

The body politics of menstruation: technologies, sustainability and destigmatization

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Abstract

In the last few years, menstrual hygiene management (MHM) advocates, scholars and policy makers have positioned menstrual health as a critical concern for development policy, pointing to what they depict as a major hygiene crisis of the Global South which is adversely harming young women's development. This concerted effort to bring menstrual health to development attention has resulted in considerable resources being poured into countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South-Asia. The major narrative in this development effort is for young women to access reusable or disposable menstrual management technologies, and access to sanitation facilities. What is addressed less directly is how to counter menstrual stigma and how menstruation is not a medical or health issue alone but has important social and ecological impacts. In this PhD I seek to move beyond the enthusiasm of MHM to create technical solutions to an apparent health 'crisis' and address more deeply how changes in attitudes to menstruation can be understood.

In order to do so, I look at how contemporaneously with MHM, menstrual activism has emerged which focuses not just on technological solutions per se but on breaking the stigma of menstruation and its socio-ecological importance for women's health and well-being. The menstrual activist narrative aims to promote education about the menstrual cycle and advancing women's self-knowledge and practice around their sexual and reproductive health.

In order to look at how these two narratives, MHM and menstrual activism, contribute to and shape the current debates around menstruation, I examine the case of Argentina. Argentina has a vibrant and expanding network of menstrual health activists who openly question the MHM framework by proposing alternatives that aim to educate women about their sexual and reproductive health. While in dialogue with the MHM, menstrual activism also recognizes the necessity for women to be provided with ways to make informed choices that are embedded within their socio-economic reality. The thesis takes Argentina as a case study in order to describe and analyze the processes involved in building what I identify as an emerging change in menstrual culture at different scales. My analysis is based on empirical data collected

online from March 2015 to April 2019 and field research conducted in Argentina from August 2016 to January 2017.

My analysis is guided by five entry points. The point of departure is a global overview of how menstrual health is being positioned in the public agenda and especially focusing on development policy. I continue to define the problem in the second chapter of the thesis by introducing a qualitative analysis of the waste management of disposable menstrual management technologies, detailing the magnitude of the environmental impact it creates. While showing that there *is* public awareness of the problem and of possible solutions, but stigma around menstruation prevents discussions on this topic. This exploration was published in a co-authored chapter titled "The Argentinean Zero Waste Framework: implementation gaps and over-sight of reusable menstrual management technologies" (Gaybor & Chavez, 2019). Chapter 3 takes up Joan Tronto's understanding of ethics of care to discuss the ideological dimension behind the emerging everyday body politics of menstruation. This analysis was published as a book chapter entitled "Menstrual politics in Argentina and diverse assemblages of care" (Gaybor, 2018). Chapter 4 explores the strategies through which the politics of menstruation are enacted online. The chapter argues that this online forum is providing spaces for women to retake ownership of menstruation by sharing their knowledge and experiences to build a community of care. This online community reduces stigma and builds a new narrative of menstruation that both questions and complements biomedical knowledge of the female body which changes their embodied menstrual experiences. The chapter has been submitted to the Journal *Feminist Media Studies* (revise and resubmit). Chapter 5 uses the Argentinean case study to respond to the development intervention and MHM scholars who are touting menstrual technological solutions to address the menstrual hygiene crisis in the Global South. The chapter explores the complexities of adopting reusable menstrual technologies into everyday life and argues that the lack of access to context-specific sexual and reproductive health education is a major issue. This exploration was published as an article titled "Empowerment, destigmatization and sustainability: the co-construction of reusable menstrual technologies in the context of menstrual activism in Argentina" (Gaybor, 2019).

Overall, the thesis contributes to the ongoing research on menstrual politics as a global issue which affects women in a myriad of ways, but approaches this stigmatized experience of bleeding as no different from other complex socio-economic/ecological experiences and therefore needs to be considered with all of its complexities in a holistic way. I contribute to the following to academic and policy debates. First, I contribute to the debate on environmental degradation caused by disposable menstrual products by adding empirical information to understand the magnitude of this problem. Second, I present an analysis that contributes to discussions about non-utilitarian ways of being with the environment. Third, I contribute to debates on the menstrual body recognizing that rich insights can be gleaned from everyday knowledge production. Fourth, I critique technological optimism by questioning technological fixes as a standalone solution to everyday problems, instead I argue that an understanding of social processes are required for technological solutions. Fifth, I problematized the limits of social change efforts when they fail to tackle structural inequalities as they can remain middle-class niche initiatives out of touch both financially and socially with larger segments of society. Finally, I question the temptation of marketization to co-opt these initiatives which creates additional barriers.

References:

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