

# First Blood: How Three Generations of Newfoundland Women Learned about Menstruation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article discusses how girls in Newfoundland learn about and experience menstruation. The project focussed on three generations of women, and we found differences, over time, in how appropriate knowledge is acquired by young girls and how the event of menarche is experienced and interpreted.

## Résumé

Cet article discute de la façon dont les filles de Terre-Neuve sont renseignées et éprouvent la menstruation. Le projet s'est concentré sur trois générations de femmes, et nous avons trouvé des différences, au fil du temps, sur façon dont la connaissance appropriée est acquise par les jeunes femmes et comment la venue des menstruations est éprouvée et interprétée.

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## Introduction

When I looked at what the women in our project said about their first experience of menstruation, how they learned about it and how that related to how they learned about sex, I was struck both by how little information they had before they had their first period ("menarche") and by how little this seemed to matter to them. Reading their accounts, I tried to remember how I learned about menstruation - and found that I could not. I could remember being told how to wrap up sanitary towels and dispose of them. I remember the fear of bleeding through one's clothes, especially summer dresses, and the joy of discovering Tampax. And I dimly remember something about "linings" and "eggs." But I clearly did not know very much. Yet I menstruated for many years and bore and reared two children, all without the kind of scientific information I might expect to have of such important processes.

So, how much information about menstruation do we really need and how do we obtain it? How do mothers provide the necessary knowledge to their daughters? How do young girls learn what they need to know to deal with menstruation (and with sexual knowledge in general)?

## Thinking about Menarche and Menstruation

Today there are many sources of clear and accessible information for young girls in literature, the media and on the Internet, which were not available to their mothers or their grandmothers. The Boston Women's Health Collective, for example, has, over the years, provided clear, woman-centred information for several generations of women.<sup>2</sup> Illustrated books, for example, *The Period Book*, Karen Graville, and *Period: A Girl's Guide to Menstruation*, Joanne Loulan, are specifically aimed at young readers. Such resources are relatively new; they were not available to many of the older participants in the study, and even today, may not be available to girls growing up in rural areas.

In this section I will not attempt a full

discussion of the rich and diverse literature on the topic of menstruation. Much of the research in this area is based in one of the health disciplines and is oriented towards ensuring young women's healthy approach to menstruation and sexual development. Among the more socially analytical, Beausang and Razor (2000), for example, looked at young American college women's written narratives of puberty and sexual adolescence, finding a generally negative attitude to menstruation. Girls had received some information from family or school, but had found it sketchy and/or embarrassing. Similar studies have been carried out in a number of countries, with similar results. Oinas (1999), for example, looked at well educated Finnish young women, and found them critical of the information they had been given. Her study also stresses that the information provided by mothers tended to focus heavily on privacy and body management aspects.<sup>3</sup>

Other approaches offer a more historical account of the way in which the experience of menstruation has changed, with the onset occurring earlier as societies become more prosperous. Brumberg (1997) accompanies her account of the changes in the patterns of menstruation in the USA over the last couple of centuries with a caution that girls have not necessarily matured socially or emotionally in step with their biology. Cross cultural accounts provide us with more diverse experiences and understandings of menstruation. Building on the work of Delaney et al. (1988; Buckley 1988), Britton focusses on what an anthropological approach can tell us about how girls learn about menstruation. Her opening point critiques the concept of information, derived, she observes, from a "view of truth premised on the superiority of medical knowledge" (Britton 1996, 645). She argues that this approach is "at the expense of the experiential, affective and value based elements" (645), going on to say that "[t]his creates a gap in knowledge because it stops short of an understanding of collective, shared beliefs and values about the body, and variations in individual experience" (645). Her study was based on twenty young women in the UK, and covers much of the same ground as our study and with many similar findings. For example, she found that while some women had got their information about their menstruation from their mothers, the majority had learned from friends or

from school. Girls' responses (ranging from pleasure and pride to embarrassment or disgust) also parallels our findings. Using an approach that refers back to Mary Douglas, Britton is more inclined to stress the element of "pollution" and association with "dirty" in the accounts of her respondents. She also sees the onset of menarche as more of a "rite of passage" than, for example, Blumberg would do. She concludes that "[t]he menarche is a significant marker of the life cycle of women" and makes an appeal for providing young girls with culturally specific and experientially based guidance rather than relying on purely scientific information.

Another approach to the study of girls' experience of menstruation is to see it in the context of girls' developing picture of their body image, and with this often come challenges to the conventional images of women - especially the traditionally passive nature of femininity. Lynne Segal, for example, in her contribution to a volume on women's health, argues that "heterosexual 'western' women's sexual agency will come from an increasingly fluid sexual and gender identity which breaks down the rigid, reified boundaries/dualities of heterosexual gender roles and power inequities," suggesting that at least some women, some of the time, will be able to challenge the sexual and gender identities handed to them by the prevailing culture (2000). Tolman, in the same collection, uses survey data to argue explicitly that "holding conventional beliefs regarding femininity is a barrier to positive sexual health for girls" (102). Natalie Beausoleil, in an Afterword to a collection of young women's writings about their bodies, points out that not only is the body a social construct, but that young women (or at least some young women) realise this (1999). Writings such as these, by young women, demonstrate that menarche can be a moment of intense struggle in the complex process of maturation from female child to adult woman, and that it happens in a culturally specific context (Prendergast 1995). Dawn Currie's study of adolescent girls' use of teenage magazines endeavors to find the agency of young women, even in the context of the repressive messages directed at them. "While de Beauvoir challenged us to think about gender as a cultural construct and, therefore, as an arena of political struggle, we are only just beginning to unravel the complexities of the relationship between patriarchal

culture and our embodiment as 'women'" (Currie 1999, 3). Thorne's study, based on 1976 fieldwork, looks at how uneven changes in body shape and size affect both girls and boys, finding that early developing boys are at an advantage, and early developing girls are at a disadvantage (Thorne 1993). She also discusses the girls' responses to puberty, including menstruation, and, more importantly, the "shaming rituals" (bra snapping and the like) used by boys to control girls entering puberty (1993, 141).

However, many studies of adolescent girls, especially narrative studies, pass over the moment of menarche in silence. For example, Crowther's (1999) account of her research on the diaries of English adolescent girls written between the late 1950s and the early 1970s reveals the feelings of the young diarists about many aspects of their lives, and many of them must have written about their menarche. But Crowther does not discuss it. Similarly, Gonick (2003) spent two years in a school, focussing her attention on the evolving identity of 10-13 year old girls (Grades 5-8), but there is not one mention of menstruation, of menarche, or of how the girls found out about or responded to their own menarche. To begin with, I found this silence puzzling and disturbing. How could such a possibly pivotal moment in women's construction of themselves be so invisible in the literature? I am less puzzled now that I have listened to our respondents, who bear out this literature in making it clear that often menarche and menstruation were not seen as pivotal in their development.<sup>4</sup>

For many years, the work of Foucault provided the theoretical base from which to think about issues of sexuality. This is not the place to embark on a discussion of the finer points of his work or the implications for much subsequent feminist work that depends on it. Foucault's great contribution, and his relevance in the context of this paper, was to place the body (both male and female), and issues of sexuality, at the heart of power relations, and to show how these were played out in the public world (discourse). This provides a key to understanding why society in general finds it so difficult to deal with sexual matters, and especially with talking about sex. In our interviews we tended to accept our participants' representation that talking about sex was embarrassing; that sexual matters, except in specific

circumstances (such as in interview, or a visit to the doctor) should not be talked about openly. Foucault would understand that this, like so much else, is the result of our being brought "almost entirely - our bodies, our minds, our individuality, our history - under the sway of a logic of concupiscence and desire" (Foucault 1980, 78). His argument accounts for why sex is so secret, and allows us to identify "the force that so long reduced it to silence..." In the course of this, he identifies the family as the site for the operation of power, "whose task is to anchor sexuality and provide [it] with a permanent support" (108). What Foucault does not do is to identify the particular elements of power/discourse that have enabled men to oppress women, and to define women's bodies for them. Emily Martin (1987) has provided us with a devastating account of how women's natural reproductive functions, including menstruation, have been "medicalised," and at the same time, used to place women in society. Her work shows us how women experience, and contest, male interpretations of their bodies.

Let me now present some examples of families of women in our study and how they dealt with providing the appropriate knowledge to young women entering menarche.<sup>5</sup>

#### From Rags to Tampons: Change over Time

The oldest participant in our study was born in 1914; the youngest in 1987. In the intervening 73 years much had changed, including how women deal with the flow of blood during menstruation. The oldest participants used rags, torn from old clothes and varying in comfort and absorbency. These rags had to be washed and re-used. The next step in technological advance was the sanitary towel. These manufactured pads had to be held (more or less) in place by a belt. Finally, tampons hit the market, and despite concerns about toxic shock syndrome<sup>6</sup> caused by the early tampons, they are the most common form of protection used today, coming in umpteen different shapes and thicknesses and with competitive advertising to seduce users.<sup>7</sup> These changes, together with the supposed increasing openness about sex, the availability of sex education in schools and the abundance of books for children and manuals and magazine articles about all aspects of sex led me to expect that, as we moved from older to younger

women's accounts, we would find increased awareness of what menstruation was and increased ease in dealing with it.

The "S" family provides us with a sense of how women learned about menstruation down the generations. Sarah is a member of the older generation:

Marilyn: How did you learn about menstruating?

Sarah (born 1935): To tell the truth I didn't know.

You know what I thought before I started to have my periods? I used to think that when you have your period it comes through your stomach...I guess there's a lot of others like me.

Phyllis: You mean you thought that blood came out of your navel?

Sarah: Yeah, yeah that's what I thought...Well I guess I just heard from my girlfriends ...As a matter of fact that was the first one I told. I didn't even tell my mom, she found my pajamas. (Laughter) I didn't even tell her, you know? I just went right on down to my friend's house and told her something happened and she told me what it was.

Sarah: Well see, once mom knew then like, well, she told me a bit about it, like what was happening to me and all that kind of thing right but like she didn't tell me anything about it before.

Marilyn: Did she find it very difficult to find the words to explain it?

Sarah: No, I don't think so; no, no. 'Cause they don't explain it. She didn't explain it very much - just told me what was happening, that it was gonna happen every month, just like, "be careful" - like, you know, when you want anything to come to her and she'd get it for you that kind of thing, right?...Yeah, but I remember I used to use cloths; I know that. My mom used to have special flannel and that's what we used to use. (Laughter) Ah my. Some different now. You can advertise it on TV and everything now.

But it was not that different for Sarah's daughter Susan (born 1957):

Susan: How did I find out? I don't know, I honestly don't know. I knew what it was when it came. But I honestly don't know how. It wasn't from my mother, that I do know. I guess it was just friends.

Phyllis: They didn't teach you in school?

Susan: No, not at that time. No. Who did I tell? I went and told H; I was more comfortable telling her than I was my own mother. I felt embarrassed and I don't know why. But that age, I was only 12, that's who I told and she told mom.

Somehow, in the interval, Sarah had enough information that she did not think the blood would come out of her navel, but this information did not come from her mother, and it may have been sheer chance that she was better informed. Certainly there was not a structure in place (in school, for example) to ensure that she was prepared. Finally, Samantha (born 1977) had this to say:

Marilyn: By the time you were 11 you were getting close to puberty, beginning to think about those types of things.

Samantha: Yeah, because I was... As a child I was really embarrassed at the thought of puberty or sex, and I guess as a child I didn't really know what sex was, but anything that had to do with my body I always felt really ashamed. I remember the first time I found a hair under my arm, I was SO embarrassed and I don't know why I felt embarrassed, but I think it was the whole religion and sex and your body change. And I didn't like my body.

Where does information/ knowledge come from?

The "B" family provides another pattern of communicating knowledge about menstruation.

Bernice (born 1936): I was well prepared before I menstruated and I menstruated fairly early at ten and a half - on Remembrance Day, I have never forgotten it. When it came to anything to do with sex I could ask (my mother) any question I chose and she

always gave me...she didn't go into great gory details, but she gave me a simple straightforward answer. And consequently, my friends got into the habit of asking of me because they didn't have parents they could ask questions like that. They were too embarrassed to ask in any case.

Like her mother, Barbara started menstruating early.

Barbara (born 1960): Well, actually, I was in B (elementary school) and I was still there and I got my period. And I remember that it was a big deal because I think it was actually only 4 of us that had our periods that early. So it was kind of almost a little select group.

Marilyn: And that was seen - how?

Barbara: It was a hard thing in a way because of course elementary school was not planned for periods. You try and get out of the bathroom cubicles with your little packages but, besides that...Yeah, I think we thought of ourselves as being older and more mature.

Her daughter, Brenda (born, 1987) was interviewed by our two young research assistants. The tone of the exchange is significantly different.

Brenda: No, when I started my period...my mom gave me a book about it and that's about it.

Kim: So did she talk to you about it?

Brenda: Yeah, she talks to me about it and stuff but she's just like, "if you want to know everything read this."

Carla: And how old were you when she gave you that book?

Brenda: I was eleven.

Kim: And did she ever talk to you about sex or anything?

Brenda: No, she doesn't talk to me about that.

Kim: How old were you when you did get your first period?

Brenda: Eleven.

Kim: Did you already know about it?

Brenda: Yeah.

Kim: You knew what it was and stuff - you weren't

scared.

Brenda: Yeah, I wasn't scared. It was just like, "okay."

Carla: So did you tell your mom right after?

Brenda: Yeah, I was just like, "mom I started" and she was like, "are you sure?" cause I was eleven and that's kind of young.

Carla: And that was it.

Brenda: Um hmm, pretty much.

Kim: Were you a little bit earlier than all your friends?

Brenda: Yeah I was way earlier, I had older friends that still hadn't started by then.

Kim: Did you tell them?

Brenda: No.

Carla: How did you feel about it - did you consider it an annoyance, were you happy about it?

Brenda: I wasn't happy about it, I find it annoying still, but I deal with it.

Kim: What else can you do?

Brenda: Exactly

Carla: You didn't like, get excited and go "yeah womanhood or anything"?

Brenda: No. (laughter)

So, despite her mother's openness, Barbara does not seem to have been comfortable talking to her daughter, preferring to rely on the books which by that time were available. I also notice the kind of rueful understanding shared by these young women. Menstruation is associated with discomfort (and pain) and embarrassment. It is not seen as positive or an indication of sexual maturity.

In the study, we found some increase in awareness about menstruation and better means for dealing with it as time goes on, but this awareness does not seem to come from mothers communicating more openly with their daughters. Instead, girls tend to learn about menstruation from friends, either peers, or sometimes from an older friend or relative.

Samantha: My best friend...her mom was really open with her about sex and she would buy her books about adolescence and becoming a young woman and whatnot...her mom was a nurse she was always very open. But, no, I didn't get any information from my family.

Some mothers do make an effort to talk to their daughters about menstruation and sex, but sometimes it is not entirely successful. Here is Susan (born 1957) telling us how she explained sex to her daughters.

Marilyn: And did you teach them about menstruation and sex and those sorts of things? Where your mother didn't?

Susan: I guess I did in a way. I wasn't explicit. I had a way, I always told a story, in story form...It's really kind of silly. Oh dear, I remember a story about a little seed, I can't remember. Yeah, it was about a little seed, oh about your period, I don't remember, isn't that terrible? There was a little seed, it was very small, I'm not doing justice to it. And it would break and that caused her period but if it didn't break, it would be like flowers that would start to grow like a baby growing in their belly and things like that, but there was a story to it...And I remember telling them about their periods and they would come and what it was. I used to try and explain it as best I could that it was like a little seed in their body each month.

What I find significant in this account is Susan's awareness that she wants to convey more than technical information. She wants to provide a positive approach to the issue of sex and reproduction, despite her own embarrassment. However, her daughter, Samantha doesn't remember it quite like that:

Samantha: Yeah, the only sex education I got from my parents, and it was my mom. I can remember my parents talking one day, and he was like "Susan, the girls are getting to that age and you should be talking to them about this," so I think it was hard for her. A couple of days later she sat me down and she was really nervous. And she told me about how I was going to start my period and that I could have babies, about fallopian tubes and seeds and babies and I never actually knew what sex was and I knew I soon would be of the age that I

could have a baby but I didn't know how. And the way I finally found out, I was at my grandmother's one day and I found a book that had belonged to one of my aunts and I was flicking through it and I saw a picture of a man and woman having sex and I still remember staring at the picture going "Ohhhhhhhhhhhh, that's what they do." And it all came together. But any information I got like that was from a book or from a friend.

Susan's "story" represents a real effort for her to communicate around a topic she finds difficult, and her embarrassment may well be a reflection of her own mother's lack of comfort with any discussion of sex: "Susan: Well, I know it wasn't from mom. That I know. Very uncomfortable. I can't even sit down now and watch a movie in the same room with my mother or Samantha or anyone if it looks like it might get a little steamy or something. I'm very uncomfortable." Samantha now works in the area of sex education. As she comments, this provides an altogether new resource: "And I go into schools now...and I do sex education and I actually demonstrate how to put condoms on and talk about stuff like that and I was thinking, 'you guys are actually really lucky to have this because I'm not that old, I graduated from high school 10 years ago and we didn't have any of this. None whatsoever.'"

As we analyse these extracts we can see different ways of dealing with both the factual information and the subjective understanding of the experience. Sometimes this process strengthens the bond between mother and daughter, but equally often, especially when the young girl has had to go elsewhere for information, it seems to drive them apart. This is especially the case if the mother's response to her daughter's sexual maturity it to become preoccupied with her ability to get pregnant, and the consequent need to police early sexual activity.

#### Becoming a Woman

For some women, menarche really was a rite of passage, an initiation into womanhood that they valued.

Jane (born 1924): Yeah. I was quite excited - excited and disappointed because everyone had made it out, "you're going to feel different" and I felt miserable. (laughs) So I was very disappointed and yet on the other hand I felt, yes, finally I am a woman...I couldn't understand what that meant at that time. I was going to feel different, people were going to treat me differently, but I felt...

Marilyn: Do you think it makes a difference that women have that point when - y'know, I've got my period, I'm a woman?

Jane: Yes - there is - definitely. I was 13 when I had my first period. Mom stressed to me, she did. And I think looking back on it now, I can understand why she said, "Oh no, its going to happen." And it wasn't like I was a wild teen. I loved to socialise, but in terms of crossing the line with someone - no, because mother always said "have respect for yourself. It's your body."

So the pleasure of "becoming a woman" is almost immediately swallowed in the concerns about sexual activity, and especially possible pregnancy. In some cases, it was a relief to finally know what it was all about.

Patricia (born 1956):...I felt very grown up too. I felt very mature when I started. Now I knew that was part of what goes on with females, that was okay.

Her daughter, Paula (born 1987) had similar positive feelings:

Paula: I guess it was around 4th or 5th grade when my friends started, you know, and people bragging about it in school and stuff. It was a big deal...for the girls, we didn't tell the guys.

In this case, we can see that a positive approach in one generation does seem to lead to a positive approach in the next. But becoming a woman is tempered by the reality that menstruation is uncomfortable. Here is Paula again.

Paula: Oh no, I wanted to, I couldn't wait because, like, I didn't start until 8th grade. I was one of the last ones in my class to start. As soon as I got it I was like, why did I want this?

Natalie: Why did you?

Paula: Just because everybody else had it you know. It felt like such a big deal being a woman and that kind of stuff you know.

Natalie: And then it happened and then.....

Paula: I hate it.

#### The Relationship Between Menstruation and Sex

In this article, I have limited myself to participants' discussions about their first or early experiences of menstruation. But most of our participants' accounts quickly merge into accounts of how they learned about sex. Biologically, of course, there is a connection. But in terms of girls' actual lives, menarche usually precedes first sexual experience by some years.<sup>8</sup> Menstruation is a "girl" thing. Boys are not supposed to know about it, although they clearly do. The conventions are that all traces of sanitary pads, even in their unused state, are to be kept from male members of the family.

Jennifer (born 1950): Now my father never did broach the subject of periods or if you went to a shop it was "get what you got to get."

Nettie (born 1952): I had none of this, you know, taboo stuff that I had grown up with...It's really funny because my neighbour comes over and if I had groceries, I'd throw a pack of pads on the table, y'know, if I was using them. Or the Tampax laid around and she'd say, "Oh God, R- is coming in, you should take that, you should put that in your bathroom." I'd say, "Why? I mean, it's clean, it's not going to hurt anything."

Menstruation thus becomes a bond of sorts between girls, but it also becomes a barrier between girls and boys. Even those who have very little idea of how sex actually works realise that such things must be kept from boys. Used tampons or pads or the evidence of blood on clothes or seats is seen as embarrassing and possibly disgusting. This lays the groundwork both for the notion that girls and boys

are on different trajectories after puberty and also for a sense that sex, being associated with menstruation, is also embarrassing, and, more certainly, dangerous. None of our participants mentioned the role of religion or of religious teachers in their attitudes to menstruation, but they did talk, at length, about their church's attitudes to, and heavy teaching about, sex. This is the subject of another paper, but here I want to suggest that at least part of the embarrassment over menstruation and the reluctance to talk about it is informed by its association with sex and the way in which sexual expression is so severely repressed by the churches.<sup>9</sup> While the churches clearly talked a lot about sex, we could find no indications that they provided practical information about menstruation up to the time when our youngest participants had graduated.

#### So How Much Knowledge Do We Really Need?

All these women finally found ways of dealing with menstruation and what sex was all about. By definition (inclusion in the project), the older two generations have borne children and are, by virtue of that experience, expert in the matter, although none of them would be able to provide a detailed and accurate physiological explanation of the process of menarche. A number of issues emerge. One is: in what form is knowledge best transmitted? The greatest need of young girls experiencing menarche is reassurance that what is happening is normal and expected. Second, girls are less interested in the theory behind why they are bleeding than in the practical steps to take to deal with it. Once alerted to their daughters' periods, mothers seem well able to take care of this aspect. The association of menstruation with the ability to conceive seems improbable, and most girls do not seem especially interested in making the connection right away. Yet, mothers are more concerned to explain enough to protect their daughters from unwanted pregnancy than they are to reassure their daughters. This inevitably means that sex gets a bad press - it is associated with something uncomfortable and inconvenient and it is also associated with something forbidden. This is not good groundwork for an informed approach to sexual relations, but that is the subject of another paper.

The use of linked life stories, at least in this project, does not provide conclusive evidence either

that the information or the method of providing it changed significantly over time, or that it formed a central theme in the mother-daughter relations. A few mothers (and this is not predicted by past history) were able to equip their daughters with their own knowledge. Most tended to avoid the issue until it was inescapable, and then to provide the minimum of practical information. Daughters might see menstruation positively as an entry into womanhood or negatively as simply painful or uncomfortable. They did not necessarily rely on their mothers to escort them through this rite of passage, turning instead to friends or other relatives. The association between menstruation and sex is complex and needs unpacking further. Mothers tended to be far more aware of the integral connection, but to see that as a further source of danger to their daughters. Above all, what our participants said marked the whole area of menstruation and sex as embarrassing, private and to be kept among women.

To return to the questions that I posed at the beginning of this paper. What forms of information and knowledge about menstruation are necessary and how do young women acquire them? Our respondents add to what the literature would indicate. What is most needed is practical knowledge, and this falls into two kinds. The first is the nuts and bolts information about tampons, dealing with cramps, and so on. The second, which is more important in terms of developing a healthy attitude to sex and reproduction, is how to regard menstruation. This culturally specific process is one of what Britton calls "interpretive procedures." Is menstruation a positive or negative part of my experience? Is my experience "normal"? How and why is my body changing? What does it mean that I can now have children? These are all important questions for girls as they become particular women. Some women learn both the technical details and the general approach from their mothers; many more turn to other sources - to friends of all ages, school, the Internet. They thus negotiate the transition from girl child to adolescent woman in a variety of ways, and while all our participants had successfully accomplished the transition, what they say may guide us in understanding the scope of the needs of young women and how they might best be addressed.



## Endnotes

1. The larger project from which the data presented here is drawn is entitled "Women's Experience of Reproductive Health in the Family: A Comparative Life Story Project" funded by IDRC and SSHRC. There are three teams, based in Newfoundland, Canada; Karachi, Pakistan; and Jakarta, Indonesia. Project leader: Marilyn Porter. Members of the Newfoundland team: Phyllis Artiss, Natalie Beausoleil, Diana Gustafson. Pakistan team: Tahera Aftab (country leader), Zareen Ilyas, Shakila Rehman. Indonesian team: Anita Rahman (country leader), Tita Marlita, Kristi Poerwandari. The contents of this paper are the sole responsibility of the author.
2. This material is also available on the Internet. See <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book/excerpt.asp?id=20> in the companion website for the latest edition of *Our Bodies: Ourselves* for a clear and an unthreatening account of the menstrual cycle.
3. See Teitelman (2004) for another example
4. Nor are we the first researchers to meet this silence. Thompson, for example, set out to examine how children of both sexes experienced puberty. She writes, "Well over ten years ago, I set out to interview pubescents about puberty. If there are more reluctant interview subjects, I have never come across them..." (Thompson 1995, 3).
5. While all our participants were from different communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, their experiences parallel those of women in other parts of Canada. Of course, the specific culture and history of Newfoundland and Labrador will mean that their experiences have some regional specificity, but not the extent of making their experience dramatically different or unusual.
6. see [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000653](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000653) for a factual account. See also [www.emedicine.com/EMERG/topic600](http://www.emedicine.com/EMERG/topic600) for an article by Dale Salandy.
7. Advertising, especially on television, is important because, while the content is indirect, it is nearly impossible nowadays for young girls not to know about tampons and their use.
8. I am excluding women whose first experience of sex precedes menstruation in the form of child sexual abuse. Our study did find such experiences, and we suspect that there are many more that we did not

find. For the purposes of this paper, I am leaving them to one side.

9. Most of the participants in our study were Christian, but from many denominations: Catholic, Anglican, United, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist. The Catholics and the fundamentalist sects were more articulate and more repressive about sex, but otherwise there was little difference between their teachings. All school education in Newfoundland was denominational until 1997.

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