

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS: MENSTRUATION AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF POWER STRUCTURES

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Abstract: According to Michel Foucault's conception of the processes and relations of power and discipline, the body can be understood to exist as the object of disciplinary practices. The body may also be a source of resistance to those practices (as cited in Armstrong, 2007). The following examples of women subverting social norms surrounding menstruation serve to highlight the importance of these acts of resistance.

According to Michel Foucault's conception of the processes and relations of power and discipline, the body can be understood to exist as the object of disciplinary practices. The body may also be a source of resistance to those practices (as cited in Armstrong, 2007). The following examples of women subverting social norms surrounding menstruation serve to highlight the importance of these acts of resistance. The bodies of women are constrained by both the medical gaze and the male gaze, and as well as by the perceptions of outsiders taken on by women themselves. This illustrates the internalization of dominant power structures, which thus cause women to discipline their own bodies in order to fit within prescriptive norms. Loss of agency over the body in relation to external structures and regulation of the body through medicalized measures are manifestations of discipline and control.

Michel Foucault's theoretical constructs of medicalization, biopower, sexuality and, most importantly, the body as the locus of control have proven useful to feminist theorists in analysis of the sources of both power and resistance. Feminist theorists view the body as an important site of political struggle, and an analysis of power relations is crucial to developing an understanding of the nature and cause of women's subjugation (McLaren, 2002, pp. 81-86). An emphasis on rituals and

practices through which power relations are reproduced is crucial to a feminist analysis of the politics of power relations. A focus such as this contributes to an altering of regulation and control at the most intimate levels of experience including those Jana Sawicki identifies "in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies" (as cited in Armstrong, 2007). The socialization of disciplinary practices functions as an effective form of social control as they then serve to regulate women at the level of the body. This, in turn, creates individuals who are thus the voluntary – yet unwitting – agents of their own subjection. This disciplinary power creates "individuals who subsequently subject themselves to self-surveillance and self-normalization" (Armstrong, 2007).

Kiran Gandhi (2016) is a feminist activist, a Harvard MBA graduate, played drums with hip-hop artist M.I.A. and has more recently made herself known as electronic music artist Madame Gandhi. In 2015, she ran the London marathon on the first day of her period without using any feminine hygiene products. Afterward, she stated that she had intended to run the way she had trained, namely with "no foreign object in [her] body" (Gandhi, 2016). Reactions ranged from outright support to downright disgust (Gandhi, 2016). Responding to oppressive patriarchal social norms which are not simply imposed from the outside but ultimately become internalized, Gandhi's marathon story illustrates that if those norms are not successfully internalized, social sanctions may ensue. Sex and gender are therefore "among the most inviolate social norms" (McLaren, 2002, p. 94).

Because reproductive issues and gender norms foreground the importance of the body to practical and political struggles, it's especially worth considering that menstruation is a natural process roughly 50 percent of the world's population goes through. Gandhi affirms she was "not in the mood for being oppressed that day." (Gandhi, 2015). According to Gandhi, the point of her decision to just run was the simple fact of showing people menstruation exists, regardless of their reaction. She points out:

I knew that I was lucky to have access to tampons, to be part of a society that at least has a norm around periods. I could definitely

choose to participate in this norm at the expense of my own comfort and just deal with it quietly...[but] on the marathon course, I could choose whether or not I wanted to participate in this norm of shaming. (Gandhi, 2015)

Gandhi elsewhere expands on what she identifies as "period-shaming". She explains, "to me, period-shaming is when you – as someone who is experiencing the bleeding – have to make somebody else comfortable before yourself" (as cited in Warren, 2016). Thus, the self-regulating behaviour of internalizing shame reflects a passive action which functions as a perpetuation of the power apparatus, despite the fact that there is no one external source actively asserting such power.

Such self-disciplining represents the ultimate internalization of an ever-present surveillance of outsiders and represents a symbolic, socialized form of Foucault's Panopticon.

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault, 1977)

It follows that when young girls at menarche are socialized to speak in hushed tones, to be secretive about their menstrual cycle and their needs during that time, this early taboo instills a form of ever-present self-policing. Gandhi identifies that "women and men have both been effectively socialized to pretend periods don't exist" (Gandhi, 2015). This denotes an internalization of shame and a restriction on a woman's ability to truthfully communicate and express how she is feeling as her body goes through its natural process.

In a 2015 interview, Gandhi highlights the importance of social location when dealing with effective processes of resistance. She reports, "I addressed the issue [as] someone living [in] a position of privilege" (Warren, 2015). It must be noted that free-bleeding as a symbolic act of resistance mirrors how over 80 percent of women in India engage in free-bleeding or rely on old strips of fabric – or even sand – as their only option. This is due to both a lack of access to feminine hygiene

products and to a lack of adequate sanitation (George, 2015).

Women and girls in the global South remain overwhelmingly unprepared for and ill-equipped to deal with menstruation, so many cannot avoid missing school or work. The dropout rate for girls around menarche remains higher than that of boys the same age (UNICEF, 2016). Many women in the global North also miss out on work or school, albeit for different reasons, specifically dysmenorrhea and its related effects. It is clear that menstrual hygiene advocacy is critical not only because women in the global South are stigmatized for simply having their periods, but also because many lack access to the necessary products and information to effectively manage their health. Additionally, there are still many young girls and women who lack the proper knowledge to effectively deal with their menstrual cycle without the fear or shame that has become associated with this biological process (Sanchez, 2015).

Another symbolic act of resistance can be seen in the photo series, "Period.", by Toronto-based artist Rupri Kaur. The series depicts scenes familiar to most women during menstruation (Kaur, 2016). One of the photos posted to the photo-sharing social media platform Instagram, titled "Painting While Sleeping", depicts a woman lying curled up in a bed with a spot of blood on her pants and on the bedsheet. The photo was deemed a violation of community guidelines and was subsequently removed by Instagram. It was removed twice. The company later reversed the decision claiming that it was done as a response to complaints from users (Zamon, 2015). However, the platform routinely allows users to share highly sexualized photos of women. According to Kaur, the decision to censor an image of menstrual blood sends the message that women's bodies are only acceptable if they are depicted as sexually desirable (Zamon, 2015).

Also in 2015, a New York City-based start-up selling "period proof" underwear called "ThinX" initially had their proposed subway ads rejected by a company contracted to handle advertisements for the NYC Metropolitan Transit Authority (Kutner, 2015). A representative reportedly expressed concern that the advertisements contained the tagline "For Women With Periods", was concerned

that children would see the word "period" in the ad, and that they would subsequently ask questions of their parents (Kutner, 2015). The CEO of Thinx spoke in an interview about being disheartened by the dominant portrayal of women in advertisements, stating "we can objectify women in their lingerie, but the minute we acknowledge that they might be bleeding in their underwear, it's no longer acceptable" (Kutner, 2015).

In addition to emerging critical discourses surrounding the taboo of menstrual cycles, a UK organization is pioneering a "period policy" in the workplace (Morris, 2016). Alexandra Pope, a forerunner in the emerging field of "menstruality", is working to allow women who need it to take time off from work during their menstrual cycle without being stigmatised (Morris, 2016). Pope explains:

I have seen women at work who are bent over double because of the pain caused by their periods. Despite this, they feel they cannot go home because they do not class themselves as unwell ... If someone is in pain – no matter what kind – they are encouraged to go home. [We] wanted a policy in place which recognises and allows women to take time for their body's natural cycle without putting this under the label of illness ... I have women staff telling me they're ashamed to admit they're in pain. (as cited in Morris, 2016)

Like Gandhi, Pope points to inherent sexism in the workplace, explaining that if men were the ones who menstruated, a policy like this would have been put in place long ago (Morris, 2016). She elaborates, stating that "for centuries women have endured shame, ridicule and embarrassment and [have] been deprived of education and positions of power because of the cycle" (Morris, 2016). Regrettably, the period policy can be problematized by those that are opposed to it (or those who see it as special treatment), and used as a pretext under which women potentially could then be excluded from positions of power. While a formal period policy may sound like a next step in equality – similar to maternal leave – it could alternately keep women in subordinate positions because there is a danger they might be viewed as less than capable due to menstruation.

Women are still in many ways earning the right to be taken seriously in the workplace, and often must defend their cycles as something that does not affect the performance of their daily activities or their roles at work (Sanchez, 2015). This policy therefore puts women in the workforce in a difficult position. The challenge is that they must either admit that the menstrual cycle impacts their ability to perform their duties, or they must carry on dealing with it, remaining silent about their symptoms as if they do not feel impacted or inconvenienced in any way.

It is evident that biological differences continue to serve as a foundation used to legitimize gender inequality (Armstrong, 2007). Accordingly, balance must be sought in confronting this matter as restrictive. Isolating women during their menstrual cycles is something that is being brought to light and challenged in many parts of the world, so implementing a policy which allows women in the global North to withdraw from daily activities during this time creates a complicated contradiction.

Furthermore, the healthy body tends to experience no pain. Taking time off for menstrual pain reflects a normalization of physical dysfunction which should be addressed rather than simply accepted. Pain with menstruation can be a symptom of hormonal imbalances or indicative of more serious underlying medical conditions. While cycle awareness in the workplace and elsewhere could have definite benefits, the practice of taking time off for menstruation points to the troubling question of whether we have lost sight of what is normal and healthy during the menstrual cycle. Therefore, the implementation of a period policy comes dangerously close to essentialism, as it implies that all women are in a weakened state – whether physically or mentally – during their cycle.

A feminist analysis brings to the forefront a need to investigate the social implications of Foucault's concepts of biopower and of docile bodies. This analysis should be made in relation to the medicalization of natural processes of women's bodies such as pregnancy and menstruation (Lock and Nguyen 2010). Foucault's identification of the medical gaze points to the dehumanizing medical separation of the patient's body from the patient's identity and illustrates, for example, how the

woman's body is made invisible in order to view its reproductive organs as separate from the whole (Foucault 1973). Further, the binary lens through which modern health care has been developed and implemented views the male body as the essential medical standard – and the female body as "other". A postmodern feminist perspective reveals the implementation of health care as oriented around the normative standard of the male body, in effect, pathologizing the biology which deviates from this standard. In the nineteenth century, under the surveillance of the medical gaze, the aims of medicine in relation to the sick body were increasingly used in studying the pregnant and female body. This has led to an equating of the pregnant with the pathological (Shaw, 2012). To take it a step further, the menstruating body is subsequently equated with the obscene.

The above examples illustrate ways in which women have begun to challenge social norms and engage in an emerging critical discourse surrounding menstruation stigma. They also highlight a recognition and a subsequent resistance to the internalization of dominant discourses of shame. The body is an important site of practical and political struggle, since oppressive patriarchal social norms are not simply imposed from the outside, but can ultimately become internalized. This can be seen in the way girls at menarche are socialized into the taboo and shame which have become associated with menstruation. It can similarly be seen in the way that a lack of proper sanitation facilities in the global South contributes to a higher dropout rate for school-age girls over boys of the same cohort. Depictions in advertising reveal an attitude that women's bodies are only acceptable when portrayed as sexually desirable, as docile bodies, and not capable of self-directed agency. Biological differences continue to function as a foundation used to legitimize gender inequality. Due to the regulation and medicalization of women's bodies, we have lost sight of what is normal and healthy during the menstrual cycle. The bodies of menstruating women all over the world are disciplined by internalized perceptions of outsiders taken on by women themselves. Finally, menstruation is a natural process experienced by approximately 50 percent of the world's population and any stigma or taboo surrounding it reflects oppressive, patriarchal social norms. []

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