

Transforming menstrual stigma: creating a cycle of empowerment from a cycle of shame

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Summary:

Menstrual stigma, shame, and imposed secrecy exist across a wide variety of settings, creating common negative experiences for girls and other menstruators across different cultures with striking similarity. Irise's comparison of girls' experiences from the UK and Uganda reveals a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle of shame and silence, creating barriers to girls' access to education, support, and guidance, fuelling the intergenerational cycle of stigma. Programmers seeking to tackle period poverty must look beyond product and service provision and tackle this negative cycle head on.

Key Facts:

- In Uganda 70% of girls are embarrassed or fearful of menstrual related accidents and 78% lack basic knowledge about their own bodies and what a period is.¹
- In the UK 48% of girls are embarrassed by their periods and 1 in 7 don't know what a period is when they first start menstruating.²
- 70% of girls in Uganda are afraid of menstrual related accidents during their periods and the same proportion of girls in the UK aren't allowed to go to the toilet during class.^{1,2}

1. Irise International (2018) Baseline Report for "Creating menstruation friendly schools in Uganda"

2. TINGLE, C. & VORA, S. 2018. Break the Barriers: Girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK. London, UK.

Where does the stigma come from?

Menstrual stigma is deeply rooted in negative cultural attitudes towards women's bodies and their role in society. Taboos and stigma originate in deviance from the established social norm within a culture and help reinforce particular ideas or behaviours. In some contexts, the conflict is between the biological reality of being female and society's sanitised and unrealistic ideals of feminine beauty. Disgust for the bloody reality of having a period is reinforcing unrealistic expectations about how girls' bodies should be. In other contexts menstruation is the antithesis of a woman's traditional, patriarchal role as a wife and mother, signifying that pregnancy has not taken place and often, sexual unavailability.³

Whatever the origin, the effect on the lives and experiences of menstruators is strikingly similar.

*"I remember this one time when I found blood on my shirt. I ran back home crying from school to immediately tell my mother. She looked scared too but all she did was instruct me to go check my knickers to confirm whether there was blood. I complied but in my mind I was wondering how those two would be related. I checked and there was nothing. When I told her and asked why she made me check, she told me I probably got the blood from someone else. "One day you will see blood flowing so you shouldn't be scared of blood." So I spent the rest of my days waiting for blood to flow not knowing where from but mostly from my breasts to my knickers."*⁴

Sam, Ugandan girl

"Like 'Oh my God, am I going to die!?' I didn't have a clue what was happening at all, I just felt like, what's happening! There wasn't anyone else in my class that knew and you were really embarrassed to ask. ...I didn't have any education on it really, I remember when I first started bleeding I thought it was because I hit myself too hard. I remember texting my friend going, 'I'm bleeding out of my vagina. Is this normal?'"⁵

Monica, British girl

Case Study: adolescent girls' experience of stigma in the UK and Uganda⁶

Irise's recent research exploring girls' experiences of menstrual stigma in the UK and Uganda found striking similarities across the two contexts.

The need for **'Silence and Secrecy'** was identified as a key theme across both contexts.

"...menstruation is [seen as] dirty, it must not be spoken about in polite society"

UK Informant

"...never shared in public, always kept in silence, why should you talk about it in public?"

Uganda Informant

'Embarrassment' or shame was discussed by all UK and all but 1 Ugandan key informants when asked to reflect on their adolescent years or when referring to girls they had worked with.

3. Winkler, Inga and Roaf, Virginia, Bringing the Dirty Bloody Linen Out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality (August 8, 2014). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2575250>

4. Irise International (2018) Sam's story; from shame to pride. Available: <http://www.irise.org.uk/blog/from-shame-to-pride> Accessed: 31/05/2019

5. TINGLE, C. & VORA, S. 2018. Break the Barriers: Girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK. London, UK.

6. Goolden E (2018) Hidden yet shared; an investigation into experiences of menstrual taboos across high and low income contexts.

"I remember I was at school and a male form tutor was teaching us about periods...we were all so embarrassed and I hear stories like that all the time"

UK Informant

"...the girls feel embarrassed, and especially if they have a male teacher in class. They will feel so much embarrassment, they will not participate."

Uganda Informant

'Lack of Knowledge' also came up as a shared theme between the UK and Uganda that crossed the generational divide and was passed from mother to daughter, demonstrating how stigma was acting as a barrier to accessing support.

"we grow up listening to what the elders tell us, we think what they tell us is the truth so when they tell you a menstruating woman is dirty you probably believe it because you don't know if it is true or not because in the end if you don't understand what the menstrual blood is"

Uganda informant

"mum never let me wash my hair...and I've since asked her why? And she said oh I don't know but that's just what my mum told me"

UK informant

How is stigma affecting girls?

Menstrual stigma is driving neglect of women and girls' needs during menstruation across different contexts. It keeps girls' and their caregivers silent and their needs hidden, perpetuating taboos and myths from one generation to the next and maintaining misinformation and silence. When practical steps are taken to improve girls' experiences, stigma limits their ability to take advantage of improvements. The stigma also directly affects girls as they internalise the negative attitudes around them, affecting their self-esteem at an important window in their lives.

The Silence

Across cultures, stigma perpetuates the silence surrounding menstruation meaning that girls are unable to voice their needs. It pervades every level of society and has kept caregivers, teachers, local officials and national and international policymakers silent for a long time⁷, allowing misinformation and taboos to pass un-challenged from generation to generation.

The Barrier

When practical steps are taken to improve girls' experiences, stigma is a barrier to their success. In Uganda, girls struggle to use more affordable, reusable menstrual pads safely because they are too embarrassed to be seen washing and drying them by their families. Even if they are able to use menstrual pads they may struggle to attend school because of teasing from other children if their menstrual status is known⁸. In the UK, embarrassment and a lack of awareness amongst male teachers prevents

7. Boosey, R. and Wilson-Smith, E. (2014) *A vicious cycle of silence: What are the implications of the menstruation taboo for the fulfilment of women and girls' human rights and, to what extent is the menstruation taboo addressed by international human rights law and human rights bodies?* Research Report. ScHARR Report Series (29). School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR), University of Sheffield

8. Irise (2018) Adapting the REPLACE approach to social norm transformation to menstrual health.

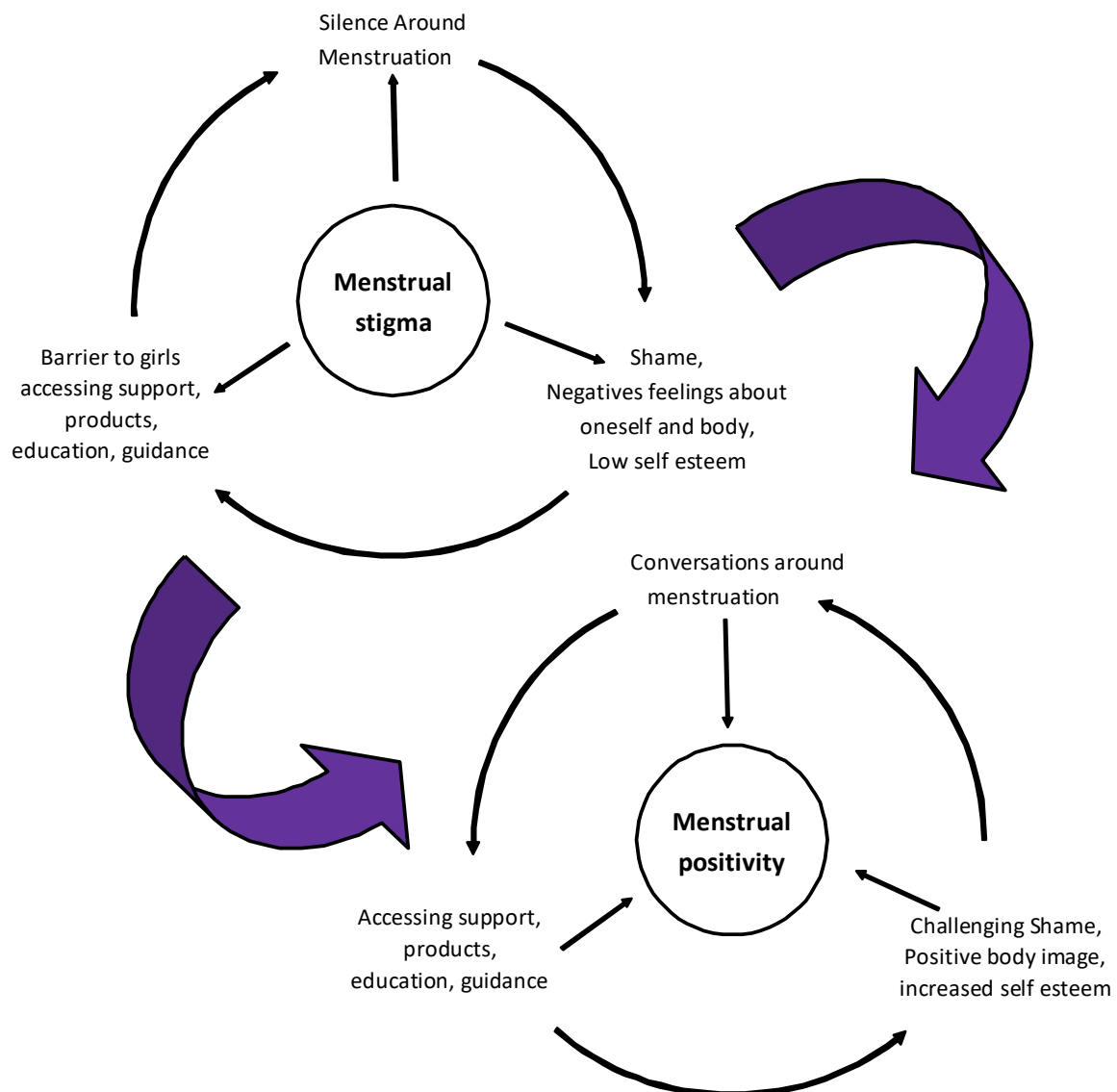
menstruators from engaging in education about periods, or from being able to access changing facilities throughout the school day.

The Shame

Girls internalise menstrual stigma, feeling ashamed, unclean and impure during their periods. They hide away, conforming to restrictive practices to ensure others are not 'contaminated' by their menstrual blood. This negatively effects their self-esteem at an important window in their life⁹. The full implications of this for their long term mental health and wellbeing remain poorly understood.

A catalyst for Progress: Moving from a cycle of shame to a cycle of opportunity

Dismantling menstrual stigma is an opportunity to catalyse broader progress towards gender equality. By normalising menstruation we can normalise being a girl by tackling the patriarchal ideas at the root of the stigma. To achieve this period poverty and shame need to be recognised as an issue driven by harmful social norms. Interventions need to shift their focus from service provision, reversing this cycle via social norm transformation and behaviour change, actively promoting positive menstrual health and transforming a neglected cycle of stigma into a driver for gender equality and empowerment



9. Wilson, E., Haver, J., Torondel, B., Rubli, J. and Caruso, B.A., 2018. Dismantling menstrual taboos to overcome gender inequality. The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2(8), p.e17.

Recommendations

1. Recognising menstrual stigma as a global barrier to achieving gender equality will support a shift towards solutions that address the roots causes of period poverty and shame.
2. Menstrual health programming must address stigma in order to deliver meaningful, long term improvements in girls' experiences of menstruation.
3. Menstrual health practitioners should apply theory and approaches from other issues where social transformation is required to strengthen menstrual health programmes.
4. Research is urgently needed to understand how menstrual stigma is affecting girls' mental health and wellbeing across different contexts.

