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STIGMA OF STAINING? NEGOTIATING MENSTRUAL TABOOS AMONGST YOUNG WOMEN IN KENYA

Abstract: Biologically most women menstruate and yet various conceptions of menstrual blood as polluting and dangerous have circumscribed their behaviour in oppressive ways. Whilst there is vast literature on the origins, meanings and restrictions put in place by perceiving menstruation in this light, less is appreciated about how stigmatisation of women's bodies is heightened in contexts of economic vulnerability. Using interviews, focus group discussions and participant diaries with secondary school-aged young women in Oyugis, Kenya, we analyse the everyday experiences and challenges that they face in managing their menses. Through exploring restrictions to their mobilities and spatial practices, we posit the need to consider why and how gender hierarchies exist and are perpetuated. Menstruation is shrouded in secrecy and silence and, coupled with lack of access to sanitary towels, hinders educational prospects and life chances. We bring this issue to the fore to argue for a multi-pronged approach that recognises how gender and **other** material inequities intersect with socio-cultural geographies. This is paramount if young women, and future generations of youth, are to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

Key words: Stigma, Menstruation, Adolescence, Church, School, Kenya

1. Introduction

An advert for Tampax Pearl in 2005 pictured a scuba diver swimming a few feet away from a shark, captioned "A leak can attract unwanted attention" (as cited in Thomas, 2007, 65). The advert trivialises the myth that animals can sense menstrual blood, implying that menstruation is dangerous and possibly even deadly. This portrayal of menstrual blood as a 'hygienic crisis' is common amongst Western advertisements, which often suggest menstruation is a process to be dealt with secretly. Menstruation however is not just stigmatised in the West. South Asian countries are notorious for singling out menstruating women; the visible presence of signboards at places of worship in India, warning menstruating women against entering temple premises, or young Nepalese women relegated to a shed¹ while menstruating illustrate the point. Likewise, in predominantly tribal societies, the stain of menstrual stigma takes equally vivid forms by significantly curtailing women's behaviour.

As Grahn (1993) notes, the word taboo stems from the Polynesian 'tapua', which is actually translated as menstruation. The sex and communication taboo—that intercourse is to be avoided during menses and the secrecy surrounding menstruation—is common across many developing, emerging and high-income countries, and relates to stigma (see Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Whilst menstrual taboos are a universal phenomenon, the way they manifest and the meanings ascribed are multivalent because of its variation across and within social, religious and cultural contexts (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). Sociologists and anthropologists

¹ Sheds, outhouses and huts are the names used in various parts of the world to denote a space located outside of the main house/home; and they can be used interchangeably.

have studied menstrual taboos in depth, most notably in academic literature where they have been equated with oppressing and reducing the status of women (Young, 1965, 2005). Many academics therefore postulate that the creation and acceptance of such taboos exist to maintain structure and order in society, validating patriarchal structures (Douglas, 1966). By enforcing social control in this way, menstrual taboos bear upon women's emotional state, physical wellbeing and overall lifestyle.

Using a case study of a local community in Kenya, we outline how the emphatic use of the imperative 'taboo' alongside 'menstruation' serves as a powerful tool of language in which to restrict and control women. The significance of this for young women and the challenges that they face is emphasized in our paper. The study thus provides insight into the bodily repression of women via menstrual taboos and its significance for schooling. We show how disgust for women's bleeding is deeply internalized, subjecting women to a plethora of rules and restrictions, circumscribing their movements, activities and broader life chances (Holden, 2001). The reason for us to focus on the social and cultural geographies of young women's everyday experiences of menses is two-fold. Firstly, while girls in the Global South are becoming the central focus of various interventions and investments, Caron and Margolin (2015:885) astutely note "girls are constructed both as victims and saviours of the global economy" without any reflection on why and how gender hierarchies exist and are perpetuated. Secondly, there is a paucity of registering and recording how girls' everyday mobilities and spatial practices are hindered by menstruation (Jewitt and Ryley 2014). Our paper then attempts to redress these two key concerns with a focus on adolescent girls and their everyday lived experiences.

We structure our paper as follows: we firstly define and deconstruct the notion of menstrual taboos from a theoretical and material perspective, illustrating how they constrain girls² and women across various geographical spaces. Here we also underscore the need to appreciate how social and cultural facets interact with socio-economic structures and ideologies that bear upon the everyday experiences of young women. This provides a backdrop to a narration on the fieldwork, methodology and ethical protocol in section three. Outlining the menstrual taboos that vary according to tribe, we critically examine how this plays out in religious settings in the fourth section. Sections 5 and 6 scrutinise the link between menstruation and schooling, and uncover the nexus with poverty to signal the structural facets that also bear upon everyday lived experiences of adolescent youth. We conclude with some summary thoughts on implications for feminist theory and practice.

² Because of ethical protocol within the University of Edinburgh, the data we analyse focuses on an 18-21 year old age group; however, during our research adolescent girls maintained field diaries too, as they wanted to get journals to account for their experiences. While our analysis does not draw upon these younger groups because menses affects girls and youth alike, there are points in this paper where we use girls, youth or young women interchangeably.

2. Menstrual Symbolism: Pollution and Dirt

Menstrual blood has most commonly been tied to notions of pollution, danger and evil, which has compelled certain societies to consider this biological process a ‘taboo’. Academic literature suggests that menstrual taboos exist to protect the community from menstruating women – who are alleged to be dirty and contaminating (Lee and Sasser-Cohen, 1996). Some existing literature on menstruation has been framed within Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) find that menstrual blood is a stigmatising mark that fits all three categories in Goffman’s work on stigma. First, it is considered unclean and disgusting (“abomination of the body”), secondly, it leads to avoidance and social distancing due to aversions to menstrual blood; and thirdly, girls/women are differentially treated to the normative and privileged male body.

Interventions by other feminist scholars have furthered this line of inquiry. Women’s bodily fluids are conceptualized as leaking and uncontrollable; hence subject to social control (Grosz 1994, Longhurst 2001). Scholarship has traced how, even as both men and women exude bodily fluids, the system of meaning making in our social world inscribe and mark women’s bodies in multiple ways. This meaning making ascribed to bodies reflect the patriarchal social ordering and structuring, and hence power relations between men and women. Menstrual taboos then need to be viewed as a form of social and patriarchal control, reflecting men’s discomfort with uncontrollable bodily fluids that needs to be contained (Longhurst 2001). Likewise, the stigmata associated with menses also reflects the view that menstruation is dirty, and as Grosz (1994:201) notes “dirt is what disrupts order, and order is conceived of as an arbitrary arrangement of elements in relative stability or harmony”. Where the patriarchal order is disrupted by the lure of menstruating women and their potent power, controlling women becomes a matter of vigilance. Yet for Grosz (1994), the centrality of appreciating bodies also as culturally interwoven and invested in historical, political, social and cultural facets is needed to appreciate “the centrality of the problematic of sexual difference to the ways in which we conceive of and act in the world” (1994:210). Our research is a modest effort to address the need to recognise how stigma attached to menstruating young women in Kenya is circumscribing their spatial and social movement.

Whilst menstrual taboos are a global phenomenon, the extent to which they impact upon the activities and movement of women undoubtedly varies spatially and temporally. Controlling the leakage of menstrual blood can be physically and psychologically challenging for women living in societies that identify menstrual blood as inherently dirty and harmful. In contrast to Western women, women from other cultures are less able to “pass” (Goffman,

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1963), which is used to illustrate how individuals hide and remain silent about their menses, which indirectly perpetuates the stigma (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013). Understanding how bodies and the spaces they inhabit as socially constructed is important for reasons that Goffman (1963) notes; yet as Longhurst (2001) and Longhurst and Johnston (2014) remark, it is equally important to be attentive to the everyday materiality within which bodies navigate social and spatial restrictions (see also Faria 2008, Langevang and Gough 2009). When we draw into our research on how poverty and inequality intersect with social and cultural taboos, we are also responding to the volatility of bodies in a material context.

For our purposes, studies on menstrual taboos have illustrated how menstruation restricts the movements and activities of young women (Sommer, 2010; Jewitt and Ryley, 2014). Constructing menstruation as polluting and unclean means that men can actively impose barriers to women's behaviour and access to certain places (Koutroulis, 2001), where spatial restrictions harm women's self-esteem. Thus, the examination of menstruation can help reveal the existence of unequal gendered power relations in patriarchal societies, which construct spatial boundaries for women. For as Grosz (1994) notes "patriarchal oppression.... justifies itself,... by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and,..., restricting women's social and economic roles..." (1994:14). These restrictions placed on women while menstruating vary from "generally held beliefs that menstrual blood is somehow dangerous through a wide variety of limitations on personal behaviour, requirements that men and male things be avoided, and... physical seclusion in a hut or segregated area" (Young and Bacdayan, 1965, 225). Monthly exile is one of the most severe restrictions relating to menstrual taboos, exposing women to death by wild animals and rape during the time of menstruation (Das, 2014). Banishing menstruating adolescent girls to sheds is common in some areas of Nepal, and disturbingly also resulted in the death of a young teenager due to the cold (BBC, 2016).

Restrictions and challenges young women face in school are particularly understudied in low and lower-middle income countries. Cultural sensitivity surrounding menstruation means that reproductive health education is often not formally taught in schools. Studies in East Africa suggest that urban migration, the impact of HIV/AIDS, opportunities to attend formal schooling and the influences of globalisation have all been linked to a breakdown in familial traditions that once provided guidance to girls about menstruation (Faria 2008, Sommer 2009, McMahon et al 2011, Sommer 2013, Malusu and Zani 2014). While social and cultural restrictions are likely to hinder how young girls access resources and their spatial mobility (Langevang and Gough 2009, Jewitt and Ryley 2014), the tendency amongst development agents, agencies and practitioners - to attribute and assume access to sanitary wear may liberate young girls from the structural facets that hold them back - requires equal scrutiny (Caron and Margolin 2015). So when the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed how young girls' lack of education is detrimental for national development: "there is no tool for

development more effective than the education of girls” (cited in IHRP, 2013, 1), he was capturing just one dimension to the structural realities that also bear upon girls. Inadequate knowledge of basic sanitation, the reproductive system, pregnancy and the menstrual cycle undoubtedly will make adolescent girls struggle through their transition to womanhood. However, as our empirical evidence reveals, these facets alone do not reveal the entire story.

Without an understanding of basic sanitation, adolescents struggle to both manage and hide their menses in school, where, often due to embarrassment and shame, these adolescents suffer dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation) in silence (Chothe et al, 2014, McMahon et al 2011). The shock, confusion and fear of starting their period can be overwhelming and with teachers inadequately trained on reproductive health, many young women quit formal education. Young women who do stay in school struggle to focus, leading to pronounced gender gaps in educational achievement (Malusu and Zani, 2014). With education a major factor in determining the life chances for women and their families, the needs of pre- and post-pubescent young women need to be heard.

Existing research predominantly identifies possible origins, meanings and restrictions behind menstrual taboos, yet the influence of menstruation on young women’s school attendance and attainment has received less attention (McMahon et. al. 2011). To fill this lacuna in the scholarship, capturing the perspectives of young women themselves is crucial (Sommer, 2010). Our paper engages primarily with young women aged 18-21 about their feelings and experiences of living with such taboos, including their embarrassment and shame at going to school as poverty hinders them from accessing sanitary wear. We explore how these factors have a bearing on their everyday lives, and how together they can cause them to miss or drop out of school.

Current literature and policy recommendations focusing on educating adolescent women fail to address the pertinence of local customs and practices that prevent them from managing their menses adequately. Even though these challenges are significant, all too simplistically the clarion call to address them becomes another gendered trope: “adolescent girls of today are the mothers of tomorrow and the forebears of the future” (Chothe et al, 2014, 325). Caron and Margolin (2015) do an admirable job in tracing for feminist scholars the pitfalls of perpetuating gendered policies, where investing in girls to be their own saviours out of poverty, a structural reality, is bound in fantasy and failure for multiple reasons. To understand the impact that menstrual taboos can have on schooling in our paper, we take a social and cultural approach by focusing on the perspectives of young women themselves. In doing so, we are distancing ourselves from simplistic arguments that deleterious cultural taboos can be broken through one- dimensional interventions, while also grappling with entreaties of feminist scholars on the fluidity and volatility of bodies.

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3. In the Field

The focus of our study is one small town in Kenya, a country that also encompasses menstrual taboos but has been given comparatively less attention than India or Nepal (see Chothe et al. 2014, Das. 2014, Dhingra et al. 2009). To gather the voices of young women, the first author spent a month in Oyugis, Kenya, during July 2015. Schoolgirls that participated in the study were 18-21 years olds, who had sometimes repeated years of schooling due to not having passed the necessary end-of-year exams. They were comfortable in speaking and writing in English, which facilitated rapport between the first author and the students. By focusing on older adolescents at the secondary school level, we provide a unique study to uncover how they negotiate menstrual taboos, not just at the onset of menstruation but throughout their school life and puberty. This fills a void in the literature in East Africa, which has mostly focused on younger, often primary or secondary school aged-girls (see: McMahon et al. 2011, Mason et al 2013, Boosey et al 2014, Jewitt and Ryley 2014).

Oyugis in Kenya was a suitable location to investigate such a sensitive topic (see Figure 1), partly because the first author had links to AMANI UK – a charity that has set up a programme called ‘Keep A Girl In School’ (KAGIS) in Kenya. KAGIS recognises that while secondary education is free there are other expenses entailed in attending school, thus the charity provides needy school-aged girls, irrespective of age, with sanitary towels. Because of this backdrop, the first author was able to gain access to schools and homes in Oyugis. The majority of participants had either heard of or been supported by the charity. This facilitated open discussion about a personal and sensitive topic that is full of “ambiguities, contradictions and are shrouded in emotionality” (Lee and Sasser-Cohen 1993, 104). As the first author was a young woman of a not dissimilar age, the researcher and the participants were able to relate to each other about the biological process of menstruation, facilitating detailed conversation based on mutual respect, trust and understanding. Yet, as we detail below, there was initial difficulty in garnering data.



Originally semi-structured interviews were to be a key tool used to collect data, partly because interviews can help to “explore the subjective values, beliefs and thoughts of individual respondent[s]” (O’Connell-Davidson and Layder 1994, 125). Yet we were unable to gather more than seven interviews, comprising five with students and two with KAGIS charity workers, because there was a reluctance to open up during formal interviews – although participants were not shy of asking penetrating questions to the interviewer about women’s reproductive health and menstruation. With the subject matter undoubtedly involving a sensitive topic that intrudes into the private sphere for women (Renzetti and Lee, 1993), a flexible research methodology was selected to create a non-obtrusive environment for the participants. In the interest of being open, we decided to carry out focus group discussions (FGDs) in addition to the seven semi-structured interviews (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

The first author facilitated five FGDs with 10 school-going women each.³ By asking questions to a group it was easier to build a supportive environment for participants to share their feelings. The FGDs took an unstructured format to allow conversation to flow naturally in a more informal setting—an important consideration given the sensitivity of the topic; and because the participants were young women from the same school, they had common interests and were often friends. This resulted in more detailed and honest responses as it became clear that young women felt more comfortable discussing menstrual issues with those that they know. Each session was also conducted in an empty classroom to ensure privacy, and was digitally

³ In some FGDs, the first author was helped by a translator when KAGIS anticipated there may be language difficulties and could assist students in translating certain words into English.

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recorded. FGDs were held during lunchtime to ensure participants were not missing lessons and to allow for an hour of uninterrupted conversation. No incentives were provided but this did not concern the students, who were eager to ask menstruation-related questions after the FGD had finished.

Despite building rapport with young women, negotiating power-laden dynamics to encounters with respondents from a different cultural context was always going to be challenging (Valentine, 2008). Given this reality, KAGIS distributed journals to students one month prior to the first author's arrival and those that were interested in writing about their experiences and feelings surrounding menstrual taboos filled these in. Keeping a diary was entirely voluntary and no incentives were provided. Yet, we realise that KAGIS disbursing sanitary towels to students, which was and is an on-going activity, is likely to have borne positively on their participation in this research. During the fieldwork, there was not only an emphasis on the optional nature of keeping diaries or participating in the wider research, but also information was shared that the research was for academic purposes and journal keeping may have a therapeutic outcome. Additionally, because the request for journal keeping came from the first author and not classroom teachers, the separation between schoolwork and the research was made evident – as was the fact that diary entries were written when at home and not in class. Many of the participants were excited about keeping diaries because it also offered them a chance to clarify with the first author questions surrounding menstrual hygiene. There was hence a mutual beneficial exchange with the diary keeping. Besides, not just for this aspect to the research but to its entirety, information was shared and the optional nature of everyone's participation was emphasized – i.e. voluntary informed consent was obtained, either verbally, through signed forms or via them signing their first name on the diary, if they agreed to its use towards the research. Some students who kept diaries were also FGD participants.

This participatory tool of diary keeping was chosen to allow young women to overcome social barriers, uncovering information that respondents might otherwise want to conceal in the interviews and FGDs. Offering an understanding of the social reality from their perspective, it minimised the influence and bias from the first author and other FGD participants. Forty 18-21-year-old students across six schools in Oyugis were given two months to document their thoughts on the subject in the diaries. Our choice of cohort was a result of a combination of factors: to ensure that we kept within required ethical protocol at the University of Edinburgh by avoiding younger groups, to address a gap in the literature and because we found older youth still in schooling. We offered some guidance to the students by using broad themes that focused on their understandings around menses and how they negotiated this time period with family, kin, community and school, thus allowing diaries to capture reflections and feelings whilst maintaining consistency and structure. This method still left room for personal comment. The research diaries proved extremely useful in promoting “direct involvement of the informants”

and eliciting insights that were not obtained from verbal inquiries alone (Banks, 2001, 94). For instance, many diary entries focused in detail on stigma, particularly on the embarrassment and shame that adolescents face from boys at school.

As a young, white and upper middle-class British woman, the first author was also aware of her positionality and the need to be reflexive throughout the research period (see Valentine 2008). Whilst we recognise that spending one month in Kenya is not long enough to overcome the “power laden nature” of researching the lives of those from a different cultural context the aim was to try and reduce the power dynamic (Valentine, 2008). With us as committed feminists, there was a sincere effort to create “a less exploitative and more egalitarian relationship” between the participants and the researcher (McDowell, 1992, 406). It is because of our commitment to feminist methodological approaches that we wanted the research to remain flexible and creative – thus author one halted using conventional open-ended interviews while in the field and used FGDs in its place. Additionally, the first author spent the initial period of her visit building familiarity with the participants before embarking on the research.

In analysing these sources of data, we code them as D for diaries, FGD for focus group discussions, I for one-to-one interviews with students and C for one-to-one interviews with KAGIS charity workers, followed by enumeration. This is to uphold our promise of confidentiality to our participants and in keeping with approval obtained by the ethics board of the University of Edinburgh.

4 From Tribe to Church: Cultural Beliefs, Restrictions and (Mis)-Conceptions

There are 42 tribes in Kenya, each holding diverse thoughts on the restrictions that should be placed upon menstruating women. Several tribes live in Oyugis, where the research was conducted; the majority of respondents were Luo and Kisii. The data collated from the interviews, FGDs and diaries suggests that each tribe holds a range of beliefs, which are summarised in [Table 1](#). Whilst there is considerable variation and diversity amongst tribal beliefs, these cultural codes always negatively restrict women in some way, including assumptions about newly heightened sexual desires (see also Smiles et al. 2017). Many participants associated menses with being ‘dirty’ and ‘unholy’, thus not only revealing an asymmetrical power hierarchy between women and men but also reflecting Grosz’s (1994) observation on how dirty fluids disrupt the patriarchal order:

Table 1: Tribal beliefs about menstruation

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Tribe	Restrictions or Beliefs during menstruation
Luo	Not allowed to: attend church, pick vegetables or do farm work, look at yourself in the mirror, eat hot/sugary food, sing, sit on parent’s bed, climb trees, carry heavy items, communicate or have sex with men, attend community meetings, walk close to the river
Kisii	Not allowed to: attend church, pick vegetables or do farm work, look at yourself in the mirror, eat hot food, sit by the fire, have sex, do housework, see a patient in hospital
Kalenjin	Not allowed to: cook, pick vegetables or do farm work, must wake up every day before sunrise to bathe in the river until clean
Turkana	Must go to river and sit on sand banks to soak up blood
Luhya	Not allowed to: Sit next to men (i.e. in church or at school)

As ~~Table 1~~ **Table 1** shows, the most common restriction was that when menstruating women are not allowed to enter the *shamba* (farm) to pick vegetables. This was because of the widely held belief that such “contaminated” produce would become inedible, unsellable, dry up or burn. Two diary extracts reveal the depth of these views:

“I am not allowed to go to the vegetable plantation because when I go – during my menses vegetable will dry” (D12)

“During this state, am not allowed to go (to) the farm because I will burn the crops” (D13)

The idea that menstruating women have the capacity to spoil food is spread across many different cultures and religions and can be linked to Montgomery’s (1974) argument that menstrual blood is toxic and contaminating. The majority of families in Oyugis depend on their crops as a source of income and food and so young women took this restriction seriously. None of our respondents gave us the sense that they used these taboos as a way getting out of tasks that they found burdensome or considered drudgery; it echoes findings in related areas, where similar taboos are restrictive or place a particular onus on young women (Faria 2008, Langevang and Gough 2009).

In general, young women respondents did not have an explanation for their tribal beliefs or an understanding of why they followed them. When asked how they came to learn about these restrictions one student revealed, *“It is our culture. Everyone just knows that”* (FGD3). As Dhingra et al (2009) write, individuals often have a “strong bondage” with the traditional beliefs or taboos that exist in their culture; this is demonstrated in Oyugis by young women’s acceptance and compliance of these restrictions. As these philosophies have become

so intimately ingrained into the everyday social and cultural practices of this society, they have taken on an unquestioned quality (Kabeer, 2012; see also Faria 2008, Langevang and Gough 2009). In this respect menstrual taboos are analogous to Bourdieu's "doxa" (1977); they denote aspects of traditions tacit in nature yet in setting social boundaries they limit social and geographical mobility. These ideas have become firmly embedded into tribes, strengthening notions of patriarchal control.

Another commonly reported restriction, in this predominantly Christian town,⁴ was the inability to enter places of worship while menstruating. Menstrual blood was believed to contaminate sacred spaces, such as the church. Every participant that was Luo or Kisii mentioned this restriction; however, it is a taboo that has been found in many parts of the world, most noticeably across India (see: Kumar and Srivastava, 2011). In the diaries they elaborated on this point, where it was apparent that church communities perceived menstruating women as dirty, impure and unholy, and suggested they should be restricted from places of worship whilst menstruating:

"The church people always say that women are not allowed to attend church during menses because they are dirty and will cause chaos to others" (D11)

Koutroulis (2001) notes how such restrictions represent an example of menstruation being used as a form of control, with many feminist scholars linking religion to the way patriarchal cultures subordinate women (Grosz 1994, Daly 1985). By limiting women's access to religious spaces, menstrual taboos serve to constrain women's agency and power in everyday life, with many recognizing this marginalisation as unjust. As one young woman stated, *"Actually it is really unfair okay. It's really unfair to women who are avoiding the church because of menses, it's not our fault"* (FGD1), recognising her treatment in comparison to young men as unfair, particularly as Christian beliefs are strong in Oyugis. Consequently, menstrual restrictions form an asymmetrical power relation between men and women, revealing pervasive gender inequalities. In Oyugis, the church has become a space that perpetuates gender inequalities through isolating women when they menstruate. Despite places of worship being spread all over the world, the practices within them are not universal – with the same holding for the Church too; each place of worship has specific geographical practices that affect young women's everyday lives. In the case of Oyugis, we find that the Church is a space that perpetuates gender inequalities through isolating women when they menstruate, adding weight to arguments that "the subordination of women [is] the bedrock of all religion" (Jeffreys, 2013, 32).

⁴ With over 80% of Kenyans identifying as Christian (Reidl, 2012), the majority of participants were religious and so many reported feeling hurt by this restriction

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The interweaving of tribal beliefs with institutionalised Church practices in Kenya that exclude women during menses means that adolescent girls are socialised into normalising their “impurity”. Even as girls and young women are hurt and offended by these restrictive practices, segregating them from Church on a monthly basis also means separating them from their family members, kin or friends. The regularity and likely internationalization of their distinctiveness during menses is then likely to impact girls and young women throughout their lives, including in other spheres of everyday life. One such sphere is schooling, as we trace below.

5. Menstruation and Schooling

How do these tribal and religious practices matter for everyday life for secondary school going girls? Sensitivity surrounding menstruation and a lack of training has meant that, in Kenya, teachers feel ill-equipped and hesitant to teach basic sexual and reproductive health information in the school curricula (Sommer 2010, McMahon et al 2011, Sommer 2013, Jewitt and Ryley 2014). We found a significant number of participants being unaware of menstruation before it happened to them because of insufficient education about their bodies, with Smiles et al. (2017) making similar observations for Ethiopia. As menstrual blood is the only form of blood that comes without injury or wound, it tends to be considered “out of place” and extremely perplexing and difficult for these young women to comprehend (Douglas, 1966). Feelings of confusion and fear were common, as one student recalls:

“My first period I was shy, I thought I was sick because I didn’t tell anyone until I went to my teacher, I thought I was dying! She discussed it with me and told me how it was normal” (11)

This lack of knowledge manifests itself as shock and stress, which can be psychologically scarring. It has serious implications for the mental wellbeing and self-esteem of pubescent women. This vignette suggests that learning about menstruation does not happen in a classroom setting through formal lessons on female/male biology. Possibly due to the stigma built up around menstruation, the prospects for learning about sexual health is individualized — a worrying prospect for young women. Thus, the inadequate level of sexual health education and transition of unique beliefs from generation to generation suggest that young women may have to navigate these restrictions in their daily lives, including in schooling.

McMahon et al (2011) observe a lack of understanding of how menstruation may hinder the educational prospects of school-going young women. In many low and lower-middle income countries extreme poverty coupled with cultural beliefs that regard menses as ‘taboo’ present many obstacles for adolescent women in school. Consequently, students are forced to

adopt poor menstrual management practices, which impede their ability to concentrate in class (McMahon et al 2011, Mason et al 2013, Boosey et al 2014, Jewitt and Ryley 2014, Malusu and Zani 2014). All participants in our research noted how they had missed school at some point due to menstruation. As we show in the paragraphs to follow, young women spoke or wrote about how menses affected their ability to concentrate because of a lack of sanitary care and fears and embarrassment around leaking. Leaky and fluid bodies then become a source of anxiety that marks the start “of an out-of-control status” (Grosz 1994:205; see also Longhurst 2001). Yet we found that these trepidations are linked to practical and structural reasons too.

The first reason why concentration in the classroom is severely hampered is insufficient access to sanitary towels, which forces young women to use other less safe materials to absorb their menstrual blood:

“I try to use sanitary towels and if the sanitary towels are not available I was told that in traditional they used animal skins” (D46)

Similar observations were made repeatedly by a number of local charity workers, where they highlighted how young girls would partition their sanitary towel, use leaves or old clothing material. Our finding echoes Jewitt and Ryley (2014), and adds more as our students noted that they used the same material repeatedly. Re-used materials, they said, would rub against their skin and produce chafing and open sores, making them vulnerable to infection (Mason et. al. 2013, Parker et al, 2014). There is a further risk noted by Paul (2007) and Kaiser (2016), who suggest that menstrual blood creates a pathway for bacteria to travel back to the uterus and so the use of unclean materials, such as mops and leaves can support the growth of unwanted bacteria in the vagina, and lead to further infections. Therefore, young women frequently tolerate discomfort as a result of making their own sanitary towels. This can prevent students from fully engaging in lessons and, consequently, they struggle to understand what is being taught.

“During education you will not be comfortable in a class or a place where you are sitting and sometimes you will not understand what the teacher is teaching during that time” (D39)

These issues arise because young women do not have commercial sanitary pads. This can be attributed not only to the cultural sensitivity surrounding menstruation in Oyugis that is likely to prevent adolescent girls from purchasing sanitary wear openly, but also to pervasive poverty. Even though there have been initiatives to remove taxes and customs fees to make sanitary towels more affordable (Callister, 2008), many families in Oyugis are still too poor to afford sanitary towels with one pack costing KSH 80 (approximately USD 0.78):

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“Yes they [sanitary towels] are very expensive. You know in our school people are very poor so it means for us to have them it will cost us so much. Many of us cannot afford them so we come up with other things” (FGD4)

Tearfund (2009) has estimated that, on average, buying sanitary towels for one woman could cost a poor family 10 per cent of their income each month. For families on or below the poverty line, apportioning 10 per cent of their budget towards sanitary wear is unlikely. The issue then is more than one of affordability: it is about poverty that thwarts girls and women, rendering their access to basic resources improbable, thus burdening their everyday lives and well-being.

Another way menstruation interrupts students’ focus is due to the fear of leaking on their uniform. Critical social science and feminist theorists, including Goffman (1963), Grosz (1994), Longhurst (2001), have traced how the visibility of menstruation via leakages and menstrual blood serves as an emblem that stigmatises women. Blood can easily permeate makeshift sanitary pads and during lessons they can fall out, leading students to become anxious (see also Jewitt and Ryley 2014). In particular many young women were worried that they would be called up in front of the class to write on the board, in which case any stains would be visible to peers. Patterson (2013) notes how revealing one’s stigmatised condition may result in social distancing and participants in our research discussed the fear of being outcast if their menstrual status was known. In some cases, students had initiated certain practices to hide their status, but menstruation still affected their behaviour:

“I cannot concentrate because I know that the blood can come out on my clothes and when I get up I must talk to my friend to look for me at my back whether there is blood there. I feel shy to walk around” (I5)

As a result of possible infection caused by makeshift sanitary towels paired with a fear of leaking, it is unsurprising that McMahon et al (2011, 2) in a study in rural Kenya concludes, “girls’ view menstruation as the most significant social stressor and barrier to schooling”. This is not only due to menstruation being a taboo topic that is not addressed during sexual health education at school, but also because Oyugis is a town stricken with poverty, making it difficult to purchase adequate sanitary products.

Stigma prevents open discussion about menstruation, which fuels adolescent perceptions that it is shameful. Many young women, therefore, remain silent about their menstrual problems:

“In my community I am not allowed to discuss it with my father because we give our fathers respect. It is a secret between mother and daughter” (D22)

“I tell nobody, I am total orphan. I live with my uncle but I fear to tell him” (D23)

A study completed in 59 primary schools in Malawi attributed 33 per cent of truancy to sickness and only 2.4% to menstrual issues (Grant et al 2010). All participants in our study revealed how they are too ashamed to admit that menstruation is the reason for their low attendance and instead used sickness as a euphemism for menstruation: *“I ask for permission to go be absent due to sickness – I don’t say it’s because of menses”* (FGD3). Consequently, the link between absenteeism and menstruation has been downplayed in studies on educational attendance in low and lower-middle income countries, and yet remains a crucial link if young women’s school experience is to be fully appreciated.

Another trigger of embarrassment is how young schoolboys react to menstruation. Callister (2008) notes that despite menstruation being humiliating for girls across the globe, shame is magnified in youngsters that have no privacy, which is the case for many in the Global South. Studies have described how women are subject to ‘eve teasing’; the sexual harassment or molestation by men in public places (Omdutt, 2013, Langevan & Gough 2009, Faria 2008). This is particularly strong after girls reach menarche because of a perceived link to sexual readiness (McMahon et al. 2011, Mason et. al. 2013, Jewitt and Ryley 2014, Mason et al. 2015). Smiles et al. (2017) in their research in Ethiopia find a belief that menarche is a result of engaging in sexual intercourse, whereas our finding is that it is an indication that an adolescent girl has reached womanhood and therefore is able to have intercourse. While seemingly subtle, it is an important distinction and a reminder of the contextual specificity regarding menstrual taboos.

We found that in school, a large proportion of participants had also been victims of harassment:

“There was a day that my uniform was destroyed and some pupils were laughing and others were just looking at me as if I had a plastic nose. The boys were shouting menses, menses, menses over and over!” (I2)

“At the time I am in my menses the boys don’t want to see me because I’m dirty and they sense when you are in your menses. Boys treat us badly during the days that we are in our menses” (D9)

Harassment and humiliation from men thus becomes an insidious everyday reality. School becomes a place young women dread each month while they menstruate, signalling a manifestation of deep-rooted patriarchal cultural norms in Kenya. As Adawo et al (2011, 9) notes, “African history is replete with diverse examples of... women’s oppression”, and so women battling various social injustices is commonplace – and as we show in this paper starts from their young days. How adolescent women are inflicted with physical and mental harm

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while in school not only reflects gender-based oppression but also represents a wider danger to society by instilling a culture of violence against women as an acceptable mind-set.

As a result of this humiliation and shame, all participants agreed they had missed school due to menstruation. Some participants said that during their menses they were missing school every month for three to seven days each time:

“When I am attending, I feel uncomfortable, I feel fear the blood can come out on my uniform. I miss school for seven days on every month sometimes” (D11)

One study estimates that missing around four days of school each month equates to losing up to 25% of pupil-teacher contact time. This puts young women at a huge disadvantage against their male peers (Kaberia, 2012), resulting in pronounced gender gaps in educational achievements in Kenya (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang, 2004, UNESCO 2012, Jewitt and Ryley, 2014).

Our participants reported that sports lessons were most affected, as they again feared they might leak or that makeshift sanitary towels would fall out, particularly whilst running. Schools are also culpable of perpetuating existing taboos because they control the mobility of girls and their involvement in schooling activities, for instance, because mixing with boys while menstruating is deemed inappropriate – as per widely held beliefs amongst some tribes. While the literature on menstruation and stigma does not interrogate the connections between cultural beliefs and menstrual stigma, Langevang and Gough (2009) remark on its relevance for youth mobility. In our research context, the effect was for many participants to miss out on opportunities to qualify for teams, play in matches and in one case not go away on tour:

“She was supposed to be going away to play volleyball with her school but because she was on her period she wasn’t allowed too, the school told her she couldn’t... but it’s so sad because she works really hard to be on her team, it’s her thing. She’s amazing. So for someone who’s so good at something to miss out just because she is on her period is crazy” (C1)

“My games teacher can be punishing me because I don’t want to run because if I run that blanket can fall down and others will laugh” (D23)

Many young women said they were so uncomfortable and anxious that they had stopped playing or missed sports lessons when they were menstruating, an aspect that existing literature fails to adequately highlight. Their spatial movement is curtailed, illustrating how menstruation can impede young women from pursuing activities that they enjoy. Stigma represents an infringement of these women’s rights to human dignity, privacy, equality and non-discrimination.

Menstruating in school presents many challenges for these young women to face monthly, restricting their ability to learn and engage in lessons. Unaffordable sanitary towels forces women to construct their own protection, which creates a constant paranoia around the visibility of menstrual blood. In particular, teasing by young men causes significant humiliation and is extremely demoralising for young girls. Hence, high rates of absenteeism during monthly periods are common, with many also feeling that they can no longer participate in sports. Menstruation clearly affects young women's education in a number of ways, and these have wider implications, as the next section outlines.

6. Sex, Stigma and Schooling Success?

Finck (2015) reports that chronic absenteeism (classified as missing a minimum of 15 days per year) translates into reduced engagement in lessons, weaker reading skills, and lower overall academic performance. As a significant number of our participants reported missing school for up to a week each month due to menstruation their absence can be categorised as chronic. This can affect young women's academic performance, leading to lower grades:

“If we don't have sanitary towels we just stay home, we lose lessons and we find our performance in school will not be good 'cause if you miss lessons every month you will be missing a lot” (FGD2)

“It is not easy to catch up with work we've missed and we would all say our grades drop because of this [nods]. I would say around 10% [per subject]” (FGD3)

With Kenyan students only progressing through school if they pass the end-of-year exam, there are consequently high proportions of women over the age of 18 still in secondary school who have been forced to repeat years as a result of missing too many classes. Many of our participants expressed frustration about how unjust it was to receive lower grades and have to repeat the year due to menstrual-related absence.

During FGDs many participants discussed the ways that they tried to catch up with schoolwork due to missed classes, one of which was to take schoolwork home. However, unlike previous studies exploring menstruation and education (see, for example, Jewitt and Ryley, 2014, Boosey et al 2014), we uncover how poverty in Oyugis means that students have inadequate facilities at home to allow them to catch up on work:

“They often just miss it [schoolwork] completely. Okay in most of their homes they don't have electricity or light so even if they go home with extra notes to copy from class that they missed they might not have enough light to do it. And that is why they continue lagging behind” (C2)

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However, this is not just about electricity; many families in Oyugis have no access to pens, paper or desks. Typically, families live in cramped huts with one or two rooms, meaning that there is no quiet space for studying. Evidently there are many aspects contributing to poor attendance and achievement, which points to the primacy of context; this was a particularly prominent issue for the poorest students living in rural areas. It suggests that feminist demands for equality via access to education, when implemented in Oyugis, for instance, would have little traction for Kenyan women. As Caron and Margolin (2015:894) remark, “to continue implementing new campaigns without a theoretical and ideological analysis promises more of the same result”; in other words, failure or partial success is inscribed because the structures perpetuating poverty remain intact. Whilst this research focuses on understanding menstrual taboos, it is paramount to highlight economic vulnerabilities as heightening the effects of stigma. How lack of facilities bears upon young women from catching up on schoolwork also needs registering in order to appreciate poor educational achievement. As Parker et al (2014) notes, young women feel undignified when they are unable to manage their menses adequately, with a profound effect on schoolwork – and this resonated in our fieldwork too.

Some young women who were uncomfortable, embarrassed and unable to keep up with schoolwork had given up on schooling completely. While we conducted research with young women who were attending school, the charity workers often attributed school dropout not just to menses but to its’ coupling with economic deprivation:

“There was one girl who would have extreme periods and I think her family decided she wasn’t spending enough time at school and they couldn’t afford it so they stopped her from going to school.” (C1)

“In a month they are likely to be away from school between four days to a week, and when it goes on and on with cramps and they don’t know how to navigate about their teen years they just say to hell with school! Because if I feel like this every month in school then what do I have to go to school for?” (C2)

Charity workers also noted how once young women leave school completely they might be more at risk of becoming young brides and subsequently becoming pregnant. They also underlined how the lack of or limited education also means that there is the danger of repeating the same cycle with their daughters. Even as the views of charity workers focus on seemingly evident themes picked up by the extant literature (see McMahon et al 2011, Jewitt and Ryley 2014), there is a feminist imperative to acknowledge that these perspectives also risk bolstering gendered tropes of all young girls with limited education as child brides, experiencing early pregnancy and motherhood (Caron and Margolin 2015). These perils inevitably exist, yet they

ought not to be foregone conclusions where intersections between gender ideologies, patriarchal structures and material circumstances continue to reverberate.

The prevalence of transactional sex – where young girls and women are vulnerable and open to sexual overtures in return for the promise of sanitary wear – has been written about in Kenya and other sub-Saharan African countries (Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2001, Mason et al 2013, Malusu and Zani 2014, Jewitt and Ryley 2014, Sommer et. al. 2016). We too found its disturbing existence both in diary excerpts and interviews with charity workers, as one worker explains:

“I’ve heard that a lot of the piki pik drivers, so the guys that ride motorbikes, use them to bribe the girls so they say oh we’ll give you a free lift if you do this or we’ll give you a sanitary towel if you give me a blowjob or whatever” (C1)

As a result, students prefer asking their parents for sanitary products:

“I may ask my parent to buy them for me because when I ask somebody else apart from my parent or guardian they may charge at a higher cost. When you ask your boyfriend he will buy them for you but he will have to sleep with you. This destroys your schooling and even your life!” (D32)

In participants’ diaries adolescent girls felt able to talk about personal experiences regarding transactional sex, in contrast to previous studies where information came from teachers or charity workers, or from students who indirectly referred to the practice (see Mason et. al. 2011, Jewitt and Ryley 2014). Due to a lack of sexual health education and contraception transactional sex can dramatically and adversely impact upon the lives of adolescent girls. Whilst some participants were aware of the possibility of pregnancy and disease, in order to attend school they still performed sexual acts in exchange for sanitary products. This underscores the desperation of poverty compounding young women’s desire to manage their menses and complete their education.

Women, in particular from the Luo and Kisii tribes, stated that they should abstain from sex during menstruation (see Table 1). Knight (1991) speculates that women may have inaugurated this prohibition on sex themselves as a way to control men, thereby suggesting that women have perpetuated this taboo for their own ‘gain’, thus downplaying the patriarchal structures that constrain women’s everyday lives. In contrast, our participants reported that men pursue sex most while women are menstruating (see also Langevang and Gough 2009). Home alone their absence from school renders them more vulnerable and is also a visible reminder that these girls’ are “sexually mature” and fertile. This finding diverges from Koutroulis’ (2001, 197) assumption that menses “poses a barrier to sex in men’s eyes”, as the following examples illustrate:

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“During your menses others may abuse you or start to talk to you. Others will force you to have sex. You must be careful with that situation from boys.” (D8)

“During that period [whilst menstruating] they like playing with me. During that situation I feel uncomfortable” (D22)

By wanting to touch and have sexual relations with menstruating women the behaviour of men thus serves to confound the entrenched taboos that menstruating women are ‘polluting’ and ‘dirty’. What should be a celebrated rite of passage into womanhood is being used as an instrument for sexual violence (Malusu and Zani 2014). Even as women undergoing menses are perceived to be dirty, their disruption to the patriarchal order takes a socio-culturally and materially specific form in Oyugis, Kenya – and it is this temporal, spatial and social specificities that feminist scholars, such as Grosz (1994), Longhurst (2001), Longhurst and Johnston (2014), have suggested that we be attentive to and analyse.

We have traced here how adolescent girls suffer from chronic absence and attempt to catch up with schoolwork in their own time, but inadequate resources and facilities at home render this highly challenging. Consequently, these girls get lower grades and thus have to repeat years, with others having to dropout from school altogether, with subsequent risks of early marriage and pregnancy. In an attempt to prevent absence and dropout, some adolescent girls engage in transactional sex to purchase sanitary pads or face sexual harassment from their peers. Lastly, for those that do stay at home whilst menstruating, they are vulnerable to sexual violence.

7. Conclusions

Using the everyday lived experiences of young women in Oyugis, Kenya, we have demonstrated that menstruation is not simply a biological process; like elsewhere, it is peppered with contextually specific social and cultural meanings. Instead of simplistically attributing the everyday lived experiences of adolescent women to gender-inflected social and cultural geographies alone, however, we have also established how material deprivation influences their access to resources and life prospects. By doing so we are heeding the call by Caron and Margolin (2015) to unravel more than the perceptions and restrictions surrounding menstruation that feed into single dimensional girl-centric campaigns. Our research also helps reveal embedded gender and material inequalities that intersect with socio-cultural geographies. These unequal power relations can be traced back to deeply internalised and patriarchal values that have permitted powerful constructions of menstrual blood as harmful and polluting. Whilst

menstruation hygiene management is context specific, and these findings are from one particular community, our findings are relevant to other geographies where menstrual taboos are reproduced and perpetuated.

Our research points to how gendered inequalities and spatial constraints inform the everyday lives of adolescent women in Oyugis, which range from Church to school. One way these deeply entrenched power structures diminish women's autonomy is via numerous tribal beliefs that marginalise women. In particular, the tribe's perception of menstruating women as 'unholy' served to constrain women's mobility by limiting their access to places of worship. The lack of sexual health education has also allowed unusual beliefs to arise in relation to women's bodies. Woven throughout these unique tribal beliefs are subtle yet oppressive barriers for menstruating women, with the result that the rules and restrictions placed upon them have become normalised. It also speaks to Grosz's (1994) solicitations of the need to appreciate bodies as invested in temporal and historical specificities rather than as merely biological entities. By making these connections, our research underlines how the social, spatial and cultural realms intersect with material conditions of the local setting.

Our paper explores how cultural sensitivity that enshrouds menstruation and lack of adequate sanitary pads are products of societal gendered norms, which are further reinforced by church and school alike. Young women's ability to concentrate in class is impeded for a multitude of reasons, including their feeling ill equipped to manage their menses in school which produces gender disparities in educational absenteeism and attainment. This is despite our sample comprising of older adolescents, where one would expect them to be better equipped to deal with menses than younger girls. Our paper therefore illuminates how the everyday spatial mobility of adolescent women is significantly reshaped and curtailed when they reach puberty.

This is as much about poverty then as it is about cultural stigma, which both informs and shapes one another. Poverty has resulted in girls not being able to afford sanitary towels, which causes them shame and embarrassment (McMahon et al 2011, Mason et al 2013). This forces them to remain silent each month, often missing school for days. Yet whilst at home, they are prevented from catching up on schoolwork due to material deprivation of their families and inadequate study facilities. By highlighting the nexus to poverty, our research adds to Jewitt and Ryley's (2014) study on menstruation and adolescent's attendance and achievement – where the primary focus is on providing sanitary products and which inadvertently downplays the material structures that lead to young women's inability to access such hygiene products in the first place. In contrast to Grant et al's (2010) study we also argue that the connection between menstruation and absenteeism is crucial to understand and examine if the veil of silence surrounding menstruation in Kenya is to be uncovered and taboos broken. Due to

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menstrual-related issues, many young women drop-out from education, with consequences for Kenya's economy, and the health and wellbeing of its current and future generations.

Our paper also drew attention to the wider implications of the challenges that adolescent women face whilst menstruating; the extent to which menstrual taboos perpetuate a culture of sexual harassment and violence against young women who are forced to sell sex in return for sanitary products. Whilst menstrual blood is conceptualized as 'polluting', it is ironic that men use the high demand for sanitary care at this time to bribe women sexually.

Unequal gendered ideologies prominent in Kenyan culture intersected with material deprivation have relegated menses to be shameful and embarrassing. While our conclusions are part of an on-going contemporary debate surrounding gendered concerns and girl-centric poverty interventions, by producing adolescent women's narratives of their everyday experiences of menses, our research provides a useful insight into the challenges developing countries face – and the need to be constantly attentive to cognate and intersecting ideologies of gender, structure and materiality.

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