims that "I tied a tampon to my key ring so my brother wouldn't take my car – It worked" (Newman, 2010). This kind of a message establishes an image of menstruation as detestable in people's minds. As Thomas (2007) observed, "in order to regulate women's hygiene, hygiene products are sold and menstruation is talked about in such a way that society establishes a taboo" (p.77). The taboo here is that menstrual blood is so dreaded by people that in this particular advertisement, it stopped a young man from stealing his sister's car. This shows the extent to which the feminine hygiene industry is able to go to encourage taboos rather than relieving women of the stereotypes related to menstruation. As shown, "most commercially prepared educational materials and advertisements perpetuated negative stereotypes about women by focusing it on a hygienic crisis" (Stubbs, 2008, p.59). By advertising menstruation as a dangerous event, capable of leading to a disaster if proper hygiene products are not used, the industry is making immense profits.

Most people might think that these commercials are free of any obscure, subliminal messages, but "shame, secrecy, pollution, and otherness lurk just below the surface even in seemingly progressive messages" (Stubbs, 2008, p.60). If one pays attention, it is not hard to see that menstruation is portrayed as a taboo in these commercials. In the commercials, one of the main benefits of the products is keeping menstruation covert, to the point that "fem-care advertising is so sterilized and so removed from what a period is" (Newman, 2010, n.p). Menstruation may involve pain, discomfort, embarrassment and less confidence, besides the worry about stains. The advertisement of menstruation as a taboo is not a recent, but rather a

deep-rooted phenomenon. It has been shown in studies that the "feminine hygiene industry has grown and continues to shape the public discourse on menstruation as a hygienic problem in need of solutions that promote secrecy" (Stubbs, 2008, p.60). Instead of the advancements made in many fields, the use of menstrual taboos by the feminine hygiene industry and our society has not decreased, but has increased over the years. The industry is taking steps to encourage the secrecy of menstruation, but no steps to relieve other physical or psychological issues related to menstruation.

Menstrual Taboos and Women's Quality of Life

The practice of viewing menstruation as a taboo is widespread. Menstrual taboos are prevalent among people from all religions, races and cultures. It is rather unfortunate that "the taboo of menstruation is embedded in our religion, culture and history" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.6). Our past dictates our present and so does our religion and culture. Even in the past, menstruation was defined as a danger that "turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in garden are dried up, the fruits of trees fall of, edge of the steel and the gleam of the ivory are dulled" (p.7). It is evident that for almost all of the mishaps, menstruation was blamed as the culprit. Also, in many religions, rules and restraints are imposed upon menstruating women. If one were to trace the roots of this belief, one can see that culture plays a key role. After observing several cultures, Guterman et al (2008) found that "the views of the menstruating women are specific to the orientation of the culture from which the religion arises" (p.5). Most societies have placed taboos on menstruating women that are specific to their culture. For example, a link between menstruation and crop failure would be present in farming communities as opposed to urban areas. One can suppose that it is a psychological device devised by the society. This social engineering has worked so well that even women view menstruation as a dismal event. Not only in primitive societies, but "in modern Western culture, women still feel that they must hide their menstrual cycle" (p.6).

In this age of technology, our society can be easily influenced by the media, which advertises menstruation as a taboo, rather than as a normal life event. Out of the several kinds of taboos, menstrual taboos are the most practiced and most believed in. Guterman et al (2008) showed and proved that "menstrual taboos are widely accepted in our society" (p.6), which is obvious through the wide range of advertisements focused on the subject of menstruation. Research studies have shown that "the negative attitudes about menstruation, such as preferring not to have a period at all, and believing that men have a real advantage because they do not have periods, are widespread" (Stubbs, 2008, p.63). Men have always been viewed as advantaged due to the fact that they do not menstruate. This can be one of

the reasons men occupy most of the positions in government, military and other workplaces. Here it is clear that menstruation is viewed by each gender in the society as a crisis in need of a solution.

Additionally, menstrual taboos adversely affect women's quality of life. The menstrual taboos have not only led to a negative image of women, they have also led to the placement of restrictions on their daily life activities. Due to the widespread broadcast of hygiene products' commercials based on keeping women stain and odor free, "many people believe that menstruation is dirty and disgusting" (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002, p. 49). This shows that a negative image is attached to menstruating women, who are perceived by people as unclean. Not only is the image of a menstruating woman being distorted, in some cultures and religions, other restrictions are also placed upon her, such as "isolation, exclusion from religious services, and restraint from sex" (Guterman et al., 2008, p.6). The restrictions that are placed on menstruating women are very strict and harsh. For example, "Jewish law expressly forbids any physical contact between males and females during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter" (p.2). Although this separation is not practiced by all Jews, it still shows the severity of the restriction in which a couple is not allowed to even touch each other for two whole weeks.

Most women dread menstruation because it limits their daily life activities and makes them feel "sick". According to an interview, some women claim that "it was as though our bodies gave us punishment" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.34). It is not rare that menstruation is seen as a "curse" and therefore as a punishment by many women. Many women are heard saying that "why did Eve have to eat that apple – All these evil things that happen to us – Thank you Eve" (Chesler, 2006). It is believed by many people that Eve ate a forbidden fruit and God punished all women by making menstruation a part of their lives. Most of the time, people blame the supernatural, fate or someone else for something that is out of their control. When women find it hard to deal with menstrual taboos and the negativity associated with menstruation, they blame Eve for it. Sometimes, young girls hear so much about the shocking and horrible characteristics of menstruation that they are terrified upon getting their first period. As one woman said, "I can still envision the agitation and the fear of becoming a woman" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.34). Therefore, "premiums on discretion, convenience, modesty, and cleanliness, activists say, are industry promoted and cost women their self esteem and a positive affirming, menstrual experience"(Bobel, 2006, p.334). Everything comes at a price and so do hygiene products. In return for the convenience that may be provided by the hygiene products, women pay their positive attitude about menstruation as a price.

Women's Health and the Effects on the Environment

The advertisements funded by the feminine hygiene industry have put an immense amount of pressure upon women. The negativity portrayed in the advertisements towards menstruation and the invention of new products has led women to take steps against menstruation, for example, the use of cycle-stopping pills. The manufacturers of these pills claim that "taken daily it can halt a woman's menstrual periods indefinitely, as well as prevent pregnancies" ("US approves", 2007). The critics, on the other hand, argue that "the same hormones that work on the menstrual cycles act in the brain, bones and the skin" (Saul, 2007). A human body is a complex machine with all its parts and processes intertwined. If one were to alter one part or process, other parts get affected as well. It is true that birth control pills are effective in controlling pregnancy, but the hormones can cause adverse effects on other parts of the body. Therefore, it was suggested that "more research was needed before women could make an informed choice about using pills that suppress their periods" (Saul). Stopping something that is a crucial life event has to be given more thought and time. One should consider, "why medicate away a normal life event if we're not sure of the long-term effects?" ("US approves", 2007). The introduction of cycle-stopping pills is a recent phenomenon and it might take years to see the overall effects of this medication. Due to the negativity attached to menstruation by the feminine hygiene industry, "it is reasonable to assume that if the view of menstruation as unnecessary (and worse, unhealthy) prevails, more females will be likely to choose cycle stopping or shortening methods" (Stubbs, 2008, p.63). Women cannot be blamed for choosing harmful methods because it is the feminine hygiene industry that advertises and encourages menstrual taboos, leading to a damaged view of menstruation.

Women's health can also be harmed by feminine hygiene products. The use of sanitary products might be efficient and time saving, but they have their disadvantages as well. Studies have shown that in the past, tampon use was the cause of toxic shock syndrome, which is the spread of infection in the body. Nowadays, the manufacturers have come up with several "safer" kinds and brands of sanitary products, but research has shown that even the improved versions of their products cause harm to some extent. For example, "miniscule amounts of rayon can be left behind in a menstruator's vagina when she wears a tampon (especially after prolonged use), activists allege, and fiber loss has been implicated as a health risk" (Bobel, 2006, p. 334). No matter how safe the tampons are advertised to be, there is still some harm associated with this product. The absorbency of a tampon is higher than a pad and therefore it is less frequently changed by the user, leading to its extended use. Due to this overuse, the tampon wears out and

the fibers detach from it, ending up in the vagina and causing harm. The tampons are also found to release "dioxins, which in turn have been linked to cancer, toxic shock syndrome, endometriosis and birth defects among other health problems" (p.334). Nowadays, many women find themselves struggling with different kinds of health complications and one of the causes could be the feminine hygiene products.

In addition to harming women, feminine hygiene products are harming the environment as well. A major concern nowadays is the "environmental devastation brought on by the use of commercial, non-biodegradable, disposable products" (Bobel, 2006, p.334). These products are made for one-time use only by the feminine hygiene industry, in order to lure women into the convenience of their products. As they are disposable after one time use, these products are released in large numbers into the environment. These products are non-biodegradable and thus cause tremendous harm to the environment. It has been shown that "not only does the production process generate contaminated wastewater, but also tampon applicators wash up on beaches and pads and tampons and their packaging clog landfills, sewers, and water treatment plants" (p.334). So much for society's effort to keep the phenomenon of menstruation out of sight! These products contribute to both land and water pollution during their production and after their use. Another threat to the environment is the release of toxins, called dioxins, during the process of tampon bleaching. According to Thompson (n.d.), "dioxin, a toxic chemical (chlorine-compound) linked to cancer (and perhaps now to endometriosis), is said by most manufacturers not to appear in bleached tampons at 'detectable"'levels". She argues that "since dioxin can build up in your body over time, even the tiniest amount, found at parts per billion instead of million, could affect you." Thus, these toxins, although at low levels, can be a major hazard, when they accumulate overtime. This clearly shows the hazard posed to the environment and even worse, to women's bodies, by the production and usage of hygiene products.

In addition to the use of sanitary products, women are encouraged to take birth control pills. Some of the newer versions of these pills have the ability to lessen or even stop women's menstrual cycles. These pills also contribute to the release of these harmful chemicals into the environment, which can substantially harm all living things, including marine life and plants. Findings from a recent study suggested that "synthetic estrogen -- a common ingredient in oral contraceptives -- can drastically reduce the fertility of male rainbow trout" (Stiffler, 2003). Due to the presence of synthetic hormones, birth control pills are harming marine life indirectly. This harm to the environment is caused by the use of feminine hygiene products and pills, which are being used by women to escape superstitions related to menstruation. Instead of falling for the hygiene products and other harmful

methods, "only through true understanding can we properly modify our approaches and remove obsolete superstitions from everyday life" (Guterman et al, 2008, p.6). One of the ways to tackle these superstitions and taboos is to spread knowledge and understanding, which are crucial for the safety of our environment.

Safe Alternatives

Even though menstrual taboos are widespread in our society, there are ways to bring a change. Our society has been designed in such a way that males dominate in almost every part, from workplaces to homes. Therefore, "it comes as no surprise that in a Patriarchy, menstruation is shrouded in shame and feelings of dirtiness" (Bobel, 2006, p.339). There are only a few matriarchies, but the acceptance and prevalence of patriarchies is high. Although the pressure from the taboos advertised by the feminine hygiene industry is high, there are still ways to cope with the problem. It has been found that "social stigma and an exploitative industry have discouraged women from knowing their bodies" (p.336). The feminine hygiene industry has exploited women by forcing them into the web of menstrual taboos, instead of exploring alternatives.

One of the ways women can be more comfortable about menstruation is by celebrating the onset of menarche. One might argue, "if men had periods, you bet that they would celebrate it" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.7). The reason is that men celebrate almost everything associated with them. There are some communities that celebrate the onset of menstruation. For example, "Kinaalda, the celebration of a woman's first period, is one of their [Navajo] most important ceremonies" (p.7). There are some other communities like the Navajo that view menstruation as a positive and crucial event in a woman's life. If menarche were to be celebrated in our society, people would be obliged to look at it positively, rather than with disgust. In the ancient times, many cultures celebrated menstruation, for example ancient "Greeks observed the festival of the menstruation of the Athena, whose laundry had to be washed at first monthly, then, as the meaning of the ceremony was lost, yearly" (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1990, pp. 256-57). Thus, it can be seen that menstruation was celebrated and is still celebrated in some parts of the world, leading to a sacred image of menstruation.

For the change to be successful, women need to take steps as well. If women were to stand up for themselves and understand their bodies, the feminine hygiene industry would have no way of attacking them. To do so, "we can't be afraid of blood, instead we have to treat it as a marker of maturity" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.16). Instead of looking at menstruation as a negative phenomenon, women can search for the positive aspects of menstruation. Menstruation makes a women, complete; without her menstrual

cycle, a woman might feel isolated from other women. Since menstruation is crucial for life processes, why should women hate and have a sense of disgust towards their own bodies due to menstruation? One of the steps "in liberating women from this dual oppression is to unlearn the shame, resist the corporate brainwashing, and, literally, get our hands dirty learning how our bodies work" (Bobel, 2006, p.336). Instead of falling for the propaganda by the feminine hygiene industry, we should learn how our bodies work.

Information also plays a key role in preparing women to deal with menstruation and welcome it. Ignorance prevents women from appreciating the process of menstruation.For example, "in Pakistan, 87 percent of girls haven't heard about menstruation prior to their first period" (Nalebuff, 2009, p.7). Without knowledge, it is hard for young girls to prepare for the onset of menstruation, which in turn can lead to confusion and a negative impression about menstruation. In many parts of the world, menstruation is kept a secret, which results in feeling like, "I thought I was sick and dying" (p.113). The onset of menstruation for most girls can be scary if proper guidance and information are not provided to them. Awareness is one of the major contributors towards the eradication of superstitions regarding menstruation. Another way to enhance women's health and the environment is the "promotion of healthier, less expensive, and less resource-intensive alternatives" (Bobel, 2006, p.333). Here the author is encouraging women to find alternatives that can benefit them and the environment as well. Thus, to counter the stereotypes and taboos spread by the feminine hygiene industry, women need to take steps by learning about their bodies and realizing the harms being done by the hygiene products.

Finally, one can see that the feminine hygiene industry is behind the widespread advertisement of menstrual taboos. The main purpose of the feminine hygiene industry is to make a profit and they do this by exploiting taboos related to menstruation. This paper has shown that the advertisements by the feminine hygiene industry have a negative influence not only on women, but on the society as a whole. The products and pills manufactured to keep menstruation hidden impact women physically, emotionally and psychologically. These products also harm our environment by leading to pollution. This signals that our society is in need of a change and the barrier that stands in the way is the feminine hygiene industry. Some of the ways to get past the barrier is encourage women to take steps and be in control of their bodies. Women should disregard any superstitions regarding menstruation and get together to educate, inform and encourage the positive sides of menstruation. This will in turn encourage women and provide them with self esteem and confidence, making our society a better place to live.

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