

A Comparative Analysis of the Attitudes Towards Menstrual Cycle in Middle- Eastern and Western Societies

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Abstract

This thesis compared attitudes to the menstrual cycle held by men and women in New Zealand, as representative of Western, modern and secular countries and Iranians, as representative of Eastern, developing and religious driven countries. The required data was gathered through qualitative interviews and subjected to a Thematic Analysis technique. The data gathered provided evidence of the spread and variability of attitudes to menstruation from a cross-cultural perspective.

Because of the potentially sensitive and publicly embarrassing nature of the topic, it was decided to gather the required data by personal face to face interview, a form which would better protect the participants' anonymity and privacy and thereby provide a better range of qualitative data. Interviews were able to conclude the ways mainstream media influence audience perceptions and provide a comparative analysis of Western and Eastern societies to menstruation.

In summary, the data collected in this research revealed that Iranian and Kiwi respondents share a narrow view of the physical aspects of the menstrual cycle, but differ in their interpretation of its cultural and spiritual meaning. For the Kiwis it is just a fact of life, for Iranians it is seen as a threat to personal and social identity. Moreover, females and males of the same cultures, retain relatively similar points of view on the menstrual cycle although background, culture, media and education are significant factors in the way individuals perceive it. Also, females despite being the ones who experience the menstrual cycle, do not necessarily understand it or see it as fair. Males by contrast are less involved in the experience and to that extent take a more complacent attitude towards it.

The findings of this research were both stark and nuanced, exhibiting a clear outcome emerging through tiny shades of meaning buried under the surface. Especially when some of the things that the participants think are perceived, they seem very monochrome, very one colour, very uncritical about life and who they are. Yet the data does not only reveal a stark contrast, but multi-layered details which are rooted in social and cultural values and beliefs and something of the processes through which the participants navigate their way.

Keywords: Menstrual cycle, Menstruation, Media, Taboo, Culture, Attitude

Attestation of Authorship

I, the undersigned Mana Ahmadi Vostakolaee, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this Doctor of Philosophy thesis and that I have not used any sources other than those listed in the bibliography and identified as references. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language. I further declare that I have not submitted this thesis at any other institution in order to obtain a degree.

This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

Mana Ahmadi Vostakolaee

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Ethics Approval



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25 November 2015

Barry King
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Dear Barry

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Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 24 November 2018.

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All the very best with your research,

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter sets out the rationale of my doctoral research and provides an overview which introduces the purpose of this study.

Mestrovic (1994) argues that there is no clear distinction about where West becomes East - and vice versa - because the boundaries are cultural rather than geographical. But in practical terms, there are some very distinct and distinctive, life practices that separate the lives of Eastern and Western peoples. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005, p.170) culture "...affects not only our daily practices: the way we live, are brought up, manage, are managed, and die; but also, the theories we are able to develop to explain our practices. No part of our lives is exempt from culture's influence." The accumulation of practices that constitute daily life are, therefore, heavily influenced by culturally-derived beliefs and conditioning and never more so, than in relation to intimate matters such as those that affect and effect, the dispositions of the body. For thousands of years, the body has been used as a major site of cultural manifestation (Goffman, 1979), and in relation to women, certain traditions evolved in relation to the female physiological functions of menstruation and childbirth that have in different historical eras rendered women temporarily "unclean", according to their cultural beliefs. In this research, the empirical focus is on individual attitudes to menstruation and the relationship of these attitudes to the cultural contexts in which the individuals were socialised. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine different attitudes towards menstruation.

At the very beginning of my study, I planned to collect the data via focus groups. It did not take long along the research journey for me to realize that, as similar research had not been done, my data was going to be very raw and exploratory. Besides, the character of the topic had the potential to inhibit individual responses, in mixed groups. I therefore opted to undertake a program of individual interviews guided by semi-structured questionnaires.

My purpose is to compare attitudes towards menstruation in what I am calling the East and the West. In order to accomplish this research task, I conducted individual interviews using as stimuli, media materials of different content related to the menstrual cycle. In this way, I have elicited participants' reactions to the topic. The significance of this study of attitudes to menstruation is that it provides knowledge that can advance the work of activists interested in promoting equal gender rights and women's rights in particular. Additionally, the outcome of this research will be to identify potential differences and gaps in the perception of a natural phenomenon that leads, to discrimination and the perpetuation of sexual inequality. My research may enable practical changes that will lead to informed public awareness and public information strategies.

I have developed my research into menstruation, to achieve a better understanding of how men and women make personal sense of a biological process that affects their relationships and influencing their chances for happiness and mutual understanding. By examining Eastern and Western perspectives on the menstrual cycle from a comparative perspective, I hope to broaden the understanding of the relationships between culture and nature, specifically human nature. To make a comparison between Eastern and Western attitudes to menstruation, I am specifically looking at

Iranian and New Zealand people's ways of thinking about menstruation or the characteristics of the Eastern and Western mindset, according to Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) cultural elements. In sum, my intention is to reveal through a systematic study the similar and dissimilar experiences of my participants in relation to menstruation.

My focus is on how people from different cultural backgrounds decode representations of the menstrual cycle. More specifically, the aim of the study is to find out whether people living in Eastern and Western societies, differ in relation to establishing attitudes towards menstruation with respect to their sex, culture, social background and the media texts that will be shown to them during the interviews. Moreover, the study will explore whether there is any relationship between perceptions of the menstrual cycle and the societies in which people live. Obviously, people from different parts of the world have different cultural experiences and forms of socialisation which shape their lives, and therefore their attitudes toward menstruation. The views that people hold are products of how they are socialised and of the social interactions that they feel are permissible and appropriate. Some societies are more permissive than others: Iran has characteristics of a repressive society and New Zealand has permissive societal characteristics. For instance, in New Zealand social interactions are generally as broad as an individual wishes them to be, but by contrast, in Iran the society in which I am basing my research, many interactions between males and females are very controlled. Therefore, the likely interactions that these two societies experience, would produce very different world views. My intention is to discover where the differences lie for people who live in a

modern, Western environment like New Zealand and those who live in a rather traditional society like Iran.

1.1 Motivation for the study

I wanted to do this research because I personally encountered certain and constant bad menstrual practices when I lived in Iran. Those practices were thrown into sharper relief when I emigrated to New Zealand and witnessed and experienced new everyday routines and taken-for-granted practices around menstruation. Given my previous experiences, those differences were far from trivial or routine for me. For example, in New Zealand were advertisements for menstrual products, mediated representations of menstruation, menstrual product kits in lavatories, tampon packages sitting openly on supermarket shelves and I witnessed my female friends address menstruation in front of my male friends. More particularly, I was surprised when a few male friends acknowledged the subject with care sometimes mixed with humour. I was pleased to encounter open-minded acceptance of the topic, but I was nevertheless surprised that the matter was not even more widely discussed. The comments that I did hear, acted as reminders of the opportunities and facilities that I and many others had missed out on for many years, due to living in a society where those things are absent or not allowed. Those normal menstrual “perks” found outside Iran even used to play as tourist attractions to me, because they were so foreign then. When I began to encounter and experience them in New Zealand, I found they triggered deep self-reflection about the impact of imposing silence on menstruation in my home country. Those prompted me to ask questions like, “What if we had this and that?” and “Why do we not have this and that?” or “Why should they have this and that but not my people?”. These questions then led me to explore

how menstrual “suppression” had affected Iranian women and this awareness inspired my academic pursuit. Although the idea came from my personal experience, my earlier studies and academic research in communication studies led me to connect my personal “menstrual” troubles with the larger questions of gender inequality. Below a few anecdotes in chronological order are included that form part of a “portrait” of menstruation as I encountered it.

When I entered menarche and wanted to express it with joy to my father, my grandmother, mother and aunt objected to it. Afterwards, they giggled among themselves and with other female relatives, “Mana wanted to inform her father, but we stopped her.” Then each one of them would laugh at the very idea of such a thing. I knew from their reactions that I must have been thinking of doing something wrong, but I could not see what was so bad. When I questioned my relatives about the reason I could not tell my father, they would simply say that men should not know about it, that women were not entitled to discuss the subject with them, not even with close male relatives. Then I realised that my mother herself had informed my father about my menarche, which confused me even more. Another time when I was a teenage girl, I woke up one morning with menstrual bloodstains on my bed sheets and pajamas. My little brother saw me in that condition and started to cry out that Mana is wounded, injured and is bleeding badly. My mother instructed me to go and clean myself up while she somehow would make a cover story to explain it all to my brothers who were ignorant of the truth. It all terrified me.

Later on, at secondary school, my classmates and I had multiple experiences of menstrual stains on our uniforms, because we had no clear instructions about menstruation and teenage girls generally had many hygiene issues with bleeding and

odor. The lack of organised education about menarche at school meant that girls' first source of information was their mothers, who sometimes would give poor advice because their own knowledge of the menstrual cycle was inadequate. For example, many mothers would instruct their daughters not to wash themselves during their periods, and not to take a shower or bath, because there is a common belief among Iranian women that infection can be contracted if the vagina comes into contact with water during a period.

One day when I was at high school, one of my classmates wrapped a jumper around her hips and told a teacher that her uniform was stained by menstrual blood. She informed the school's principal, who then contacted her parents to take her home. That moment was very significant to me, as for years my school uniforms had been stained by blood, but I had never dared to ask for help, even from my peers. It was only then that I realised why it had never occurred to me to ask to leave school for the same reason: I had no idea that I could ask for help in that situation. The realisation was too late to be helpful, as I was in my last days of school and by then, by trial and error, I had mastered the art of controlling and concealing the visibility of blood.

Afterwards, when I started my bachelor study, although I found that I was not alone in the problem of concealing my period and dealing with its stigma, I faced new tricky situations which seemed even more demanding than my previous issues. For example, my best friend used to call me and ask me for a menstrual pad, as she was ashamed to ask her mother for it. Sometimes her sister came to our house, and on several occasions questioned my mother and me, wanting to know why we stored our pads in a lockless drawer rather than in a more hidden and secured place. She

was worried because she thought there was a risk that the products could easily be exposed to my father or brothers. Sometimes she and other women objected when my mother asked my father or brothers to buy menstrual pads for us.

The last and the most significant relevant moment was the time when I was still a social science student in Iran, doing my bachelor's degree. During a very painful period with heavy bleeding, I stayed home to watch a foreign movie about the crash of a passenger plane in a deserted area and how the passengers tried to survive and make lives for themselves there. Because of my period, I naturally began to wonder how I would cope with menstruation in a survival situation. How would I manage without menstrual products? I thought the subject might be covered in the movie, but as Iran's media has to follow strict censorship agendas, those scenes may have been cut. However, I discovered that references to menstruation were not necessarily censored, but possibly were never made, even in Western media. Pursuing our plan to leave Iran, my husband and I started to watch English language movies and television to strengthen our English skills, and among the series we followed was *Lost*, whose storyline reminded me of the movie I had watched previously. This time I was more disappointed by the absence of any concern about women and the issue of menstruation during a long period of isolation in a wilderness. Thinking back, I realised that the reason that the movie did not mention menstruation, was not because it was streaming through the television network of the Islamic Republic of Iran, rather it was because the movie makers behaved as though the matter did not exist. The series that my husband and I were watching was an original version that we bought via underground sellers in order to have an uncensored copy, and again, menstruation was not a matter that was dealt with. This

lack of representation struck me as unrealistic and unfair: of all the issues that might face people suddenly bereft of the comforts and conveniences of civilisation, dealing with menstruation would be a real and possibly immediate concern for most women. Was it ignored because it was not quite nice to talk about, or because it was a woman's issue, and therefore less important than other more dramatic matters? When we ultimately moved out of Iran to Cyprus, I was even more struck by the lack of representation. I really had expected to see more about the menstrual cycle in societies that are rather more open than Iran, but what I found was mostly advertisements for menstrual products.

1.2 Theoretical engagement

The research idea originated in my awareness of specific types of menstrual representations. Corinna (2011) argues that most menstruation representations are pejorative, shameful or humorous and it was this finding that stimulated the design of my research. I decided to select certain representations of menstruation and gather viewpoints on them within two quite different societies, to assess the similarities and differences in perceptions of the concepts. The idea that this research is built around therefore, is the cultural differences in the attitudes towards menstruation between Western people and Eastern people; specifically, New Zealanders and Iranians. I chose this because I am from a more repressive culture than New Zealand and I noticed that there are similarities and differences in attitude towards the menstrual cycle between the cultures Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) Cultural Dimensions Theory has some utility in explaining the differences between New Zealand and Iran. According to Hofstede and Hofstede, cultures can be measured according to six different elements: short-term/long-term orientation,

femininity/masculinity, power distance, collectivism/individualism, uncertainty avoidance and indulgence/restraint. Of these elements, Power Distance is significant in comparing New Zealand and Iran, because it measures the degree to which the culture engenders respect for the position, as opposed to respecting the person. Lower power distance is found in egalitarian societies. Hofstede and Hofstede showed Iran as having a high-power distance, while New Zealand is one of the countries with a low power distance. Another cultural dimension is the degree to which the functions of society are highly gendered, whether there are things that women cannot do that only men are allowed to do and vice versa. Functions in Iranian society are quite gender-specific, whereas in New Zealand, that is not the case. In New Zealand, a person's sex is not a determinant of an eventual career, while in Iran's case, for example, there are majors at university that only men are entitled to study and jobs that only men may work in. Also, New Zealand understands a person's gender as separate from their sexual orientation and recognises a number of genders. In Iran by contrast, homosexuals are hanged if they are detected by authorities.

Collectivism and individualism are two more of Hofstede's (2005) cultural dimensions. In some cultures of the world – the ¹Pakeha or non-Maori, westernised part of New Zealand is one whereby individuals are expected to take responsibility for themselves. And it is a measure of their adulthood that they do so. In other cultures, maturity is measured by being able to contribute to the group that socialised them, not just at the level of their family, but perhaps of the village or an even bigger

¹ Of or relating to white New Zealanders and their languages and culture.

group. According to Hofstede and Hofstede, Iran is an Eastern collectivist culture, and typical of Eastern thinking, tends toward tradition and orthodoxy.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) identified ‘uncertainty and risk avoidance’ as a defining element of culture. In some cultures where life is precarious because of drought or war, people are so uncertain about the future that they minimise risk in their daily lives. Often times those sorts of societies are strongly religious in a very orthodox way, because to them it seems that ‘we’ do ‘this’ and ‘we’ do ‘everything that is pleasing to God’ then ‘he will not let bad things happen’. Other countries are more open to the idea that bad or disastrous things simply happen. In relation to this cultural element, New Zealand is interesting, because New Zealand has a particularly safe environment and it has no war on its own shores. It is not surprising to see that New Zealand is not risk-averse and is not constantly on the alert for danger. Iran, on the other hand, is highly risk-averse, which might account for the highly orthodox, rigid, top-down religious structure that prevails there. Currently, authority is based on a religious revolution and the country is called the ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’. Furthermore, to add to the country’s risk-aversion, not long after the revolution, which was driven by orthodox religion, Iran was involved in one of the longest conventional wars in the 20th century. The war lasted nearly eight years and its recent history has been a series of constant upheavals internally and internationally.

The dimensions outlined above provide some rationale for the differences between Iran and New Zealand cultures. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) is not the only scholar who has developed cultural measures. For instance, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (as cited in Hills, 2002) proposed four value orientations to explain human cultures: relations with nature, relations with each other, relations with time, basic human

motives. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck argue that future-oriented societies are more likely to be open to risk and uncertainty, whereas societies that orient to the present or the past are likely to seek the status quo. Following Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Iran is oriented to past times, whereas New Zealand is oriented to the possibilities and uncertainties of the future.

the different theories help explain the fundamental differences between Iran and New Zealand and contribute to the foundation of cultural understanding on which my study is built. However, these broad understandings do not entirely account for the differences in attitudes towards and experiences of menstruation, because this phenomenon is also personal. The wide sweep of cultural orientations does produce tendencies. An orthodox, strongly gendered, high power-distance society might readily be predicted to force certain attitudes on its members, although individuals may fight back and adopt new beliefs and practices. Therefore, gathering individuals' standpoints on a phenomenon in a social context should produce different reactions from those obtained by examining it at a social level. In other words, it is easy to compare the cultural norms and values of advertising or the education systems and note the differences between New Zealand and Iran. However, comparisons at the level of society do not expose the lived experience of women dealing with their bodies in comparative ignorance, shame and embarrassment. Though it is important to me to appreciate the broad differences and similarities between New Zealand and Iran, ultimately, it is at the level of individual women and men that I want to understand the effect of cultural constructions of menstruation.

1.3 Background of the study

With the rise of awareness regarding the negative influences of menstruation portrayal and conceptualisation on people and societies, menstrual studies are growing to be one of the hot topics of contemporary academic research. Some examples are: “Kiss Your Period Good-Bye” (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack & Wares, 2006), “It’s in the Blood” (Cochrane, 2009), “Menstruation Matters” (Bobel & Kissling, 2011), “I, Being Born Woman and Suppressed” (Corinna, 2011) and “The Menstrual Mark” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). However, the subjects of many of these studies are rarely concerned with the cultural studies and social aspects of menstruation and how it is related to the everyday culture of humans. This study is situated under a cultural studies lens to locate where menstruation stands in people’s view based on an ethnographic perspective.

According to Scott Reeves and Ayelet Kuper’s “Qualitative research: Qualitative research methodologies: Ethnography” (2008) Ethnography is a highly useful methodology for addressing a range of research questions within the cultural studies. In particular, it can generate rich and detailed accounts of cultural viewpoints and interpersonal relationships, researchers’ interactions with people, and their approaches to delivering analysis, as well as in-depth accounts of participants’ experiences.

Although the menstrual cycle is as old as humanity and common in everyday experience, it is hardly researched in communication and media studies, yet according to studies in the field of interpersonal communication (Yagnik, 2015), it affects women’s communication and relationships. Often it is mentioned in terms of being “traumatic”, “disruptive” and “creating ambivalence and confusion” (Koff et

al. as cited in Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, as cited in Burrows & Johnston, 2005). The cycle produces subjective experiences and affective meanings for women: they attribute moods, such as anger, sadness, happiness to the point they are at in their own cycles. Similarly, the absence of the menstrual cycle also generates its own set of experiences and meanings. Roberts, Goldenberg, Power and Pyszczynski (2002) found that for both males and females, “The mere presence of a tampon led both men and women to view a female confederate as less competent and likeable and to physically distance themselves from her and it also led highly gender-typed participants to engage in greater objectification of women in general” (p.138).

Burrows and Johnson (2005) argue that negative attitudes towards menstruation develop at an early age, even amongst pre-menstrual girls, suggesting that, “The meaning of menstruation for...girls seemed to be largely constructed through a range of negative socio-cultural representations and practices” (p.246). This finding supports the contention of many feminists (see for example, Allen, Kaestle & Goldberg, 2011; Bennett & Harden, 2014; Sommer, Ackatia-Armah, Connolly & Smiles, 2015) that menstruation is socially constructed as a matter of shame and embarrassment. It is a thing to be kept secret, even an illness. It seems that in general, people see menstruation as “disgusting” and “embarrassing”. Cochrane (2009) further argues that it is a feature of female experience that is rarely discussed. Some feminist writers and researchers (Allen et al., 2011; Bennett & Harden, 2014) have called for a public discussion to remove the stigma on the topic, and research that will produce clear insight into the taboos and difficulties about menstruation.

The menstrual cycle is an inevitable physiological occurrence for women, but understandings of it are shaped socially. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) maintain that anthropological research has characterised menstrual taboos as having two equally influential origins. On the one hand, they argue that the menstrual taboo is a cultural construct that furthers the oppression, control and marginalisation of women in patriarchal societies and on the other, that it is evidence of neurotic complexes. Thus, according to Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), "... psychoanalytic theory aims ... to account for the near-universality of menstrual taboos and their... intercultural diversity" (p.15). In their explanation, menstrual taboos are a universal fact of human nature, albeit connected to neurosis: "... practical responses to the demands of bioecological actuality...have been culturally extended to cover religious endeavors" (p.18).

1.4 Significance of the study

This study is significant because there is a lack of research into the phenomenon of menstruation, especially in terms of social perceptions. The topic in general contributes to understanding more about women's status in society and this study helps to understand how important the menstrual cycle is for understanding attitudes towards women, with particular emphasis on the way women are socialised into perceiving their own physiological functions. The research will also shed light on the cultural variations in audiences' decoding of certain depictions of menstruation. This is, so far as I can tell, the first study that focuses on cultural decoding of menstruation. Understanding the menstrual cycle is essential to understanding the female body and the investigation of cross-cultural feelings towards menstruation offers new knowledge and new ways to comprehend cultural difference. I did not

undertake a feminist study, but because of my earlier studies, a cross-cultural comparison of attitudes. My research, therefore speaks to feminism, but it is not a feminist study.

1.5 Research objectives

In line with the overall aim of the research, I want to explore:

- Whether there are gender differences in how menstruation is perceived and interpreted;
- Whether there is any difference in the perception and interpretation of menstruation with respect to cultural background;
- Whether media representations of menstruation (TV serial or feature film and graphic images) have an impact on attitudes towards it.

1.6 Research questions

The study sets out to investigate Iranian and New Zealand people's attitudes towards menstruation, and is formed around four research questions:

- a) Do males and females decode menstruation depictions in the media differently?
- b) Do males/females from different nationalities (Iranian and New Zealanders as representatives of Eastern and Western countries), differ in the way they decode menstruation representations?
- c) What influence does cultural context have on the decoding of menstruation representations?
- d) In what ways do media depictions of menstruation affect audience's attitude towards it? Do the media lead to attitude change?

The method of addressing these research questions was by presenting media representations of menstruation, from menarche to menopause, to participants who

were chosen by snowball sampling from among men and women aged 20-80. By means of one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013), I collected participant responses to the stimulus materials. The collected responses were then subjected to a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). There were three groups of participants I wished to include, and all the participants were from either Iran or New Zealand. Group 1 consists of Iranians in Iran, group 2, of New Zealanders in New Zealand and group 3, Iranians in New Zealand. Group 3 was included mainly to see if the broad social milieu in which people reside makes a difference to their views, compared to people from the same culture who live in the country of origin.

The interviews were conducted in private locations in Tehran and Auckland. They were conducted in the first language of the participants, so that they felt comfortable and fluent in expressing their views. Throughout the data collection period, the interviewees' voices were recorded for later transcription, and the researcher took notes as needed.

1.7 The organization of the thesis

Each chapter of the thesis contributes to the overall achievement of its purpose and supports the research rationale and process. Following this first chapter that has given an overview of the study, the succeeding chapters will examine: in Chapter Two the history of research into the phenomenon of menstruation, a review of the literature and the general themes established in previous research. The methodological foundations will be presented in Chapter Three, the data analysis will be in Chapter Four and Five; the discussion of results in Chapter Six. The final Chapter will discuss the results and the findings, suggesting further avenues for research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter reviews scholarship on the cultural and historical constructions of blood, covering topics such as the relationship between bloodletting and menstruation, the religious rules governing behaviour in relation to menstruation, the social taboos connected to menstruation, changing social attitudes towards menstruation, and the representation of menstrual cycles in the media.

2.1 Relationship between blood, bloodletting and menstruation

The beliefs, rituals, symbols and taboos related to menstruation have been affected, shaped and constructed by the same phenomena which mark the symbolic representation of blood in different cultures (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). In the mores of ancient societies, blood had both positive and negative connotations in relation to fundamental experiences such as giving birth, injury and dying. On the one hand, blood was associated with life and wellbeing, but on the other hand, it was linked to pain and death (Delaney, Lupton & Toth, 1988). These negative and positive connotations extended to menstruation. As one of the necessities for human reproduction, it imparted a certain recognition and power; but in terms of its relationship to pain, discomfort and the taboos around the “menstruating body”, it was depicted as a negative attribute of the one experiencing it. There has always been a ‘duality’ of thinking about menstruation (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). For instance, menstruation has produced multiple social taboos and even fear of the menstruating, but simultaneously has imparted power and mystique to women, in

that they can bleed, without dying (Delaney et al., 1988). Buckley and Gottlieb specifically argue that contradictory nature of menstrual taboos reflects the ambivalent attitude toward women even in the most "advanced" cultures/societies.

The anthropological literature showcases the view of ancient peoples that blood was considered both magical and nutritious, a substance that could give life from one creature to the next. Starr (1998, p.18) observes that blood was believed to possess qualities beyond that of being simply a nourishing liquid: it was thought to be a substance that embodied "the spiritual essence of man". Thus, it carried "the essence of the creatures in which it flowed" and was seen as the "bearer of life". Anatomist, William Harvey, after the discovering of the circulation of the blood, referred to the 'heart' as the pump of life and the "seat of the soul, the source of all life...." (Starr, 1998, p.8) Jean-Baptiste Denis, a physician to Louis XIV, believed "Blood, it seemed, was a universal nutrient, beneficial to all species." (Starr, 1998, p.10) Anything associated with blood, such as menstruation, was imbued with the same connotations and power. To find out about the roots and sources of taboos and beliefs about menstruation, research is needed into ancient rituals in cultures and religions. According to Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) "the topic of menstruation has long been a staple of anthropology, for this apparently ordinary biological event has been subject to extraordinary symbolic elaboration in a wide variety of cultures."

(p.3)

On the basis of anthropological findings, Figure 2.1, summarises the "symbolic potency" attributed to blood in traditional societies and cultures, revealing how these attitudes still have resonance in contemporary cultures.

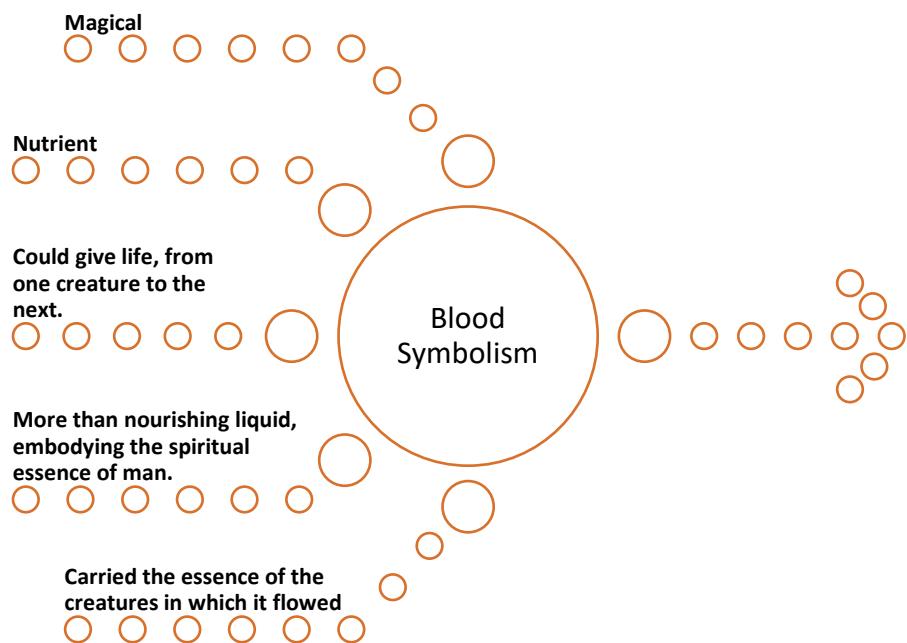


Figure 2.1 Blood background notions

Starr (1998) observed that ancient societies' way of thinking about blood, was influenced by the theory of "humours" - phlegm, choler, bile, and blood. The balance of the humours was seen as determining the human temperament of personality. The theory of humours or humourism was embraced by Christians as a way of understanding the body and remained unchallenged for a long period. "Blood, as the Paramount Humor, was considered the bearer of life, carrying its vital spirit throughout the body, ebbing and flowing through arteries and veins and sloshing through imagined pores in the heart" (Starr, 1998, p.7). Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) argued that beliefs about blood were linked to fundamental concepts about the nature of society. In this tradition, Douglas (1984, p.6) also argued that the study of religious thought was the way to uncover the logic of menstruation taboos.

These kinds of theories share a common view, that society and religion are fundamental processes that influence people's way of thinking, life style and beliefs. Furthermore, medical practitioners and scientists, who are supposed to be better

informed and free of common prejudices, tended to follow prevailing religious and cultural attitudes. Despite the doctors' sophistication, they ... held fast to a core of ancient beliefs, which had survived unchanged for fifteen hundred years. According to this belief, a stag's blood might carry traits of courage and longevity; a calf's blood, tranquillity. (Starr, 1998, p.5)

In line with the theory of transfer of humours, Jean-Batiste Denis in 1667 undertook the transfusion of blood from animals to humans in order to examine the possibility of curing, effecting bodily changes or increasing longevity by using the "power" of blood. Notably, he did not experiment with transfusions between humans, because blood was considered a sacred source of life which could only harm the donor. On one hand, therefore, Denis took a big step towards modern techniques of transfusion, but on the other hand, was guided by 'accepted but wrong beliefs' that inhibited empirical experimentation. Denis, for instance, who had been examining the effects of transfusing blood from animals to human beings, was "misguided by modern standards, [and] exhibited the mixture of science and superstition typical of his age" (Starr, 1998, p.5). Some practitioners moved beyond Denis's practice, while still holding to the belief that temperament added qualities to blood:

The technique spread to Germany, Holland, and Italy, where doctors began transfusing among all sorts of creatures and presenting wildly exaggerated claims. Transfusion, some said, could cure scurvy, leprosy, and other "devouring eruptions." A German doctor saw it as a potential treatment for disagreeable personalities: A spleenetic person might be calmed with blood from a mild one, or, better yet, marital problems could be solved by exchanging the blood of feuding husbands and wives. (Starr, 1998, p.12)

According to Douglas Starr, the achievements of the experimenters sparked a backlash among the elite, especially among French intellectuals who were extremely

inclined to politics and tainted by their desire to hold the favour of the court. “In their eagerness to curry favour with the king, the elite had become expert at maligning each other, every achievement leaving a jealous throng in its wake.” After months of Denis’s success stories, the mandarins at the French academy – rivals to the academy of Montmor – decided it was time to attack Denis and his techniques. G. Lamy, a Master of Arts at the University of Paris called his technique a useless way to cure that could never help. Some critics said that if calf blood conferred tranquillity, it could convey the animal’s dumbness as well. Pierre de la Martiniere, another of the king’s doctors and a French academy member called it a “monster” methodology, a barbaric practice, reminiscent of cannibalism, issued directly from “Satan’s boutique”, and in general, transfusion was seen as antithetical to nature and threatening to the very existence of the human species (Starr, 1998, p.13). Denis’s name and character were blackened by a campaign of pamphlets, letters and lobbying by conservative members of the French Academy, by the king’s court, by physicians, the French and English Parliaments, and as a result, research into transfusion and even “the basic concept of blood circulation” was outlawed. Finally, the Pope banned transfusion. In spite of this wholesale banning of blood research at the time, Denis and his contemporaries continued to undertake scientific experiments in humoral medicine by “showing that the body was ruled not by vague humors but by chemicals, vessels, and pumps. They even cast doubt on the practice of bloodletting, in that blood could be a nutrient rather than an evil humor” (Starr, 1998, p.15).

Bleeding patients to effect cures became a common medical practice through many cultures and lasted through the second Industrial Revolution. Doctors bled patients

for a wide range of ailments from pneumonia and fevers to back pain, from diseases of the liver and spleen to rheumatism. It was also used for the nonspecific ailment known as “going into a decline”, for headaches, melancholia, hypertension, apoplexy, bone fractures, stopping other wounds from bleeding and simply to maintain bodily tone. In fact, bleeding was seen not only as a cure for illness, but also as a preventative. As Starr (1998, p.17) points out, “Until the 1920s, country doctors in America would seasonally “breathe a vein” to keep patients in good health. And yet there was never any evidence that bloodletting did any good.” Yet, despite the wide-spread belief that bleeding was beneficial, according to Douglas Starr (1998, p.18):

No one knows its origins [of bleeding] ... perhaps the ancients, seeing that menstrual bleeding seemed to alleviate discomfort in women, associated blood loss with the relief of symptoms. The Egyptians may have practiced bleeding as early as 2500 B.C., although it is not known why they bled or what they thought it would accomplish.

From Hippocrates to Aristotle and through him to Alexander the Great, then through Alexander to the Persians and Hindus and on to the Greek, Roman, Arabic and European civilisations, the technique of bloodletting spread throughout the known world (Starr, 1998, p.18), earning both support and opposition for the new techniques and methods. Bloodletting was trusted and practiced widely:

Bleeding was as trusted and as popular then as aspirin is today. Monks bled each other several times a year for general maintenance of health.... The Talmudic authors laid out complex laws for bloodletting. Physicians obligingly drained the blood of feudal lords. Doctors devised elaborate charts indicating the most favourable astrological conditions for bleeding. The second medical text ever printed on Gutenberg's printing press was a *Bloodletting Calendar* in 1462. The first was a *Purgation Calendar* printed in 1457. (Starr, 1998, p.19)

Doctor Guy Patin, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, claimed “There is no remedy in the world which works as many miracles as bleeding.” As one of the medical leaders of the time, he used his position to emphasise the crucial role the procedure could play in curing intractable disease. In one instance he described the case of a colleague who “was attacked by a rude and violent rheumatism, for which he was bled sixty-four times in eight months, by order of his father … and in the end recovered.” Shedding blood, therefore, was almost universally considered to be a useful tool in the toolbox of medical practitioners.

The concept of ‘vitalism’ attracted the attention of the Church to ancient ideas about blood. According to Starr (1998, p.18), vitalism taught that:

...blood was more than nourishing liquid, embodying the spiritual essence of man: Flowing from the liver to the heart and brain, it acquired a trinity of spiritual characteristics from the combination of organs through which it passed.

The diagram below summarises religious attitudes to menstruation, indicating a hierarchy in which blood, bloodletting and menstruation were viewed by the Church. If the practice of medicine extolled the miraculous attributes of the bloodletting procedure, inspired by females’ monthly menstrual cycle, the association between the “curse” of menstruation and the sacred quality of blood, was one of the reasons that bloodletting was banned by the Church, which in various faiths, saw itself as exercising God’s authority over earthly matters (Starr, 1998). It was based on the same ideology that Phipps (1980) also argues “Throughout Judeo-Christian history the taboo has been a main cause for excluding women from positions of authority” (p.298).

2.2 Religious views on Menstruation

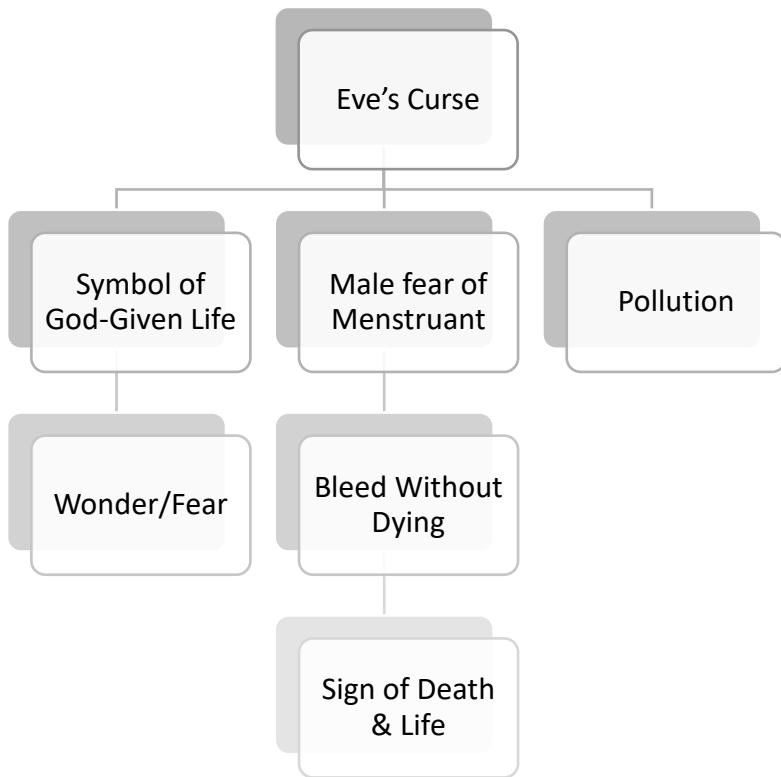


Figure 2.2 Religious metaphor
(Bogue, 2013)

According to Starr, In traditional societies in which the Church was a central institution governing belief, the medical practice of bloodletting was constrained by religious beliefs and moral ideals (1998). The menstrual cycle, in particular, was regarded as, if not taboo, then subjected to ritual prohibitions and practices. Accordingly, rules were formulated that defined the correct way women should behave during menstruation, and the way that other members of society should behave towards menstruants. William E. Phipps (1980, p.299) identified the regulations concerning menstruation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Menstruating women were the only people excluded from the four courts of the Jerusalem temple, the place that Isaiah and Jesus called “a house of prayer for all people.” Another menstrual related protocol that was taught in the Qumran was that menstruants and lepers should be segregated from the general population and in the event of death

should be buried in a segregated area. (“Temple Scroll” cols. 48-51; as cited in Phipps, 1980) The equating of menstruation with leprosy projects a shocking fact: that the state of women in menstruation, was considered as a ‘contaminating affliction’.

Records of Judaic thought from medieval times show that it was believed that menstruation was one of the ten curses given to ‘rebellious Eve’. This school of thought required women to take a ritual bath at the end of their twelve days of “uncleanness”, and in modern orthodox Judaism, Eve’s “curse” is still considered to apply, for menstruation continues to be a main reason for excluding women from religious ceremonies. In Christianity, writings from the third century AD advocate restrictions against menstruants, teaching that such “impure” persons should not approach the communion table and an authoritative manual of the Greek church not only quotes approvingly the Old Testament prohibition against sexual intercourse with a menstruant, but adds that it should be avoided “out of regard for the children to be begotten.” Eventually, in Christianity the rules and limitations on menstruants gradually eased because of social changes, but also because of controversy within the church. For instance, Pope Gregory was critical of anyone who would deprive a menstruant of communion, saying that “To the pure, all things are pure” and placing the “defilement” not on the menstruant, but on the person objecting to it. Religious authorities could attempt to moderate menstrual taboos, but this might not have a great effect on popular folklore.

In Islam, menstrual rules are followed on a day-to-day basis by the devout. Menstruants are forbidden to touch the writings of the Qur'an, the names and attributes of Allah, the names of the Prophet, the Imams and Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet. It is better not to touch names of other prophets too. They are also

forbidden to recite the verses of the Qur'an in which sa-jdah (prostration) is mandatory. In fact, it is better not to recite even a single verse from these chapters. Another prohibition is against entering a mosque, which means that menstruants cannot circumambulate (tawaf) of Ka'bah, nor observe i'tikaf, an Islamic practice consisting of a period of staying in a mosque for a certain number of days, devoting oneself to submission to Allah during these days and staying away from worldly affairs.

Other rules apply to menstruants. For instance, they are excused from prayers because they do not meet the requirements of salat (cleanliness). The teaching that affects this rule comes from Imam Ali Raza (peace be upon him), who said, "When a woman has her monthly period, she does not ...pray because she is in the state of impurity (of blood), and Allah likes to be worshipped only by a pure person..." Likewise, a menstruant woman is excused from fasting during Ramadhan although the fast has to be "made up" later. Sex is forbidden during menstruation. When menstruation is over, women must perform the *menstrual bath*, which purifies them from the shedding of blood under Eve's curse.

Furthermore, in a Muslim society like Iran, it is often taken as understood that menstruation justifies restrictions banning women from holding public office. Although there may not be a specific written constitutional rule that states directly that women cannot be judges or run for the presidency, the reason for the marginalisation is widely understood. Attitudes promulgated through religious studies in schools, television programs and by religious-political meetings at mosques or holy places, have created a public mindset in which menstruation is one of the factors that define women as less capable than male members of society. The

embargoes against women are not limited to those social-political roles that could be considered sensitive. There are some specific laws that make women second class citizens: for instance, females inherit only half of a family fortune compared to their male siblings. The ‘blood money’ (atonement, wergild) for injury to a woman is only half that of males, while married women can have their own passport only by permission of their husbands. Polygamy is allowed for men but is banned for women and although women cannot divorce, men can divorce women. Any exception to the rule about divorce would have to be granted by the husband in a prenuptial, but “prenups” are rare and considered a disgraceful practice. Even with a prenuptial agreement in place, women have limited power, because men retain the power to name the conditions and reserve custody rights over the children.

As has been pointed out, gender inequality is linked to religious practices, which in turn relates to the cultural stigma applied to menstruation, which re-enforces religious practices and dogma. As already emphasized, many popular attitudes about menstruation derive from the metaphor of “Eve's curse” and subcategories related to that notion, such as the concept of 'pollution' in Islam. Yet there is also a degree of ambiguity connected with blood, because it is simultaneously a marker of pollution and a symbol of life bestowed by God, so that "...its presence was an awe-ful occasion" (Phipps, 1980, p.299). Phipps (1980) goes on to argue that some of the resistance to ordaining women as priests might have originated in an unconscious male fear of menstruants who, since they bleed without dying, produce signs of both death and life." (p.301)

Blood, menstruation, the menstrual taboo and social attitudes to females’ bodies, are all linked and affect each other and though the specific details may change over time

and space, the positions adopted tend to be unfavourable to females in particular and, as a consequence, to societies in general.

Roberts et al. (2002) consider concepts of women's nature from an historical and anthropological perspective. Women because of their perceived closeness to biological processes, were not perceived as rational beings compared to men. In the same vein, Tauna's study, conducted in 1993 observed that in history. the conceptualisation of women, is accentuated by their connection to nature as a foundation for women's subordination. According to Roberts et al., philosophical and religious viewpoints have long highlighted the "mind" and the "soul" as the important characteristics that raise humans above the status of animals. In contrast, women, have long been viewed as ruled by their physical bodies and emotions, and were therefore frequently perceived as more distant from the gods and closer to the status of animals. As a study of Plato and Aristotle shows, men who failed to exert rational control over their emotions were thought to be reincarnated as women, and if that inability to exert control continued, it would result in reincarnation as an animal (Hamilton & Cairns, 1973; Barnes, 1984). Again, menstrual blood was thought to be inferior to and less pure than semen in men. In some tribes and communities, the most common theme regarding the physiology of conception is that a child results from the union of menstrual blood or vaginal secretions and semen. These two substances, which were believed to contain "procreative essence" in isolation, worked in unison to cause conception. Nor is this kind of metaphorical work only found in "primitive" societies. John Morris's (1938) study, conducted in 1938 gives an example of the same phenomenon among the Lepcha people, who believed that a child's bone came from semen and flesh from vaginal fluids. Women's reproductive

powers were supposed to reduce their perfection, intellect and soul, by tying them more closely to animal nature (Roberts et al., 2002, p.132). Metoyer and Rust's (2011) content analysis of gynaecology textbooks in US depicts that little has changed since Emily Martin's 1992 article in which she found that textbooks portrayed the egg as vulnerable and dependent, and sperm as active and dominant. They extend the lens of gender to the portrayal of cervical fluid and semen, which duplicates the same pattern of dominant and passive, that applies to sperm and egg respectively. It all builds up to the gendered assumptions "invoking stereotypical images of the female as dangerous and obstinate and the male as heroic" (Rust, 2011, p.196).

According to Roberts et al. (2002), there is considerable anthropological evidence that women's menstruation has incited fear and disgust; making women taboo, especially when menstruating, and requiring them to disguise their period in order to prevent unwanted consequences. Delaney et al. (1988) claim that primitive man's fear of menstrual blood was greater than their fear of death, dishonour, or dismemberment (as cited in Roberts et al., 2002). They have found that to avoid pollution from menstrual blood, many non-Western cultures have required women to withdraw themselves from the community in their menstrual days, often by staying in menstrual huts. Some communities still require women to be removed from the community for those days, by various means. Additionally, menstrual taboos, most commonly in regard to food and sex, have been introduced in many cultures to stop interaction and pollution (Delaney et al., 1988). Food taboos restrict menstruating women from growing, preserving, cooking, and serving food and contacting men's hunting tools. Fragments of ancient food and sex taboos survived even down to current times. Doctors in the 19th century had written that a

menstruating woman could spoil a ham and that men could contract gonorrhoea through sexual contact with menstruating women (Delaney et al., 1988).

In a further de-valuing of the whole woman, at the beginning of the twentieth century, medical professionals in the United States of America and Western Europe encouraged women to invest their energy in reproduction at the expense of education, because the typical medical view depicted women's emotions and behaviour as affected by their ovaries (Roberts et al., 2002). Medical professionals stated that women who sought intellectual pursuits risked problems with their sexual organs and mental instability too (Cayleff, 1992).

As I have shown here, menstruation as a producer of blood and as an essence of the female body has been reconfigured many times by religious, medical, political, social, cultural and traditional concepts, but what all the re-configurations have in common, is that in general the taboos point to processes of evaluation determined not by women but by men. As a result, menstruation has come to be controlled by patriarchal values. As some studies show (E. Martin, 1992; Rich, 1976), feminist theorists of the body argue that in patriarchal cultures, women's inferiority is defined by what physically differentiates them from men. A patriarchal standpoint on gender differences argues that since men have power to fix meaning and value, they define their own bodies and behaviour as normal and good, rendering women as inferior.

2.3 Menstruation Taboo Construction

Montgomery (1974) observes that for primitive people who had no explanation of the physiological causes, the concept of menstruation must have been strange. It must have appeared to them to be a bleeding that repeated every twenty-eight days,

yet there was no wound, scar or any injury to explain it. Furthermore, it occurred solely in females, disappeared during pregnancy, and terminated in middle age. It was a mystery sometimes attributed to the moon and linked with the ebb and flow of tides. This mystery may have prompted the male envy that childbearing and menstruation once inspired in ancient societies (Bettelheim, 1954) leading to the idea that the imposition of taboos was not intended to reduce the status of women, but rather, to equalize the sexes. In fact, Montgomery (1974) elaborated on Bettelheim's (1954) theory of vagina envy, arguing that primitive males were envious of females' sexual organs and the ability of the female sex to bring forth life. Thus, there is an argument to be made that the menstruating woman, has at different times been presented as simultaneously sacred and profane, which might support the notion of male envy of women. Furthermore, there is some merit in Frank Young's argument that menstruation initiated not disgust or even awe, but admiration (1965, p.151). Despite these discussions, however, the prevailing view seems to concur with that of Weideger (1977, p.89) who argues, "Generally, the object of a taboo may be a source of good or evil, but in the case of menstrual blood the ascriptions are almost universally evil."

Burrows and Johnson (2005) believe that the meanings attached to menstruation are social constructions and therefore can be changed in the socio-cultural settings that engendered them. Over the centuries, many different labels have been applied to menstruation in different cultures. Some of those labels are: "dangerous", "defiling", "negative", "potency", "constraint", "malevolence", "offensive", "contaminant", "injunction", "prohibition", "oppressive", "holy", "forbidden", "sacred" and "defiled". These labels, obviously are both negative and positive and any group of

reasons, drawing on biological, psychological and social constructs, might lead to the growth of a taboo or its disappearance from social thinking (Montgomery, 1974). Douglas (1984, p.3) contended that "...some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order". Thus, the beliefs, rituals and taboos that have come into being about menstruants and menstruation do have the potential to change.

According to Douglas at the time of menstruation, women are considered marginal. Furthermore, Douglas argues that throughout the period of menstruation, women are told they are "powerful" and "dangerous".

Disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns also, that it has potentiality. "It symbolizes both danger and power" (Douglas, 1984, p. 95).

Therefore, as over time men were considered the base of societies' norm and culture construction, social orders' patterns are according to their needs and demands. Then, menstrual cycle issues are perceived as phenomena that happen out of the patriarchal constructed orders and patterns. Which may convey dual effects of being either dangerous to those social norms or powerful to overcome them.

Also, there are a lot of cultural constructs around the idea of women being the unclean ones. The women put the men in danger of becoming unclean by their impurity. And in some of the discourses in Islam is this idea that women tempt the men, they put themselves on display. They inflame the men and men should not be

tempted. There is no sense that men should be able to resist, in fact the notion of uncleanness here elevates to an element of danger. Consequently, women would be considered as unclean during menstruation and a threat on all other times.

For instance, in one of the earliest surviving great works of literature, 'Legend of Gilgamesh' it is referenced, at the time of godly wild hero Enkidu, people started to say if he met Gilgamesh in battle, that he would beat Gilgamesh. So, they send a prostitute out to lie with him and take his strength away. In the legend of Gilgamesh that was 2100 years BC, so we are referring back to about 5500 years ago. We are talking about attitudes that came into being post hunter-gatherer societies and presumably were in place during hunter gatherer societies as well. So, when people survive by following the game to hunt, they made women go aside when they had their periods way back then, because they believed women on periods would bring bad luck for their hunting, game meat, hunt utilities.

That predated Islam, Christianity and Judaism by about 1500 years. But the idea of it was already there, that women were somehow going to do something to men. So, this whole connection still existed, it was already there to hide them away and keep it secured or secret. But it is not so long ago in the West that women having had a child would not be acceptable at church until they had been churched. There was a special thing, because giving birth and bleeding made them unacceptable in the community. Christians get brought up to take communion, so they could not take communion after birth until they been churched. Islam on the other hand bans women on menstruation from mosques, shrines, holy places, praying, fasting, touching Quran, other religious activities and sexual intercourse; because they would make holy things or men unclean. That idea demonstrates that committing those

actions while having periods, is a sin that may be accountable for by punishment after life.

Tarik Sabry (2010) in his book *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World on Media, the Modern and the Everyday*, brought up the concept of ‘mental emigration’ for which he did research with young Islamic men who watched the program ‘Baywatch’. And so, before they even got to the West they had mentally migrated to the idea that that was how they would come to experience women. And so, the idea that women could be modest or dignified in the West was not the basis of this ‘mental migration’ that they had already made. So, it might be that there is this extension of uncleanness relating to the role of women in society and by extension, the temptation of men perhaps, which goes right back to the Abrahamic, the whole teaching about women.

There was time in the West when women were not allowed to work in the garden, if they had their periods, because of the wholeness thing. But there were other places in the West where they wanted menstrual blood for the very purpose of the sacrifice to fertility Gods and things, which is completely wrong of course, because they did not understand the way it worked. Thus, women and menstruation have been labelled with impurity and danger concepts throughout history; which presented itself in different forms and by different rules assigned for them.

Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) call for “new cultural-anthropological approaches to menstruation” (p.5), based on both “traditional male-focused structures of ethnological inquiry” (p.5) and “biocultural perspectives” (p.5), to establish the broadest possible cross-cultural understanding of the topic. The aim of such studies would be to employ anthropological and biological understandings of menstruation

in order to link personal female experience with the social contexts in which women live.

Past & Current Approaches	Cosmological Framework	Gender Roles	Menstrual Synchrony
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menstrual beliefs universally oppressive to women Expressive of men's anxieties. Supposed toxicity of menstrual emission. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pollution & Reproduction-Human & subsistence fertility are religiously linked. (Among Muslims) Prohibitions separate menstruous women from religious contexts & earthly ones. Sexuality Over Reproduction-Marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective Seclusion Women Power

Figure 2.3 Blood magic book's 4 parts.
(Boddy, 1989, p.586-587)

Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) found that explanations of menstrual taboos fall into a limited range of categories:

- Theories that view “the menstrual taboo” as both reflection and a source of female oppression;
- As evidence of neurotic complexes;
- And as means for addressing any of several practical problems in social life.

Many contemporary scholarly texts claim that menstruation is one source of the oppression and suppression of women. Some examples are: “Kiss Your Period Good-Bye” (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack & Wares, 2006), “It’s in the Blood” (Cochrane, 2009), “Menstruation Matters” (Bobel & Kissling, 2011), “I, Being Born Woman and Suppressed” (Corinna, 2011) and “The Menstrual Mark” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Buckley and Gottlieb (1988, p.9) noted that the “most pervasive

interpretation of menstrual taboos in both the popular and professional literature, has been the one that equates the notion of “taboo” with “oppression” and hence menstrual taboos with the suppression of women in society”. In the field of menstrual studies, several scholars argue that menstrual taboos contribute to the controlling and marginalizing of women, based on their bodily endowments. As Delaney et al. (1988, p.7) argue, the deep taboos attached to menstruation have a powerful effect on people's day to day lives. It affected primitive man's mealtimes, bedtimes and hunting, out of the fear of the unknown and mysterious nature of menstrual blood, according to the understanding of the time. Primitive woman also was convinced that the safety of the society depended on how she conducted herself when menstruating, leading her to accept ritual taboo practices. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) cite menstrual huts as an example of the oppression of women: “We must consider the degree to which accounts of such seclusion have been inflected by the pride of missionaries and other colonialists in putting an end to what they perceived as an evil, rather than by the lived experiences of women in menstrual huts” (p.12). They argue that the ways women's monthly cycle is practised, has its own particular character in different societies. Menstrual huts and menstrual synchrony are respectively examples of how different societies view menstruation practices as subordinating rituals that reproduce gender inequalities or as affording women a certain agency within an overall context of subordination. Thus, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) suggest that theories that propose the menstrual taboo as oppression of women are not rigorous enough, because they simply do not accommodate a wide enough range of views. They conclude that, “To assume that the presence of menstrual taboos is a universal indicator of relative female “status” ...is tautological and, moreover, simply does not fit specific ethnographic cases” (p.15).

Nonetheless, the overwhelming consensus is that the menstrual taboo and the secrecy and shame surrounding it express a form of male dominance based on controlling and manipulating women's access to accurate information about menstruation. According to Weideger (1977), menstrual blood is almost universally acknowledged as an evil taboo. According to Delaney et al. (1988), taboos originally came into being to protect society from potential danger and traditional understandings taught that anything powerful was potentially dangerous. Thus, beliefs about the power of blood in general attached the same energy and leverage to beliefs about menstrual blood. Traditional perceptions of menstruation framed it mostly as dangerous, first because of its relation to reproduction and second because of the accidental similarity between the menstrual and lunar cycles, which applied menstrual fear to connotations of cosmic energies. Pathological anxieties were linked to women's monthly periods, because no other creatures shared a similar process. Moreover, the fact that women experienced menstruation for only part of their lives made it seem uncommon, and therefore something to "cure". Accordingly, some cultures prescribed charms and medicines (Phipps, 1980, p.299).

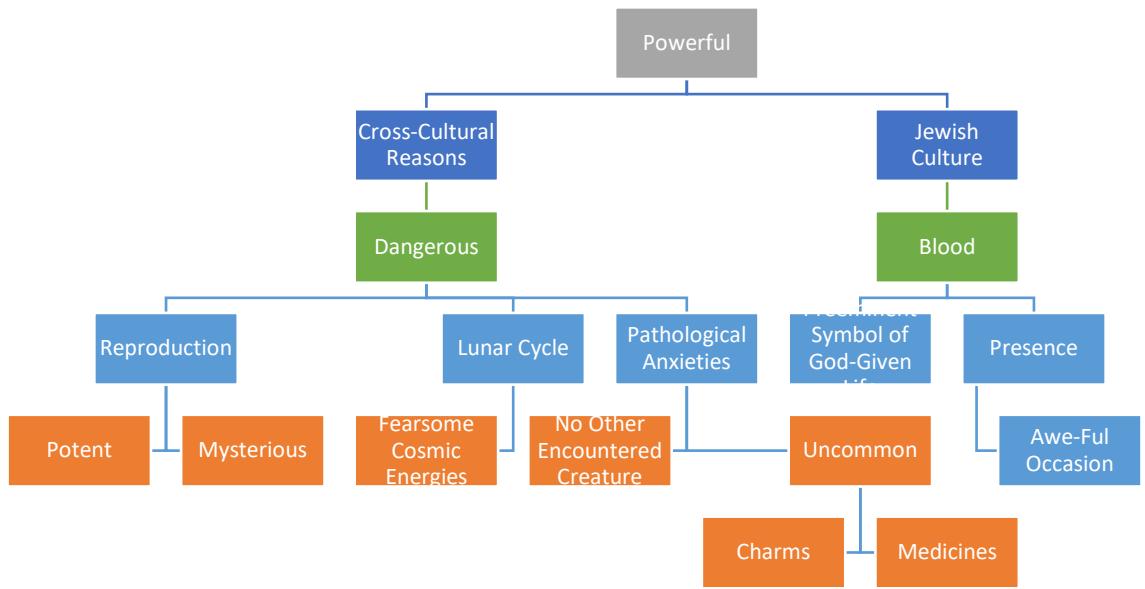


Figure 2.4 Traditional models of perceiving menstruation
(Phipps, 1980)

Even in scientific explanations of menstrual taboos, it was hypothesized that menstrual discharges were toxic, leading to the theory of Menotoxins. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) argue that this theory is debatable and there are counter arguments against it. In general, it has not been proved scientifically but its acceptance as reliable by some, is evidence of the impact of cultural value on empirical evidence. For example, although some studies revealed that “menotoxins” in menstrual blood retard the growth and kill plants, such studies neglected to use control fluids, such as non-menstrual blood and are therefore unreliable. (Whelan, 1975, p.132)

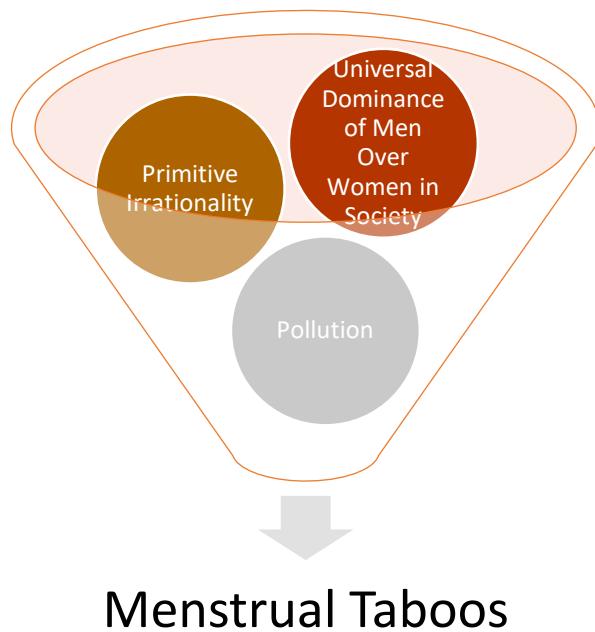


Figure 2.5 Menstrual taboos elements

Young and Bacdayan (1965) also see menstrual taboos as forms of institutionalized discrimination against females imposed by males, approaching the problem from a “socio-genical” point of view. They hypothesise the existence of a strong connection between male solidarity within a society and the elaboration of menstrual taboos. Consistent with other research, Paula Weideger (1977) explains the menstrual taboo as a male defence mechanism against the threat posed by women, and as a means of keeping the fear of menstruating women under control. The menstrual taboo means that men can control women and maintain their male solidarity.

There are contrasting opinions regarding origins of menstrual taboos, but the suppression theory is the most widely accepted. While the suppression theory supports the “universal dominance of men over women in society” (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988, p.3), there is, ironically, an opposite hypothesis that assumes menstrual taboos exist due to sisterly solidarity among women in hunter-gatherer communities. Joan M. Gero critiques Christopher Knight’s (1995) argument, pointing

out that it rests on a view of women as “sexually exploiting” and “manipulative of men” (Gero, 1998, pp.147-149) in a structure consisting of a victim and a manipulator.

James R. Gregory (1984) explained that although women’s public status has been always lower than men’s, the influence of women on the decision-making of their male relatives is undeniable. Elizabeth Gould Davis’ (1971) theory that matriarchies were the world’s first political systems, sees the female-blood taboo as an indication that matriarchs used the menstrual taboo to make men of their society respect and fear women. The matriarchs would tell tales of menstrual blood danger to men, "to scare little boys into obedience and respect for women." (p.92)

Knight (1995) surmises that in hunter-gatherer societies, women may have withdrawn from sexual relations with men by enacting a sex strike and the practice of convergent menstruation. Solidarity tactics such as these ensured that the men were organised into supplying meat for the women and children. He also states that blood rituals including biological and social practices were constructed by women to increase notions of danger and pollution, associated with menstrual blood. Through these techniques, women were able to set sexual morality as a means of controlling men’s behaviour. However, no matter how appealing or otherwise any of these notions is, as Delaney et al. (1988, p.8) say, "There is as yet no direct evidence in anthropological literature that menstrual taboos originated with one or the other sex."

The “engendered perspective on the origin of culture” (Gero, 1998, p.11) model shows a related link between menstruation and monogamy too. In addition, William N. Stephens’ (1961) study, conducted in 1961 shows that, nuclear households and

monogamous marriages are variables that affect the elaboration of menstrual taboos. He suggested that the monthly withdrawal of women from these units would create excessive inconvenience and interrupt domestic routines. Hence, menstrual taboos would be weaker in cultures characterized by monogamy and nuclear families. On the other hand, he found a 'moderately positive correlation' between the strength of menstrual taboos and the practice of polygamy (Stephens, 1961, p.147). Such correlations may prove Phipps' (1980) claim that, "Menstruation is a constant that transcends marital status and cultural concepts of feminine roles and beauty." (p.302) Since menstrual blood "represents the essence of femininity" (Beauvoir, 1953), fear of it is a benchmark of attitudes toward women in society.

As an example, Iran as a large Middle Eastern country, has characteristics of family changes in the region. While a few decades ago families' structure was mostly extended families and polygamy was more common, it all increasingly changed and the nuclear family became the structure of common households in Iran. It could then be expected that menstrual taboo may not be as strong as it was in the past. In the past, most women married before the age of twenty, but today 18% of that age range are married in Iran (UN, 2002, as cited in Moghadam, 2003). "To get an idea of how perturbing it is for Iranian society to deal with an army of unmarried adolescents, one has only to remember that the legal age for marriage for females in Iran is thirteen and for males fifteen" (Mernissi, 1987, xxiv). The surge in unmarried young people and the fear of illegitimate sex led some influential Islamists, such as then president Hashemi Rafsanjani, to support "temporary marriage" ("mota'a" in Arabic, "sighe" in Persian) an Islamic contractual arrangement for sexual relations. Temporary marriage is extremely disliked in middle-class society though, which connects it with

legalized prostitution. Temporary marriages in Iran act as a form of polygamy that carries the culture up to this date. Due to the disgrace that comes in the modern era, Iran being influenced by technology, education, the Internet, Social Media... all affecting cultural values, temporary marriage is viewed as a recollection of widespread polygamy system from the past. So it does not get practised as extensively and vividly as then and is typically kept as a secret relationship or is viewed as an affair.

Sociologist Mansoor Moaddel and his associates (1999-2000) led a survey on value orientation, that specified the consequence of modernization among Iranians. (As cited in Moghadam, 2003. P.142) The results reveal significant changes in Iranians' gradual transition from traditional beliefs and values toward modernity. This raises an interesting question about the Iranian migrant's attitudes. As an example, 17% of Iranians approved the statement that marriage had become an obsolete foundation. On the issue of wife submission and respect to husband, 24% of Iranians strongly agreed with the statement that a wife must always conform to her husband and follow his lead. It is remarkable that the majority of respondents participating in the research were against polygamy. Decades ago, the very same research would have included further traditional, religious and patriarchal characteristics, and would have produced a different outcomes. These results display a reasonable shift in attitudes in Iran in terms of family structure. (Moaddel et al., 1999-2000; as cited in Moghadam, 2003)

The role that women themselves have played in the construction of menstrual taboos is not clear. There are a few ethnographic commentaries (Montgomery, 1974) exploring women's attitudes about themselves and their allegedly hazardous

emissions. Equally, there is no recorded evidence of women's resistance to the taboos, but rather a form of passive acceptance. A logical explanation of this acceptance might be that women came to feel some embarrassment about their menstruation and saw the taboos as a way of mitigating feelings of shame and awkwardness (Montgomery, 1974). This may or may not be a reasonable explanation, but what can be certain is that it is not possible to determine which sex first labelled menstruation as dangerous.

Montgomery's article on Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables, shows that the involvement of males in female issues has been occurring in many cultures. She found that, "The majority of the chi-square tests shows a strong relationship between participation by men in rituals associated with reproduction and numbers of restrictions on menstruating women." Although she argues that "these correlations do not establish the origins of menstrual taboos..." because ...in using cross-cultural data against which to measure two sets of variables it is impossible to determine which set is "antecedent" and which set is "consequent" (Stephens, 1961, p.391).

Certainly, different views on the origins of social taboos about the menstrual cycle may reflect social practices that cannot any longer be accessed. Because these taboos emerged in hunter gatherer communities, they were not based on systematic information or reliable scientific facts. Once scientific study was possible, many taboos had either already been normalised in many societies or were no longer practised. Then too, many explanations of the taboos could be influenced by modern attitudes and biases. As Ball (2011, p.232) argues, "Any researcher who tackles a subject like menstruation sets an ambitious goal. The study of the topic is difficult

both for the limited evidence it presents and the reticence with which the topic is often treated.” In some ways the perception of menstruation as unclean is understandable, especially where environmental factors such as hot weather, humidity, the presence of insects, and the absence of hygienic practices could lead to infection and disease. The taboos may therefore have evolved as a way to control possible physical threats perceived as caused by women rather than by underlying microbiological processes. However, if the basis of the taboos is fear of disease, it is surprising that prejudices have survived in the modern era when infection and disease are understood as objective processes. It is the contemporary context that needs now to be considered.

2.4 Attitude Towards Menstruation in Current Era

As has been discussed in the previous section, scholars who have accepted that menstrual taboos are based on superstition and lack of information, have explored the differing attitudes towards menstruation questioning why prejudices still persist, despite scientific evidence. One important strand of research focuses on the relationship between popular attitudes in the West and the role of the contemporary media (broadcast television, cinema and advertising) in constructing menstruation as an issue that promotes the marginalization and devaluation of women.

One important theory concerns the phenomenon of the ‘menstrual mark’ which portrays menstruation as a social stigma. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) argue that media representations of menstruation tend to exhibit Goffman’s (1963) theory of damaged identity and stigmata. In Goffman’s sense of the word, stigmata are stains or marks that single people out for having a flaw of body or character that

spoils their appearance or identity. Burrows and Johnson's (2005) research tends to confirm the proposition of the menstrual mark. Their participants were teenage girls who thought menstruation was something to be ashamed of and embarrassed about, a thing to be kept secret and an illness. These findings align with the idea that menstruation is a stigma.

Such studies suggest that for women, menstrual symbolization has a powerful effect on identity formation and management. Identities are "the way we think of ourselves and the self-image we publicly project" (S. Seidman, 2003, p.9) through behaviour, clothes, verbal expression. Identity is fluid (S. Seidman, 2003), so that individuals may have a "wardrobe" of identities that they strategically deploy. Thus, regarding the menstrual issue, some women will make decisions about their social activities based on their menstrual status, identifying themselves as being less active for the duration of their periods - though there is the issue that some women experience severe pain. In this sense, menstruation can be seen as limiting women's ability to manage the full range of their identity options because if they adopt negative or unrealistic perspectives on menstruation, they may apply them negatively to themselves when they are menstruating.

Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008) conducted research on 160 adolescent girls in West Bengal. The purpose of the research was to discover what the girls knew and felt about menstruation, their sources of influence and information and what kinds of hygiene the girls practiced. The results from revealed that mothers were the first source of information in less than 40% of the cases. Perhaps unsurprisingly, friends were also an important source. However, in another study (El-Gilany, Badawi, & El-Fedawy, 2005), it was found that mass media were the main source of information

for girls aged 14 to 18 and mothers were a secondary source. This fits with the desire for privacy, avoidance of embarrassment attached to menstruation. Another study (Deo & Ghattargi, 2005) found that teachers provided information, or girls obtained knowledge from books.

In many societies then, mothers are the primary source of information about menarche, but mothers in rural areas and more traditional communities are hesitant about raising the topic of menstruation with their daughters (Dasgupta & Sarkar, 2008).

Roberts et al. (2002) maintain that ignorance about menstruation influences attitudes towards it. They found that if people know a woman's menstrual status, they are more likely to assess her abilities less favourably, like her less and stay physically distant from her than when they make judgments on characteristics unrelated to menstruation. Also, they theorized that overall "the menstrual status priming would lead to greater objectification of women" (p.132).

Although modern science provides clear knowledge that contradicts many of the prejudices associated with menstrual taboos, some attitudes still prevail in contemporary thought. Western culture has never confined women in menstrual huts, but menstruation has been discursively constructed in advertisements as a "hygienic crisis" that can be managed by the use of certain products (Havens & Swenson, 1988). Several scholars (Lee, 1994; Kissling, 1996; Williams, 1983; Ussher, 1989) have found that Western women take pains to conceal their periods from others, disguising their menstrual products and using euphemisms to refer to menstruation. One reason for the efforts to make the period a covert experience

might be embarrassment on the parts of both the menstruant and society at large. This notion is developed in Lee's (1994) contention that a menstrual stain would be taken as a woman's obvious failure to maintain the cultural mandate that she should conceal her menstruation to avert embarrassment to others. Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1982) and Williams (1983) argue that women and girls are strongly socialised not to talk about menstruation in public, especially to men and Kissling (1996) found that the names given to menstruation are mostly negative. In vernacular speech, for instance, menstruation is often referred to as "being on the rag" and "the curse". In older research, Whisnant and Zegans (1975) found that parents found it so hard to talk their daughters about menstruation that they often delayed the necessary conversation with their pubescent daughters. Perhaps because of this reluctance, Ussher (1989) found that girls received conflicting messages about menarche and that although some girls felt positive about menstruation, others learnt to associate it with shame and the need for secrecy.

Advertising for menstrual products often emphasises the idea that menstruation is unhygienic. Allen and Goldberg (2009, p.543) state that, "As girls transition from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood, they confront contradictory cultural messages that position them as sexual agents, with the power to experience sexual pleasure and give life, but also as female bodies that are typically defined during menstruation as messy, dirty, smelly and even gross." Their study found that the perspective of young educated females towards having a sexual relationship during menstruation depended on both their sexual experience and the status of the relationship. The majority of the participants described sex during a period as unpleasantly messy, whereas women who either had more sexual experience or

were in stable ‘heterosexual’ relationships did not describe it as disgusting, but rather saw the messiness as part of a “mature sexual relationship” (p.543). The ‘messiness’ of menstruation, too, has been argued as one way in which women can exercise some power in sexual relations, and also as a means of practicing birth control (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003).

Roberts et al. (2002) argue that reactions to the depiction of women’s breasts illustrate the dual response to women’s bodies. Breast feeding in public without covering up can be judged as offensive and yet sexually objectified breasts are used to promote products. The duality of reaction is shown in Coutts and Berg’s (1993) work, which argues that just as breast-feeding mothers are encouraged to hide their breasts in public, menstruating women must hide their menstrual cycles. At the same time, the products that allow them to conceal their periods push an unrealistic archetype of super femininity. Bramwell’s (2001) study, which compared attitudes towards breast milk and menstrual blood, established a link between them as “discourses which position female bodily processes as problematic, and uniquely female bodily fluids as disgusting...” (p.95). Bramwell’s findings overall concur with those of other studies (Roberts et al., 2002; Coutts & Berg’s, 1993) but with one difference, which is that societal attitudes towards breast milk remain ambiguous, whereas views of menstrual blood are overwhelmingly negative. If women are socialised into seeing their menstrual blood as disgusting, one effect is turn them into consumers of the products that free them from the constraints of their biology, but a further and perhaps more significant effect, is that women are defined in terms of their capacity to deliver sexual pleasure to men.

Sadly, women are not objectified only by men. Studies by Roberts et al. (2002) and Morris, Goldenberg and Heflick (2014) show that women are also objectified by other women.

In summary, misunderstanding and shame have been attached to menstruation for a long time Cochrane (2009). She found that prejudices persist to the extent that even nowadays, some girls learn about menstruation only at the time of their first period, and some adults feel embarrassed about purchasing menstrual products. The generally negative attitude towards menstruating women is present amongst women as well as men (Roberts et al., 2002), which shows that the stigma is powerfully present in society, even among those who are its victims.

One alternative theory of the prejudices against menstruation concerns the role of fear. The theory of terror management (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000) argues cultural belief systems have evolved to allow societies to manage their fear of death, and part of the theory suggests that people may eschew matters to do with menstruation to keep at bay thoughts of their own corporeality and mortality.

2.5 Terror Management

Goldenberg et al. (2000) argue that the terror management framework allows societies to cope with the threats of corporeality by changing the body from its essential animality to an object that bears beauty. The process of ‘beautification’ means that certain culturally-determined features of the female body will be stressed and (possibly) objectified, while others (such as menstruation, for instance,) will be concealed because childbirth and other female biological functions can serve as

potent reminders of humans' fundamentally animal nature. This perspective makes it logical that menstruation would be concealed as a matter of course and would attract a negative response should it ever be exposed. This, ultimately, separates women from their physical nature and tends to increase objectification (Goldenberg et al., 2000). Menstruation is a natural bodily function, but because of the menstrual taboo and associated ideas, it is frequently construed as a failure to be perfectly human, and such a construction implies that women will be considered inferior to men not just when they are menstruating, but all the time, because of their potential to menstruate. As Roberts et al. (2002) argue that people who focus on women's menstrual status would also be likely to objectify women, because such objectification "is a response to women's creatureliness" (p.133).

These studies used Terror Management theoretical framework as illustrated in Figure 2.6.

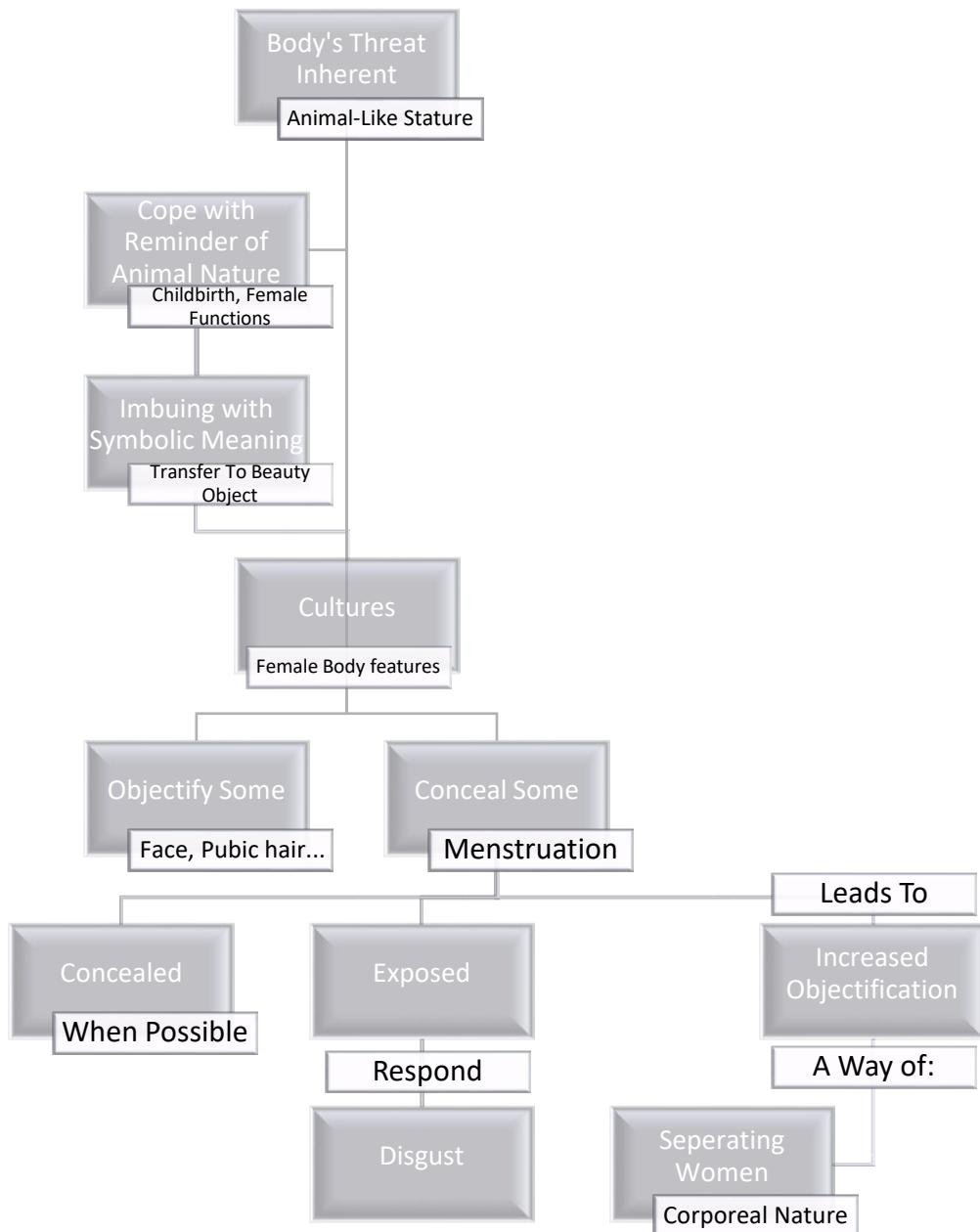


Figure 2.6 Framework of terror management theory – Menstruation part

Corinna (2011) argues that young adult women in modern times have received messages that some aspects of their natural bodily functions are “unacceptable”, “troublesome” and “unfeminine”, with the result that young women must either propose new standards of ‘ideal womanhood’, or must hide their menstruation in order to avoid both the embarrassment and the potential harassment should it become known. One approach to managing the menstrual stigma is to use hormone

treatments to suppress the period, on the basis that in earlier times, when women had more pregnancies, they also had fewer periods. In practice, the therapy required to alter the physical features of menstruation is difficult and may lead to medical dangers.

In line with terror management theory, the practice of menstrual suppression seems to be driven by a desire to control the female body (Corinna, 2011), especially, perhaps in patriarchal societies which persist in seeing menstruation as a ‘curse’. However, suppressing menstruation removes a distinguishing feature of womanhood and arguably, imposes a male-centred denial of female sexuality that derives from the postulates of the Terror Management theory.

As the scholarship I have reviewed so far shows, in general attitudes to the menstrual cycle have not been changed decisively although efforts are being made to do so. However, to date the work has not been enough to effect much change, as it is mostly located in academic scholarship that does not reach out *en masse* to wide society audiences. Bobel and Kissling (2011) have compiled a list of some of the contemporary activism aimed at changing attitudes to menstruation:

- Red Is the Colour – Collection of photos of women with shocking red lips – Berton-Moine
- Adventures in Menstruating – Essay discussed Chella Quint’s Adventures in Menstruating zine – Kira Cochrane
- My Little red Book – Collection of menarche stories – Rachel Kauder Nalebuff
- A post about a forgotten tampon – On the US website Jezebel
- Period? The End of Menstruation – Documentary Film – Giovanna Chesler
- New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation – Book – Chris Bobel

As cited in Bobel and Kissling (2011), other artistic examinations of menstruation include Vanessa Tiegs' (2000) "dramatic artwork created with menstrual blood", Ingrid Berthon-Moine's (2009) "provocative photos of menstrual-blood lipstick", Lacy Hale's poetry telling the story of her own and her parents' reactions to her menarche and Chella Quint's poetic illustration of a world in which "teens were not embarrassed but amused and proud of menstrual stains."

Although all these works are well-intentioned in their efforts to break the menstrual taboo, most are avantgarde works not targeted to the general public but to cultural elites which do not necessarily offer the public general access (Bobel & Kissling, 2011).

Though these works are not in the mainstream media, they do have the potential to stimulate debate and depict the menstrual cycle fairly as an aspect of female biology.

Bobel and Kissling (2011) argue that breaking the secrecy associated with the menstrual cycle is part of a longitudinal project designed to re-think the social control of women's bodies. Bobel and Kissling conclude that "...we must build upon those critiques to develop representations that are authentic and meaningful to those whose lives they describe" (p.124).

Burrows and Johnson (2005) believe that damaging attitudes to menarche and menstruation can be altered by ensuring positive representations in a range of forms, including "... academic writing, health professional education, school sex and health education, the management of menstruation in schools, and the media, including girls' magazines and the internet" (p.247). But they warn that change will be difficult.

Hardly any of the facilities mentioned by Burrows and Johnson are available for Iranian women, but are provided in New Zealand and other Western countries. As this review of scholarship about menstruation has already shown, negative attitudes

are extant in Western countries, but to a less marked degree than in Iran and other countries where the menstrual taboo is sustained by strong religious orthodoxy. Dasgupta and Sarkar's (2008) study of the menstrual issues of girls in West Bengal revealed what might well be a prevailing pattern of "ignorance, false perceptions, unsafe practices regarding menstruation and reluctance of the mother to educate her child" (p.4).

Like Burrows and Johnson (2005), Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008) recommend the development of education programmes that would aim to remove the stigma connected to menstruation. They suggest that mothers too should receive education about how to break the menstrual taboo because, as Johnson-Robledo and Chrisler (2013, p.16) say, "Clearly, the stigmatised status of menstruation has detrimental consequences for girls' and women's self-esteem, body image, self-presentation, and sexual health." In countries where feminism is not legally accepted, and equal gender rights are not social considerations, such remedies could come about only as part of enormous systemic changes to the structure of society.

2.6 Menstruation in the Media Context

Media, society and culture have been subjects of studies in the social sciences, in the 80s the ethnography was used in media studies as well; one of the contexts it was used for was reception studies (Spitulnik, 1993). Once the link was made between ethnography and media (Nightingale, 2012), ethnographic data from non-western societies were made use of to find out about media and human communication (Prins and Bishop, 2001). They investigated the appropriation of media among social groups according to age, sex, class and ethnicity. "Other research aims related to questions

of power relations, the production, circulation and representation of cultural identities and the relation of media to consumer practices in the capitalist mode of production” (Cruz and Ardèvol, 2013, p.30).

Ethnography is used in media studies in order to dig into how media becomes consequential to people’s perception and to have deeper and wider knowledge of how it is integrated in their day to day life. In total, ethnography is related to both cultural and reception studies in media studies context. However, understanding of media text in reception studies were principally focused on the appropriation of media in everyday milieu. The traditional relationship between audience and media is leading academics talk about content and the emergence of a participatory culture. Coining how society, culture and media can be interrelated and influence on each other, via media and ethnography.

Even in the current era, although there is not yet universal awareness of the damage done by the menstrual taboo, public education and the media have played a critical role in constructing a more positive image of the menstrual cycle. Houppert (1999) argues that such efforts can only have limited effects since menstruation is constructed as ‘normal’ only during education programmes, outside of which young women are bombarded by the message that menstruation is a dirty secret (Erchull, 2013). Houppert also asserts that even among educated women, advertisements create and magnify anxieties about menstruation so that, despite the fact that science identified the physiological processes of menstruation as long ago as 1863, the representation of menstruation as a ‘social problem’ continues and is too valuable to lose, because it assists a powerful sales pitch. In effect, stigmatization persists because it sells ‘sanitary’ products.

It is possible that young women who have had some education about menstruation may develop a degree of resistance to the negative messages, but many teenagers do not receive menstrual education at school and are therefore aware only of objectified notions around menstruation or its cultural suppression. Erchull's (2013) work, when compared with M. Martin's (1999) study, offers some insights into this. On the one hand, M. Martin noted that education about menstruation in the 1990s is better developed than in the past, while on the other hand, Erchull's (2013) research suggests that in advertisements for menstrual products, the female body is linked to freedom and full activity in idealized, sexualized and alluring images, that the various products purport to make possible. The minimisation of menstruation, or freedom from it, is meaningful only in the context of shame and the need to hide menstruation from others.

There are certainly some books (Karen Gravelle, *The Period Book*, 1996; Mavis Jukes, *It's a Girl Thing: How to Stay Healthy, Safe, and in Charge*, 1996) that promote positive attitudes toward menstruation, but their primary audience is teenage girls. Houppert (1999) also cites Madaras' *What's Happening to My Body* as an example of a book that is positive about menstruation but notes that while it builds a positive and non-threatening picture of periods, it simultaneously shows negative attitudes towards sexuality. Houppert claims that conflicts such as this are typical in books of advice to young women and argue for finding a necessary balance, because the advice in such books could powerfully affect a girl's future identity as a woman. Lara Freidenfelds' book, *The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America*, reviews the media representations of menstrual products and concludes that content has improved in past years, but that one area that still needs to be widely understood, is

the role of commercial manufacturers in producing the discourse about menstrual products and by extension, menstruation itself. The advertising favoured by manufacturers is important, in that in the last few decades, the representations of girls being fully active and unencumbered by fear or shame while having their periods, have played an important part in correcting the menstrual taboos and rebalancing gender history. The advertisements also allow a mode of managing menstruation to be developed from sources other than medicine (Ball, 2011).

Although menstrual products and ways of managing menstruation have changed, the menstrual taboo has not, because cultural concepts continue to give meaning to the representations that abound in the media (Bobel & Kissling, 2011). Menstrual huts and modern menstrual products are both, in their different ways, modes of concealing the biological processes of menstruation. Compared with the stereotyping of female bodies in advertisements, it is possible to view the concealment of menstruation as one of the subtler ways that the female body is represented in the media, but even this subtlety may encourage women to view themselves negatively. Bobel and Kissling (2011) claim that the negative messages in the media, both frustrate women and also distract them from looking for trustworthy information about the functions and health of their bodies. Thus, it is possible that some women may give the appearance of sophistication but may in fact lack quite basic information about menstruation.

As Phipps (1980) points out, secular media can and sometimes do, criticize the menstrual taboo. For instance, Phipps cites “All in the Family”, a nineteen sixties sitcom about ‘modern’ life and attitudes, which mocked the beliefs taught in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Archie Bunker in the episode urges his daughter to “Read

about Adam and Eve". "Going against direct orders, she makes poor Adam take a bite out of that apple. So, God got sore and told them to get their clothes on and get outta there. So, it was Eve's fault God cursed woman with trouble. That's why they get, what do you call it, the curse" (p.302). Phipps concludes that attitudes towards menstruation benchmark a society's attitude toward women, which implies that the questioning of taboos is likely a potent force for bringing about change. Norman Lear the creator/producer thought Bunker would be seen as a laughable bigot, so everything he claimed would be dismissed. Unfortunately, many viewers saw him as a man brave enough to speak the truth. Which demonstrates to what extent culture is induced and stubborn, thus needing more creative, sophisticated and continuing pedagogies.

M. Martin (1999) contends that in the 1990s, media representations of menstruation were improved by showing it in a more positive light. Her focus is the representations of menstruation in educational texts, but she maintains that even those that are pitched towards entertainment can offer opportunities for girls to learn. She points out that in the 1990s, some commercially-sponsored texts usefully challenged traditional ideas about puberty and suggested that in the future, there could be further improvements to the representations of adolescence.

Docter's (2015) *Inside Out* is an example of the sort of text that both entertains and educates about emotional development during teens. Towards the end of the movie, a "Puberty button" appears, posing the question "What's puberty?" The answer is, "I don't know, it's probably not important."

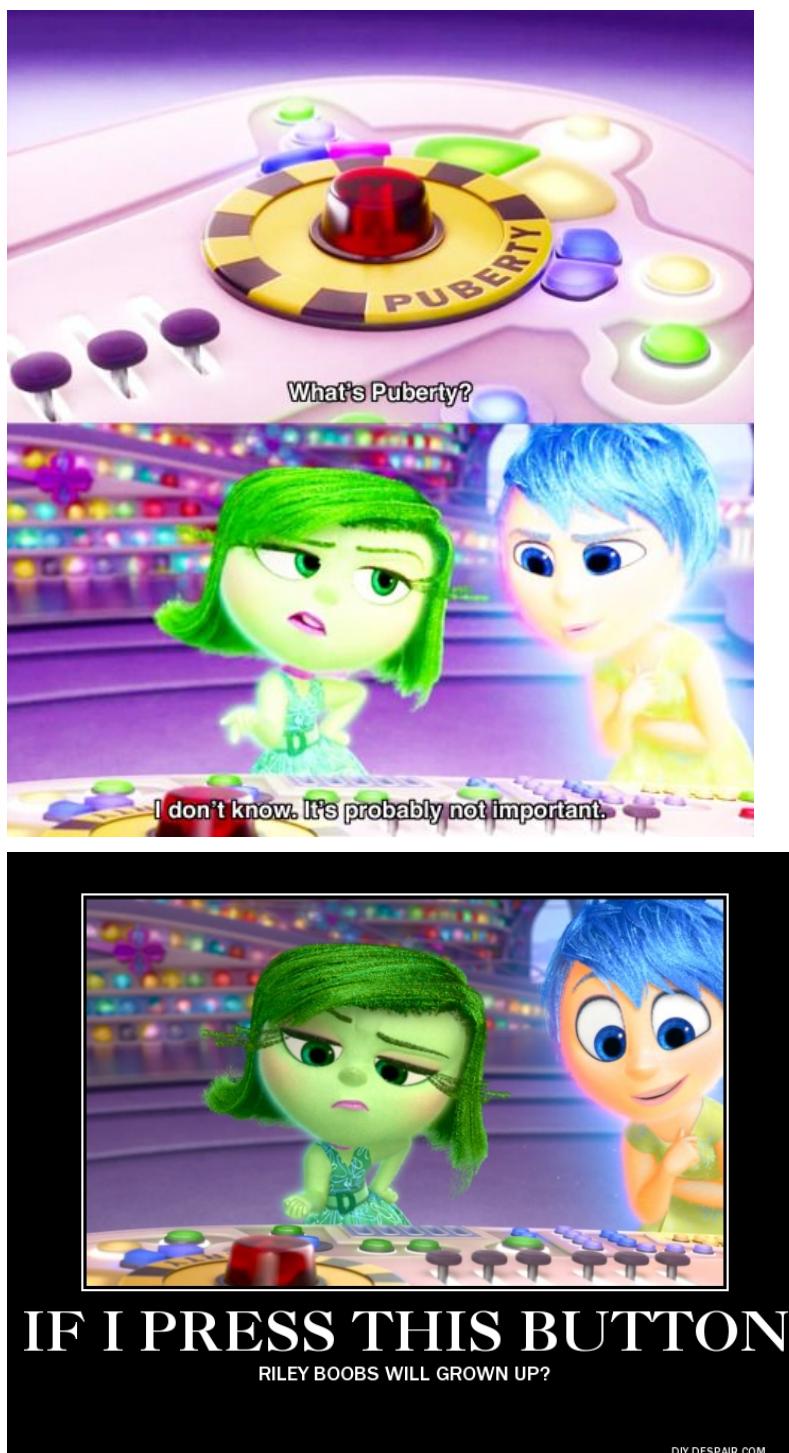


Figure 2.7 Puberty button in 'Inside Out'

This example raises other questions about the experiences that occur in adolescence and the movie is important, because it shows a way that a medium can combine entertainment with learning. The popular media can therefore be effective in breaking the silence around the menstrual cycle and could be helpful in breaking the

menstrual taboo, because raising the subject of menstruation would automatically stimulate open talk in public.

M. Martin's (1999) comparison of pre-90s and 90s Menstruation Media elaborates that the former types include: more declarative and less interrogative methods. They contribute imperative elements consisting of adult female exhortation to shed backward attitudes, technical explanation of menarche's physiology, more traditional informational and a fictional line in puberty media presentations, more sexual development facts, objective reality, and they were exclusive to Eurocentric, Western and White culture. Contemporary Menstruation Media practices and texts on the other hand comprise both declarative and interrogative methods. They incorporate lore of children, which is interrogative instead of direct adult instruction that is rather declarative, girls' narrations of their menarche story, incorporation of lore into traditional instruction, less distinct fact and fiction line, including individual interpretations. It is inclusive of ethnic and cultural diversity. The latter method conveys a declaration aspect which corrects puberty information; and an interrogative aspect that questions and considers individuals' own puberty story.

Additionally, the below figure summarizes M. H. Martin's (1999) further argument that besides educational and informational-specific Menstruation Media, entertainment Media carries menstrual messages within it and also plays an informational or educational role as well. Despite the fact that the chief drive of these types of Media is to entertain, when they are done correctly and properly, they are able to deliver profound vicarious, cultural and educational learning experiences too.

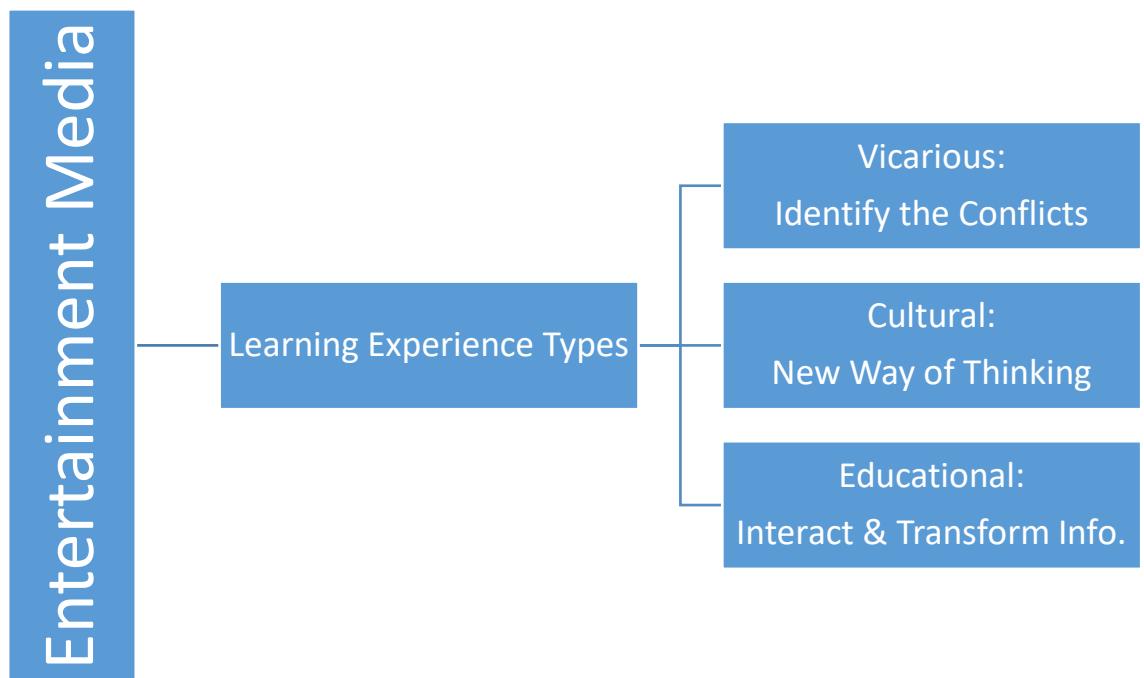


Figure 2.8 M. Martin's notion of menstrual knowledge via entertainment media

Carlson, Li and Holm (1997) claim that balanced and accurate information about the menstrual cycle is rarely found in the media and representations of it are mostly negative. For instance, the study concludes that the coverage of menopause in the popular press does not provide much information (Carlson et al., 1997). Johnston-Robledo et al. (2006) concluded that stories in the popular media do not enable women to make well-informed decisions about their reproductive health, including menstrual suppression or menopause. Part of their conclusion is that the attitudes promulgated in the texts can be heavily influenced by commercial imperatives, such as those of the industry that sell the products that suppress menstruation. Furthermore, Johnston-Robledo et al. (2006) argue that the texts sometimes misuse feminist notions of “choice” (p.359) by promoting the idea that suppressing menstruation is an exercise in personal control, when in fact this practice does not offer women more choice, but rather imposes another form of control that benefits forces external to women. Attitudes toward menstruation in pro-menstrual

suppression media content revolves around notions such as: inconvenience, bothersome, incapacitating, unnecessary, interfering, hindrance, treatment needed and cancer causing. While menstrual suppression marketing and promoting authors invest on ‘liberating’ concepts: freeing, functioning (healthy), ease, hail and medicine’s secret (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006, p.358).

Similarly, Mindy J. Erchull’s ‘Depiction of Women’s Bodies in Menstrual Product Advertisements’ provides a content analysis of 240 menstrual product advertisements published in the magazines 'Seventeen' and 'Cosmopolitan' over 12 years. The results are consistent with Terror Management Theory. The hypothesis of the study was that “practices in advertising do change over time”. Nonetheless, for the time frame and the samples they selected, the presentation of menstrual products’ advertisements was mainly composed of techniques that are consistent with Terror Management Theory (TMT). Distancing mechanisms were evident in the graphic and photographic advertisements. Based on the results, three main distancing techniques were identified: objectification, noticeably less sexual depiction (compared to non-menstrual female product advertisements) and widespread resistance to including female body for the products’ advertisements.

Table 2.1 Erchull's presentation of menstrual products ads

Objectification	Sexual Aspects	Female Body
Idealized images of women/girls	Explicitly sexualized images are rare (Based on TMT, people usually would like to distance from reminder of human body corporeality)	Slightly half of the samples contained images of women (Removing female body from the picture is consistent with TMT)
	Sexual Availability (Not in all as is against Terror Management Theory; more in drawings than photography)	25% of ads with women images used further distancing technique (Less Realistic Images)
	Target of gaze rather than active actor (In photographs, not drawings)	“Disidentifying” clothing (Tight and/or white as means of maintaining secrecy and avoiding shame) As per TMT, it stimulates mind that the one in that attire is not on period
	Flirtatious Posing 12% depicting romantic/sexual attention from men 4% depicting women objectifying other women (Women as target of women’s gaze)	

Current media attitude toward the menstrual cycle varies from its suppression to making awareness for it and its aspects in personal and social life. In general, Corinna (2011) argues that by looking to the treatment of menstruation in most written media, both fictional and non-fictional coming-of-age books, newspapers and magazine articles, humorous or serious, it is apparent that misogyny still exists. As per her article ‘I, Being Born Woman and Suppressed’, those kinds of depictions do not deconstruct menstrual shame but deploy it as a vital weapon in reproducing women’s oppression. She continues, “even if we dismiss or deny the effects of misogyny, the widespread internalized hatred of menstruation and the female body, and the cultural and interpersonal pressures to erase that which is undeniably female, how can we deny the obvious lack of concern for women’s health, esteem and general

well-being...?" (Corrina, 2011, p.212) She takes her arguments to another level by comparing menstrual blood with semen and relates it to porn as a mediated representation. She suggests that periods can be messy, but semen is messy too; both need to be cleaned up and both leave stains. There is no portrayal of menstrual blood as a female bodily aspect in pornography; semen as a feature of the male body is celebrated though. "Pornography, for example, often teaches not just that women's desire is pointless unless it serves men's, but a culture of mainstreamed pornography tells our daughters that while having a face coated in semen is sexy and hot, having thighs wet with menses is disgusting and obscene." (p.214). The titles and fragments of some sample of both sides in media are indicated in the below chart, parts of magazine and online news article.

Table 2.2 Menstrual suppression vs its awareness in media

Pro Menstrual Suppression	Pro Menstrual Awareness
Lifting the Curse – Chicago Sun-Times	All in the Family S3 E24 - The Battle of the Month – TV Series
Off the Rag – salon.com	Toxic Shock Syndrome: The myths that need busting – <i>The Telegraph</i>
Move Over Mother Nature – ABC's 20/20	How much do men know about periods? - #JustATampon – V.Point YouTube Channel
No Flow – The Stranger	Bad blood: the taboo on talking about periods is damaging lives – <i>The Guardian</i>
A Pill to Uncram Women's Style – Washington Post	How Women Have Lived with Their Periods Since 1900 [Body & Mind] – Elite Daily YouTube Channel
Continuous Contraception May Banish Periods – NPR, Morning Edition	Lizzie Marvelly: Girls missing school because of periods is a national disgrace – <i>The New Zealand Herald</i>
<i>Take Control of Your Period</i> – Book	Why I don't feel like celebrating Women's Day – RNZ
Teen tells menstruating women to 'hold their bladder' – Newshub	Primary school 'excludes' girl with period – RNZ
	Campaign aims to stop 'period poverty' – RNZ
	Watch the Dolan Twins Read Period Stories – teenvogue.com
	How Different Animals React to Menstruation in Humans – teenvogue.com
	This model lost a leg because of an infection from tampons. Here's what she wants you to know. – <i>The Washington Post</i>
	Periods: 9 things every woman should know – stuff.co.nz
	Growing up fast - <i>The New Zealand Herald</i>
	Why turning 50 is no barrier to feeling sexy - <i>The New Zealand Herald</i>

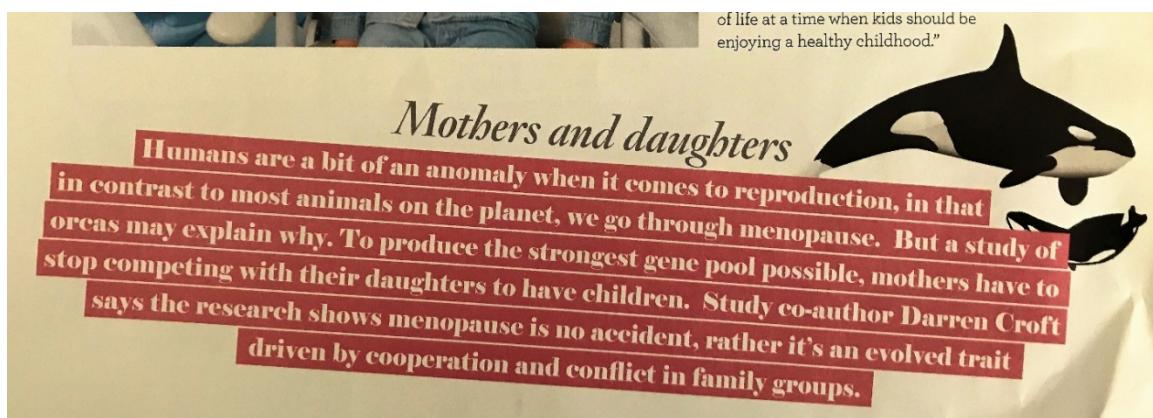


Figure 2.9 Magazine part 2.1 Menopause 1

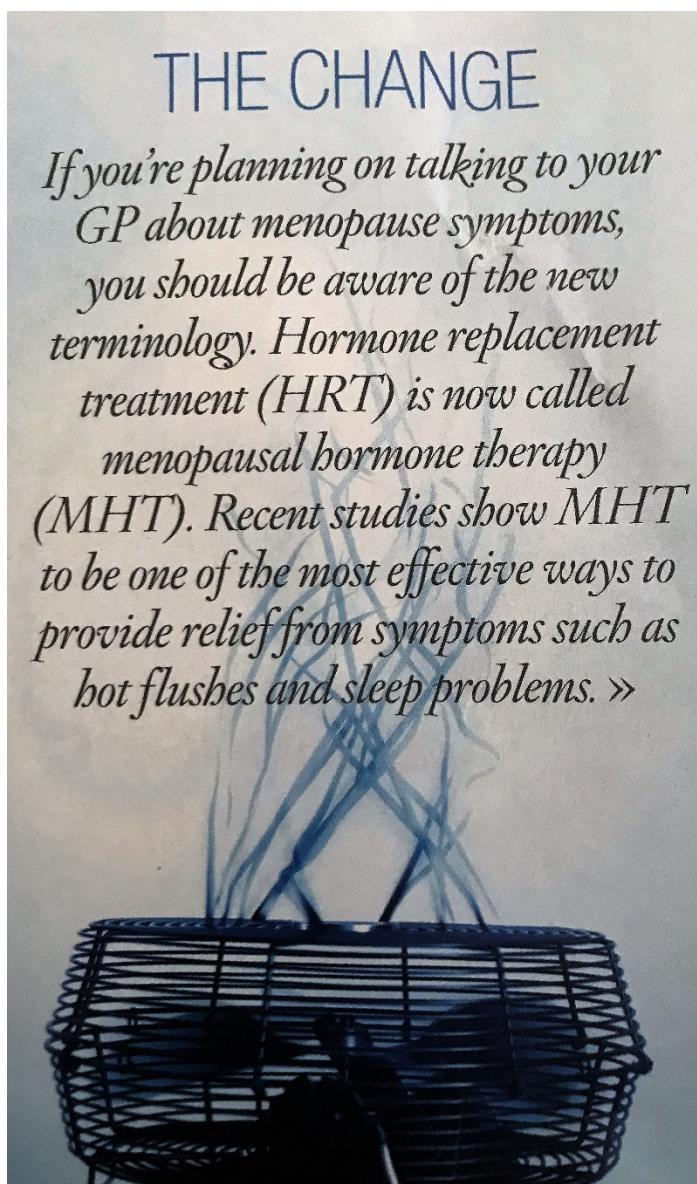


Figure 2.10 Magazine part 2.2 Menopause 2

sexy). And yes there is the spectre of the menopause but the good news is HRT is back on the table. The North American Menopause Society has just updated its guidelines to say that, for many women, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Figure 2.11 Online news 2.3 NZ Herald



What's a hot flush between friends?! Frickin' hilarious that's what!

Ladies - and brave men keen to avoid domestic meltdowns by not attending - Menopause the Musical is set to pour more blood, sweat (think buckets) and tears on New Zealand as this award-winning, box office record-breaking show returns for a national tour in August and September. Tickets on sale this week. Previous tours of this hysterical and uplifting show have sold out, so don't delay, call your friends and book your tickets today.

Only Menopause the Musical can take hot flushes, mood swings, and memory loss, and transform them into a universally praised, international sensation.

Menopause the Musical sets four women in a department store who have nothing in common but a black lace bra they want to buy at a lingerie sale. The female cast pokes fun of their woeful hot flushes, wrinkles, night sweats, and chocolate binges. A sisterhood is created between them, and a wonderful musical that features popular tunes from the '60s, '70s and '80s is born.

Figure 2.12 Menopause the musical advertisement

Women
Jessica Valenti column

Social media is protecting men from periods, breast milk and body hair
Jessica Valenti

Instagram took down a photo by artist Rupi Kaur that showed a small amount of her menstrual blood. When will society accept women's bodies?

Figure 2.13 Online article 2.4 The Guardian

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This chapter presents the rationale of the study. It introduces the research methodology and design, population and sample, data collection and analysis techniques, research procedures and ethical issues.

3.1 Ethical Issues

Ethical approval was crucial for this study, given that interview participants may have incurred discomfort or distress and that they would go deep down through their experiences or perceptions. In order to decrease the risk of embarrassment and inconvenience as much as possible, steps outlined below were taken to address the ethical considerations for this study.

Ethics approval was initially sought and granted by AUTEC (Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee) for the research. As a result, a Letter of approval, Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form were produced for the present study. All are attached in the Appendix section of the thesis.

Afterwards, an Information Sheet and Consent Form were provided prior to each interview for participants. This information was used to inform individuals about the voluntary aspect of the participation, and ensure they understood their right to withdraw from participation without explanation or any negative consequences at any time. During interviews, the researcher tried to pick up if any sign of discomfort or annoyance surfaced. If this occurred the participants were informed by the

researcher of their right to discontinue the participation at any time. If required, they were also offered break time or skipping that segment if wished by the participant.

One important consideration for the interviewees, was to not to expose them to any danger or threat. Because of the sensitive nature of the present study's topic, their confidentiality was maintained by keeping their identity, beliefs and thoughts anonymous. Interviewees would feel vulnerable exposing their views or experiences around menstrual matters. For them to ensure their confidentiality in the study and the research's reliability as to the content of their interviews, they were offered the opportunity to review their own transcripts if needed. At the end of interviews, it was restated that the utmost care would be taken in handling data and reporting findings, to protect their privacy.

Lastly, since the Iranian community in New Zealand is small compared to other communities, the researcher was mindful of 'dual relationships'- always a feature of snowballing but intensified by the likelihood of close proximity. Participants were referred either by other interviewees or people who would know each other. In addition, given the nature of Iranian society as a traditional religious society, extra efforts were taken to assure that the interviewees did not feel pressured to disclose information during the interview that they would prefer not to. Also, it was necessary to be sensitive to the advantages and responsibilities of doing research in settings that provide "researchers access to resources that are not always available in more traditional social sciences interviews." (Garton & Copland, 2010, p.548)

3.2 Research Methodology and Design

The research is based on a qualitative methods framework. Unlike quantitative study which is based more on statistics and figures, qualitative study collects rich, deep data on understanding people's behaviours, attitudes, fears, knowledge. The qualitative method's goal is to "address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds." (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002, p.717) This study uses 'words' as data and utilizes a meaning-based form of data analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2013) It is important to acknowledge the relationship between the subjectivities of the researcher and the interviewees. In particular, it is taken as axiomatic that those with first-hand experience of a phenomenon are an important resource for understanding its complexities. Utilising a phenomenological and interpretative framework, this analysis focuses on the experiences of individuals in their everyday life. It uses text-interpretation method, aiming to understand experiences by using interviewees' memoirs and narratives to unfold meanings and themes.

Exploring the participants' reactions based on cultural context and gender, relevant data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Utilising Thematic Analysis, themes were identified that revealed the participants' understanding of the phenomena and experiences being examined.

Linguistic data collected from interviewees, provides insight into their thoughts and inner perceptions in relation to the subject matter of the research. Qualitative analysis for this study includes a combination of interpretative, semantic, comparative and descriptive forms, in order to extract and generate themes from those patterned meanings across the data that may have been showcasing

themselves in different forms. These varied components provide deeper vision to the extent that the dataset surfaces to decode connotations and meanings that may be hidden but are important to be interpreted.

According to Holloway and Todres (2003) Thematic Analysis is another component of phenomenological research, designed to conclude at an understanding of a phenomenon from the standpoint of those experiencing it. (Woodgate, 2000) The method is chosen for this research because it fits the philosophy behind the interpretative and phenomenological tactics in which an individual's experiences shape the core of the study. This is considered a significant factor in predicting outcomes of such research.

3.3 Qualitative Research: Rationale

As Bouma and Atkinson (1995) argue, qualitative research is a social science research method that can explore the meaning of dimensions of people's experience, tracking the relationship between the stories they tell and the way they behave. This thesis sets out to research people's attitudes towards the menstrual cycle in general and its mediated representations. "The essence is to view events through the perspective of the people who are being studied. Qualitative researchers typically provide detailed descriptions of the settings they investigate." (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995, p.207) In other words, qualitative research is more interpretative, seeking to uncover the subjective and cultural processes that produce attitudes, experiences and behaviours.

Accordingly, this research strategy is not to identify a "single, static or objective truth" but rather multiple "'truths' through a series of subjective accounts." (Winter,

2000, p.6) There is not just one correct version of reality, but a multiplicity of truths connected to factors of culture and the effort of human beings to “make sense of the world in a particular way.” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p.5)

Turning to another orientation, the researcher Willig (2013) suggests, that when a researcher favours a qualitative approach, he or she is concerned to find out what it is like to experience a situation, how people make sense of the events they have experienced and find meaning accordingly. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.8) believe that qualitative approaches lead to “access to people’s subjective worlds and meanings and to groups marginalized (e.g. by their gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity/culture) and often invisible.” Hence, qualitative methods provide the best method to study females/menstruators and their experiences of marginalisation. Because of its capacity to capture experience, a qualitative approach provides a suitable framework to research the representation of an invisible phenomenon, such as the menstrual cycle, by the media. Revealing in turn how these representations affect people’s attitudes to the menstrual cycle, what their behaviour is towards it and how different representations alter way menstruation is perceived.

The research in collecting data entails an ethnographic approach. As a qualitative research method “Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours and perceptions that occur within teams, organisations and communities. Ethnographic studies typically gather participant observations and interviews” (S. Reeves & A Kuper, 2008, p.514) It is through using these methods that ethnographers set and generate in depth meanings of the “social actions”, via the relationship the ethnographer shares with research participants, “reflexivity” is a crucial part of this type of research. Ethnographers compare interview and observation in order to

improve the quality of their work, this technique is important as what people say about their thoughts can contrast with their actions.

According to Ethnography in Qualitative Educational Research “Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that gathers observations, interviews and data to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social” (S. Reeves et al., 2013, p.1365). Using ethnographic research can result in several rich accounts into its role, functions and difficulties in the understanding of social action. The method may convey conceptual, methodological, ethical and practice challenges like “demands of recording the complexity of social action” or “the unpredictability of data collection activities”.

3.4 Interpretative and Phenomenological Research

As knowledge is culturally constructed, qualitative methodology is a suitable context for interpretative studies too. Accordingly, the design of the present research includes a phenomenological perspective in order to examine processes of perception and interpretation found in everyday interactions and experiences. In this case, the underlying premise is that similar events can be interpreted and experienced differently by different people. Such a model also assumes that any interpretation and reconstruction of an experience under examination may be limited by the researcher’s subjectivity. (Grbich, 2013) Phenomenological analysis can disclose and identify a person’s perceptions and understandings of a situation; it can deeply and richly uncover meanings related to the focal point of the phenomenon under investigation. Phenomenological methodology is an effective research approach for understanding individuals’ everyday life experiences, providing insights

into people's motivations and actions in making sense of a phenomenon. (Lester, 1999)

Nevertheless, phenomenological methods have their drawbacks. They can limit insight into the phenomenon being studied, since they only rely on participants' perceptions, understanding and viewpoints. Combining phenomenological research with an interpretive approach produces outcomes not just taken "at face value" but are able to situate "meaning within a particular social and cultural context." (Willig, 2013, p.17) Besides as Willig (2013) declares, "qualitative research is inherently interpretative in that the qualitative data ...needs to be read through a particular lens which gives it (a particular) meaning" (p.39) Therefore, "interpretative phenomenologists do not believe that it is possible to produce a pure description of experience and that description always involves a certain amount of interpretation." (p.17) Thus combining phenomenological and interpretative techniques is a useful approach for studies such as this, that aim to explore individual attitudes towards representations of menstruation in order to uncover the implicit meanings of participants' responses and thereby gain a richer "insight into and understanding of, the human condition." (Finlay, 2011, p.10)

3.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

There are three different basic techniques in social and behavioural science for measuring the variables. The first is observation, the second is interview and the third is examining records and documents. (Bouma and Atkinson, 1997, p.70) This research deploys its data collection via semi-structured interviews, which is a study technique used in social sciences. In the semi-structured interview research method, there are

just the interviewer and one of the interviewees. An advantage of this method is that it focuses only on one participant's ideas and information given, at a time. "This makes it fairly straightforward for the researcher to locate specific ideas with specific people." (Denscombe, 2007, p.177) Another advantage is that it is easier to direct interviews with one participant. "The interview is a stage upon which knowledge is constructed through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee roles." (Kvale, 1996, p.127) Interviewing is self-communicating, it is the story contained in it that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations. (Kvale, 1996, p.145)

Before meeting with the participants, a set of questions or prompts were prepared to guide the general interview process. The interviews were recorded, and notes kept. Audio-recording was used for recording the interviews and notes were taken. As per Steinar Kvale (1996) "The context is introduced with a briefing in which the interviewer defines the situation for the subject, briefly tells about the purpose of the interview, the use of tape recorder and so on and asks if the subject has any questions before starting the interview." (p.128)

As I. Seidman (2013) argues, people's narrative and storytelling practices are techniques for finding meaning and recollecting human experiences. Interviews as 'knowledge-producing conversations' provide a systematic record of the narratives by which individuals select the "details of their experience from their stream of consciousness", reproduce them, direct them and make sense out of them. (Brinkmann, 2013) Due to their facilitation in comprehension of complex social and psychological topics, interviews are one of the major resources to collect data. (I. Seidman, 2013, p.7) Interviews as a means of data collection are fitting for this research which aims to capture the participants' experiences, perceptions and

attitudes toward an everyday phenomenon. Moreover, interviewing enables the researcher to identify the individual's understanding and the lived practices. Of particular importance are the kinds of narratives that individuals use, in order to make sense of their experience. (Braun & Clarke, 2013) To suit the phenomenological and interpretative framework of this research, a semi-structured interview format was selected, because of its "purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena." (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.6) Interviewing is one of the best methods to comprehend people's state of mind or circumstances; "its meaning to them, what is especially significant about it to them, what might be significant to others but is less so...to them..." (Krathwohl, 1998, p.286).

In addition, for research "where little is known about the topic of interest, where the topic of interest may be particularly sensitive", semi-structured interviewing is a suitable method for collecting the required data (Adams 2010, p.18). Both circumstances apply to this study's subject matter. Not only is there limited information about how individuals experience the menstrual cycle and how they interpret it in relation to its public representation, but also because it is a sensitive matter unlikely to be discussed in public. This is especially so in mixed gender settings, such as focus groups consisting of male and female participants.

As this research evaluates people's reactions and attitudes to the menstrual cycle, one-on-one interviews are preferred because they provide the opportunity to access deeper understanding of the topic of research. Semi-structured interviews by providing prompts, create the opportunity for the researcher to facilitate conversations and to explore topics in depth with individual participants in a context

of privacy. Considering the sensitivities around the research topic, using this research technique offers the best chance of generating richer meanings of a phenomenon as subjectively experienced.

Although in-depth interviews are ‘open’ and often exploratory, a theme list or inventory of important topics is typically used. This ensures that all relevant issues are discussed and that the interviewer is free to concentrate on the ongoing interaction (McCraken, 1988 as cited in Liamputpong & Ezzy, 2005, p.62). However, such lists do not prevent the contingent nature of the interview being exploited, with new lines of information being pursued as they arise and subsequently integrated into the theme list where appropriate.

The present study’s interviews were designed with open-ended questions to have more chance of facilitating in-depth discussions, along with a set of mediated representations to stimulate participants’ reactions. Hence, the questions were designed to capture how the menstrual cycle is personally and socially perceived and reacted to. Since examination of the ways of understanding the menstrual cycle is a core aim of the present research, interviewees were encouraged to lead the interview process in directions prompted by materials or questions provided. The researcher encouraged the participants to elaborate on the subjects in a rather exploratory style. The interviews’ plot or structure consisted of 18 open-ended questions – including 7 closed-ended questions – and 12 mediated representation materials. Only two questions differed for males and females because they were designed to focus on females’ actual personal menstruation experience. Instead, males were provided with the same questions but with a focus on how they feel about or perceive females’ menstruation experiences. The general goal of the

interview was to elaborate on participants' attitudes toward the menstrual cycle and their responses to the topics raised, in detail.

As previously argued, the central focus of this research is the audience's reactions to the representation of menstrual cycle in media. This has to be adapted to the media's values, standards and agendas and as a result, the menstrual representation can drastically be changed or limited. To elaborate on the influence of socio-political changes on the representation of the menstrual cycle in the media, I have chosen twelve representations to analyse. These identify and explore the notions and key concepts that respondents use in interpreting the media provided. All these materials are selected through a non-random sampling procedure hence, the results are not meant to be generalized to all other depictions of period and other aspects of the menstrual cycle. I chose these twelve portrayals because they represent different aspects of menstruation and subjects related to it. Selected representations of menstrual matters that took place on media gave me a broad perspective by which multiple views towards the menstrual cycle could be considered.

In order to select the materials, I searched for mediated representations of the menstrual cycle and categorised them in visual, written and audio versions. Audio material was limited to an Iranian song; visual materials included:

- 1) Advertisement
 - a) Image
 - b) Video
 - c) Paper
- 2) Movie
- 3) TV Series
- 4) Reality Show

- 5) E-Card
- 6) Social Media Content
- 7) Caricature
- 8) Educational Film/Cartoon
- 9) Documentary

And written materials were including:

- 1) Book
- 2) Website
- 3) Blog
- 4) New
- 5) Scholar Research
- 6) E-Card
- 7) Social Media Content - Including Joke

Ultimately, to narrow down the materials to be used in the interviews because of the duration of interviews, the length of visual and written content had to be considered so the sessions would not be rushed. I selected the materials based upon three criteria: first, the materials had to be from different media forms; second, the contents had to span from menarche to menopause and include different issues regarding menstrual cycle and third, although Iranian representation of menstrual cycle is very narrow and limited, I wanted to include them as much as possible. Therefore, the analysis will cover a variety of representations of the menstrual cycle which helped to widen the scale of the research.

Once I selected a subject matter or a medium, that format of media and that subject was put aside and the remainder of the aspects that had to be covered were selected from other forms of media. For instance, I figured out that in relation to transgender matters of menstruation, I could only gather a movie in that context. I selected the

movie as an illustration of transgender and menstruation in this way, one form of media and one aspect of the menstrual cycle was put aside. A movie specifically, because _ unlike transgender documentaries or relevant articles which could outline a specific perspective _ the movie's content had a mainstream storytelling and was not directly educative, biased or patronising in a way that could specifically hint to the audience how they should feel or react to it. Or when I realised the only audio material that I had access to was an Iranian song by a singer in exile with anti-Islam lyrics, I made the decision not to use it, even though my Iranian materials were very few as they could spark a backlash from Iranian participants. Or when considering written materials, I decided to have an e-card format. For example, books, websites and written materials in general were not similar to visual representations, so that I could only snip the part in relation to menstrual cycle. Written contents were all too comprehensive and solely focused on the subject matter which were too long to discuss with participants; the summarised version or bullet points were found appropriate for the occasion could not fully deliver the intended message. Instead, it was more suitable to use social media and e-cards for written format of the representations.

In exploring media discourse and representation of the menstrual cycle as a topic depicted by the media, both in its factual and fictional modes, this method invites us to explore how it is perceived and talked about - for example, as a treat to social stability, or as a disease or as a source of existing narrative; how it is defined - for example, in relation to offences against a person; and how these forms of thinking and talking have changed through time. This pulls into the frame of comparative analysis genres that are normally discussed in isolation from each other - such as, in

this case, news, dramas and reality TV, and highlights interconnections between how we think about aspects of menstrual cycle and how we think more generally about social responsibility or individual rights in the face of an increasingly gender equality and women empowerment seeking communities.

3.6 Procedure

The details of the interview process were as follows. The first part commenced with a few priming questions which were posed to attempt to get a general background and overview of the interviewees. By starting the procedure with general questions, it helped the participants to feel more comfortable at the outset. Afterwards, interviewees were asked to disclose their background relevant to the research's subject matter, including family and personal backgrounds. Then we moved to their perception of the menstrual cycle and the ways they see it was explored. Once participants' ideas, perceptions and attitudes towards the menstrual cycle were gathered, the second part of the interview followed, which involved exposing interviewees to mediated representations of the menstrual cycle in order to specifically collect their understanding or reaction to different aspects of it. Three main contexts were designed for this part of the interview: covering menstrual cycle stages, from menarche, menstruation to menopause.

The first set of questions were asked before this second stage, so that participants were not influenced by the contents of the materials, thus they had not seen the materials before the second stage. Asking them about their personal point of view beforehand provided a benchmark control against which their reactions would be to

the content of the media representations. The last part of the interview questions revolved around exploring the participants' reactions after exposure to the materials.

The interview questions and materials can be found in the Appendix section.

3.6.1 Conducting Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of eighteen participants (eight from Iran and ten from New Zealand) over a period of six months. The interviews were on a one-on-one basis, because the topics of discussion covered personal details and perceptions that might make some interviewees uncomfortable if shared in the presence of other interviewees. Individual interviews eliminated the effect of peer pressure and encouraged open responses from the interviewees.

The Iranian interviews were conducted in Farsi/Persian (the interviewees' and researcher's native language) to allow free expression of ideas and feelings and lasted around 40-95 minutes each. Kiwi interviews, conducted in English, lasted around 46-124 minutes. New Zealanders' interviews were held as informal sessions inside empty classrooms in AUT's WG building in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, with the researcher assuming a listener role. The Iranian interviews were conducted in the same manner and in empty rooms within safe personal premises. As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest, effective interviews are those that set the interviewee at ease so that he/she can relax, open up, and provide information concerning the study. In this circumstance interviews will "produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents' perspectives" (p.97). Each interview was audio-recorded for later transcription with the consent of participants.

3.7 Thematic Analysis

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), Thematic Analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis that identifies and offers insights into patterns of meaning or themes among data. Through this approach, researchers are able to extract “what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.57), in relation to their research topic and areas of study. Thematic Analysis “is well suited to use with social phenomenology” for the reason that it is not limited or attached to any theory. (Joffe, 2012, p.211)

Thematic Analysis is a reflective and thorough method that provides flexibility in order to elicit a wide range of interpretative data. Thematic analysis is descriptive and interpretative at the same time, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the dataset by going ‘beneath the surface’ in order to comprehend how and why the themes and accordingly meanings were generated. (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.174)

Data analysis is done through Thematic Analysis; which also measures participants’ attitudes, knowledge, inspiration, aspirations, behaviours and practices. The planned evaluation process was through Interviews, analysing data, determine findings and reporting results.

3.7.1 Thematic Analysis’ Phases

Thematic Analysis has six phases that lead to qualitative outcomes: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes and producing the report. (Braun and Clarke, 2006) Table 3.1 below is an overview of them and then descriptions of the steps taken are explained:

Table 3.1 Thematic analysis' phases

Stages	Activity Outcome
Stage 1 - Gaining familiarity with the data	Several Data Reviews and Transcribing Data (Pinned them up on the wall to be surrounded by the ideas all the time.)
Stage 2 - Generating initial codes	Producing Sub-Codes
Stage 3 - Searching for themes	Categorizing Frequent Patterns
Stage 4 - Reviewing themes	Double Checking the Themes and their Matching Categorization
Stage 5 - Naming themes	Distinguishing Each Theme
Stage 6 - Producing the report	Decoding the Meanings Out of the Patterns

During this study's interview process, each stage in the procedure was followed and applied in the data analysis phase; each step proved beneficial. The only minor difficulty encountered was in matching the codes generated via English language speaking Kiwis, with the codes generated from Iranians' Farsi/Persian discourse, so that similar and different concepts could be compared and contrasted. Overall, the coding system worked well for this research and no step needed to be skipped. Furthermore, the implementation of the system was guided by the author's own practice in extracting the codes and meanings implicit in participants' responses. Basically, the attitudes that the participants expressed and frequency of them were the baseline materials from which the codes were extracted. The following aspects of the data generation can be emphasized:

(a) Becoming "familiar with the depth and breadth of the content" via "repeated reading." (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) For this research the familiarisation stage started with the translating and transcribing. These processes helped the researcher to gain profound insight into the dataset.

(b) Generating initial codes by means of analysing the transcripts line-by-line, to classify the features of interest and relevance to the subject matter across the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2013) An inductive tactic was used for the analysis as the coding was data driven which meant that pre-existing assumptions were set aside (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Descriptions ranging from a single word to brief phrases were applied to the data identified by patterns of similarity and difference.

(c) The third segment had similar tasks to the step 2 of producing initial codes from the texts. The procedure of classifying meanings required a “great deal of interpretative work”, “close attention to conceptual detail” and flexibility for new codes to be added into developing themes. (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.392) Theme generating started once the dataset had been coded. Similar established codes with common patterns were grouped into themes for elaborating meanings in relation to this study to “create a plausible and coherent thematic mapping.” (Smith, 2015, p.236)

(d) Checking the reliability of the coding. This point recognized that participants’ data patterns were double-checked against the coded data extracts and then entire dataset. This phase was “to ensure that both individual themes and the analysis as a whole capture[d] key meanings and patterns in the data.” (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015, p.238)

(e) Following the coding procedures, thematic strands were named in order to identify them as units of meaning.

(f) The report stage entailed writing up the analysis. The “analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data” but needs to make an argument in relation to the research question. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93)

3.8 Population and Sample

Due to sensitivity of the research subject matter, data required for it was gathered through Snowballing. Those willing to participate suggested others who might be willing, after considering the participant information sheet, to volunteer. Table 3.2 below gives an overview of the participants’ demography.

Table 3.2 Participants’ demography

	Iranians in Iran 8 Interviewees	Iranians in New Zealand 5 Interviewees	Kiwis in New Zealand 5 Interviewees
Age Span	22-80	27-34	20-75
Sex	6 Female - 2 Male	3 Female - 2 Male	3 Female - 2 Male

Convenience Sample or Purposive Sampling is chosen to recruit participants. For the interviews, convenience sampling strategy was employed due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. Likewise, because of the potentially sensitive and publicly embarrassing nature of the topic, it was decided to gather the required data by face to face interview; a form which would better protect the participants’ anonymity and privacy and thereby provide a better range of qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews built around a series of prompts provided focus for the discussion, without limiting the participant’s freedom to digress or elaborate. Given the overall research question which aims to identify the ways mainstream media representations influence audience perceptions of menstruation in different cultural and social

contexts, the researcher's familiarity with both New Zealand and Iranian culture and mores, provided a unique resource for conducting the interviews.

3.8.1 The Participants

The data for the present research was collected through three separate sets of semi-structured interviews. In the first one, eight people participated, six of them female and two of them male in ages ranging from 22-80 years. All the participants were interviewed in Tehran, Iran. In the second one, five people participated. Two of them were male and three females, with ages ranging from 20-75 years. All these participants lived in Auckland, New Zealand. The third interview phase was conducted with Iranians based in New Zealand who have been residents of New Zealand at least for two years and over. Being resident for at least two years is important because for example, one who has lived here for more than two years may behave or perceive differently from the one who has just arrived; the former can be considered rather settled in comparison. Also, although New Zealand is a multicultural country with high net migration, other nationalities are exempt from this study in order to maintain sampling consistency.

Iranians in Iran and New Zealand and Kiwis in New Zealand constitute the population of the study. The participants all have different backgrounds with different cultures and attitudes and their different ages make them look at life differently. All Interviewees were of 16 years and over. As has been mentioned earlier, one of the places that the present study was conducted, was Iran. They also answered all the predesigned questions. And in the third group consisted of five Kiwis, again two males and three females who also live in Auckland. The second and third groups' interviews were conducted at Auckland University of Technology's premises in

Auckland. As has been mentioned above, data has been collected by in-depth semi-structured interview method. Convenience sampling was used for semi-structured interviews, in which overall eighteen participants consisting of six males and twelve females attended. Their personal details which might reveal their identities have been kept confidential.

Some media representations of the menstrual cycle were shown to the interviewees during the interviews. They covered a wide range, from menarche, menstruation, menopause, transgender relation to menstruation, all to help in accessing to the participants' angle of view in terms of menstrual cycle matters in general, though for cultural and sociological reasons they were mainly Western. Both Eastern and Western materials were presented in order to gain the reactions from each group. A key research question was to find out if there was any difference in the way menstruation was understood and interpreted in different cultures with different values and traditions and if participants from the same nationality living in two totally different societies, think differently regarding the subject. And, if they do what factors may have changed their attitudes.

In summary, data collection has been conducted at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and Tehran, Iran in winter 2016. Data are collected by interviews with eighteen participants. Eight Iranians in Iran, five Iranians in New Zealand and five Kiwis in New Zealand.

3.9 Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were from Iran and New Zealand and had different social and cultural backgrounds, different levels of education, occupation and age. As

mentioned, our interview groups are divided into three groups. Before starting with the main section of the interview, a series of priming questions were asked, which encouraged the participants to provide information on how they heard about the research and why they were willing to participate. This phase was designed to identify the rationale and motivation behind the participants' choice to participate in the study and to reflect on their reasoning behind it.

Then a series of questions were asked in relation to the participants' patterns of media consumption - such as television, the internet, motion pictures and social media. The reason for asking these questions was to understand the participants' media use as a possible influence on their attitudes. They were asked about their attitudes to the menstrual cycle and its media representations, in addition to the topics possibly related to their own experiences. Since the interviews were semi-structured, sometimes the exact sequence of questions and the form they took depended on the participant's account of their own experiences and opinions. The interviews were divided into sections mentioned below and then analysed thematically.

The first section (Part A) sought to collect information about how these participants saw or felt about the menstrual cycle in general. For instance, if they were female participants they were asked - How do you see yourself when you are on your period? Are you pleased to get your period? Or for both female and male participants, do women welcome it? The second section (Part B) was about the participants' reactions to media representations of menstruation and how participants decode those representations and feel about them. The third section (Part C) investigated the reactions of the participants to the stimulus materials. The last section set out to

collect information about the participants' specific and general points of view and identify which concept of the materials they found most positive and negative.

Throughout the coding, participants' names were kept confidential by labelling them by numbers, for example from 1 to 6 in each particular group. Also, "F" was given to females and "M" was given to males, for instance "M1" or "F5".

The present study provides some comparisons between males and females, such as: what are the differences between a female's or male's opinion on the appropriateness of the media in depicting the menstrual cycle? How do the differences between males and females impact on the meanings they draw from exposure to the stimuli?

In addition, the interview process sought to disclose whether there were significant differences between Kiwi and Iranian attitudes to the public representation of the topic and to specific images and texts; and if there are, what are they? The important part for this study is in the framework of interpersonal and social communication of people from different countries and ages with the subject. As Orbe and Bruess (2005, p.23) indicate "All interpersonal communication is affected by, and a reflection of, the cultural rules and experiences of the communicators." Given that, do the participants have common or different notions for interpreting and decoding different medium contents in regard to the present study's issues?

Before being questioned the participants were asked to give a brief statement about themselves in order to distinguish them from each other during the analysis phase. As individuals responded throughout the interviews, the researcher noted their reactions. Did they seem uncomfortable, stop, think, laugh, get saddened. These

impressions were written down and keyed to the relevant part of the interview, questions and stimulus material.

In addition, the recording of each interview made it easy to identify each participant from their voice and kept interruptions by the researcher to a minimum, providing participants with the opportunity for free expression. One-to-one interviews make analysis straightforward because each person's response is recorded by itself without interference from other factors. Notes were also kept of features of the interview process. Then the data coming out of the recorded audio and relevant notes were analysed separately for each participant.

After listening to the audio recording and reading the notes, the main analysis commenced. The dataset was analysed thematically, with answers being related to the topic and issues being considered. Analysing the data started with organizing responses according to the interview questions which are listed in separate individual interview transcription charts. After the questions and responses have been organized, the coding started and data was interpreted for a final report.

Duration of interviews varied from 40 minutes to 2 hours and 5 minutes. The interviews contained 30 close-ended and open-ended questions. Participants provided demographic data consisting of age, gender, nationality, background information, media use and other information related to the subject matter of menstrual cycle, including comments on different people in different situations and engaged in different activities. Although most of the questions were open-ended and designed to prompt discussion, a few extra questions emerged during some interviews based on the participants' response. These provided the researcher with

further data not foreseen in the interview schedule and increased the richness of the interaction between the researcher and individual participants. This increased involvement assisted the researcher in analysing the collected dataset.

After the audio-recordings and notes that were kept during the interviews, the collected dataset was listened to and read multiple times to quality check them and become engaged in their intricate details. To analyse the results of the interviews, at first, I translated the answers of Iranians' interviews; secondly transcribed all three set interviews and organized them according to the questions of the research. Then I compared the results of the interviews with each other and then categorized them into two main standpoints on menstruation: negative comments and reactions and positive comments and reactions. These revealed the underlying interpretative themes used by the participants. Each theme consisted of several sub-themes that are explained in the detailed discussion of the findings.

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed firstly on their own and then recurring themes were found and analysed thematically. As mentioned, the data collection was conducted by using semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Additionally, the delicacy of the topic made it more effective to question the participants in private and provided an effective setting for understanding their culture, social lives, beliefs, and attitudes in relation with menstrual cycle. The comparative analysis methodology also was used and employed for analysing the data to amplify the reliability of the study in different social and cultural backgrounds. “The process of qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth focused on by quantitative research.” (Rabiee, 2004, p.657) is also valid for this research, as the researcher wanted to seek personal information

from participants in relation to menstrual cycle's different aspects through mediated representations of it.

3.9.1 Data Analysis Procedures

A qualitative content-based thematic analysis was selected as an appropriate method of data analysis for the present study. Qualitative content analysis is a broad term used by scholars mainly “to characterize the collection of generic qualitative analytical moves that are applied to establish patterns in the data” (Dornyei, 2007, p.254).

This method of analysis typically follows a very generalized sequence of coding for themes, looking for patterns, making interpretations and building theory (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Consistent with content-based thematic analysis procedures alluded to above, analysis of the data for this study progressed in four major steps: (a) transcribing the data and translating the Farsi ones to English; (b) coding for themes, looking for patterns and developing ideas through data display and constructing voice memos and (c) interpreting the data and ultimately (d) drawing conclusions. Each step is illustrated in detail in the following sections.

3.9.2 Data Transcription

The first step in data analysis was to transform the voice recordings into a textual form. Audio-recordings from all three interview groups were transcribed in full. Since transcription is naturally a lengthy process and results in a massive load of data, the researcher invented a set of individualized transcription rules and formats to facilitate manageability of the data (Lapadat, 2000). These involved making use of punctuation marks, upper case letters, underlining and emboldening to signify body

language, intonations, pause. Moreover, columns and tables were drawn with various pen colours and highlighters to separate descriptive notes from reflective ones during the data collection and data analysis procedures. Personalized symbols, shapes and figures were some other techniques used by the researcher in order to mark and pinpoint specific implications, to simplify and fasten comparative notions.

General personal information and known details were inserted on top of each transcription to represent each interviewee, so that whenever needed, the researcher could refer back to them in order to correlate any aspect if needed.

In short, compiling the data for analysis involved transcribing data from the audio recordings of interviews. To accelerate the second step of the analysis process that is data coding and to prevent future complications, the transcriptions were segmented in the order produced. Each segment represented a unit of an apparent reflection or utterance that later became the core element of encoding.

3.9.3 Data Coding

The primary phase of a qualitative data analysis process has been analogized to a playground floor covered with hundreds of toys that need to be organized (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). One can choose among various ways to go about classifying them: by shape, size, colour. The decision, however, will depend on the purpose of such classification. A similar condition obtains when a researcher is encountered with a multitude of transcriptions. Then, the research questions serve as the best guide for data categorization since those are the queries that need to be attended to in the end.

Categorization of the data begins with coding. A code is simply a “label attached to a chunk of text intended to make the particular piece of information manageable and malleable” (Dornyei, 2007, p.250). Qualitative coding techniques are aimed at reducing and simplifying the data while highlighting special features of certain data segments to link them to broader themes or concepts. In this way commonalities and affinities among the provided comments are easily identified and the researcher can “find and mark the underlying ideas in the data, group similar information together and relate different ideas and themes to one another” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.229).

Coding schemes can be derived inductively or deductively. In the inductive method, no template of pre-determined categories is defined and codes emerge directly from the raw data. In other words, the researcher allows the data to define the codes and not vice-versa. The deductive method varies from the inductive approach in that it starts out with a code manual. Thus, the first step of data coding would involve composing a template of pre-determined (first level) categories according to which transcriptions will be coded. For this study, the inductive method was employed, with Data-Driven approach for which – unlike two other approaches: Theory and Prior-Research approaches – the data required the research to be produced from scratch. For the present study, this was generated via in-depth one-on-one interviews.



Figure 3.1. Boyatzis' 3 approaches of inductively derived code

The initial coding process involved reading and rereading the transcripts thoroughly numerous times. As Krathwohl (1998) recommends, "Reading and rereading the data seems to facilitate seeing patterns. It chunks the material in your mind so that you get past the details to the larger picture" (p.309). Data transcriptions from all sources were given a first appraisal and primary codes were manually assigned to response segments. Coded segments were then sequenced and combined to determine interrelated patterns that emerged. Subsequently, coded combinations were compared to see if larger classification of code types was possible (second level categorization). The outcome categories were eventually examined to see if types of participant perceptions could be identified. During each reading, the researcher also highlighted or underlined key notes which were thought to have an impact or considered to be regular and resistive practices in the same interview or among them all. These reflections helped shape conceptions about the data and influenced the categorization procedure. In short, data coding is a multi-level process that needs to be carried out level by level. For this study, a coding procedure with two levels was conducted. In Level 1 coding, the researcher read the transcripts of the interviews intensively and organized the data into small units of basic ideas (primary categorization). Initial codes were then assigned to all the ideas that emerged in response to the research questions. In Level 2 coding, patterns were identified through comparisons of the basic ideas and comments and similar themes were grouped together (secondary categorization). Secondary codes were then assigned to each theme segment.

3.9.4 Data Interpretation

As a continuation of the previous stage, specific sections of the interview transcripts and the attached memos were marked for retrieval. Once all the source data was loaded, information was interpreted in relation to the research questions.

In short, the process of interpretation and drawing conclusions involved taking stock of all existing data, appraising the generated patterns and insights, and finally selecting a limited number of main themes and storylines to elaborate on. Selection was based on the salience of concepts and their relationships with other significant categories. The ultimate intention was to ensure that the appointed main themes served as a focus or lens through which the whole image could be presented.

As the research literature indicates, the process of qualitative data analysis is not a clear-cut procedure and is by nature iterative, non-linear and follows a zigzag pattern (Dornyei, 2007). Various stages frequently overlap with each other and the researcher often must move back and forth between data collection, analysis and interpretation in response to emerging results. For instance, in this study, as the researcher went through the transcriptions in search of commonalities to assign codes to, she strived not only to observe and take note of these relationships, but also to reflect on how and why they were important. This cycle of interpretation is particularly salient in the data coding process with the text being coded and recoded several times. In the beginning codes are usually descriptive and low-inference but are gradually enriched and supplemented by higher-order pattern codes.

In interpreting qualitative data, one must keep in mind that instead of seeking a generalizable “correct interpretation”, qualitative research aims to broaden the

repertoire of possible interpretations of human experience. Thus, the rich data about participants' experience can widen the scope of our understanding and can add data-driven (rather than speculative) depth to the analysis of a phenomenon (Duff, 2008). A qualitative study is inherently subjective and interpretive as well as time and context bound; that is "in a qualitative inquiry "truth" is relative and "facts" depend upon individual perceptions" (Morse & Richards, 2002 as cited in Dornyei, 2007, p.54). This implies that "in qualitative research, the researcher's own values, personal history and "position" in terms of characteristics such as gender, culture, class, and age become integral part of the inquiry" (Haverkamp, 2005 as cited in Dornyei, 2007, p.38) and accordingly "the researcher essentially becomes the main measurement device in a [qualitative] study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.7). Miles and Huberman (1994) agree that it is the researchers' background knowledge that helps them to see and decipher details, complexities, and subtleties, as well as to decide what kind of questions to ask or which incidents to attend to closely.

Table 3.3 Examples of transcript and corresponding close-to-text codes

Questions & Materials	Aged 29, Female
What media do you consume?	Social Media, TV, Billboards, Satellite
What is your opinion on exposure of menstrual cycle in media?	It should be there. But it's not in Iran. In their TVs, for example, in satellites the ads...the things... pads get advertised. But this does not happen here. That is because for example, they think it is flaw. There isn't that kind of things. (Menstrual ads.)
How does your family feel about menstruation?	I think that, maybe they deal with it not so easy. For example, they are not comfortable. For example, that, it would have been very routine...
How do you see yourself when you are on your period?	These nerve... I get like nervous and so. I cry suddenly a lot too. But, for example, I feel that, like all must be very understanding of me in that period. They should pay attention to me. For example, when I'm on my period, like maybe, I'd crave chocolate on the rest of the time; but when I'm on my period I'd buy chocolate for myself certainly. Or, that I'll be more careful about what I want to do.
Are you pleased to get your period?	No. I become so upset. Because, I have so much pain. There's nothing to be happy about. Because, it so hurts.
Do women welcome it?	No; hence, anyone that I saw around me, nobody likes it. More because of those pains that they suffer from. And, annoyance that they go through. No one likes. For example, one of my friends becomes happy. (Grins) Like my friend's friend that I'm friend with too. She's married. Then, because she does not want childbearing and so; when she gets on her period, she becomes very happy. She says: like, hooray I'm on my period. For example, just this... In this context, I see that..., I also saw, like other guys become happy that they weren't pregnant. Otherwise, the rest of them don't like.

Table 3.4 Examples of transcript and corresponding close-to-text codes

Questions & Materials	Aged 43, Male
How do you see yourself when you are on your period?	N/A
Are you pleased to get your period?	N/A
Do women welcome it?	<p>By God, usually... that daughter of mine... one of my daughters, I remember that she hated it much at a time. She used to say: I wish I were a boy. She didn't like that this case occurs to them. But those who are satisfied with them being women, they accept much easier on this issue. This problem is more for that... maybe occurs more for the early years of their maturity. After that their bodies... it's going to be a habit for them.</p>
 Video Advertisement: U by Kotex Tampons Leakage Freakage	<p>I think it shows the reality in most families. (Laughs) The guy that was as a woman was very sad and angry, the man was keep remained desperate. The kid was... with himself. (Laughs)</p> <p>It is different for everyone. For some with that intensity and anger and that hormones that occurs to them, its highs... they become much more nervous. But well, some control themselves.</p> <p>Originally, it's promotion... I don't know its name! Tampon?</p> <p>I don't know but I think, it's not very common in Iran. But, I'd heard that, for those who are an athlete, especially swimmers... for example, it's their swim match, this condition occurs to them, they must use this. I think, its inventor originally was such a person that originally was an athlete; this case occurred to her, and she had to make such a thing manually for herself. It's as I heard that she was originally inventor of tampon that then they said that... like they went, talked to a company to make it. It's a good thing now; but I don't know in terms of sanitary and so, is it good or not! I don't know! But, it's very little common in Iran. It is much less common.</p>

Table 3.5 Example of creating first-order themes

Transcript - Coded Meaning Units (Codes)	First-Order Theme
Up until the first time, I didn't know at all, when I saw the blood I got shocked.	Did Not Know Shocked
It scared me.	Scared
I told to my cousin (female) that why have I became like this? She told: Oh! Don't tell anyone. Then, instantly out of sudden she beat me and (laughs) I said: "why do you beat me? Swear to Quran, my pants are bloody. Certainly, I don't know." (laughs) She taught me; she said, do like this, do like that, nothing else.	Don't Tell She Taught
I did not know at all.	Did Not Know
I was about 14-15.	
Neither our mother said anything to us (laughs) and, we didn't know. Nor we had literacy that for example we could read, to do a thing. We were illiterate. Our poor cousin guided me.	Mother Did Not Say Anything We Didn't Know Could Not Read Illiterate (Female) Cousin Guided

Table 3.6 List of some first-order themes

Positive Codes	Negative Codes
Developed – Progress	Hiding/Hidden
Prepared/Preparation – Notify – Awareness	Not Routine
Comfortable – Convenient	Uncomfortable/ Not Comfortable
Informed/Informative–Knowledge–Understanding – Education	Not Easy to Deal With
Raising a Current (Women)	An Issue Between Females
Empowerment	Hidden from Males (Religion Based)
Interesting	Contracted
Observant – Tolerate – Considerate/Considerable – Unprejudiced – Cooperation	Neglected – Ignored
Health	Annoyed – Irritable – Little Things Bother Much
Growing Up (Maturity)	Nervous
Okay – Good	Too Hard/Hard (Difficult Time)
Common Sense	Sensitive
Not Feeling Bad	Cry
Not Disruptive	Seeking Attention or getting Spoiled
Pregnancy	Limit (No Work...)
Satisfied	Frustrate – At Last... Like it to End

Table 3.7 Examples of relationships between codes, first-order themes and second-order themes

Coded Meaning Units (Codes)	First-Order Themes	Second-Order Themes
Up until the first time, I didn't know at all. (F1)	Did Not Know/Not Aware	Lack of Knowledge, Information or Awareness
But, if she'd be told beforehand that this will happen to you; this change will occur in your body, such occurrence happens; she'd accept it more comfortably, isn't worried. When this happens, she doesn't have to worry; that 'why I am like this? I didn't do anything but why this happened to me?' And, I personally was like that though! (F3)		
when I saw the blood, I got shocked. It scared me. (F1)	Shocked/Scared/Anxiety	Bad or Negative Feeling
When this happens, she doesn't have to worry; that 'why I am like this? I didn't do anything but why this happened to me?' And, I personally was like that though! (F3)		
Don't tell anyone. (F1)	Don't Tell/Discreet	Hiding or Secrecy
... we had been trying that no one ever notices, that like we got period. Then, no one should notice. (F2)		
I was shy, when I was on my period, I used to try that my mum doesn't know it at all. I used to try to prepare and make ready something for myself stealthy and so. I was very shy. (F3)		
Our poor (female) cousin guided me. (F1)	She/Female: Taught/Guided/Explained	Female Family Member Instruction
Mom had explained to me. (F4)		

Table 3.8 Examples of themes related to Iranians (in Iran and New Zealand)

First-Order Themes	Second-Order Themes	Organizing-Themes	Themes	
Shock Tough/Alone Experience No Idea/Notification	Hiding Ashamed Secrecy	Lack of Menstrual Education	Taboo Derived Rules	Lack of Menstrual Education
Superstitious Beliefs				
Pain Discomfort Bleeding Blood Stain	Menstrual Physical Issues	Social Limitation/ Marginalization	Heterosexual Relationship Decisions	
Husband Fertility Child Femininity Health Beauty Youth Sexual Desire	Successful Heterosexual Relationship Female Factors		Sexism and Patriarchy Values & Point of View	
Losing Fertility Lack of Sexual Desire Aging Love Life Risk	End of Heterosexual Relationship Satisfaction, Thriving or Opportunities			

Chapter 4

Iranians' Data Analysis

This chapter looks into details of the dataset to extract codes so as to isolate identifiable patterns and themes emerging from the data. Throughout the chapter, Iranian participants are labelled as IM (male) IF (female), Kiwis as, KM (male) KF (female) and “migrant” Iranians as MM (male) and MF (female).

4.1 Iranian Interviews

The data for the present research was collected from three separate interview sessions. All the interviews were conducted on an individual basis and were semi-structured and open-ended. The first set of interviews with Iranians resident in Iran had eight participants: six females and two males, aged from 22-80 years. The second set of interviews had five New Zealand participants, two male and three females, with ages ranging from 20-75 years. New Zealand snowballing procedure was taking too long, as the researcher had less connection there, that is why the two New Zealand groups consisted of five participants each; overall ten interviewees for the New Zealand part. The third set of interviews was with Iranians who migrated to New Zealand and had been residents for at least two years. As mentioned, five individuals were interviewed for this group too, three females and two males. The three groups provided two control conditions – New Zealand and Iranian residents with the third group of Iranians resident in New Zealand selected to test the interaction between the attitudes revealed in the control groups. This design was adopted to explore the interaction between traditional and modern attitudes to menstruation with the

“migrant” group providing a measure of interaction effects on attitudes. For purposes of maintaining consistent comparison, other nationalities were exempted from this study.

4.1.1 One on One Interviews: Process and Evaluation

To analyse the results of the interviews, I translated the answers and where necessary, transcribed them. Having organised all the responses, question by question, I then compared the results of the interviews with each other and then categorized them into three main themes which are: negative comments and reactions in the interviews, positive comments and reactions and finally, there were other aspects such as religious and also media related responses on the topic of menstruation and various representations of it. Each theme consisted of several sub-themes that will be elaborated in detail.

4.1.2 Semi-Structured Interview Process

As already stated, the participants were resident in Iran and New Zealand or in the comparison group had migrated to New Zealand from Iran. In addition to factors of geographical location, the participants had differing social and cultural backgrounds, different levels of education, religion, class and age. Each participant was asked what they thought about media representations of the menstrual cycle, what issues and problems they had with them. Before starting with the main section of the interview, a few questions were asked regarding a participant’s use of the media - television, the internet, radio and movies. Following this introduction, they were asked about their attitudes to the menstrual cycle and how media representations of it related to their own experiences. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the exact sequence of questions and the form they took depended on the interviewees’

reactions and their account of their own experiences and opinions. For example, what was their usual pattern of media consumption? What was their opinion about whether the menstrual cycle should be addressed publicly in the media and how they felt about encountering representations of the menstrual cycle in media? The interviews were divided into sections mentioned below and analysed thematically. The first section (Part A) sought to collect information about the participants' general views on the menstrual cycle. The second section (Part B) was designed to elicit their reactions to media representations of the cycle, as presented in different contexts and formats – such as image advertising, video advertising, television series, movies, social media content, reality shows. The point here was to determine the participants' emotional reactions to the stimulus materials. The last section (Part C) collated the data collected in Part B in order to identify patterns of attitudes and opinions. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned identifiers from 1 to 6 according to gender - "M1" or "F1" and so on. These labels were also differentiated according to ethnicity.

4.2 Analysis and Findings

First an overview of Iranian interviews is given, following that each part of the questions and materials are discussed and explained in detail. This is followed by consideration of the New Zealanders' interviews.

4.2.1 Iranian Interviews

1. Negative Attitudes

The dominant feature of the Iranian interviews was negativity. Interviewees expressed this through their reactions and comments while talking about the materials or about the menstrual cycle related issues. Interviewee IF6 says that

“there’s nothing to be happy about. Because, it so hurts.” Also, interviewee IM1 sees menstruation mainly as negative. He states that “somehow I do not like lethargic [menstrual woman] and for example, collapsed [menstrual woman] and like this. And well, that bleeding also...because, I myself hate blood, well it’s very bad.” In addition, some of the interviewees relate the menstrual cycle to the matter of dirtiness and uncleanliness. A young woman interviewee refers to this issue as “it’s dirty.... For example, like going to restroom.” Both the male and female participants do have similar responses in terms of pessimism towards menstruation.

Interviewees had different responses to the question regarding the suitability of how of the menstrual cycle is represented in media. So not necessarily negative – more nuanced. Yet, the majority found menstrual cycle depictions as fulfilling an important public information function and they perceive media representation of it as a positive fact which could alleviate menarche problems. For example, interviewee IF3 says that “It’s very good... It’s very good. Because, as I said, a kid, a little girl when a physical change happens, if she doesn’t have this preparation, she doesn’t know, then an occurrence... this happens to her in that age, experiences a panic, a fear. But, if she’d be told beforehand that this will happen to you; this change will occur in your body, such occurrence happens; she’d accept it more comfortably, isn’t worried. When this happens, she doesn’t have to worry ‘why I am like this? I didn’t do anything but why has this happened to me?’ And, I personally was like that though!” Additionally, some of the interviewees related this issue to the factor of social development and progress. Interviewee IF1 says that, “Those stuffs are not for us anymore... There was not Anything about it... It never got explained... There was not any guidance or education for it... we wish new generation get developed. Be prepared, be told about

everything, get to read and learn... they become comfortable... why would I disagree!

Those must be for all of them."

2. Positive Attitudes

Overall, positive attitudes throughout the Iranian interviews were few compare to widespread negative attitudes toward menstrual matters. Yet some optimistic remarks were made which mainly revolved around menstruation, as having a positive benefit such as giving menstruators a feeling of health. From the point of view of both Iranian men and women, fertility is a main advantage of the menstruation.

3. Religion

The religious significance of the menstrual cycle was not raised frequently during the interviews. Some scattered comments and viewpoints in relation to religion would come up, but overall, other than the general influence of religion which is particularly strong in Iranian society, the participants did not make widespread reference to a religious context in order to rationalize or justify their opinions and responses. Except for the oldest Iranian interviewee, who did so. Nevertheless, the existing observations around religious aspects were predominantly discussed in the context of the Iranians' generally religious way of upbringing. The impact of taboos around menstruation was strongest in religious families.

4. Media

In this section of the interview programme, participants were asked to reflect on their own media use. How much media exposure do they have, what sort of media do they use and questions about their opinion of the representation of the menstrual cycle in media?

Generally speaking, the research literature on the impact of the media on popular opinion is complex. As demonstrated in the literature review there are a range of theories of media impacts in terms of concepts such as agenda setting, norm activation and opinion formation. Here, the immediate purpose is to track media influence in relation to menstrual issues. In this respect, the Media is an interpersonal source of information for learning about the behaviour and attitudes of the others that make up the larger society. All participants, state that they watch TV. All of them go to the cinema or watch movies; however, the frequency of these behaviours differs from person to person. Seven of the participants use the Internet and on the internet, the participants' activities are included using social media like 'Facebook', 'Telegram', 'WhatsApp', 'Viber', 'Instagram'. The same seven participants watched satellite channels too. Two of the participants used radio. Two of them used books, one of whom is a participant that is also a radio user and the other one used online books too. And one of the participants used an online newspaper.

Having established media usage profiles of participants, the interview topic shifted to the discussion of the participants' attitudes to media coverage of menstrual issues and themes. The reason for exploring the participants' attitudes to menstrual cycle imagery in the media, is to establish a relationship between the participants' attitudes in general and specific attitudes to media coverage. Particularly in relation to the latter, the question turns on how exposure to media depictions affects their understanding and how well they understand the messages the media representations are promoting.

Six of the participants were in support of media representations of the menstrual cycle; only IF4 was against them. And the two males claimed that the issue of representing the menstrual cycle was unimportant and not worth considering.

Later in the interviews, media representations of the menstrual cycle were shown to the interviewees. These samples were shown in order to reveal the participants' reactions to depictions of the menstrual cycle and how they decode the encoded messages.

Part A: Background

In this part, questions were asked of the participants to check e.g. how their family background may influence their views of the menstrual cycle.

In answer to a specific question about the attitudes of their family to the menstrual cycle, the participants were free to focus on the family they grew up in or their own family by marriage or both, if they were comfortable with discussing both. Moreover, some were single. The participants who had family of their own, were also prepared to discuss the attitudes of their relatives and parents. Some participants reported that different family members had different attitudes and expectations about the appropriateness of discussing menstruation, some were for it and some were against it. On the one hand, some female participants spoke of the positive support they received from their family. On the other hand, the majority of the female participants reported they did not know about menstruation before their menarche or did not receive support and understanding and had to deal with menstruation as a private and possibly taboo subject. Besides, none were derived from generational aspects. Which means generation was not an important variable in this case. But taboo and

stigma are ongoing issues in the society regardless of generation related changes. In general terms, five of the participants thought that their families were considerate, cooperative, observant, tolerant, understanding or even unprejudiced with regards to menstruation. They mentioned one or more of the options to express their thought in regard to their family's feeling about the subject. At the same time, six of the participants think that their families either hide, ignore, neglect and feel uncomfortable about the topic, or even viewing it as a female problem that the individual must deal with alone. The ones who had family of their own, either married or with at least one child, made a distinction between attitudes in their own family and their family of birth. In reporting the conversation, the answers were grouped according to whether they pertained to the family of birth – including the single respondents - or the family of their own if they had one and whether they reported a positive, negative or mixed response. Five of the participants strongly emphasized that their families in which they grew up, did not talk about menstruation, even to the extent that two of the females disclosed that they had never been told about menarche by their family; only learning about it from extended family members once they started menstruating. Accordingly, they were shocked and scared. IF1 illustrates the event in detail:

Up until the first time, I did not know at all, when I saw the blood I got shocked. It scared me.

I told to my cousin (female) that why have I become like this? She told: Oh! Do not tell anyone. Then, instantly out of sudden she beat me, and I said: why do you beat me? Swear to Quran, my pants are bloody. Certainly, I did not know. She taught me; she said, do like this, do like that, nothing else.

I did not know at all. I was about 14-15 years old. Neither our mother said anything to us and, we did not know. Nor we had literacy that for example we could read, to do a thing. We were illiterate. Our poor cousin guided me.

Also, IF3 directly points out to her situation as below:

I kept going to toilet to wash myself. I saw it again that it has not gone. I went and talked with my sister-in-law that I... like I even swore for her that I did not do anything, 'swear to God. But, I do not know why it is like this. Like does not matter how much I wash myself, I do not become clean. It was only then... like only then, my sister-in-law who was like educated, she explained to me. But before that, as if I had known through my family... from my sister or from my mother, I had not been told about this field, they did not tell anything to me. No, I did not know about such changes at all.

The ironic side is that, IF1 and IF3 are mother and daughter. Which means although IF1 suffered from not being informed about the subject, she actually treated her daughter in the same way. This seems to have influenced her attitude to menstruation as a taboo or shameful topic so that she intentionally kept what little knowledge she had hidden and didn't pass it on to her daughter. As probably she assumed that was the way she had been treated by her own family, so it may be the only way to deal with the subject. Therefore, they didn't even at least have a mother-daughter heart to heart talk about menstruating. Moreover, as IF1 observed her mother was illiterate and the fact that as IF1 was growing up there was limited access to the media and what little there was would not have any menstruation related content. So it can be concluded that the mother could only refer to her own limited experience on how to act or treat menarche. The pattern clearly repeated years later in regard to her own daughter.

In IM1's case, as a man he clearly recalls that the fact of menstruation was cloaked in secrecy:

They hid it at those times! Means, when we were a kid, we did not know that our sister or our mother, when...? Unless out of sudden, accidentally we saw a thing in toilet's bin that we saw such case occurred to them. Otherwise, they hid it; means they never said that they have this problem. Only sometimes from their models or their fatigues or lethargy of like my sister I realized that... Or

my mother had given her more attention sometimes. She used to say now is the cycle of... her cycle... she would give a short explanation to me that now is not a good cycle; and, we are observant of her.

Overall, three of the Iranian participants considered that their families, whether by birth or marriage, had negative attitudes toward menstruation. But two of them saw a positive attitude and three of them thought there was a mix of positive and negative attitudes including their own family or the family of birth. In this group of participants, most of them felt their female relatives were more likely to have a negative view compared to male relatives, two participants felt their relatives, male or female, have no negative attitudes or feelings and only one felt both male and female relatives viewed menstruation negatively.

In terms of the question of how females see themselves when they have their period, out of six female interviewees, five saw themselves as either annoyed, nervous, sensitive, irritable or being limited at work, the gym or social occasions such as attending a party. One of the participants sees herself as okay, good, balanced in her attitudes and behaviour and not feeling bad or socially restricted. However, the same one declared that in the last days of her period, she gets frustrated and cannot wait for it to end. So, altogether it is obvious that the participants, find having a period to be, for the most part, a negative experience.

Participants who declared that they were going through menopause, had three types of responses to a question about their attitudes to periods when they had them. The responses were divided into three different kinds: One participant strongly asserted that she is pleased with it, three others are not pleased to get their period and two other participants were both pleased and not pleased depending on the

circumstances. For instance, IF2 said that she was not pleased to get her period because she had found it annoying. Although, she quickly adds it that:

... well but, then that I understood that this is a natural thing of human body's levels, well yeah; I was just happy. Especially in this age of the... last years, that now I reached the menopause stage, like.... I until 55, 54 years old got menstruation in order. Means it didn't decrease & increase at all. But then that I hadn't got it anymore, not getting it... then I stricken by issues of things... I was annoyed. For example, in terms of... I got headache difficulty... difficulties... I even want to say that I got severe depression. That actually I had a course of treatment.

I wanted to have it (period)... Because having it was very good for me. Both spiritually... also that... at the end of it.... like... Even I was waiting that I be on period, so I feel good. Because I had a strong feeling of heaviness in my head. After all I was totally feeling bad though.

IF5 on the other hand, responds this way to the question that, when it (menstruation) finishes she is pleased to get the period and actually, she mentions that it is a very good feeling and when it is over, it seems that she is highly refreshed as per her explanation. When she was asked how about when she is on her period she responds:

Of course, I get more annoyed during it. I'm okay from the fourth day till seventh. I can go to the gym, if there would be any work or party I do not get annoyed. But, after my seventh day finished, it seems that again I am refreshed. I have a good feeling then.

According to their answers, women mostly do not welcome menstruation, except for four main reasons which are: physical and psychological conditions, knowledge, pregnancy, satisfaction. IM2 strongly claimed that women do not welcome it at all. IF4 finds it very interesting that, as far as in her own case, she does not really feel terrible about this herself as she is satisfied with her sexuality, but on the other hand in regard to women's feeling toward it in general she explains:

They dislike it much.... I always see in our culture, it's very interesting... no, women don't welcome it at all. They know it as a troublesome thing.

She even provides an example of a female that she knows and illustrates that she never felt the same:

...for example, I remember she was saying that, 'I like that my baby to be a boy.' 'Why?' 'Because, he doesn't become miserable, the same as us girls. We're miserable. We since, 13-14 years old, we have trouble. We're very miserable humans. A boy is always comfortable.'

IM1 has a similar point of view and believes that, females who are satisfied with themselves and their sexuality would welcome menstruation, while the ones that are somehow not comfortable with their body, sex or related issues, would dislike it and be unwelcoming toward it.

By God, usually... that daughter of mine... I remember that she hated it much at a time. She used to say: I wish I were a boy. She didn't like that this case occurs to them. But those who are satisfied with them being women, they accept much easier on this issue. This problem is more for that... maybe occurs more for the early years of their maturity. After that their bodies... it's going to be a habit for them.

When we compare this response with the previous one it can be said that this is the one thing that they have in common with each other. So, females who are comfortable and happy with their sexuality's aspects have the same happiness and satisfaction with their menstruation, no matter if they come from an open-minded family or whether they come rather from a close-minded one. On the one hand, in IF4's case the family is rather more conservative and menstruation is considered a disgraceful secret among females. On the other hand, IM1's family is more open about menstruation and several times, it was mentioned that menstruation is discussed by females with male relatives.

Part B: Male Presence Effect

In part B of the semi-structured interview process, the core topic was the different ways in which the menstrual cycle was represented in the media, covering menarche to menopause. Generally speaking, understanding media representations depends on knowing how to decode the text and images. For an image advertisement, mostly participants did not understand the image before it was explained in detail. They actually could not decode it in the first place and found it confusing. Three participants clearly expressed having difficulty with understanding the message or image (both two male interviewees and a female), when it was explained that the angry man in the image is a representative of women who are having PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) or are on their period and what the pill does. Only then could they express their thoughts. The participants viewed it as either irrelevant, stressed the physical aspect like pain, exaggeration, family distancing but mostly they felt sympathetic towards it.

Figure 4.1 is a menstrual pill campaign that promotes the slogan ‘When she is not feeling like herself, get her back with Kitadol Menstrual Period’. It is a series of print advertisements, depicting people around menstrual women; those people in company of menstrual women are supposed as victims of premenstrual syndrome. Below image out of all other images was chosen because it is the only material that was found with pointing out to PMS in a family context that actually includes a member of family a child besides the man of the family or the man that is supposedly affected by PMS issues of his female partner. In the image the menstrual woman is illustrated as an aggressive male Thai boxer to pinpoint hormonal side effects of premenstrual syndrome; the presence and rage mood of whom apparently affects

other family members in a negative way and in a way that brings distance and lost connection between them.



Figure 4.1 Image advertisement: Kitadol's get her back campaign (menstrual pill)

Commenting on this advertisement, IF4 said: “Look, now like, even you’re saying on ads...we are so embarrassed by this section!” Most of them mention that they would be able to only decode the message in the image after explanation. But given that the media themselves show a tendency to hint rather than explicitly address menstruation the need for more information and explanation was inevitable. As the participants reported, whether approved or not, menstruation is a natural process and an everyday reality. The advertisement with its implicit analogy between a menstruating female and a “savage” seemed unrealistic, exaggerated and crazy. They recognized this because they could draw on the experiences that they had and the relationships that they had established with their partners or in their families. The advertisement also raised an issue of negative stereotyping. Two of the unmarried

females were strongly offended by it. By contrast, the other females in existing marital relationships or having had a previous one or having children, found the image easy to decode and did not object to the portrayal. This response particularly suggests that married females are more likely to adopt a male perspective on menstruation as a PMS-filled problem. One of the participants said that the main effects of a period were physical pain and cramps and not exaggerated psychological effects such as aggression and mood swings. Another participant pointed out that, although menstruation can be difficult and hard, this representation is exaggerated in order to present it as a problem that the product would solve. They said that the advertisement was biased and gave a false, if not crazy, interpretation. Other opinions by the Iranian group were that the advertisement was anti-female. One of the two male participants, who was single, claimed that women with PMS need to take the pill. This participant, based on our conversations, had limited information about the menstrual cycle. Five other participants claimed that emotional factors such as bad temper, irritability, being nervous, violent and aggressive, were a natural accompaniment to periods and that the portrayal accurately captures reality in most families. This entire group of people also tended to blame the female for creating negative feelings to others, especially their male partners, that are due to PMS. In contrast to male participants three females draw the attention to the man in the image for the purpose of suggesting an appropriate male response. For example, the man doesn't understand a woman's physical conditions, doesn't make allowance for her period, should be patient, be aware of it, understand it, tolerate it. While none of them say anything about children, how to address the PMS issue when it comes to interacting with children, or how people should behave with children in general during the recurrence of the menstrual cycle. This, despite the fact that all three

female participants have children of their own. It was most revealing how they were ONLY concerned about men's behaviour, understanding and tolerance while they clearly ignored the child part as a part of family and that particular advertisement.

These responses seem to indicate the effect of power relationships on the perception of menstruation as a "relationship" problem for women and accordingly assigning responsibility for solving the problem. Female respondents may consciously or unconsciously see men as superior to themselves and children as inferior compared to men's status. So, whilst considering themselves competent to take care of children, they seemed to accept the obligation to manage their periods and the emotional and psychological effects so that men's needs are met and their psychological comfort not disturbed. The ones who used their family experiences to express their thoughts on the image, concentrated on the effects on their husbands or male partners rather than how menstruation affected other family members including children. Constantly mentioning and being concerned about the man of their family and ignoring the child part was a feature of all the female interviewees' responses, regardless of whether they had a child of their own or not. This was highlighted by the fact that the only participants who acknowledged the possible effects on children were male. In the Iranian sample, the two male interviewees were the only ones that acknowledged that the effect on children was barely acknowledged in the media examples. This may reflect a cultural expectation surrounding gender in Iran where men are expected to be the ones that take care of the entire family. Male participants in contrast to the female participants, discussed all three characters in the advertisement, rather than choosing to ignore a character they deemed less important. In a strongly patriarchal society the rules of conduct and

law favour men, who are considered to have the authority over and the duty to take care of the 'vulnerable' - women and children. As a consequence, women in such societies tend to seek men's attention, respect their point of view and want men to accept them and take care of them. It seems that these female participants in relating the media representations to their personal lives, saw children's understanding, awareness or caring in regard to PMS as unimportant. This seems to be because a man's point of view and mindset would have the greatest impact on their lives. Significantly the only participant that claimed women can control themselves in such conditions, was male. The other male participant showed no understanding or sympathy toward the woman and was only concerned for the impact on the man and any children. Both responses defined menstruation as a woman's problem. Moreover, if most of the female participants expected men to adjust themselves to the fact of periods, none related this to a strategy of female empowerment and being in control of their own lives.

Figure 4.2 is a Kimberly-Clark's U by Kotex brand campaign called 'Leakage Freakage'. The campaign promoted Pads range and Tampons. The television commercial presented the unwritten rules girls follow when they have their period to avoid being seen with a potential leak, such as: wearing black clothes, staying close to the bathroom, having jumpers around their waist and practising the 'back to the wall shuffle'. It claims girls can forget the rules altogether when using the products, which protect against leaks. This campaign wanted to show that 'U by Kotex' is a brand that really understands girls and tries to use the supposedly fun, edgy personality to demonstrate that girls can feel confident when using those menstrual products. The TV commercials were supported by print and digital advertising campaign of same

kind. The video tampon version of the advertisement was chosen to be shown for interviews, because it included more information for an audience compared to the print versions and pad video advertisement.



Figure 4.2 Video advertisement: U by Kotex tampons leakage freakage

In relation to the U by Kotex Tampons Leakage Freakage video advertisement, two female participants recalled the time that they had to use cloths instead of sanitary products, washed them and air dried them in the sun to sanitize them as there were no irons available. Two participants had the opportunity to use tampons, but they did not feel comfortable using them. Three others agree with the message that women need to prevent or hide leakage. They suggest that a woman must be organized to prevent leaks and deal with the possible consequences. For example, one should not wear clothes in light colours when menstruating and exercise care when choosing the type of sanitary pad to use. Three female participants observed that tampons are not widely available in Iran. One participant emphasized during the interview that selling tampons has become illegal in Iran and tampons are no longer sold there.

Three participants thought that the fear of leakage affects their social behaviour, such as going to a party, to work or even interacting in public. This could be as much a matter of self-respect rather than a matter of seeking men's approval, due to the stigma attached to menstrual blood stain. Some felt that any social contact might be avoided because of the potential shame and embarrassment. In this manner menstruation was equated with voluntary confinement. So most of them agree that the situation depicted in the advertisement is real and is associated with anxiety and stress. Accordingly, the participants could relate to the advertisement and the social situation it represented. One participant said she had the issue when she was younger especially during high school, but said she was no longer worried by the problem. A male participant revealed limited and wrong information about tampons, their use and the way they are designed to be used and whether they were sanitary.

Figure 4.3 is from Keeping Up with the Kardashians show. This particular reality show episode was picked out, of all other options available as it was one of the rare materials which content actually elaborated an educational take on the menarche subject matter. It particularly depicted two teenage girls, one being shy and the other more comfortable with menarche discussion, in their family context being taught about menstruation and menstrual products, including pad and tampon.



Figure 4.3 Reality show: Keeping up with the Kardashians (season 2, episode 4)

In this section, the interviews addressed the topic of adolescent girls' menarche and how adequately they were educated and informed about this transition to adulthood. Almost all of the participants emphasized the importance of educating and informing girls in regard to menarche. Their opinions varied between educating

adolescent girls in the family or school or in both settings. Most of them thought family information should be managed by female relatives – such as the mother or older sister. However, at the end of the interview, all participants had stressed the importance and need for education and information whether this occurred in family, school and/or media situations. Three of the female interviewees pinpointed their own bad experiences of menarche, which they attributed to lack of information and education and inadequate word of mouth advice from female relatives. One of them explained that she learned everything slowly *after* she was married and another said that her periods became normal to her gradually after 3 to 4 years of menstruating. A third one talked about how information about menstruation was very important but observed that her mother's explanations were of limited use in enabling her to manage her periods. So they all three got the bigger picture just through experiencing it in action and over time. Therefore, lack of a support system or a systematic education is tangible here.

Just one female participant and one male participant acknowledged that menarche is natural while three participants observed that girls felt shy about discussing their periods and this could lead to fear.

She was like me. I was shy, when I was on my period, I used to try that my mum doesn't know it at all. I used to try to prepare and make ready something for myself stealthy and so. I was very shy. Until gradually, after 3-4 years it became normal for me. But still, when I was on it, I was very considerate that, when my underwear got dirty (bloody), no one sees. I washed them myself, I used to do all the related stuff by myself. So, she was like me. (Sighs) [A part of IF3's interview.]

As it has been written above, a general lack of openness about menstruation and the absence of reliable information, meant that misconceptions and misperceptions

tended to persist connecting menstruation with uncleanliness, shame and taboo. But this was not simply a problem for adolescents - adults' information in Iran is not necessarily right and complete as well. In a society where menstrual related information tends mainly to get passed via word of mouth, the reliability and accuracy of the informant's knowledge is very important for understanding different aspects of the menstrual cycle. As an example, IF4 said:

... We don't have. This issue is so terrible. I exactly had this experience with my daughter. She got on her period very soon. Then, she was 10-11 years old. Then, they don't propose it at all. Then, my daughter that had experienced this issue, it was a situation that, the kids' moms somehow, they knew her like [excuse me], as a bad girl. Then, somehow, they do things; as if they want to make boundaries for this girl. Means, they (the mothers) say to their daughter 'don't talk to her anymore!'

When a person of the same sex is stigmatizing them in this way, it creates problems for their own self-image during the menarche. They feel bad because they think the friend, or her mother has a problem with them and their body's natural condition. They feel nervous, uncomfortable and lacking in confidence. The current tendency to treat menstruation as a personal problem to be managed informally therefore can have negative effects. The media and the education system have an important role in providing alternative and positive messages. But as these responses show, when women do not have an accurate view of menstruation it cannot be expected that men will. IF6 as a 29-year-old declares that: "This is very good; that for example they come and educate. This is very good. But like, I never knew use of tampons till now." So somehow this Reality Show's video creates a question mark in her mind regarding a product that is invented for her, but she has never used it and besides, it does not get sold in Iran. As another female participant acknowledged, the media representation (Reality Show) represented the subject well and had good points for

educating adolescent girls. She says that, how to educate is very important and in her opinion, they are educating the girl beautifully. She continues with reminding that, we do not educate these topics to our girls at school, so they become more uncomfortable and that, this (the video) is very PERFECT.

It is clear there is no male presence in this video. Therefore, all interviewees were focused on the adolescent girls' issues and did not define and connect anything to male relations. However, there is another sort of gender relation that is present in this section, which is four out of the six female participants connected the adolescent girls' issues, educating and responsibilities to their female relatives only. In this way, they implicitly define menstruation as a woman's problem.

Part C: Menopause

Figure 4.4 below is from Desperate Housewives television series. This episode is picked out in TV series category because it addressed the early menopausal factor in menstrual cycle matters, showcasing how devastating the issue can be for a woman and how unacceptable it may be for her. Then it continues to display how she opened up about it to her husband and how her husband tries to comprehend it and react to it as best as he can so that she calms down. However, at the very end it gets obvious that the lady was pregnant.



Figure 4.4 TV series: Desperate housewives (season 4, episode 1)

Thus far the interviews have been focused on the menstrual cycle and aspects of its depiction in the media. Another theme cited by participants emphasized the representation of the menstrual cycle's link with patriarchy. In such an ideological system, women are expected to seek out and secure a heterosexual relationship through providing men with sexual satisfaction and the provision of children. The first image which was shown to the participants, explored PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) and featured a male and a child (male) along with a menstruating woman representative. As noted above female participants tended to focus on the question of meeting the needs of men as husbands or partners with the needs of children, being completely ignored. It was men's understanding, emotions and attitudes that provide the normative framework for interpreting the image. Ironically, the female respondents did not recognize that their own lack of knowledge and agency in defining menstruation as a feminine experience, was being re-enforced by posing menstruation as a problem to be solved. In order to test out the impact of a male perspective more thoroughly, a menopause related video with male presence was

shown to participants without the presence of an actual child. In this context, the key dramatic problem centred on the woman's ability to satisfy her husband or partner sexually through a loss of desire or other physical symptoms and on the consequences of female infertility. All eight participants' answers (male or female) accepted this view of menopause as a problem, which reduced the value of the woman as a sexual plaything and a provider of babies. This male satisfaction centred view of menopause, was identified as a source of anxiety. That the women were getting old and that men deserve and desire a younger woman or that women were losing their attractiveness. But it is not just attractiveness in terms of fertility; it is also simply sexual attractiveness. All the ladies echoing the limitations placed on sexual relations and reproduction signalled by menstruation. In this interpretation a menopausal woman is rightly or wrongly represented as a useless creature. IF4 gets further impacts on a woman's sense of worth and self-image:

Means, no one likes. This lady didn't like at all too. Yet, we can't; this issue is this much important for ourselves _for example, I personally_ that we can't understand, come on, this issue may be not important for the one that loves you; it's not important for the man. 'Well, I love you. Now, we didn't give birth to a child, it's not important. The same that you're is OK.' But, a woman or a lady, is this much negative towards this issue that, doesn't understand at all that, come on, he can love you too. Because, we don't like this story at all ourselves. Then also, she saw that the test result came; well, they gave the world to her. (laughs) She became very happy. But generally, I personally, not at all; I go do a series of yoga exercises. Then exactly, I focus on that point. I do that breathing exercises. For example, once I understand that, this exercise, this particular move of yoga causes that, your menopause falls behind, I do that. Means, if I do not do anything, I do that.

Here the interviewee clearly puts a male attitude toward a woman's body first, compared to a female's attitude. And, basically it prioritizes men's definition of the women's body as a source for male satisfaction and preservation of the life line.

Although only two participants point out that menopause is natural and normal, the whole group thinks that menopause is a negative event that could have bad results sexually or reproductively, especially for those in a relationship with a man and those without a child.

Moreover, the primacy of a male centred view of menopause shows up in the participants' sympathy and understanding that they have for the female character as she panics about ageing, saving marriage and what this means for keeping the husband happy sexually. As already mentioned, losing the capacity to provide a child for him is one of the key concerns female participants had. Basically, in taking this attitude, these women think that they are solely responsible for the quality of their partners' sex lives and they believe that with the onset of menopause, the men would not be as sexually satisfied by them anymore. So they did not deny that things would change. But they did not recognise that it was up to both of them to keep their relationship mutually satisfying, without laying the blame on the woman. This is in part a reflection of the traditional patriarchal view of gender. "Women have been simultaneously perceived as less competent and inherently less valuable than men, but also are idealized as wives and mothers." (Glick & Fiske, 1996, as cited in Roberts et al., 2002)

This lady's fear from... just because, well eventually she wanted to save her marriage; and wanted that her life doesn't ruin and so. That was why! But it was very good that her spouse treated her like that... it happens seldom, that such... in Iran it doesn't happen at all.

Another participant added that the situation ended happily, as the woman was not yet menopausal and got pregnant and observed that early menopause without a child is much worse and results in depression as well. In different ways, all the

participants saw menopause as a threat to relationships, especially marriage. But again, they all in their own way showed and expressed satisfaction that at the end of the episode the test result showed pregnancy and the fact that the menopause was false.

At the same time, three of them acknowledge that there is no support system in Iran for women on menopause. Each of them points out that, neither spousal, social, cultural, informational or media support exists over there. IF3 clearly tries to explain the situation from her point of view and said:

(Laughs) Menopause. (Sighs) Well, the truth is that here... means, (I) myself think that if one doesn't menopause... of course with our society's culture that is the same words that this lady told, well anyway some desires decrease in women, but rather than be supported, they aren't supported at all. Then even, men of this society of ours... our men even... actually when ladies get stricken by a very big change and transition, they even put them alone! They think that they don't meet their needs; or, one would say 'I want kid.' That way, they leave ladies alone like this. On the other hand, ladies think they don't have that previous efficiency too. For example, they think, they become depress then. As I said, as they don't have supports. Or, our media don't notify people either. Like guys, we need to help ladies a little, in this age. Because, on one hand they don't inform people; and on the other hand, in terms of thought and culture of this society's men.... actually, ladies are under pressure, from both sides. They get depressed, they get sick automatically, they can't communicate anyone. For example, instead of that someone else pays more attention, says 'come and drink more milk, like foodstuff that in term of calcium and so on' to support her, she doesn't have such person. They even think actually... how should I say? Means, fruitful... the same way that the lady told that I can't bear child anymore! Means only... we only, being woman and... only that like we can give birth, we childbirth. Once we don't give birth, they think we are no longer usable; our expiration date is past then. Like we have passed our expiration date. It's not possible at all... they put us away comfortably. Means, the period of menopause in our country _I don't know about overseas_ becomes exactly this shape... ladies aren't supported anymore at all.

In the study of “Feminine Protection”: The Effects of Menstruation on Attitudes Towards Women, Roberts et al. argued that, “...the bodily functions associated with menstruation serve as an emblem of women’s inferiority.” The responses that were

received in relation to attitudes toward menopause as a female bodily function that directly relates to menstruation, show how women are looked at as the so called second inferior gender from both a man's and woman's point of view in Iran's society. In this context, the value given to women is only linked to their childbearing and sexual desires in a heterosexual relationship.

In summary, the participants male or female, looked at menopause predominantly from a male point of view (male gaze), objectifying the female body and its capacity to service male needs and desires. As a consequence, childbearing, marriage and ageing were the main issues discussed. Moreover, it was very interesting how women could see themselves as meaningless or useless with the onset of menopause – thus inscribing their worth as dependent on their sexual usefulness to men. All menstruation's negative aspects and difficulties that came up during the discussion around menstruation related material, did not come up during the discussions about this menopause related representation. It was at this point that they (especially female participants), expressed and showed their need of menstruation in order to be productive, useful, fruitful, healthy or in demand. It is as if fertility is the only power they have as women, then menopause disempowers them by taking away the only resource they may have to secure a heterosexual relationship.

Participants contrasted what menstruation felt like compared to being on menopause or becoming menopausal. The latter was less acceptable and involved attached emotional and defensive guard,

...if she becomes menopause, she can't deliver baby. Eventually, the man wants child, is it possible that he doesn't want?... Well, she should give birth to a baby sooner... they got married, eventually she must have child, and she

should give birth to child. Well, the man wants child. ...Ladies must do childbirth. (IF1)

...a state of_ I don't know why at all! _ one knows herself a useless creature. For example, as if we're not going to work!... And, us women's attitude itself, towards this menopause is not a good thing at all. (IF4)

Of course, it feels bad for someone who starts menopause early. Especially, for someone who does not have kid, it can be much worse though. In my view, somehow a depression comes to her. But well, here it ended very well at the end though. Anyway, it ended very pleasant and happy (As they were expecting a child). (IF5)

To summarise these participants' accounts on the differences between menstruation and with menopause, an overarching factor is fertility with menstruation preferred because it promises to sustain their relationships with their male sexual partners. Menstruation, if a fact of nature with all its disadvantages, is one that confers some physical advantage. The same is not assumed of menopause, despite the fact that there may be some release from the anxieties of pregnancy.

One of the things that is very noticeable about the research data, is that most of the women do not expect during menstruation, to be able to carry on their everyday basic routines. In a sense they lose their identity as useful beings in relation to male desire, expecting that having their period made them less than complete human beings with ordinary lives. It disables them from full participation in their lives for that time of the month. They are almost expected to be that way and they expect the men to see the situation for them in the same way. This effect not only applies to those employed full time but for those who work part-time or are full time home-makers. Ironically mirroring traditional taboos and the need for isolation, menstruation provides a licence to withdraw from some engagements and acts as an acceptable reason to put aside responsibilities or interests and take some time off. This is

understandable and fair for women with unbearably painful periods and exceptional menstrual conditions. But, as this concept was raised by the majority of Iranian female participants, with quite different menstruation experiences, it indicates that a norm of withdrawal is routinely accepted. So in a way it is going to perpetuate the feeling that men have, that women are somehow not as functional in society as they are, because men are not so afflicted, not so tied to nature. For a woman, having a period is to lose - for a short, but constantly repeated period - their full capacity as social beings.

In fact, in the time that women are fertile (during the years that they have their period, from menarche till menopause), they are healthy, but this is not how many in society, especially males but also females who internalize a male viewpoint, treat them. Strictly as the medical profession realises when a woman is between menarche and menopause she is at the high point of her reproductive time and making a contribution to the continuity of humanity. But this is not how the media represents menstruation – it is most often depicted as an illness rather than as a fact of human nature. Insofar as these representations work, a woman is disempowered by her own fertility cycle. It is not just that fertility is under the control of men or presumably just in their favour. Birth control methods can be seen as offering an empowerment for women but only at the cost of confronting the interests of men or of becoming through the control of conception a readier instrument for giving men pleasure with limited responsibility. In societies like Iran, where men are more concerned to control women's sexuality than to free it for exploitation, the obligation to have a son or produce many children functions as a form of social control.

In Iran, the majority of women are not economically productive outside of the domestic economy and their involvement in paid labour is limited. The existing prejudices against menstruation clearly assign women to the role of breeders and sexual servants of men so that they are only regarded as productive, if they are reproductive. Meanwhile they remain financially dependent on men and men are considered as the breadwinners and responsible ones. The expectation that to be a woman is to suffer and to be frail, clearly serves this patriarchal agenda. In this way of thinking about women's status and treating them, to be a woman is to be less than a man. If these women expect to suffer because they were born a woman and they expect to be looked after, it seems they are accepting that to be a woman is to be somehow less than a man.

Figure 4.5 is for negative attitude towards menopause; showcasing menopause as an Eve's curse.

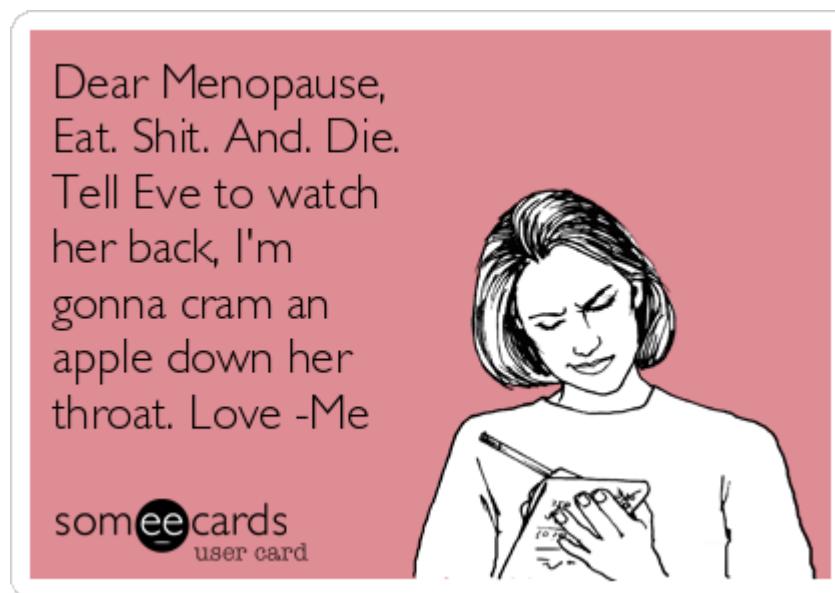


Figure 4.5 Negative menopause e-card

Myth and lore are also important in shaping humanities' mindset toward the biological aspects of life; the same applies to the menstrual cycle. One of the oldest

myths is the story of Eve and Adam and the way that God punished Eve with having to bear childbirth pain, menstruation and menopause. The belief in religious context is rooted in Judaism and it is in the Jewish the Old Testament. And even then, it is considered most people would say that was a myth and it is very strongly linked to other ‘traditional religions’, back from a thousand or years earlier than that Jewish one. It was not new for the Jews; it was something that existed and was picked up by the Jews – even earlier than Ibrahim . It was just around and about in that region of the world, the concept of ‘the man’ ‘the woman’ being created and being punished for a sin and this sin was the sin against wanting to know as much as God knew basically. And it was not Jewish then or obviously not Islamic or Christian either, but it was just around and it got picked up into the Jewish tradition. So, this idea that women are to blame for things is a very old idea, as old as settled civilization and that part of the world, it goes back to Sumer or to the Sumerians (that is earliest of Babylonian) and probably even before Sumer; it almost comes from around then.

It is there in some Iranian people’s thinking but is kind of source-less. Because if it is not in the Quran that is being used as a way of blaming women for something and keeping them ‘accountable’ or ‘ashamed’. But believing in the story is very important for understanding different feelings.

Half of the participants - all female with one exception - agreed with the Adam and Eve story and believed it represented historical fact. Male participants were sceptical though. As an example, IM2 said: “In my opinion, that Adam and Eve is a symbolic story though! And well, it has nothing to do with poor Eve. (Laughs) Well because, it’s in all animals too. Only mammal animals! For example, monkeys, chimpanzees,

guinea pigs, like these." One female participant chooses not to address it and she was the only one to take a realistic view:

I think we must accept menopause like period too. We accepted that, we must accept this too.

We mustn't that much make a big deal out of this issue for ourselves. We mustn't this much, do disappointing for ourselves, isolate ourselves, think that we became menopausal, so we no more... look at it like this. Let's accept it, accept it as a part of life.

For seven of the participants, being satisfied or dissatisfied with their gender identity is important. They mentioned that they felt menopause was a threat to femininity/feminine identity. Out of the six female participants, three of them were on menopause. But as already noted participant (IF3), was the only one among the participants who are on menopause, that unconditionally points out the importance of understanding and accepting menopause as a natural process for females. However, all other female participants who at some point throughout the interviews, claimed that they are totally happy with their gender and satisfied with menstruation as a part of that, whenever we reach menopause related materials, they either try to distance themselves from the subject, or set conditions for its acceptance.

IF2: It all comes down to the creation of the ladies entirely again. We totally can't have anything to do with that creation/nature of woman now. But I say if each woman accepts that like 50 years old... menopause... is an age; this age must pass. Then, conditions, the impact that... by the way, they must be very happy that they passed that course, reached age 50. And accept 'I'm a woman' and be proud to be woman. Now, although we get hurt but... I didn't feel good about menopause... for example when I reached menopause, I mentally got in trouble. That I kept visited doctor and I was really under observation. But also, at the same time I was happy; I used to say, well reached to age 50 then; I must go through menopause then. After all, it depends on the woman's thing... and mental condition. Well but, Eve also shouldn't have eaten that apple though.

IF4: (laughs)... that well, exactly is the same though! See, it's all totally the attitude of ladies; see, it's all exactly...we have this sentence 'what sin we did?!" See, exactly this... What sin we did?!" And, this always is something really big though! It's a big thing in culture though! 'What is this woman's misfortune? What misery is this? What sin is this we have?! What the hell we have done that we became a woman! Why are those (men) comfortable?!" Well especially, in very OCCASIONS; in all OCCASIONS. For example, you want to travel; you want to go to swimming pool. Well, it's cumbersome though! It's a story. Yeah, exactly. Well, I agree with it!

IF5: I agree. I personally like that; this menopause happens to me the latest as far as possible. Because I mean, I saw my mom or, I saw the women who were around me. I saw that what bad conditions it has...hot flashes, the sensitivities..., I really like it to happen as late as possible. I think like, one's succulence gets taken away, when it (menstruation)...is no more. I agree. (Laughs)

When a person of the same gender is looking at the matter from a distance and tries to stay away from it or blame it on other phenomena, this creates different feelings for them. They feel bad because they think the gender-related aspect creates a problem of identity. They feel nervous and uncomfortable. Although, they think of themselves as proud of their gender identity, in practice they saw the biological aspects of being female as a threat. Even a young female participant who is far from menopause and did not express any fear about menopause at this stage of the interview, somehow managed to link the Eve related material to her own concern, which is menstruation:

It's interesting though. I had never heard of it at all. But, I think it's a ridiculous thing. Means, I do not think such think exists. A superstitious thing. It's interesting though. But like, I haven't heard such a thing till now. But I think, don't they have superstition mode?

I also have to write a letter for my period! (Laughs)

By contrast male participants felt uncomfortable with the topic. IM1 believed that: “(Laughs) This is because women are not very happy about this case of them, when

physical problems occur to them. However, they should experience it as a woman."

The other male interviewee had exactly the same opinion, "She is not satisfied with what she has got. Maybe, it is her gender or happenings that occur to her. Maybe prefers to have the same gender in another model. She is not satisfied from what she is!" So somehow this created a question mark in his mind after translation and explanations. When he needed more elaboration on the Eve and Adam story, one of the very interesting parts is when menstruation, pregnancy and menopause was considered as Eve's 'curse' on women, he kind of went into a guard mode only for the pregnancy part and totally was keep trying to separate pregnancy from the other two female body features. Nevertheless, a female interviewee looked at the issue from a similar viewpoint:

Swear to God, it was the will of God too that, she ate the apple. If it wasn't God's order, she wouldn't eat the apple. Ladies must do childbirth, have child that the estate have population. It can't be that way. If there would be one person, what's the usefulness of one person? Just God should be one person, he must be one person. All the prophets have children, all of them gave birth to child. The lord ordered Eve to eat the apple, so that these women can bear child, so the race increases.

Once again, fertility, childbearing, childbirth, productivity or pregnancy, maintain their importance compared to the menstrual cycle from a female and a male point of view. The male participant goes to the extent to ask the interviewer why somebody would look down on pregnancy and degrade it, as if there is something wrong. But throughout his whole interview, he never questioned the same for either menarche, PMS, menstruation or menopause. Summarising the outcome of this set of interviews:

- a) There is a double standard applied to the female body which creates dissatisfaction.

- b) This does not depend on whether a ‘male’ or ‘female’ applies the double standards.
- c) There is a pattern flowing through the Iranian responses which indicates:
 - being woman is more difficult than being man in terms of bodily functions;
 - women either do not like their menstrual cycle;
 - or, they do like it up until menopause phase;
 - women claim they are happy with their gender, but;
 - they exclude menopause phase from their gender satisfaction.

At this point, it can be concluded that majority of females in Iran are not 100% satisfied and happy with their gender and many of those who claim to be satisfied, set definite boundaries and conditions on what counts as important to being female.

Figure 4.6 is for ‘positive attitudes’ towards menopause; looking at it as a birthcontrol for a woman who does not want to become pregnant.

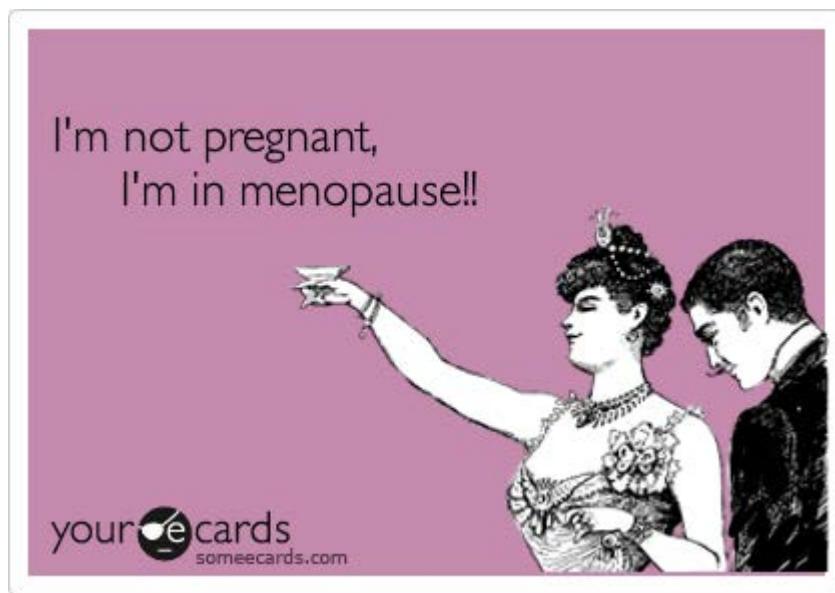


Figure 4.6 Positive menopause e-card

Another e-card introduced a different perspective on menopause and prompted a different set of responses. For half of them, being fertile and able to be pregnant is

important to the self-concept as female. At the same time two of the female interviewees showed annoyance, negativity and resistance toward menopause.

IF4: She looks at it very positive. Says, ‘I don’t menstruate, I’m not pregnant, I’m on menopause.’ She looks at it from a positive perspective. This in my opinion, is...imagination...me not at all! You have thousands of ways to prevent, not to become pregnant! Unless, fertility that is along with the period, is a sign of pregnancy! Means, it is requirement is not pregnancy. You can have fertility, but not be pregnant. But, I will not at all that, _ like I am penchant that, _ I prefer to be pregnant again rather than menopause. (Laughs)

IF5: I prefer that, pregnancy’s stress remains but, menopause happen later. I think a good contraceptive method can be used for that anyway. But, you can’t put menopause on pause anyway.

This pattern of favouring fertility/pregnancy over menopause, suggests that these women are representative of Iranian women's attitudes in general. They cannot relate to menopause as a general process nor can they imagine it happening to them.

This denial is common to male and female participants in the study and suggests a common mind set throughout Iranian society regardless of gender, education, age, occupation, status. In IF2's case, who is childless and menopausal the hope of fertility/pregnancy is extended to last drop of menstrual blood, “But well you know that, like if she saw a stain, up to one year after they are likely to become pregnant.”

By contrast, IM1 directly links menopause to pregnancy and suggests that for some females this is a cause of unhappiness, a loss of attractiveness and for others a welcome relief from the “threat” of pregnancy. Moreover, he tries to relate the subject more to foreigners rather than Iranians by saying that, “in our country the situation is somehow else. In foreign countries, although it is not bad for them, they do not like to become pregnant out of sudden.” So, he concludes that the foreign lady that in e-card is happy for the same. Here the participant tries to point out more ‘open sexual relationships’ in foreign countries and its link to the related material.

Two others of them respond in sort of same way, by sexualising the issue. IF3 acknowledges the open relationship matter too and even apologises to the interviewer for raising the possibility. Moreover, she expresses that the lady could have relationship problems with her family and social circles if she became pregnant when pursuing ‘open relationships’. In this manner sexual relationships after menopause are seen as a social problem. Furthermore, IM1 claims that it depends on the sexual mood that the partners in a heterosexual relationship have at that time.

In the eyes of men, it's very good. (Bursts into laugh.) Yeah, for... well, in the eyes of men it's good. (Laughs) I say unless, that desire of that woman if doesn't change much, is good for men. But, the desire becomes weak, well, if men... I say it depends on how both of them are! At a time, you see that the man himself also is too cold; well, for him it does not matter much. But if the man is hot and that of the person (woman) be vice versa, family problems might arise for them.

In this case, the situation is totally considered from a patriarchal point of view and the woman’s body is considered as a sex object and its sexual responsiveness as a threat to a stable and satisfying relationship.

The oldest female participant who was on menopause for the longest time among menopausal participants, stressed what she considered the positive impact of menopause, observing that women no longer run the risk of pregnancy or of getting sick during their periods. She confined her responses to the direct message of the e-card though. As the youngest female participant, 29 years old IF6, consistent with her previous responses to menopause materials, expressed a rather neutral point of view. She stressed that her knowledge about menopause was limited and not necessarily accurate:

I don't know! I don't have an opinion about this.

I can look at my period as a positive thing; I can think of that (menopause) as a positive thing. They are two separate things. But, I can't say this is better than that! Or, that is better than this.

I can't say.

So although throughout her interview, she kept blaming menstruation and PMS and complained about it, she tried to look at menopause from a balanced point of view. Whenever she talked about its negative aspects, she gave other people's examples that she was in contact with. That is an indicator that younger generations of Iranians may be more open-minded towards menopause, although the messages they receive from the society in that regard are absolutely negative. Older women that have been menopausal for a long time and are used to it, are more likely to be accepting of it rather than women who are close to it or have had it not for so long.

In general, all of the participants felt discomfort considering menopause. Female participants exhibited the greatest level of unease in considering the menopausal materials. Male participants by contrast looked at menopause in relation to its impact on sexual relationships and fertility, whereas no female participant made any comment about men's sexual desire or activity when considering the man-period material. The only interviewee to mention 'sexual desire' on the man-period section, was one of the two male participants. He compared the so called 'man-period', to men's sexual desire and concluded that their sexual desire have sinusoidal mode in their 'period'.

Anyway, the guy gets nervous or becomes aggressive. But well I think, it doesn't have a regular cycle for men. And even I think that, their sexual desires also are the same; have a sinusoidal mode. It has a sinusoidal! Sometimes maybe, it is entirely below zero; sometimes, their case may be too high.

But well, I haven't heard of something as man period. (Laughs)

Considering the fact that this was the participant's first time hearing about 'man-period' concept, this response shows a male individual's immediate reaction to a media presentation. As with the other male participants, he was quite familiar with the concept. No female participant, whether they knew about the man period before or not, made a connection between the concept of man-period and sexual activities. This was not the case when male and female participants expressed themselves about the menstrual cycle overall.

Part D: Transgender and the Menstrual Cycle

Figure 4.7 is from the movie Boys Don't Cry, in which transgender angle of menstrual matter is depicted and was chosen as it was the only choice available in that regard. The movie is based on a true story and only menstrual related parts of it were shown to the participants. In short, the relevant parts address struggling aspects of menstruation for a transgender person who is placed in a patriarchal and radical environment. For instance, the measures that a transgender person took to hide his menstruation, includes stealing menstrual sanitary products and the consequences he faced once his menstruation, as a proof of his sexuality was discovered in a male-controlled and rather old-styled community – being raped and getting killed.



Figure 4.7 Movie: Boys don't cry – 1999

Boys Don't Cry was used to raise questions about aspects of menstruation for the transgender community. This dimension was explored as a contrast to the participants who identified with heteronormative gender identity. For transgender individuals who are struggling to transcend the limitations of sexuality, menstruation could be seen as the revenge of their biologically defined sexuality against their wish to be Other. The presentation of this film clip was intended to gauge the response of the participants to a different perspective on the relationship between sexuality and gender.

The discussion that follows in Iranians' interviews constituted a detour into questions of sexuality which hitherto had been treated as natural and unproblematic. Almost all interviewees in Iran expressed a sort of empathy or sympathy for the subject, although there was an obvious lack of information about the transgender issue. Four participants related the transgender condition to a sickness and a physical defect, such as being androgynous or with psychological or spiritual problems, that impaired

the formation of a normal identity. The condition was compared by a couple of participants to AIDS, drug addiction, cancer, even 'incurable like leper'. IF3 who came to know about the transgender issue through an overseas Persian/Farsi channel, after comparing transgender people against people who are sick, argued that transgender people suffered a particular disadvantage compared to ones who suffer from cancer and drug addiction. These individuals receive support from family, friends and society but a transgender person does not benefit from such support.

Because of this, in my opinion, this kind of persons, need very, very real compassion, not pity. And even means, it's not common for people yet. Especially, in our own country. I don't know about overseas, maybe there are some understanding people too. Then, families aren't receptive of it. That even, families don't accept, they don't accept him really. Then they say that, 'what are you talking about? You're this and that.'

And, they don't know what to do at all. While, they're human like us. They quite have the same feeling that we have. The need for family, the need for society, the need for friend, they have the need for everything. I always pray for them. I say they're really undecided. They don't know what to do! Poor them. Like we say, O God help sick people that have hard illness...

In a couple of cases interviewees asked about the reality of the condition and required more detail and information about it, but there were cases in which the participant had no idea such persons existed at all. So, the three parts of the movie that were streamed to them in relation to some menstrual aspects of transgender people's lives, was the very first time that they encountered such reality. For the rest of the interviewees that knew very little about it and had limited information and awareness of it, it was the first time to be exposed to the subject from this angle too. So, although the transgender community is the only part of the LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer and intersex) community in Iran that is not considered illegal or against law and religion, there is a huge lack of awareness,

information and knowledge about transgender issues for the majority of Iranians. Participant responses varied from ‘feeling very sorry for them’ (transgender people), ‘it’s sad’, ‘very sad’, ‘so upset for him’, ‘one becomes very very upset for them’.

Only three participants out of eight knew anything about transgender people. One of them came to know about it through an overseas cable TV channel, another one saw them as a group who gather in certain locations, such as parks. And the other knew one in person as a university student who had the surgery. Participants tried to express their thoughts or speculation about them by saying that, these people face rejection and families do not support or accept them, nor do people in general. They have a difficult life and rejection eventually may lead to suicide. Two participants acknowledge the need for family and social groups’ support and argued, supporting campaigns, training and education for communities and individuals to promote awareness of transgender issues are essential. One participant was undecided and could not offer an opinion beyond expressing her sadness overall. Two of them acknowledge their difficult life and that it is so hard. IF5 tries to describe the situation as:

It's exactly specified for us that what we are for! Yeah, they don't belong to girls, don't belong to boys. They must be careful all the time that, how people judge them. They should be concerned about the judgment of others. And that, somehow their obligation is not specified for themselves either.

Only one participant did not acknowledge the transgender identity of the character in the movie and showed that first impression that she got was about not being prepared with a menstrual product. By giving arguments like:

Totally, this issue is very OK; but, as I said it's OK. But, when everything is in order for you. Your life...means well, it is OK though; like you're living an ordinary life. For example, you're in your home. Or, it's a story of a very typical

life. Well but, always like a pad is at your hand. All your things are at your hand. Everything OK. But well really, when you're in an outside atmosphere, like this happening occurs to you at a time, that for example, imagine you're at your workplace now, you can have no move; really in my opinion, at its time if you don't be PREPARED, it's very tragedy though. It was one of the impressions that I had. But well, the poor guy was very hapless. It's a very bad feeling though!

The participant thinks that as long as one can keep menstruation discreet and not visible in public, there is no problem with it. So mostly this idea establishes the mindset that menstruation is a private not a social matter. This indicates that menstruation is seen as unclean, confirming that although menstruation is a 'cleansing' process for women it has been perceived as one of danger and pollution for human beings over decades. (Douglas, 1984)

The main theme that can be extracted from this part of the interviews is that, although all the participants knew the research focus was the menstrual cycle, with all the conversations, stimulus materials exploring aspects of it, almost all of the participants only addressed the transgender issue instead of menstruation for this particular representation. For all of the other media representations, participant responses centred on the Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), menarche, menstruation and menopause. For Boys Don't Cry participants put aside the consideration of the menstrual cycle and preferred to explore another subject either wanting to know about transgender identity or to express their understanding of it. Moreover, the other aspect that showed very limited knowledge on the transgender subject in Iran, was the fact that some participants could only conceptualize gender in binary terms and established variations such as bisexuality and homosexuality. Accordingly, they automatically tended to consider a character as homosexual or in few cases bisexual. For instance, interviewee IF5 said: "In my opinion, it's so hard that one becomes like

this; it's a state of almost being androgynous." And interviewee IM1 said: "Are they called homosexual?" So, awareness plays an important role for decoding the differences of sexualities. There is no rejection or hatred, it is just like lack of information and lack of understanding which led to puzzlement. Only one person in the group expressed himself explicitly as not supporting homosexuality while discussing transgender issue:

I don't really know what's right form of it! For example, those who are gay in Europe's countries, we see that they're promoting this case though! Well I think, that is not right too. Means, neither promoting it is right, nor not supporting & rejecting them is right.

But look, lesbians, the same Trans' that you say... not lesbian, the same Trans' those who have physical problems, well they have a physical problem. But, gays & lesbians don't have any physical problem. They most have a mental problem. In my opinion... When someone advertises like this, the people who are normal might inclined to give it a try; it might be good! And, they're promoting this. It's very bad in my opinion. Not good! But when the guy has a physical problem, well she/he has physically a problem; is sick. And must be supported. Goes under operation or surgery now. Should be able to do a normal life.

...my opinion was that case that, they should be supported, not that it gets advertised for them.

In sum, the views of participants based on their answers about aspects of the transgender community tend to show a common confusion and possible antipathy. The use of the transgender example therefore revealed by contrast the strength of the participants' commitment to heteronormativity.

In Iran, transgender identity has not yet attained the status of being taboo, because a taboo is when a society says we know what this is, and we do not like it, we are going to stigmatise it, whereas it hardly registers by the accepted norms.

Media representation in promoting awareness of the issues surrounding gender identity and menstruation had an important role. Given the very little and sometimes wrong things the participants knew about the subject, participants were led in responding to examples of various media texts, to reveal their limited knowledge and effort to describe what they saw in relation to a common-sense view of gender relationships. In discussing the materials, they revealed feelings of sadness, confusion, condemnation, pathologizing and on occasion sympathy and empathy. The media texts and the open-ended interview process, uncovered a gamut of emotions and elicited responses that were otherwise implicit in a background of common-sense about the relationship between the physiological and cultural elements of gender. The non-verbal behaviour of the participants also provided a rich source of data as facial expressions, hand gestures and head nodding served to emphasize verbal expressions. Overall the reaction to the transgender sequence was of deep sadness for what was perceived as a psychological illness and a tormented identity. With this focus, the issue of menstruation and transgender behaviour was set aside. The keenness to dig into the transgender matter to state what they thought or felt about it was not only bolder than what they said about menstruation, it was the dominant topic of the interviews constituting 90% of the responses. This result can be looked at from three points of view:

1. The Iranian interviewees were facing something new and in some cases exotic, so they were more concerned to explore it and find out more about it, as the transgender community in Iran is not out of the closet.
2. They put transgender matters first priority before the menstruation matter, because their thinking about menstruation relied on the idea

of a strict binary comparison between male and female which the possibility of transgender identities simply destabilized.

3. Because as some pointed out, the transgender community does not have easy and secure life in their society and are arguably a very persecuted minority. As a result, the participants were led to concentrate their efforts on the nature of transgender individuals which led them to ignore the fact that menstrual issues also affect transgender people.

We move on to the next section of the semi-structured interviews that is also the last part of the media representations sequence. This section mostly covers the social media sphere, its perspectives or views as distinct from the mainstream media.

Figure 4.8 is in regard to man-period; correlating it to premenstrual syndrome (PMS).



Figure 4.8 Man-period e-card

One male and one female participant did not have any information about 'man-period' and had not heard of it till the related e-card was shown to them and they requested it to be explained to them. By comparison one male and one female participant knew about the concept. IF3 had heard about it but did not know any

details. However, two others had learned about it and one of them acknowledged that she found out about it through social media. Moreover, IF1 had a very different take on man-period which she may have confused with male fertility. Revealing a rather confused and literal reading:

Whatever that is, as much as men's ages rise, they still can be fertile. But, since the time women don't get on their period, they can't bear a child. Once they have menopause, they can't bear a child. All men..., our father was 80-year-old, got a wife, had a child too. He was 80-year-old. Men, they got 1 thing only, their period is that, just their underwear gets dirty at some point and nothing else, it doesn't show up though. However, they change their underwear and that's how theirs are.

Generally, after seeing the e-card and having heard the explanation as needed, one of the first things that most of the participants acknowledged about the concept of a man-period was that, if a male has a kind of period, it is a mental or hormonal condition. They gave several examples: confusion, mental period, being nervous, aggressive, angry or not feeling good. There are other points of view of the persons, in the way in which he or she looks to the man-period phenomenon. A female participant somehow linked it to men's fertility and a male participant made sure to acknowledge the subject in regard to sexual desires. Moreover, one female participant made the point that understanding of the matter depends on one's sense and awareness. As has been written above, there are also other indicators in the way the participant sees subjects such as fertility, sexual experience, gender differences, comparisons with the attitudes expressed in the media representations and the role of humour. This latter feature was evident in the reactions to the following e-card.

Figure 4.9 is about a ‘positive attitude’ towards menstruation which by illustrating a woman as a witch conveys the message that the power that is sourced by menstruation or women empowerment in general may be of a vicious nature;



Figure 4.9 “Positive” menstruation e-card

According to the participants, this e-card contained an empowering message for women, which they linked it to concepts of magic, mystery and the feminine mystique. This was an important feature of the interviews since even the ones who had negative attitudes toward menstruation, acknowledged that it had its empowering aspects. This set of responses showcased the media’s capacity to redefine attitudes and bring about attitude change. All the respondents saw the funny side of the e-card and having considered it reflected on the topic of women’s empowerment, which was rare in the interviews in Iran. The effort to decode the meaning of the e-card and its image was mostly based on the participants’ own experience, and feelings. But it also prompted comparisons between female and male biology. This latter comparison led to reflections on the relationship between gender and power. Since women are not normally considered to be stronger and

more powerful, the participants in various ways were led to consider gender stereotypes. Could the supposedly stronger male endure the pain of menstruation and were men not the “weaker” sex? IM1 says:

Well...for example, while many men say they don't like blood at all... well, I personally am like this, I feel bad, ever. But well, women are too strong. (laughs) It shows both they're strong, also that it causes their longevity. Means well, on the contrary, the elegance and...in terms of muscle they may be somewhat weaker; but well in this regard, they're very strong.

The two male participants were the only ones who related the e-card to the concept of health. But even so this interpretation was made within the context of humour. When IM1 considered the message of female empowerment he chose to reinterpret it as empowering men's right to sexual access to a woman's body. Citing the fact that nowadays cupping is common, and men can have the advantage of women's periods without the bad side effects of it. IF2 also commented on the threat that such woman represented to society in general: and particularly said, “In a way it can be said that, people should be really careful with this woman.” For her, the image of the e-card of woman as a witch was linked to dangerous spiritual and magical powers. Only IF3 acknowledged that the message was that women were strong and powerful, because they not only had to manage menstruation and menopause whilst dealing with all the other responsibilities that women were expected to fulfil. In a sense, this particular response epitomised the issue of gender inequality in her point of view, because, she was emphasizing that women need to perform according to social expectations, even when they have their periods. But this would apply to health in general. She made a point that men are not so challenged by the facts of biology.

When a media representation makes a point that goes against common sense, the audience tends to give the feedback on the message in the same and similar way that the representation does. It is a form of Agenda-setting theory that designates the "ability (of the news media) to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Or it is Norm-setting that defines the way the mass media emphasizes conformism and conventionality to social norms and socially isolates those that don't adapt. And it all relates to framing the agenda-setting but develops its perspective by focusing on the issues at hand rather than on a topic. The essence of framing theory, is that the media emphasizes consideration of events and then seats them within meaning. As the participants try to make sense of the message they may even see beyond what they were used to. During the interviews, all of them use their experiences with their family, friends and things that have happened to them to a greater or lesser degree. But all of the participants believe that awareness, education and information play an important role in understanding a phenomenon such as menstruation.

Figure 4.10 is regarding negative and sexist attitude towards menstruation. Looking at women as sexual objects that are unusable when on period.



Figure 4.10 Negative menstruation e-card

During interviews and in different situations based on the materials shown, the point of view of the interviewees and the connections that they established may have changed occasionally. But, mostly each participant revealed an identifiable pattern of thinking.. For example, when faced with a directly sexist text, all of them have a kind of criticism on it, even though their comments in some previous sections contained sexist remarks, that marginalised women and projected patriarchal values. Participants seemed unaware of the sexist content of their own opinions, treating patriarchal norms as natural even when considering materials that downgraded women. For males encountering sexist representations, there were two identifiable readings. IM1 linked the menstrual cycle to its impact on sexual activities in different contexts. IM2's identified pattern was to insist that many of the materials were humorous, therefore they were not relevant to real and actual circumstances. Moreover, he kept juxtaposing men's and women's relative situations in order to prove that women are equal but different to men. Thus, his specific comments on the materials were no exception to his view of society as a whole. As for female

participants, four out of six of them used almost the same underlying concept despite different vocabularies, that men's sexual needs had a social priority. Thus, they expressed resignation to what they saw as the unquestioned facts of male sexuality: "all men are like this. Men want women for sexual relationship", "this is totally masculine. It exactly exists too. That's men's attitude generally", "men want girls just for sleeping with. Otherwise, existence of those girls is not important for them. They ignore all their values just for..." and "the same goes to men's selfishness in this context then. That woman's existence other than this did not have any value for him then. Men look at women more as using". Consequently, there is one thing they all have in common: that their opinions depend on their circumstances. The sexist viewpoints that they establish from their own point of view sounds normal to them as they have been institutionalised in their mindset. The opinion that they had on menstruation could vary with circumstances but overall, they accepted patriarchal rule. For example: IF4 who previously criticised Iran's girls' schools for not providing support for her daughter's menarche, failed to address the sexism in the mediated representation. She identifies sexism in the text of the e-card, while her own explanation on the same material supports it:

Yeah though! Well, this also exactly is something that is totally masculine. See, or like it exactly exists too. For example, ... In girlfriend-boyfriend relationship, this issue is very important that, the boy must be careful that...means, you have a negative card though! If you're on period. Then, this exactly in my opinion, even is in wife & husband's relationship. Now, not that very clear...for example, if you want to travel with your husband, it's important for the man; plans it. Means that, somehow plans...if he can, if he'd be flexible, somehow plans that you don't be on period. This is a negative card too; it's right though! That, men's attitude generally... yeah!

So the point of view that they have regarding menstrual cycle's various aspects can switch from a female and male perspective. IF4 was very understanding and

supportive of menarche education at school for girls, but was not so considerate of women when she faced this sexist representation, legitimizing menstruation as a problem of male access in a heterosexual relationship. Mostly the interviewees used their own personal concerns and experiences in their explanations and link menstrual cycle aspects with heterosexual relationships. Iran is a society in which women do not get empowered through any official support system and the normal and accepted perspective toward women is what links them within the protection and supervision of a male figure, like grandfather, father, uncle, brother, husband, son. Therefore, the society is not familiar with the concept of empowering women. Women are expected to be good daughters, wives, mothers, sisters within the domestic sphere rather than independent achievers in public life. This seems to be the key reason that this pattern of linking menstruation and menopause to a relationship with a man, exists throughout Iranians' interviews, regardless of interviewees' age, gender and relationship status.

Figure 4.11 below is a caricature illustrated by an Iranian caricaturist which symbolises marginalisation, control and censorship of period dialog by male domination or patriarchy.

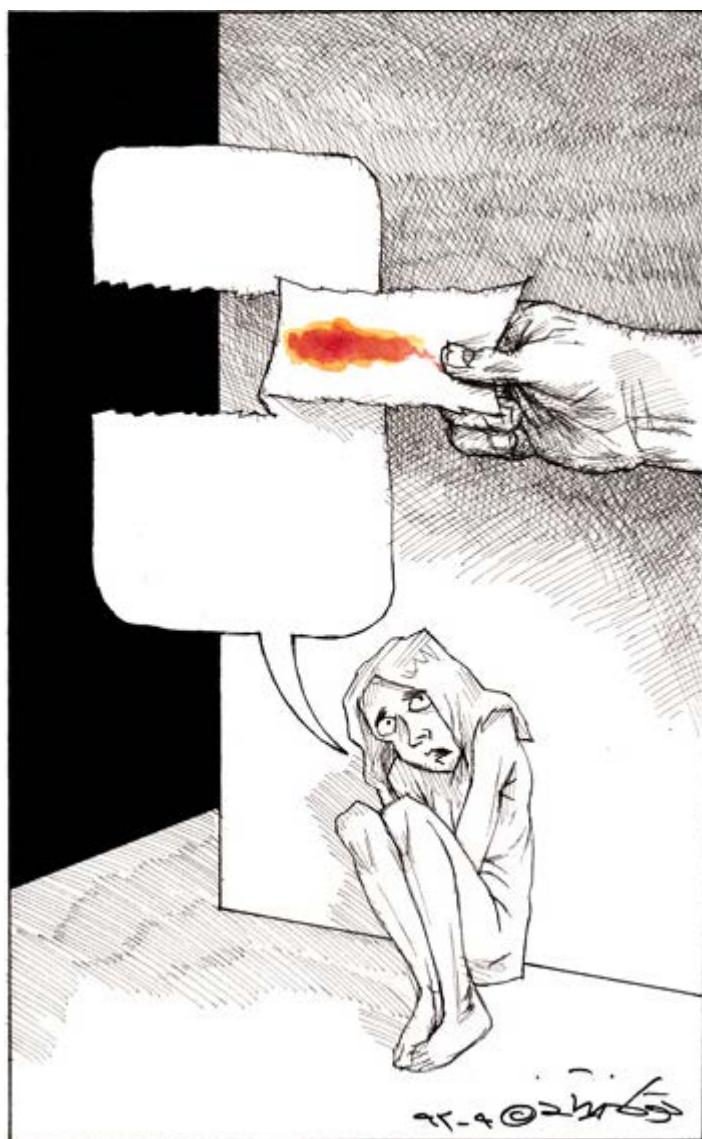


Figure 4.11 Menstruation caricature

Additionally, the attitudes participants had towards an image were created by an Iranian caricaturist whom some of them know and some do not is different. Some say that they can relate to the illustration or its message by seeing it as a literal rather than metaphorical statement that women in Iran are weak, miserable, needy and they sit huddled in a corner. Someone else points out the need for more menstrual education in Iran that makes clear it is not considered as an embarrassing, bad thing or illness, rather than something that is related to health. But there are also a few of

them that state most women in Iran have a patriarchal point of view towards themselves too:

IF2: ... it's a fact here that women are as weak, also women themselves, they admit that 'yeah, we're like this.' While, it's found very little that a woman knows herself equal to a man, socially or in terms of everything else. Means she say that, 'the same thing that a man can do, I can do.' This one is women's own acceptance... because from the first they've been told to be acceptable of it like this; they've been taught so. While, why a woman can't ride a bike like a man? Why a woman can't be a pilot? Why a woman can't become a president? Because, women themselves accepted though! We have nothing to do with this now....for example, in our society that is male-dominated... this has both weak and strong sides....well, most of it is patriarchy though! There are people that really look at woman as a device for themselves here. For example, we have two TV sets; well, 'I have two women too.' They know women as commodity, a device for themselves then. They don't know... woman as a human to be beside them. Then, they're used in every way... women in other ways are used now though! This is amazing fact that our caricaturist has drawn, well done.

IM1: This came behind this girl's thought to... means, it's showing the hiding of that case that, this girl is ashamed, and the girl is also young. And, hides it. Means, hide that... maybe it's showing her hiding. Well originally, it's showing oppression of that woman. It's been seen as a negative thing, in the eyes of men. There was a case also that for example, I was dealing with it; I was seeing that... kids don't talk about this case with their fathers. Now, I don't know... girls... become embarrassed... somehow figurative or metaphorically, for example they can somehow deliver to their fathers that, now I... It's not a good time! 'I'm fine. Don't bother me. Or, my blood pressure is low.' This way. But well, I recently... our new generation a little... is a bit better. Means, they say much more open. That, 'mom today is my period time.' But for that also, it's different in families. In the more religious families, this case is hidden and isn't spoken. But, in families that are a little more modern and are culturally more advanced, the girl may tell her father too. I think in Iran above 90%, girls don't tell this case to their fathers or their brothers. Or even, they consider it bad. Means, the mother says that, 'why did you go to your dad and told this? It's feminine.'

IF4: It's totally right... If I say about the image, about this woman...see, Iranian woman is this though!...not that...Iranian woman isn't this really, in society man wants that Iranian woman to be this. Means exactly, our society's effort is...that, Iranian woman to be this. When Iranian woman becomes independent, when Iranian woman gets strength, when she becomes so, she's dangerous. Then, always Iranian woman must be this. So, this image of Iranian woman, yeah...she's needy and miserable and sits huddled in a corner. Then, herself being miserable that's nothing, this one (points out to the menstruation sign), they make it a BOLD thing. That, one of the reasons that you have to

accept it is because of... that, 'you have a big flaw! You have a stain of shame! This is your stain of shame....if we want to make it apart from you, yourself will be torn! Can't help it anymore. Then, you have to be like this.' Yeah;.... It's one of the looks that totally is there....even generally...men...in Iran, they know this issue of women in a very view of...means, they know themselves way more premier that, they don't have this fault, they don't have this defect! Their point of view is that, women are very...like one of the negative points...you don't want to become manager of X factory or you can't become judge..., is because of that, 'you get confused.' One of them is that, 'you become like this, I don't.'

IF3: ... they always want to show women weak. And, women's weakness... For example, they show women's weakness by their period thing....'as you have hormonal change each month...'....For example, because of them having period, they say you're weak, you can't do your tasks, do certain... actually, this is the same patriarchy that is in Iran.... If such thing occurs, it's even possible that they say no need that you come to certain travel with me.

IF1: Society is that... some are so;... they keep do things on women. They say, women don't have right to get a job... but, there has been development now. Women go to parliament now... all really weren't like upper thing then; their level of understanding wasn't high; woman has the right to live. At that time women, did not have the right to live.

The main patterns in their discussions concern (a) a comparison between past and present attitudes; (b) the period being used as a justifier of females' subordination to patriarchal control and oppression and, the fact that the majority of women in Iran follow their lead and admit it themselves too. IM2 persisted in seeing the caricature as fun and claiming that it is not like this in Iran anymore at all. On his account, the girl in the image does not want men to know she has her period and is afraid that they might find out. In addition, he did not understand the caricature at first and had to have a basic description of its elements, so he would not misread it as a joke. At first it was not quite sensible to him that it had a serious purpose but then he admitted there was a conspiracy of silence; "there is no talking about it. Quarter of their lives is getting away from them by this society."

All participants strongly compare that caricature with their social context in Iran, as much as they can in their own unique experiences, seven out of eight of them admitted that the caricature is an epitome of women's status in Iran. Two participants compared attitudes of the past generation with new generations, claiming that women's status in society has improved and that the discussion of menstruation in families, is more open compared to the past. Four of the interviewees at this point of the interview declared that men are responsible for the situation, they expressed their thoughts by saying that either women in Iran are used as a commodity for men, men want them to be like that since if women find strength they become a danger, or that the caricature portrays the oppression of women through menstruation because it is negative in men's eyes. Two of them pointed out that women themselves admit that they legitimise the discriminations too. Three participants state that the female period has been used to emphasise women's weakness. It is depicted as a big flaw, stain of shame, fault and defect that helps men keep their own premier status in society. Half of the participants even link the situation of women's status and their menstruation to the issue of women's discrimination in the workforce in Iran. Only one underlines the importance of education, because it can sustain the idea that, if a woman is on her period, she should not be embarrassed because of it or feel like it is an illness and a bad thing. In fact, it is a sign of health and being healthy.

Mainly in this part of the interviews, participants had a rather more realistic and fair point of view towards women's status in Iranian society in general and where images or attitudes to the menstrual cycle contributed to it. This was the point when they all discussed something common from a fair point of view and for some of them their

ideas conflicted with their previous point of view. It seems possible that these shifts in attitude were triggered by the fact that they were faced with a portrayal of their own society by someone from that society. But of equal importance was the fact that the image itself clearly illustrated the unbalanced power relation between men and women in Iran. It is here that the question arose: why did such a perception of gender oppression did not happen for the previous media representations? The previous material had the same theme, but its focus was precisely on sexual matters in the context of male-female relationships. But it may need to be considered that, the material consists of a language barrier issue for this group of interviewees. Therefore, it's possible may be that a message coming from their own society via a person that is one of them, had more impact on their viewpoint.

Figure 4.12 below is the last material and is from Iranian social media feeds. It conveys a sexist message that believes that women should not become presidents of a countries, due to PMS as a result of menstruation. The message questions those countries' presidencies led by women. As the material is from Iran, it also must be acknowledged that in Iran women do not hold the right to become president.



Figure 4.12 Menstruation in Iran's social media

Translation: How do those countries in which the president is a woman function? Cause, the president will go through her period and will ruin the whole nation!

The last material is from Iran's Social Media. It has content that is directly linked to half of the participants' thoughts in the previous one. During the previous materials' discussions, four participants acknowledged gender inequality in job opportunities. During the interviews as a whole, the issue of the sexism in the job sphere in Iran was seldom mentioned. This once again illustrates the fact that the content of the images causes the audience to reflect on certain subjects which remain implicit until made explicit, when seeing a representation of themselves in a familiar context. Moreover, unlike other materials the caricature contains a critical point of view on a serious issue

and could not be convincingly construed as fun or escapist entertainment. That could be another factor that encouraged the participants to reveal their social concerns in regard to women's status in Iran, which was not specifically raised during their previous discussions.

In the preceding interviews, if a representation explores aspects of the female identity with menstruation there is a variety of interpretation, even amongst female participants. Regarding the last media representation, all female participants regardless of their social status are against such representation of women and the social inequalities. By contrast, male participants persisted in the strategy of reading the representation as a joke. In the female interviews, anger was shown in their expressions and at the same time they used their perception of male attitudes to it, as a foil in formulating their own interpretation. Four of them brought up the concept of 'man-period' which was earlier shown to them to bring attention to the fact that men have periods too. One of the female interviewees relates the subject to men by saying that men get angry too and the other one states that men say such things about us as women, as they do not understand us and they do not believe in us, as they consider menstruation as an illness rather than being natural. Therefore, the portrayal mainly consists of female participants' rejection and comparison to men either emotionally or physically. Otherwise, it makes them feel bad and nervous and for two of the participants, the joke is out of proportion and exaggerated.

In this section of interviews, participants' gender is important because according to their gender their reactions change. Moreover, most of the people of the group are very sensitive to gender. Female participants can feel the degrading message that portrays them as second-class citizens regardless of whether they had expressed

sexist viewpoints in previous responses or not. For example, IF1 said “No though; everybody sees her own ability. It’s not possible that she gets angry, when she becomes president. She either takes pill, or eventually, does a sort of refrain that the week passes. It has nothing to do, no. Same, they don’t get angry. Now at last, certainly they get angry, if they get shocked. Men get angry too.” One of them declared that she was not a militant feminist but argued if a man can do a task, then a woman can do it too. Another participant felt that the message was strongly biased because in other countries there are successful female politicians that meet all their obligations. Two of the participants strongly agreed that this kind of job-related discrimination towards women, exists in Iran and is real and men exclude women from certain jobs because of the emotional behaviours attached to menstruation. Three of them emphasized that men are capable of being affected by their emotions - the metaphorical import of the man-period meme - but this dimension of male motivation is not part of the male stereotype found in the media.

From this part, it becomes clear that the female interviewees understand the menstrual cycle’s connection to the women’s social status and regardless of their own social status agree that the concept is wrong and depicts women negatively. However, both male participants mostly acknowledge the fun side of the message.

Females have shown understanding of themselves and in some cases, were critical of the attitudes of other females. Male participants by contrast were defensive and even attacked the opposite gender verbally. Males that had been both understanding and critical of female related material, reacted defensively when shown materials that explored male attitudes. Some male participants were less protective; it was a common tendency to treat male related materials as jokes. As someone said, “these

are funny stuff and not real". Moreover, all of the participants, male and female, tended to play down the social content of the representations, focussing on matters of form and the entertainment value, saying the materials were very beautiful, very good, true, interesting and that they liked it. This disjuncture between form and content seemed related to the recognition that social change was unlikely.

IM2 in several cases insists that it is solely a joke -which applies in this case as well. The material was further explained to him like before, to see if the participant could view it in any other way. It was only then that he hesitantly shifted his point of view. In other words, his understanding of the meaning of the material shows that he could interpret the material both in a funny way or social-critical one, but he chose to consciously justify the message by defending its funny side, rather than seeing it beyond a mere joke. For instance, IM2 said it is wrong, because the society is patriarchal: for example, there are female politicians in other countries but that does not matter though! There are men related jokes exist too. His reaction to what has been shown to him when an attitude looks down on women, depends on his mood. He has been asked to look at the subject after further elaboration again to see if the fun part is the only aspect that he genuinely gets or if that is the aspect that he chooses to address. At the same time, his reaction changes according to his idea about whether if the material is a mere joke or has underlying social meaning. After his shift of thought, at last he still makes sure to once again insist that related men jokes exist out there too. This pattern is quite frequent for this participant not only at this stage, but during his whole interview. Just two of the participants' who are our only two males, rely on the funny side of the material and the other six participants mention that they find the message wrong and not true. Female participants try to

make a point by saying that, if it is the period, anger and feelings caused by it are what create such unfair attitudes toward women, but men do have man-periods too. She used the concept to defend women and they admit that in Iran's job market/opportunities, the law ignores women's right and eligibility for certain roles, such as becoming a president, or a judge. When the opposite sex looks at the material or issue deeply he thinks the same and the reaction is the same as the females', except for the fact that his thoughts are shadowed by protecting men's status and always bringing men's related subjects into the matter. There is also the other male participant that said,

(Bursts into laugh.) (Continues laughing.) Well, because in that time, especially before it, they're very angry, they should try not to set meetings at that time. (Continues to laugh.) President must announce before it that, when is my time! (Laughs) To know when to have visits! (Continues laughing.) For example, we have. Like, there is a manager in our company that is a woman. Then, suddenly the serviceman comes out says, don't go to the person, she's on period. (Laughs) Was saying not to go, her condition is devastated. I said, well, ok. (Continues to laugh.)

According to them, in this case, the best behaviour that could be used by the male interviewees is to find an opportunity to talk about how humorous this topic can be. At the same time, it is important to consider whether it would be different if they were shown material with the same context on a serious note, to see if they could start to relate to it seriously as well, or whether they would convey the humour regardless. For all persons from the opposite sex, they use critical discourse or try to talk with a dismayed tone. However, there are female participants that laughed at the joke, but their behaviour did not change and they kept their critical tone afterwards. Usually there was not a distinguishable difference between our female and male participants' opinions. But rather 'humorous' representation from Iranians

came up - two groups of ‘fun’ and ‘critical’ thoughts for male and female interviewees respectively. From the entire group, just two people treated that as a mere joke or in a humorous way; the same two male participants had bipolar opinion though! For IM2 it is fun/joke, just to laugh and that no one means anything! For IM1 on the other hand, it is a subject that needs to be addressed as he even experiences it in his workplace management sphere. Four people agree that women may face certain feelings such as anger and sensitivity during the Menstrual Cycle which is important not only when they have leadership responsibility but also for their personal, professional or marital lives. And it has a direct relation to the ability to perform day to day tasks. Four people strongly compare the concept against men’s status/condition and two of them compare with other countries about this.

Part E: Post Materials Encounter Questions

We move on with part D of the semi-structured interviews that is also the last part and mostly covers information about the participants’ perspectives after having encountered the various media representations of the menstrual cycle. As has been mentioned earlier, for the present study’s semi structured interview, four parts were conducted. In this section, the last part will be analysed. Six questions were prepared for this part.

These six questions are open-ended questions and aimed at finding the attitudes of participants for menstrual matters after being exposed to the materials. Some of questions are as follows: Do these representations match with what you expected? What is your personal reaction? / How do these make you feel? What’s your overall feeling and understanding about menstruation and menstruators?

In relation to the question that investigates whether the representations match with what they expected, interviewee IF2 said:

You explained some problems here that... like that Trans'... well, more research should be done on these, work should be done on it anyway. Well, a series [of the materials] also are some things [related to] cultural issues that I think, a GENERICALLY series is in all nations. Also, there are a series [of the materials that in contrary are] mainly because the cultures are different. Now, I think perhaps religions also have an impact on it. I think in the world, well, very little has been discussed. Much less from media. Unless, they had been media that are especially for women. Or, usually it's not especially in the form of television. Means, an article is said about it in writing on the Internet or in the newspaper; that can guide. I think that a lot more work should be done on this case in communities. That women also, don't become sad that they're a woman; that they say, 'I wish we were man, and we didn't have this case.' No, I did not notice anything wrong.

In general, all of them said that the representations matched with what they expected. But what makes the answers different, is that two of them said that it depended on the subject. For instance, before the interview IM2 thought women become happy by menopause, but he admits that during the interview he saw that some become sad. Overall though, the concepts were not very far from his imagination and thought. Or, IF6 thoroughly elaborates the situation this way:

Some things did. Some of the things I didn't know at all. For example, the tampon one. I didn't know about that! Or, that one, the boy [Transgender]. I haven't heard till now at all! Means, I hadn't thought that one would be born like this!

Moreover, although IF2 and IF4 both admit that the representations comply with their thoughts, they have contradictory thoughts in terms of the coverage of the materials and the outcome:

IF2: Due to this current century, well yes. For example, because so many feminism currents launched as they say; and due to these conditions, I thought that it should be broader; like to be more than this. Well but, being to this extent also... that one's come up, is doing a thesis like this... I do not think such

a thought... If it becomes like this, that's much better. In my opinion, it can be a very good notification... means that if they really can spread this...not that it be limited to the extent of, a dissertation defence... a thesis. Not to be limited. If it continues...

IF4: *Was much broader, more beautiful! I for example, expected it to be about this issue but, no; its dimension was so much more extensive! Means, it was more DETAILED. Or even, me myself...has had never looked at this issue this much extensive and in details like this with a big LANDSCAPE! Its scope is huge! It was very good! For example, let me tell you like this; it became a beautiful sight for me though! That, this issue...well, I knew it a routine of my own life. Means well, 'I have this experience this month, it was on time or not! Now, the PLAN...' That's it! It was small, it's area was bounded. It's very beautiful now that for example, you see this as a general thing; has very jollity. Then from now on, I become more sensitive though!*

Half of the participants acknowledged that they were faced with some new issues or phenomena. IF5 suggests that the representations totally were aligned with her thoughts. However, it was through watching and encountering those materials, that she found out how much Iran's culture is different [especially in that area]. She declares that unfortunately there is not relevant training in Iran. But those modes, sensitivities and issues all were the things that always have come into her mind during the Menstrual Cycle. Nevertheless, she ignores that somehow and she was also affected by the media and caught by her own concerns. Her main one seems to be PMS (Pre-Menstrual Syndrome) and female menstruation as a young fertile woman. Her comments suggest that she mainly focused on those areas which includes the majority of the materials. Nonetheless, either the participants answered two questions considering all the materials or even if they were partial about some specific ones, more or less, they expected what they encountered.

Their personal reactions or how those representations make them feel, all participants described themselves as being generally satisfied with the process and not feeling bad. Nearly all representations were perceived as good, great and

interesting and not in conflict with the participants' own opinions or values. The second reaction came from only three participants, who found some parts upsetting, which were mainly in regard to transgender and Iranian representations. The third reaction was to express appreciation of the presentation and that the research was important and should be continued. There was a common agreement that the issue of menstruation and menopause had the power to affect an individual's quality of life experience depending on whether one was male or female and on the individual's awareness and state of knowledge. At this stage, most participants brought up topics that related to their feelings about cultural and social issues, such as the stigmatisation of the menstrual cycle, shame and secrecy around it and the marginalisation of women, issues of gender inequality, gender power relations and menstrual awareness. Although a couple of them concluded negatively or neutrally, overall the sense of women's empowerment in female participants and menstrual awareness in male ones, were quite obvious regardless of their previous views. In all these features the media representations and their contexts played an educational role. Some respondents emerged with strikingly different attitudes, some becoming more curious and some with their attitudes unchanged. This was not essentially linked to gender though.

For five of the participants, the feelings that they had after being exposed to the materials, did not establish a new understanding of menstruation. Three of them felt their attitudes had changed. Moreover, male IM1 says "No, it's not a new sense. You just re-focused my attention on the case. That's it." Whether their feeling was a new sense or not, they were asked what the experience meant for them. Various reasons were cited but there were still a few similarities behind their answers. According to

half of the females, they felt a new sense of their identity after going through the process. They were more interested in the social dimensions of the topic and became more sensitive towards it, by reflecting on the representations they had seen. For the other half of the females the answers were the opposite. They did not feel that their feelings or opinions were changed but two of them acknowledged the importance of the research. Equally, the males felt that their general attitudes to menstruation had not fundamentally changed, but that they had a better appreciation of the issues at a personal level. Accordingly, they felt that they should be more caring and compassionate when communicating, knowing that menstrual processes place women under bodily and mental stress.

In sum, the majority of participants - male and female - tended to see menstruation and menopause as a personal rather than cultural issue. Most participants said that their overall feeling about menstruation was that it is a natural and inevitable part of being a woman, even if it had a negative psychological impact on a woman's sense of well-being. If all these participants strongly agreed that the menstrual cycle is a natural physical procedure, they also recognised that the kinds of effects experienced were influenced by the way the cultural context framed menstruation, thus encouraging others to attribute meanings to the experience differently. The feelings and attitudes of participants such as IM1, IM2, IF1, IF2, etc. were nuanced because of the kind of cultural frame they drew upon to interpret what they saw. But despite these individual differences, the menstrual cycle was seen as a 'double edged sword'. It was natural, normal and linked to good health, although it includes hormonal changes and discomfort. One notable exception is that a few female participants distinguished between menstruation and menopause, the latter being

seen as entirely negative. For example, IF2 argued that “My general feeling (is) that... it’s a so-called normal and natural situation (so) that it should be for all women. Well, if it’s not, one would feel pity that this woman... well that sense of being woman (of her) ... and as shown in that (Desperate Housewives Series-menopause) ... Then, well that is also pitiful. Well, it’s (period) very good; it’s a thing that must exist.”

Overall, awareness of menopause is lower than awareness of menstruation in Iran. In addition, if people seek any sort of education or information about the menstrual cycle, a consideration of menopause would only focus on how to delay or avoid it. In this sense menopause was not seen as part of womanliness but rather its absence or end. Although menstruation and menopause both are natural and normal, in Iran people would acknowledge menstruation but are very much more hesitant in accepting or welcoming menopause as a natural process. Rather it is perceived as a threatening and inevitable event leading to the “death” of femininity. Therefore, there are many misunderstandings and fears that suggest that menopause is a greater taboo subject there.

The participants were also asked: which one of the materials did they find most offensive and why? Which one was most informative and why? For this question the responses with few exceptions were the same.

The following pie-charts identify the range of responses.

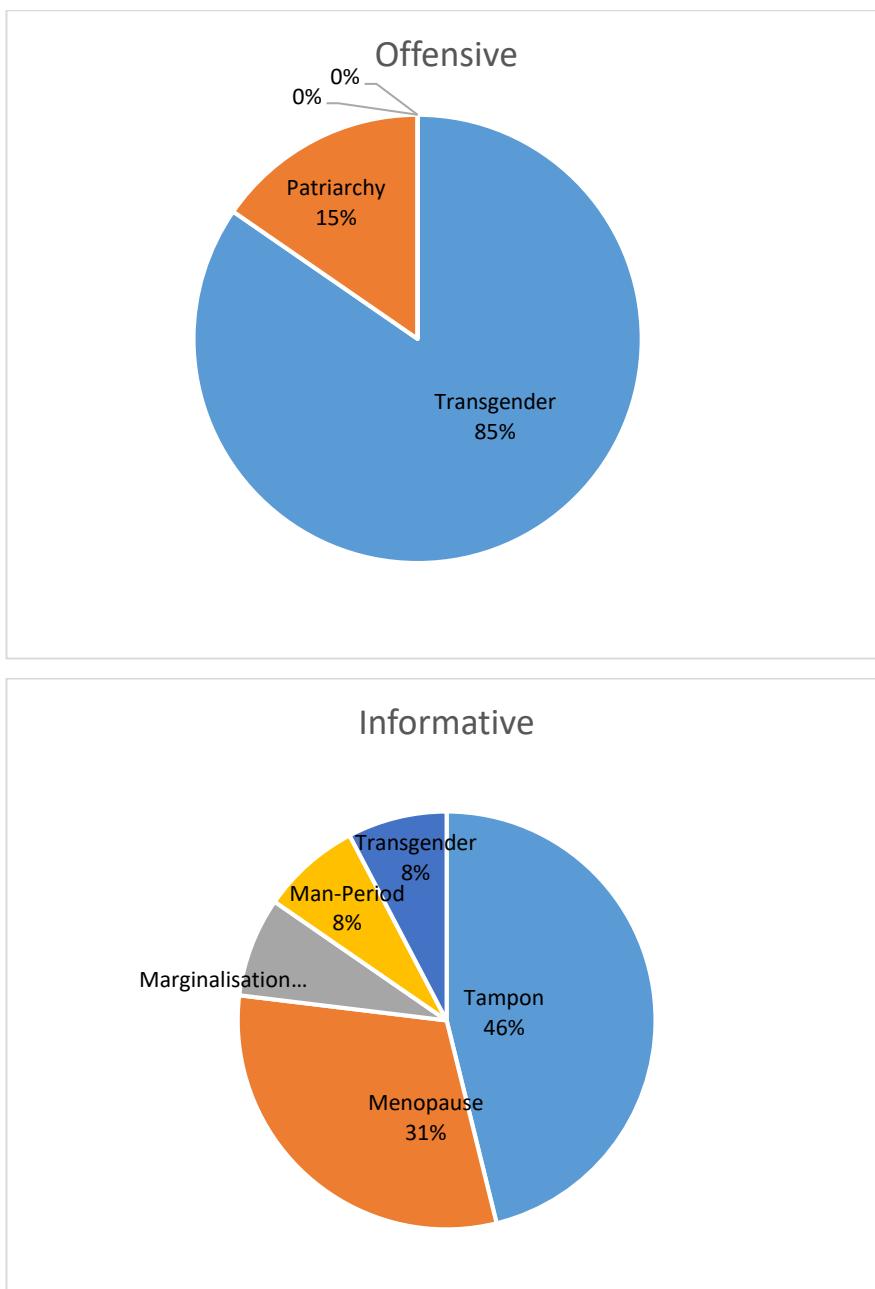


Figure 4.13 Most offensive and informative materials to Iranians

Most frequent responses, whether negative and positive, show a distinct pattern. Transgender, tampon and menopause as topics were commonly felt to be the most offensive yet best known choices. Though expressing offense, the participants also expressed an interest in these topics. All three aspects have one thing in common in Iran's society, which is that they are all marginalised and not accepted or welcomed

overall. Generally, Iranians who live in Iran have limited knowledge or make wrong assumptions about the transgender community, tampons and menopause.

The transgender community in Iran is an invisible minority whose issues are unknown to many Iranians, because of lack of awareness about the subject of the entire LGBTQI community. Of the Iran based participants, none of the eight had a sound understanding of the situation of transgender people nor even of their existence. Menopause on the other hand was understood as a normal and natural aspect of female ageing, but is mostly not welcomed by women in Iran, who in general have many misconceptions about it.

There are common devices like menstrual pads (sanitary napkins) or tampons that many women have been using around the globe. However, the selling of tampons has been banned in Iran, owing to its insertion into the vagina which carries unwelcome sexual connotations. Accordingly, the use of tampons is limited and mostly confined to the middle and upper classes in society. Moreover, based on Iran's culture, tradition and its official religion of Islam, the majority of women do not have sexual intercourse until they get married. Therefore, as the tampons' application is internal, it is commonly considered as a threat to virginity. Since this would not apply to married females the connotation of penetration must be another factor, such as the control and dominance of patriarchy over women's reproduction organs. The common belief in preserving virginity before marriage means that the usage is very low, added to which the official ban on tampons means that females who did not have traditional reservations about tampon usage are also discouraged.

The female interviewees only used menstrual pads and the two eldest of them had grown up using a cloth. As some female participants observed, pads can be uncomfortable while doing sport and with most dresses, using pads can be challenging. This is especially when you are not at home and (sometimes) the volume of bleeding poses difficulties. On the other hand, despite the disadvantages, long use has persuaded the participants that pads are the only acceptable and convenient option. In Iran, as noted, participants do not have the necessary information nor the facility to check out the effectiveness of other products such as tampons. Although tampons are not available in Iran, materials presented that included tampon related contents, brought the need for better knowledge among participants. Nonetheless their minds were made up that a tampon is not as comfortable as pads in general. It is imaginable that some women in the West feel the same. The issue here was that none of the female participants who were against using tampons, had ever used them before so the comparison was fairly unjust and one-sided. A couple of female participants were strongly resistant to the idea of considering tampons at all. Nevertheless, there were a couple of other female participants who hope tampons become available in the drugstores. This paradoxical combination of resistance and curiosity is understandable with regard to subjects that are rarely discussed in Farsi/Persian.

As per the interview outcomes, the majority of Iranians may not know that in developed countries many women use tampons from adolescence to menopause. But of course, they would also not know there are some girls in far-off places - the third world, pre-modern societies - who have no effective means for dealing with

their periods and sometimes must stay at home or cut going to school which puts them in a state of social exclusion.

Generally, people in Iran do not have the whole picture and do not know their bodies and how they function, as there is no sexual and menstrual education overall. Even if females did get relevant advice, they would still see it as wrong to address it publicly, especially to males, even if they are their close relatives, such as father, brother, son. In IF4's interview she shuddered to imagine having menstrual products being advertised on TV. She felt her response would be that of a broad range of Iranian society:

Look, now like, even you're saying on ads...we are so embarrassed by this section! For example, when I sit, the satellite channel is on, all sit together; all sit together, imagine like a spectrum of guests came, men are in them; my father-in-law is there; close men, not very strange; it advertises pad, it's foreign channel but in Iranian language; the satellite's Iranian... They advertise. Yeah like, certain (satellite) 'channels' advertise pad. I become too embarrassed... In Farsi language. Then even, they don't mention its name. 'All-day convenience with like certain...', 'Experience the all-day convenience.'... They do not mention 'pad'... For example, they show a lady that is very convenient. Like, she's very happy and so and... Then, they show a pad, they deliver the intended purpose. Then like also, even the same, when it shows, I don't like at all.

Although, IF4 herself admits that she used menstrual products for her daughter at the time of her menarche. In Iran schooling is based on gender segregation, and it is probable that menstrual awareness, education or information would be sought after, as long as it is among females only. Altogether girls are forbidden from talking about the menstrual cycle by their families – primarily mothers. This taboo would occasionally be revoked by peer pressure in certain situations – such as, religious studies taught by female teachers in girls' schools and religious meetings or functions in private places administrated by female religious patrons. Basically, Islam's

menstrual rules are based on menstrual taboos against uncleanliness and pollution. So people are disgusted by it as they barely hear or know about menstrual cycle facts and even if they do, such facts would be framed by metaphors of stigma and religious prohibitions. Every one of the interviewees are living in and have grown up in this environment. Additionally, what role doctors play in Iran is unclear, since they could be the conduit for objective information.

4.2.2 New Zealand Iranian Group

This group was selected as a ‘control group’, so that the degree of cross-cultural impact, if any, could be identified. It was hoped that this set of interviews would provide a benchmark for gauging the impact of contextual influences that underlay potential similarities or differences across the New Zealand Iranian samples. This would ensure that the results obtained would not be distorted by an overly simplistic bipolar comparison.

Before the analysis began, it was decided to have New Zealand Iranians’ analysis separate from Iranians in Iran. Nonetheless as the research unfolded it was found out that there was no or very little or insignificant variance between Iranians’ attitudes and reactions whether at home or in New Zealand. Basically, the two groups’ responses were similar. No matter how I searched for differences, the responses from the New Zealand based Iranian sample, duplicated the responses already collected. One obvious reason for this outcome was that Iranians in New Zealand maintained close ties to the migrant community and thereby were firmly anchored in a traditional culture. Given this circumstance, I decided not to repeat the data in a separate section but instead point out the broad similarities. Accordingly, to avoid redundancy and repetition in this section, the meaning behind the two Iranian

groups' identical responses or its connotation is highlighted in order to have a touchstone for the comparison rather than replicating the detailed responses.

The consonance between the attitudes of Iranians in the national and diasporic groups demonstrate that the menstrual stigma is pervasive and deeply rooted in Iranian culture. The attachment to concepts of menstrual shame, the devaluation of the menopause and the sexist insistence that women's bodies are expected to serve male desires, are pervasive throughout both Iranian groups' interviews. This prevalence suggests that even though migrant Iranians are in a modern, open country like New Zealand, where women's rights and equal gender rights are supported, the values and attitudes in which they were acculturated with regard to menstrual matters, continued to be as same as those of their compatriots who live in Iran. That basically means migrant interviewees' points of view remained the same but had been slightly affected by their experiences in a new society.

If, for example, New Zealand based Iranians witness or experience more openness to menstruation and may use it to advantage in their personal lives, general attitudes remain unchanged. An Iranian woman living in New Zealand, who has thoroughly compared the working environment in banking in both countries' comments:

It's a thing that pretty happens in Iran. All keep cover it. They never talk about it. An interesting thing that suddenly I remembered now is a memory that one of our colleagues in bank (in Iran) said. Was telling that there was a girl working at one branch and was so abusive and so on. Then, Iranian managers-this thing that all deny and so on-they never consider too, that this woman that doesn't feel good now, may be on period, let me give her an advantage. Then, the girl was saying that I want to go; head of the branch told you can't go and so on. We have work, the branch is busy. The girl also told him, 'I'm on period, do you understand? I feel bad.' In the middle of the branch shouted it to head of the branch's face. Because of seeing, the guy doesn't understand. But, she didn't tell her quietly too! To tell him in a corner, in his room. Because of it being so much embarrassing subject; that you [feel] shy to tell that you're on period.

E.g. if here I feel bad, I don't [feel] shy to tell my manager that it's that time of the month. But, do you dare to say this there [in Iran]? You think, they made a calendar for you and tick it out; well, it's this week; it turns out to a subject matter. But well, instead of talking about it with him, she made a subject this much flagrant; because of feeling she doesn't have any other option. This (caricature) exactly reminded me of this memory that was for many years ago, I forgot about it at all.

Her comparison is another indicator of relatively more intolerance for menstrual subjects in working or social atmospheres in Iran compared to New Zealand. She experienced both and can tell the difference. Yet despite this experience, she was against the representation of menstruation in the media, absolutely against menopause and expressed a sexist male-dominated viewpoint. For instance:

...in my opinion menopause is very depressing too. It's a thing that always I avoid even reading about it or think about it, so on. I feel people that become menopause become very nervous and like change, they become frown. I feel that, it's a very unpleasant thing. Even it's worse than period. As per Susan (the TV series character) it's a level before death. It exactly gives the same feeling to one. God forbid that day! The only thing that I thought about menopause is that, I know there are medical solutions now that as much as you want, you can postpone it. I will do that. With all (my) existence/being. But, whenever it's its time, I don't know when one must start it! Whenever it's its time, I start it. I feel, there's much time yet still. (MF1)

And somehow, she managed to link the Eve related material to menstruation and interpret it differently in line with her own concern and worries about menopause,

A version that I heard, I only remember that, one of the prophet's wives was in it. I don't know, like Aisha (Mohammad's wife) was in it! I heard many years ago, therefore, I don't remember what the story was exactly now. but, the same logic that a woman committed a sin, therefore, all women in the world are victim of it. If you want to look at it that way that, this was a person's fault, one is entitled to hate her. Because of it not being a pleasant thing. Then, the greatest thing that is nerve racking to women, is that men don't have a similar mode. Means, the man is still 80 years old, then has many erections, has much sex drive. But, the woman has fallen from 10 years younger. Then, I don't know in that situation what happens to one's love life! Well, you see men that are very old but have the same feeling and physique. But, they have wife that may be on menopause for 10-20 years. One doesn't know what they must do! Means,

it's a very bad situation that one be in. But, I don't think about it. Because, it's very unpleasant!

Or to take another example as expressed by MF2, "...when ladies become on menopause...their sexual feeling destroys too. Because of the same...a woman that's on menopause, becomes an absurd, useless old woman..." It is clear that Iranians in New Zealand demonstrate and hold the same attitudes as those in Iran. Looked at generally such opinions express a patriarchal view of femininity: "...reproduction is the purpose of female sexuality; a view wholly relevant to their social context, which values and considers motherhood as women's central role." As Nafiseh Sharifi in the study of *Female Bodies and Sexuality in Iran and the Search for Defiance* stated (2018, p.115).

None of the migrants were brought up in New Zealand, nor primarily educated in New Zealand nor received sexual awareness education. By the time they moved to New Zealand, their fundamental principles and morals were formed growing up in Iran. In addition, settling down in a different country, probably had other requirements and priorities; that at least by the time their interviews were conducted, their insights into the subject matter of sexism and marginalization of women, were no better than the views of their counterparts in Iran. Probably if the research were designed with another group of Iranian migrants who were born in New Zealand, had grown up or had received their education there, it would have produced different outcomes than our current two Iranian groups. Of course, they would not have been Iranians in a sense, but could have been influenced to some degrees by the culture through their families. Practically if New Zealand born Iranians participated as part of a New Zealand Iranian group, a greater range of attitudes may have been encountered.

The indistinguishable pattern of the two Iranian interview groups raises a more general concern. This is after all a major aspect of the research, and the fact that New Zealand Iranians are not more likely to recognise sexism than Iran's respondents, points out to a major result: that the experience of a different political or cultural context, may not necessarily have an impact on their attitudes and reactions towards a phenomenon for which they were socialized during a significant time of their lives. That acculturization is a process in which several factors such as its duration/time, age range and educational system play a significant role in shaping and contributing to the stability of attitudes, is suggested by this outcome. Persuasion to change an attitude "often fails because individuals are motivated to defend existing attitudes, or because the manipulation of attitudes is perceived as a restriction of freedom" (Vogel & Wänke, 2016, p.232). Resistance to attitude change suggests that the stability of attitudes is as important a factor as change;

Persuasion becomes difficult if receivers of the message already hold strong attitudes opposing the message. Attitudes become stronger after inoculation treatments (i.e. exposure to mild counterarguments), high cognitive elaboration during attitude formation, direct experience with the attitude and repeated attitude expression. One way of explaining these factors' effects on resistance is that they increase attitude certainty. (Vogel & Wänke, 2016, p.232)

In some ways the New Zealand Iranian group is the most interesting group, since they show the strength of traditional ideas and prejudices. Before the New Zealand Iranians data gathering and analysis stages, it was not expected that Iranian and migrant Iranians would have consistent attitudes.

There were some minor deviations. For example, women in both migrant and home samples, more readily recognized the issue of women's empowerment, although this was comparatively rare. Such remarks tended to present themselves post exposure

to the materials and toward the end of the interviews. Such ‘empowerment observations’ may have been partially influenced by the media representations, as no ‘empowering suggestions’ were made throughout Iranian interviews before the material exposure section.

The only empowering comment from the New Zealand Iranian sample, emerged at the very end of MF3’s interview in response to the question that asked, which one of the materials did she find most offensive? She was the only person out of both Iranian groups who chose the e-card that read “I’m not pregnant, I’m in menopause!!” and she elaborated her choice by explaining that:

You must enjoy each moment of your life, when you are on period or menopause enjoy it all. Was interesting to me to look at everything in life this way, to have power. That doesn’t usually happen. Each happening have a reason, don’t look at it negatively.

To recognise sexism is to depart from traditional stereotypes (somewhat). By putting the Iranian participants’ responses together, it can be observed that this pattern of departure is barely visible. But when it did, it emerged as a post-exposure effect, particularly in relation to the ‘more empowering’ ones and toward the end of the interview sessions. Therefore, it can be concluded that the media could have an important role in changing sexist attitudes. This potential will be further discussed in the conclusion.

However, in the case of New Zealand Iranians, the apparent lack of impact of living in a more ‘liberal’ culture, indicates that there are other factors at work than simply the absence of media exposure of menstrual issues, products and services – which is the salient feature of Iranians living in a traditional culture, with little media exposure to images of menstruation.

The responses of New Zealand located Iranians – separated from the other Iranians who were interviewed in Iran – are an indicator of persistent culturally and religiously prescribed beliefs and understandings of the menstrual cycle, as an aspect of the female body and sexuality that is predominantly perceived and shaped from traditional points of view. One of the key findings is that relocation into a more liberal environment has only a minor impact on patriarchal attitudes to the menstrual cycle. Nonetheless, additional research is needed to understand and address the specific menstrual-related variance or resemblance of migrants who are brought up and acculturated in an open and liberal society from early ages. That way familial and generational factors and stimuli may also be addressed for further insight into the matter.

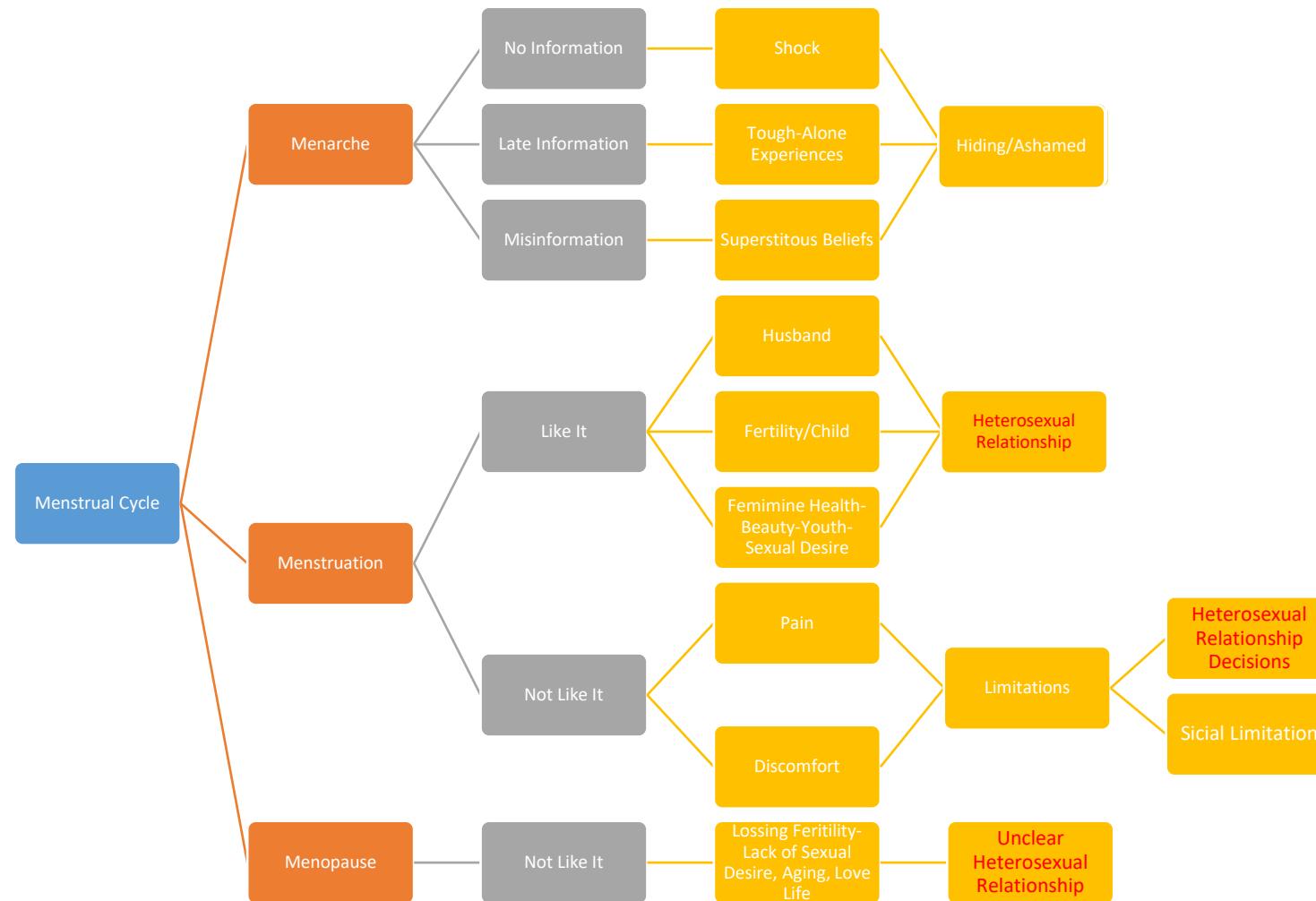


Figure 4.14 Thematic map of Iranians' sexist and patriarchal values themes and subthemes:

Three Main Themes out of Iranian's attitudes based on the mediated representations:

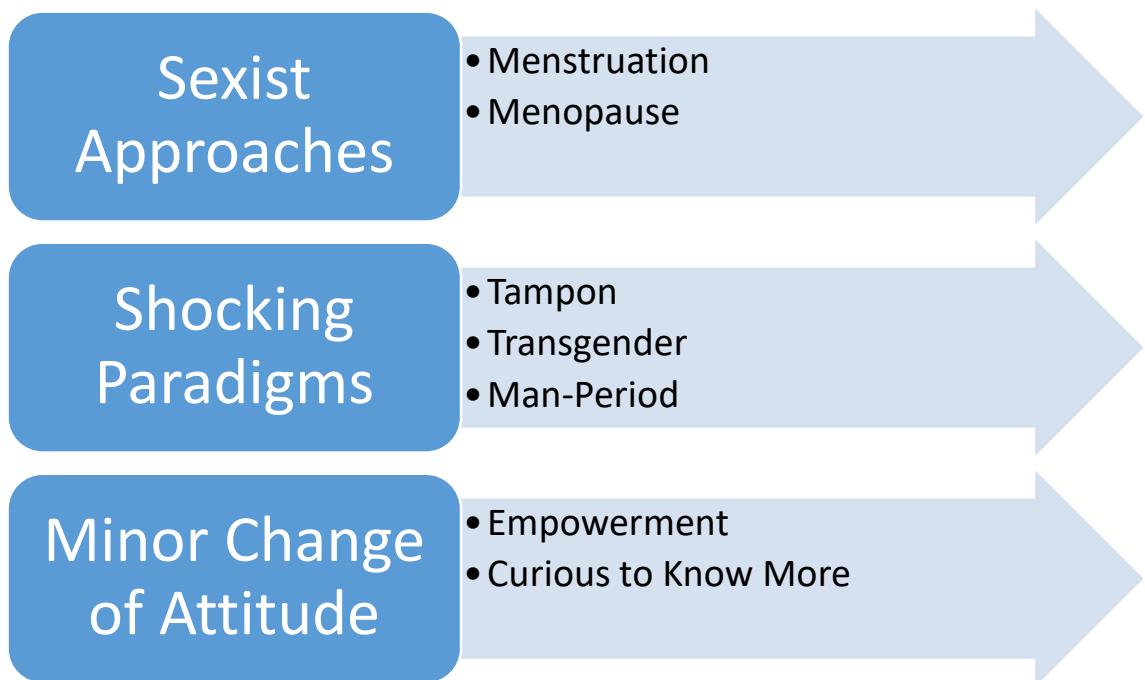


Figure 4.15 Attitude themes

The main reasoning/concern behind negative attitudes toward menopause by Iranian men and women:

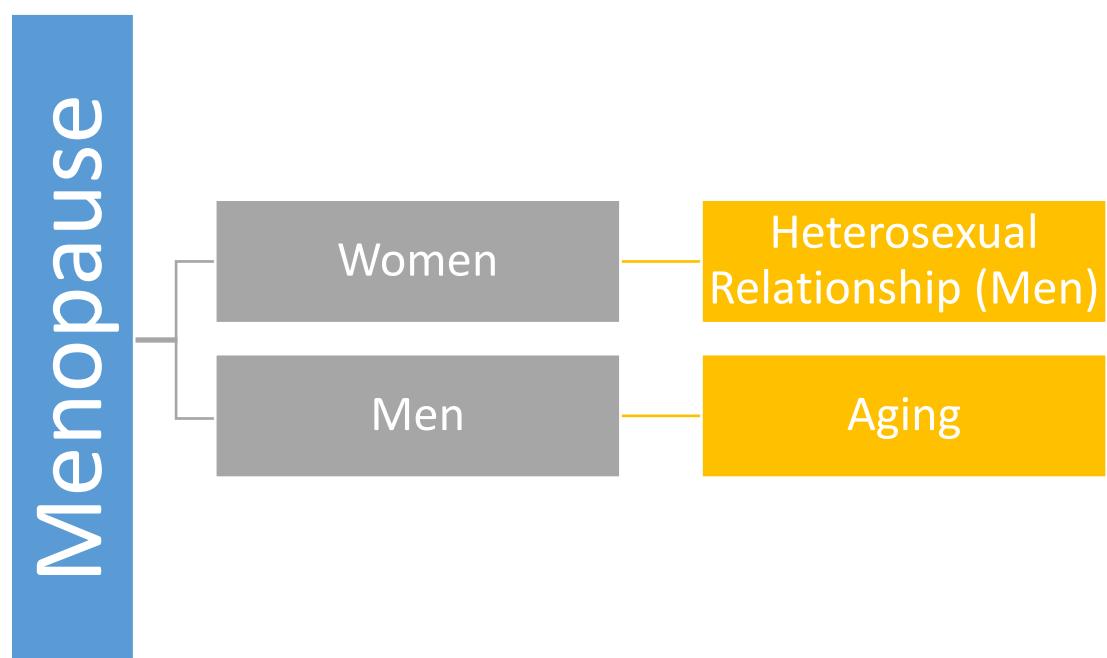


Figure 4.16 Iranians' attitudes toward menopause

This research is about the menstrual cycle and why menstrual education and awareness should be used for it and what would be the options for the same matters. In conclusion, based on the findings of this research, these topics are threatening to a non-secular and traditional society. It is a subject that is considered taboo by Iranians. The ladies may talk about it reluctantly and men are usually not well informed. The information that is shared around the menstrual cycle is very important. But you will not find a lot about it if you search in Persian. Despite the clear lack of information and knowledge and openness for the subject, still Iranians believe if you are a man, the information may not concern you directly but will give you the ability to support the women in your life, like your mother, wife, sister, daughter, partner, girlfriend. This is also a considerable point, that they all declare there is no shame in it at all; it is so natural and normal. They are willing to let the change begin in themselves, have dialogue about their experiences and talk about their problems. They want to learn if you know any new or old methods for this period. Although alternatives look and sound very exotic to them, they have very little right and truthful information about them. Another considerable factor for Iranians who are not exposed to conventional menstrual exposure of any kind, is that most of them showed a sort of curiosity of why am I talking about this? And what should we talk about now? What menstrual products can be officially sold and used, are decided by governmental entities. In addition, the traditional and religious culture in Iran determines menstrual discourse and its presence of any extent in the society, although people showed curiosity and a sense of wanting to know more about menstrual cycle's several aspects. Sexist thoughts and beliefs are still obvious and widespread among them.

The outcome of Iranians' interviews reveals some more patterns that include: some of them critical of the fact that since their childhood they have been told that speaking about this matter is a flagrant breach of etiquette. As a matter of fact, it turns out that in Iran, there are two usual paths by which people come to know not to talk about the menstrual cycle. One is that they are told so through their family – mothers in particular, the other one is the complete absence of talk about the subject in their family, by which they conclude the subject is taboo and engage in self-censorship. The latter not only includes males, but also females. Indeed, there are females in Iran who do not get to know or talk about periods in their family. Some of the interviewees who are affected by the stigma put it all into words about the first and foremost life-changing event in a woman's life. They acknowledge women are the source of life and of the planet earth's population. And, they question what makes talking about this a significant but normal matter taboo? Why were we not told and the girls are still told not to talk about it with the men in their life or even not to give them a hint, so they can comfort and help them more? Since it is already known that women become more sensitive in this period due to the pain and hormonal activities in their bodies and need to be understood and comforted. But no one knows what is going on and they cannot be comforted either. However, many of Iranians who grew up in Iran have seen someone coming out of a drugstore carrying a black plastic bag containing sanitary napkins (menstrual pads) and they look like they are carrying some contraband. Some are even ashamed of buying it themselves and ask others to do it for them. What is so unusual about it that causes this fear, shame and secrecy? Why is the blood inside the human's body so disgusting even for women? That blood is exactly of the tissue and septum produced in the uterus, in order to become fertile every month and continue the life cycle. Each time

fertilization does not occur (which does not often occur), the septum falls off. This is where a ‘fetus’ is created and grows.

Chapter 5

Kiwis' Data Analysis

5.1 Kiwi Interviews

1. Positive/Realistic Standpoints

Unlike the Iranian interviews, negative attitudes towards the menstrual cycle are not a dominant feature of the Kiwi interviews. Participants brought up empowering and rather realistic standpoints through their reactions and comments, while talking about the materials or about menstrual cycle related issues. Interviewee KF1 says that “we’re very powerful, we’re very strong and, at times we underestimate our strength and abilities to just get on with life.” Also, interviewee KM1 states that “the ones (advertisements) that I’ve seen tend to sort of maybe represent a hitwoman. So, bit of a smart young woman around town and maybe that doesn’t always apply to some women, who are perhaps not as socially forward as the one that shown on TV.” Or, KF2 comments on the exposure of the menstrual cycle in media this way, “It’s great. It should be encouraged more and I feel like its very kind of danced around a lot of time. So, I really want it to become more of a mainstream thing.” The positivity and realistic points of view here, are derived from the recognition of women’s rights or at least public discussions about them, framed by the participants’ exposure to the subject matter intermittently in the media and pop culture. While in the Iranians’ interviews, the subject is viewed as a private and personal issue that imposes a burden on the participants’ personal/social lives, this privatised view is completely absent in the Kiwis’ interviews. In addition, unlike the Iranian participants that related menstruation to the matter of dirtiness and uncleanness in several occasions, this

was a theme that was not present in Kiwi interviews. There would be discussions about minor discomfort and menstrual related mood swings, but, not constant references to dirt or disgusting feelings.

Before being exposed to the interviews materials, Iranian participants mostly acknowledged the media representation of the menstrual cycle as a necessary process connected to the menarche and puberty. This was because Iranians were not familiar with how extensive the subject could be, covering from menarche to menopause and all the personal and interpersonal dynamics involved in each menstrual process. On the other hand, Kiwi participants found the coverage of the menstrual cycle in the media insufficient and commercially biased. For example, interviewee KF1 says that “It’s not discussed a great deal. It’s a subject that doesn’t have much exposure. The only exposure that you see is on TV (for products).” This does suggest that in everyday life the topic is avoided as in Iran to some extent. Additionally, a male participant addressed the issue from a rather conservative standpoint. He said that, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything about it in media. I think it has to be treated with care. Out of some people may be feeling it’s not something you should show in general media.” After starting to watch the materials though, he could recall related television advertisements and brought up a very critical issue in regard to how inclusive the menstrual product advertisements on television are regarding representation of menstruation in women.

2. Education, Fertility and Religion

These three spheres that came up at different stages of Iranians’ interviews, but they were not a significant element in the Kiwi interviews. As for education, unlike Iran, in New Zealand menstrual education has been a part of their education system at

schools. Consequently, it is a settled matter for them. But, in Iran a lack of menstrual education led Iranian participants to acknowledge the lack of adequate public information and point out (female participants) some negative experiences that they encountered because of the lack of publicly available information.

In contrast to the Iranians' interviews, the relation between fertility and menstruation was not a prominent feature in the Kiwi participants' interviews. They did not connect the menstrual cycle to the matter of fertility. Iranians would evaluate a woman's status in terms of whether they were fertile or infertile or whether they had children, while in Kiwi interviews this connection with its associated negative judgment was not made.

3. Media

The media that Kiwi participants consume are in general identical to the Iranians. Various mainstream media includes: newspapers (both on paper or online), radio, television, cinema, social media, with the difference that Iranians who live in Iran consume rather different and more conservatively censored contents.

In terms of Kiwi participants' opinions on coverage of the menstrual cycle in media, they generally pointed out that because of the dearth of its representation, they could not recall many instances when it was addressed. Television advertising was the one area that provided an exception to this lack of exposure. Two participants even acknowledged that for a delicate subject like menstruation to be exposed in the mainstream media, it must be treated with care and decency. Many of the representations, especially in advertising, are not inclusive of the variety of women's lifestyles. The reason for this would be that a male dominant point of view dictated

the narratives and storylines. Nonetheless, maybe the role of demographics and marketing research on consumer preferences would also play a part. KF3 put it this way:

It is almost like a case of men trying to appeal to women about something they know absolutely nothing, not really anyway! What we always used to say is - as high schoolers - that, if women invented tampons, it would've been invented years earlier, decades earlier.

Although there are only occasional menstrual representations in New Zealand media compared to Iran, what is provided is still not perceived as representative, and Kiwi participants tend to agree that the topic is not fully discussed, in almost any medium. KF3 summarises this view, “We’re a bit honest about it now. But, we’re still not very good at talking about it... you get some mono-groups that are fine, that are good.”

A strong feature of the Kiwi interviews is that the question of the media representation of the menstrual cycle cannot be divorced from gender issues. Particularly, the fact that the narratives presented are structured around the male gaze. This was connected to the belief that men created the advertising rather than women for what is a woman’s product.

Part A: Background

Similar to the Iranian interviews, Kiwis also identified positive and negative aspects in relation to their families. But there is a significant difference between them. In Iranian interviews negative references to their families - predominantly the family in which they grew up - include both female and male family members and were significantly more numerous than the positive ones. However, for Kiwi interviews there is no negative family related aspect when referring to a female family member. If they had

anything to say about a female family member in relation to the menstrual cycle, it was underlined with positivity and understanding. They had negative things to say, but only as criticism of male family members not being comfortable around the subject or making fun out of it. This feature applied to both female and male Kiwi participants. Generally, Kiwi participants thought that their female family members were understanding, prepared to discuss menstrual issues and show acceptance and openness. In all Iranian and Kiwi groups, the positive expressions are predominantly referring to female family members, especially to mothers.

Unlike Iranians' interviews in which secrecy around menstruation was widespread in family life, none of the Kiwi participants mentioned that their families operated a conspiracy of silence about menstruation, although the avoidance of the topic with one male family member remained an exception. Even this was not a prohibition but rather a matter of discretion. Female family members might decide to raise the topic with male members if they chose, which contrasted with the Iranian taboo placed on such conversations. Moreover, unlike Iranians who disclosed that they had never been told about menarche by their immediate family and only learned about it from their extended family members with the onset of the menarche, no Kiwi female interviewee reported the same experience nor underwent the distress and fear that Iranian females encountered, concerning the same issue.

Overall, these features demonstrate that, menstrual taboo and stigma in Iran have a marked presence in both female and male mindsets and this pattern was also found in the Iranians resident in New Zealand. By contrast in New Zealand such negative aspects are mostly confined to male perspectives. Once again this underscored the fact that living in a more open society such as New Zealand does not necessarily

change an inherited traditional mindset. Part of the reason may be that Iranian migrants live in transplanted cultural and religious enclaves and this may also relate to the recent arrival of migrants.

In terms of how females see themselves when they have their periods, Kiwi female participants see themselves as having either a small amount of discomfort, occasional grumpiness or not as carefree as they are when period free. These factors are relatively similar to some of those that Iranian females mentioned too. However, there is no reference in Kiwi female participants' discussions of being restricted in going to public events and activities such as work, gym or party-going. The practice of voluntary purdah, was common in Iranian females' interviews. One of the Kiwi participants describes the way she sees herself during her period as:

I just see myself as just being kind of like my regular self but just in the same way that I would if I had said like a chronic headache. So, like just I'm carrying around like a little bit of weight. Because, I'm maybe in pain or whatever! But, I don't really think I'm very - you know - I'm no hugely moodier or hugely anything; I mean, I guess sometimes I act like I am, and I use it as an excuse. But, I don't actually think I'm really any different when I'm on my period.

Altogether, it is obvious that, most Kiwi female participants focus on Pre-Menstrual Symptoms, aspects and situations that arise when they have their own period. But this is a matter of individual experience since there are no general constraints or taboos in effect. The only comment on PMS issues was that of a participant who felt it was unfair that most women are fine whilst others experience difficulties with the menstrual cycle. She also metaphorically complained that it was also unfair that about 99% of men do not get a man period and therefore do not understand the females' experience. It was also observed that the female body is subject to many physiological changes, not just in their lifetime, but in every 4-5-weeks as a repeated

cycle. The participant was furious with males in this regard and pointed out that if there was a little more understanding from the rest of the populace, she would feel less grumpy about it.

In sum, periods for Kiwi females did not draw a barrier between them and their personal or social involvement and responsibilities. This was a stark contrast with almost all the Iranian females who felt menstruation interfered with their day to day life. Not withdrawing from social scenes and not planning social presence based on period calendar were the characteristics of those who did not feel inhibited.

The responses of female Kiwi participants to the question - were they pleased to get their period? - took two forms. There were those that were not pleased to get it and those who were indifferent to it. In some cases, responses implied that being pleased or not pleased depended on different circumstances or whether a period was perceived as a natural rhythm or a physical annoyance.

A very distinguishable pattern that shows itself in this part is that, here is one of the very rare instances that Kiwi female participants link menstruation with offspring or sexual relationships. A 47-year-old female said, “personally speaking as I’m unlikely at my age to ever have children, so in some ways, if I think about it that way, it’s a reminder of missed opportunity.” She continues that it was a personal choice that she has made and it is just something that has not happened in her lifetime so far. And that considered, she felt that it is not an important factor in her life. And, KF2 expresses her feeling in this way,

I'm kind of indifferent in a way. I mean, I like it; cause, I like the idea of just having this natural rhythm that is... just always comes and goes. And, if I've got a sexual partner then I like to get my period. But, it's not like, it doesn't really

have a like, I don't feel upset if I get a... and I also don't really feel super pleased. Just like a normal thing for me.

These two participants are the only ones to connect the menstrual cycle with the potential to have a child or a full sexual relationship. For them menstruation serves as a badge of maturity and competence. On the other hand, we have two female participants from the Iranian and Kiwi samples with very similar personal and social status. Both are middle aged, single, with no children, working and menopausal. While both mentioned that they were not really pleased with menstruation, IF2 from Iran said that she was not especially happy in the last years of having her periods as she was reaching menopause stage. She preferred menstruation over menopause because she considers menopause to be the cause of aging, loss of beauty, spiritual difficulties and related issues. KF1 from New Zealand on the other hand, responded she celebrates menopause and is thrilled and happy to have it and welcomes it. In other words, she was pleased that her period is finished and was not pleased when she was on her period. So, while Iranian females, would not express happiness with the menopause because they welcomed menstruation as a sign of their youth, beauty and fertility, this Kiwi respondent was happy that it is permanently finished and did not see menopause as degrading or devaluing in her personal and social life.

According to the Kiwis, welcoming menstruation by women mostly depends on the difficulties that they have to put up with in their particular life circumstances - such as pain, social stigma, evidence of ageing, a source of annoyance, of unpleasant symptoms, of the need to avoid men, the cost of products and a lack of confidence. The Kiwi data does not suggest that women do not welcome menstruation as strongly as Iranians. Almost all the Kiwis were careful to present a fair point of view

in this regard. There are comments on both kinds of women – those who would like to repress their menstruation and those who see it as an empowerment. Unlike Iranian men, who were prepared to state that women did or did not welcome menstruation, Kiwi men were less definite in their viewpoints. Kiwi men were careful when commenting on women's issues and were careful to state that their point of view or impressions were based on the things that they have heard from different women that they interact with. For example, KM2 cautiously points out some major issues in that context,

I don't know! You have to ask women. Like, I find it hard as a male to say how a woman reacts! Cause, like it's their body. I don't want to say someone should react in this way... in can't ever go through that... just like if a woman does the same thing to me, I'm like, you didn't even go through the experience. But, I wholly say, just I've heard, there seems to be annoyance at like understanding around it. And, how it's quite painful or there're other kind of symptoms related to it. And, lot of people especially men, kind of just put it under the bus; put it under the rug. From women's perspective, I can see this kind of annoyance around that. I can't experience it but, it seems to me there are a lot of annoyance around like understanding and that it can be quite difficult! Like, people they get really painful symptoms. Like, they get really painful stomach cramps during that time or they get particularly bad PMS. So, I think firstly like for them that's kind of hard to manage. Just because, it happens once a month. And, have to deal with all those kinds of pain. And then, there's this kind of understanding. And I think, for a lot of women I know like they get really annoyed they have to pay for tampons or for pads. Like, why they have to pay extravagant amount of money for these things? Like, that seem like a luxury item. It should be a right to have. So, there's also this annoyance. There're so many like different layers of annoyance. Like, there's this annoyance that the things that actually should help them are expensive.

Once again it may be an indicator of Kiwis being familiar with certain rights and having better public information available, which Iranians lack, that explains a more relaxed attitude. It also relates to New Zealand's individualism versus Iran's collectivism. Iran's cultural value stresses on cohesiveness amongst individuals and prioritization

of the group over self, while New Zealand's moral attitude and societal stance emphasizes the decent worth of the individual. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005)

Part B: Male Presence Effect



Figure 5.1 Image advertisement: Kitadol's get her back campaign (menstrual pill)

For this advertisement, most Kiwi participants did not understand the image before it was explained in detail. Most of them could not decode it in first place and found it confusing and strange! Two of them clearly expressed the issue of having difficulty understanding the message or image (a male interviewee and a female).

KM1: It doesn't give any images to me! It looks like very strange situation!

KF2: I didn't understand it at all! I wouldn't know if you hadn't mention that. I wouldn't know, have assumed that, that was what the ad was about!

Only when the image was explained could Kiwi participants express their thoughts. This reaction was the same as the Iranians', who had difficulty figuring out what was

going on in the image and the purpose that it was supposed to serve. Here it may also be concluded in regard to the image that, perhaps this is a rather poor advertisement, since people from two very different cultures and backgrounds both struggled to comprehend it.

Kiwi participants like most of the Iranians did not fully appreciate the significance of the child figure in the image advertisement, although the factor that excluded them from being ‘male-struck’ like most of the Iranians is that, they did not respond to the image solely in terms of its implications for heterosexual relationships. Responses varied from being critical of the depiction which even though it identified the effects of menstruation on mood, were exaggerated and offensive. There was also criticism of masculinizing a woman while she is going through a very feminine feature, playing on empowerment and sexist notions and men’s general ignorance in the menstrual cycle context. Last but not least, it was dark and gloomy. In sum, Kiwis were critical of the obliviousness of males toward a natural aspect of life and the consequences that this ignorance has and how the advertisement promoted stereotypical ideas in the same vein. They did not consider its effects through the very limited topic of a wife and husband in a marital relationship. This is in contrast with the fact that the majority of the Iranians were concerned about the image’s message about the marital relation that they have or will have. Their viewpoints mainly covered just personal (heterosexual) concerns of themselves. Kiwis are mainly concerned with social impacts of the depiction and even went through certain gender rights matters; no mention was made of racism though.



Figure 5.2. Video advertisement: U by Kotex tampons leakage freakage

The Kiwi participants who were not happy with the previous material (much like Iranians though for different reasons) all found this video advertisement less dogmatic and sexist. Another similarity between Iranians and Kiwis here, is that as a female participant pointed out, her grandmother had to use folded cloths pinned to underwear instead of sanitary products, washed them and air dried them on the washing line. Since this part of the interview programme aimed to tease out reactions to a sanitary menstrual product, it was striking that both groups mentioned old-fashioned ways of absorbing the menstrual blood. By way of context, it is worth noting recent reports in Newshub and Radio New Zealand that poor families could not afford menstrual products in New Zealand. In those cases, in New Zealand or in other places in the world, the cloth reusing practice may not be considered as outdated or obsolete after all but a common practice.

One difference again occurred here, which is that the two Iranians who discussed the matter underlined how secretive and private the whole procedure was. By contrast, the Kiwi one discussed the fact that there was no privacy and anyone in the neighbourhood would notice the regular practice of hanging the related equipment (washed cloths assigned for menstrual use, along with the related underwear), in the backyard or similar open-air area.

The Kiwis point out the fact that the sanitary pads can be a huge help for women during menstruation. But, unlike many of the Iranians, none of them said that women need to hide leakage and prevent it happening or expressed the view that it is the woman's sole responsibility to be organised against the possibility of accidents. 'It is better that one considers everything', 'not to wear clothes in light colours', or 'be careful which type of sanitary pad to use so this problem does not happen' were some of the associated commentaries of Iranians. This does give the responsibility to women. In Iran these considerations are seen as a matter of common sense rather than shamed compliance, whereas the Kiwis acknowledged that the sanitary products and such advertisements are great to encourage women to be at their best and engage with their everyday lives. But besides this acknowledgment, the Kiwi participants feel that advertisers should not use the social shame of the menstrual stain to sell the products. Iranian participants by contrast saw the onset of the period as when should withdraw themselves from personal engagements and social scenes. There were Iranian participants who thought leakage fear affects all aspects of social life – such as going to parties, work or any social occasion. So, most Iranians agree that a period is a socially stressful event which is fraught with fears and unpleasant feelings, their remedy is a kind of purdah. Whereas, the Kiwis remark that the

situation depicted could happen, none of them believed that a leakage would be a barrier for social interaction. In contrast, there were concerns among the Kiwis that such advertisements target a limited range of women with a currently fashionable body image, 'hot young women', who are smart socially forward women around town, who are very beautiful with skinny bodies, perfect clothes, makeup and hair. There are Kiwis who were concerned that, those regular portrayals would be an exclusive depiction of women on periods that is empowering only one type of woman.

It is a frequent factor in the interviews that illustrates how Iranians consider menstruation as a potentially beneficial problem that needs to be dealt with privately and discreetly. Kiwis tended to see a bigger picture and escalate their criticism to another level that does not see it as a female body issue that women need to clear up, but they consider it as a female body matter that happens in a social sphere on a regular basis that needs more awareness and a fair point of view. As KF2 explains it,

It's nowhere as bad as the first ad. It's kind of funny. Cause, it's like, it's great that it's actually showing women going about like their everyday thing while presumably having their periods and still looking fabulous and [not] awkward. But, I guess like I don't really like that kind of that showing of something's that's just natural and they can't really help...like, it's kind of nice that they make a joke out of it rather than actually making the woman like socially shamed or anything. But, it's just the shame that...they can't just be like bleating about it in terms of being like, this (leakage/menstrual stain) is something that happens sometimes and it's fine. But, if you don't want it to happen, that's cool to... (do the things/use the product.).

Another difference between Iranians' and Kiwis' responses to this material is that some Iranians explained that tampons are not common in Iran, others did not know how they function. As has already been mentioned, one of the main reasons for this is that selling tampons is illegal in Iran. For the Kiwi participants, tampons are a

commonplace menstrual product used as a matter of choice and convenience. Furthermore, there is no need to describe tampons to Kiwi male participants – as they understood what a tampon was and how it was used – unlike some Iranian males who had limited and occasionally wrong impressions of the product.



Figure 5.3. Reality show: Keeping up with the Kardashians (season 2, episode 4)

In the Iranians' interviews, this part was the very moment in which they all got to see how a tampon works and watched it in the context of a reality show family discussion. Summarising the Iranian response to the clip we can note:

- a) there is no comprehensive sex/menstrual education in Iran and people's information about it is generally dominated by word of mouth from close female family members (almost in all cases) – excluding the ones who get no such basic information and,
- b) the fact that tampons are not being sold in Iran anymore and are not a regular menstrual product there; due to their internal application, which is a red line crossing for virgins;
- c) legitimate public media representation of the menstrual cycle is not common and acceptable in Iran's media, based on those reasons and many more

subcategorized related issues, such as the role of social media, the participants were more fascinated by the:

1. Tampon application,
2. Public media representation of menstrual family discussion and its openness.

This kind of media representation presents a situation that is quite rare in Iranians' family experience. In the case of the Kiwi interviews, almost all of them were able to focus on the broader implications of the sequence since the public service advisory part of the sequence was not as shocking as it was for the Iranians. As already pointed out, Kiwis receive information from their sex/menstrual education classes during schooling. This meant that they were more able to focus on the sequence as a representation of a family discussion. Given this focus, they pointed out both positive and negative aspects of having such discussions in the context of a reality show and the involvement of a teenage girl, considering the teenager is not an actor and is a "real" person presumably in real life. They were supportive of the fact that the representation/discussion:

- Takes away the mystery and fear of the topic;
- Is direct and to the point;
- Did not dance around period subject matter;
- Is accessible;
- Is educational and informative;
- Portrays family discussion of the topic;
- In contrast to the general feelings/ideas, the sequence represents menstruation as not a bad thing, but as normal and not frightening;
- Is not conforming to general accepted menstrual 'taboo'.
- If viewed in a good and supportive environment, it can be helpful.

Meanwhile, they all pinpointed the flip sides of the public representation and family discussion of a personal part of life of a specific person. In this regard, they argue that:

- The age needs to be considered;
- The public demonstration would be softer on the specific person if it was conducted in a school classroom type environment;
- It could be mean and uncomfortable for the one who is the subject of the presentation.
- It was comical in terms of playing on the girl's discomfort to it, thus, making fun of a serious topic.
- In general, in poking fun at menstruation, it poked fun at women from central part of their biology and life experience.
- The impact of the sequence would depend on the context of reception and the existing family dynamic. Some families would provide the worst possible environment; and for anyone who was shy and introverted, the public discussion of a private matter would not be appreciated.

Kiwi participants detected a gender bias hidden in the layers of the representation. It was argued that the reason that they were able to show something like that on commercial TV, was because it is still kind of rooted in a sexist idea of women and of their reproductive system. The setting in 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' is clearly a very gendered factor. At the same time if the sequence was poking fun at menstruation, this meant it was a bit subversive of the stereotype and the seriousness attached to it. So, on one level it broke with the norm of the invisibility of menstruation on prime-time TV but did so in a manner that suggested it still should not be taken seriously.

Such negative side effects were overlooked by the Iranian groups as they were fascinated by the depiction of the application of tampons and by the open, rather public, discussion of a female topic that all of them considered taboo in their communities, especially as many of them had never experienced any sort of open, educational or conversational discussion about the subject, even with close family members.

Part C: Menopause



Figure 5.4. TV series: Desperate housewives (season 4, episode 1)

Unlike Iranian participants who strongly emphasized the menstrual cycle's link with patriarchal values for women, including the necessity to satisfy men sexually and provide them with children, Kiwi participants were more focussed on women's needs and praised the depiction of men as supportive. When the menopause related video with a male presence was shown to Kiwis, none of them was worried about the impact of menopause on the relationship between the man and the woman, given that she would no longer be able to have a child. Nor did they see menopause as

necessarily a threat to the couple's sex life. This was strikingly different from the responses from the Iranian interviews. All eight Iranian participants construed the subject of menopause as a problem for women in satisfying male needs. The Iranian male participants saw the female menopause as an indication of ageing, becoming old and losing attractiveness and sterility to the detriment of male sexual satisfaction and men's social standing as a father. However, Kiwi male participants did not have any similar comments. In fact, one of them connected the challenge presented to heterosexual relationships by menopause, as one of life's necessary changes that had to be managed effectively. Their perspective on the media representation of menopause was less gender stereotypical than that of the Iranians. They realistically acknowledged that women were the ones who experience it and they should be understanding and supportive. One Kiwi male participant suggested that if we consider menopause as a life change that challenged women's desire to be young and beautiful, then menopause was not just a natural event, but a threat to one's personal identity. It should not therefore be the butt of a joke. He further stated that, even though the menstrual cycle is shown on television or in the media, it often pokes fun at and demeans women. Once again, the Kiwi group's discussions include complex social layers of the interpretations of mediated representations, while Iranian groups' discussions again are filled with individual experiences and expectations.

Iranian females typically see menopause with anxiety, as a threat to all women because it is a potent symptom of aging, loss of youthful energy, social exclusion and a loss of sex appeal. To them not having sex appeal means that the woman may see herself as a useless creature without a social or useful economic function. This

attitude plays an important role in re-enforcing a woman's sense of inferiority and acceptance of patriarchy. In line with this structure of feeling, Iranian female participants reveal a male-centred perspective on their own bodies. This mindset represents Iranian women's attitude toward what is at base a natural process. It also confirmed at a fundamental level their dependency and reliance on men, even when assessing what is a female experience.

This finding once again proves that Kiwi females unlike Iranian females, see menopause as a part of the menstrual cycle, as something inevitable and accept it as a natural part of life rather than looking at it as a sign of ageing or the end of a full social life. The following quotes from Kiwi females illustrate clearly this different perspective:

KF1: It doesn't – from my own experience – depict reality. Most women that I know are thrilled about when menopause is coming. Right, they're very happy it's coming. They don't perceive it as a sign of being over the hell or aging or anything! (It is) just a relief!

KF2: It was the one thing that I didn't like so much. Which I did like a little bit of, I liked that the man showed were really comfortable talking about it and they were like 'look, this is just natural', which is great. But, I didn't like so much having it that, the woman was hysterical about it by comparison. And, that they didn't matter – like, their feelings about what's happening to their body. When actually, it should only be their opinion that matters. Like, if they freaked out about it, then like, maybe they should be freaked out; it's up to them. And, it's just a sort of interesting as well after seeing all those clips about how bad a period can be! That then the idea of stopping a period is also bad! It's like you can't win. It's like you got the period and that's embarrassing. But, the shame of having it stopped as well like... you have to drag it on as long as you can. So, it's like you just can't win. Like, as soon as you go through puberty, there's no... you just can't win!

KF3: The husband gets a big prize for being suitably supportive when the wife is going over possibly being menopause... So, it's kind of depends on when you get what news! And, what stage of life you're at! What you want! ... So, it depends on who we are and what! But, attitude to the start and the finish... I think it also reflected the gender thing where the men will often make decision;

it's that they've done; it's a yes/no, black/white. For something like this particularly – start & finish – women take a long time to get used to it. There's emotional rollercoaster that's attached to it, at both ends. Both at the beginning and at the end. That is partly chemical and partly emotional and partly 'social' – but it's a combination of things. It's just the matter of you having to get used to the idea that you're up to that particular stage. And, if you can more comfortably view it as that particular stage, especially now where it is no longer an end to sexual activity... it all has stages, all has cycles. Where there's a beginning and there's an end. And, the ending can confirm all sorts of things...

Another pattern that is not common between Iranian and Kiwi females is the sympathy that Iranians have with the female character as she panics about ageing, the loss of fertility and sexual life with her husband. None of the Kiwi females showed the same degree of concern over saving a marriage because of the impact of the menopause. The ease of divorce may figure in this difference. No older or younger Kiwi participants indicated relief over the fact that the onset of menopause did not jeopardise their marriage or relationship. Another aspect that needs to be emphasized is that by contrast, the Iranian participants reported relief that their worst fears were not realised, fears that were only present because they accepted a male-centred set of expectations. Moreover, gthey thought that pregnancy status is socially and personally ranked higher than menopause, especially with early onset menopause. They all expressed satisfaction that at the end, the test result showed pregnancy and not menopause. This outcome was based on their own life experiences and how the media represented a couple dealing with menopause. In contrast to the Iranians' concerns, the Kiwis did not complain about lack of a support system in their country for women on menopause. Iranians point out that neither spousal, social, cultural, informational or media support about menopause exists in Iran. The Kiwis did not have any issue with the absence of support systems. Rather four of them were concerned with the lack of inclusive and realistic depictions of

menopause, which indicates that in New Zealand although there is limited representation of the subject, people are less troubled by the process, because the support is there when needed. Consequently, compared to Iranians for whom menopause is a barrier to being free and happy in society, the Kiwis felt relatively free of anxiety because of the social and cultural differences between the two societies.

The Kiwi responses to menopause as a female bodily function indicate that the relationship between societal attitudes to gender and equality is an important contextual variable. New Zealand's commitment to gender equality meant that the onset of a normal biological event did not necessarily lead to stigmatization, whereas in Iran it generally did. For Kiwi women, the value given to women was not exclusively linked to their childbearing capacity and sexual desires. Menopause was seen as a part of the menstrual cycle with a focus on women as independent individuals, who when necessary could consider the family aspects of the subject within the context of it being a woman's issue. Rather than putting an exclusive emphasis on the needs of others – especially significant male others – Kiwis discussed 'women' as the main subject in relation to the subject matter and saw the impact on others as consequences to be managed. The following attitudes common in Iranian interviews were more or less absent in Kiwi interviews:

- Looking at menopause predominantly from men's point of view (male gaze);
- Deferring, unknowingly, to the objectification of the female body and its function; e.g. childbearing, marriage and ageing;
- Women seeing themselves as meaningless or useless with the onset of menopause.

The Kiwi female participants did not see menstruation as a necessary condition for a productive, useful, fruitful, healthy and sexually attractive life as if fertility is the only

power they have as women. If this view is taken, then menopause socially disempowers women by taking away the only resource they have to secure a durable heterosexual relationship. This perception of the relationship between sexuality and a competent and respected social identity was fundamental to the Iranian perception of menopause.

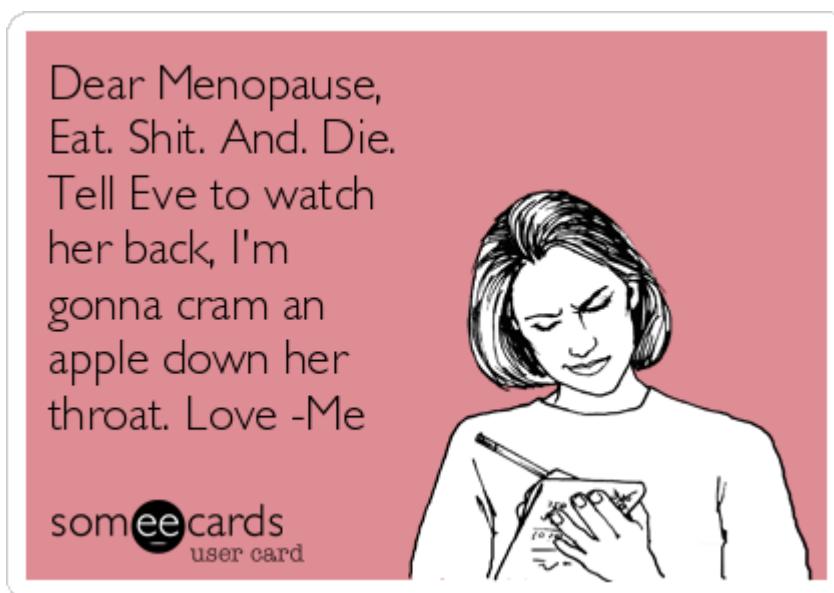


Figure 5.5 Negative menopause e-card

None of the Kiwi participants agreed with the story of Adam and Eve – which is the context of this flashcard – unlike the majority of female Iranian participants who did. All the Kiwis looked at the matter from a realistic point of view and did not see a link between menopause and the religious context of the Eve and Adam story.

Among Kiwi participants, there were menopausal and non-menopausal participants, but as mentioned above, none of them – unlike most female Iranian participants – correlated being satisfied or not with menopause or mentioned that menopause would compromise their femininity. Kiwi female participants unconditionally pointed out the importance of acceptance and of understanding of menopause as a natural female body process. Again, different to Iranian female interviews', Kiwi females

neither tried to distance themselves from the subject nor set a condition for accepting it. They did not avoid the topic or assign blame to another factor. Given their belief in gender equality they do not feel bad about it. They are proud of their gender, without setting limits or deciding how far their bodies are feminine, which was a key concern with Iranian females. They do not feel nervous or uncomfortable discussing the menopause even when it is not a remote possibility for them. This is in a marked contrast with a young migrant Iranian female participant who far from being even close to menopause did express fears about it and was not looking forward to it.

Furthermore, Kiwi males did not look at the matter from a critical or superior point of view. KM2 even criticized the concept and believed that the religious context of the concept is not fair-minded or non-discriminatory to women,

It is this kind of rejection of menopause! I think whoever did this meme, is... someone who's gone through menopause, and it's for them; they're really struggling with that. And so, they kind of made this meme to be quite humorous; as a way for them to process it... Since, my reaction to it is just this woman who probably just made it as a way to make herself feel better; and that she's taking the 'piss' out of Christianity and religion. Saying, women only have this thing because Eve was the seductress woman who got punishment being a seductress. So, they're fully being punished being seductress! So, it's poking fun at that idea!

In contrast some Iranian males criticized women's identity by citing their dissatisfaction with the stereotypical qualities of gender or denigrated menopause as a failure of femininity. One of the outcomes of this kind of response is that a double standard is applied to the female body, making them uncomfortable with what is a natural biological process. The double standard is, for example that men do not accept the effects of ageing in relation to their sexuality, while denigrating women.

Such responses were missing from Kiwi males, they either stuck to known physical-hormonal characteristics of menopause or denied the de facto repression of menopause in different social frameworks. That could be a reason why Kiwi females compared to Iranian females, are more satisfied with their gender identity generally and not just in relation to the question of menopause. Kiwi females did not have the fear or discomfort that Iranians females had discussing menopause. And, Kiwis do not exclusively value the fertility phases of females' life cycle above their post-menopause phase.

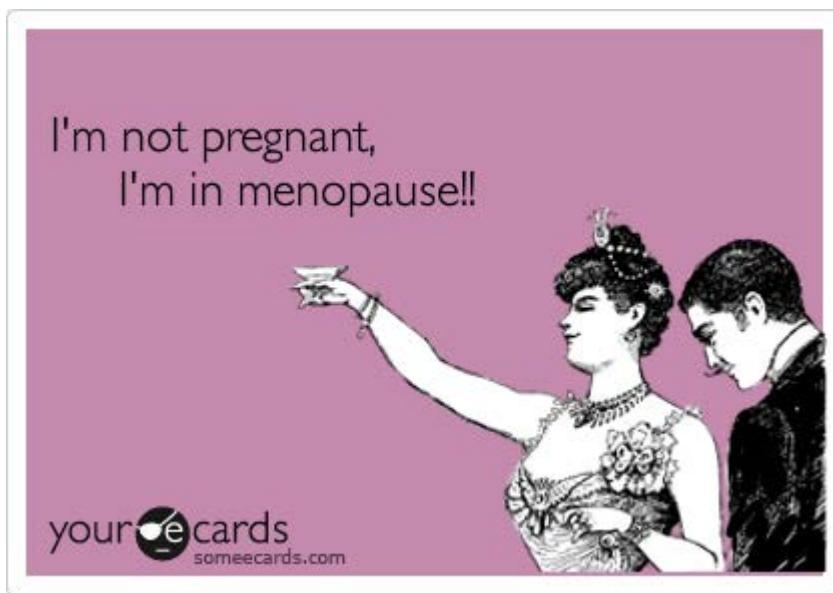


Figure 5.6 Positive menopause e-card

This was another e-card for which Kiwi participants gave different answers to, compared with Iranian participants. In general, for the Iranians, being fertile and able to choose to be pregnant or not is more attractive and important than life after menopause and they also see menopause as a potential barrier to their sex life. The female participants feel mentally annoyed, negative and resistant toward menopause. The pattern of favouring fertility/pregnancy over menopause is completely missing in Kiwis interviews. Kiwi female participants who are on

menopause can relate with that phase of life and the ones who are not can imagine themselves, their bodies and lives after menopause. In the case of this e-card, the onset of menopause is celebrated and the woman's body is not presented as a sex object linked to fertility. It is possible, though to construe this as celebrating the freeing of sexual relations from the constraint of pregnancy – which prompts another thought - how does contraception figure in all this? It is an impact of considering that menopause relies on the fear and risk of pregnancy, like the period itself on a small scale.

Kiwis do not see menopause as a limitation on sex-life and do not favour menstruation over it; they treat both phases of the menstrual cycle as equal and fair. Overall, none of the Kiwis felt uncomfortable regarding menopause, an affective pattern that was quite widespread and common amongst the Iranian participants. In conclusion, the contrast between the Kiwis' and Iranians' approach to menopause indicates the difference between modern and traditional values in the two societies.

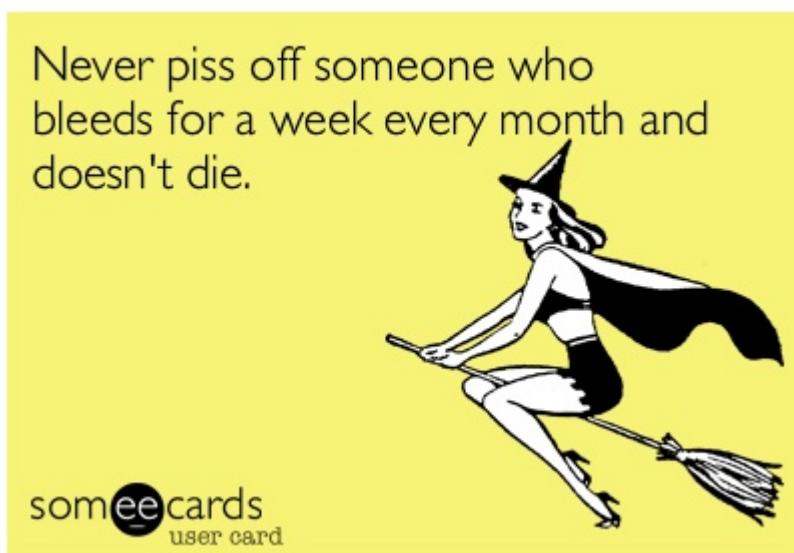


Figure 5.7 “Positive” menstruation e-card

According to the Kiwis' answers, this e-card had a dual signification: it connoted female empowerment and yet was sexist. In a way this does justify a male attitude of aggression or anti-feminism. There were acknowledgments that women could be powerful, strong, magical or mythical among the Kiwis comments, which are empowering messages for women and felt by them when reading the e-card. At the same time the figure of the witch if conveying power, also conveyed the notion of malignancy. Accordingly, the aspect that distinguishes some Kiwis' comments from Iranians', is that there are concerns that the message can be a double-edged sword. Because it plays off the stereotype of women as becoming aggressive during their period and are irrational and dangerous (you do not want to 'piss them off'). This stereotype implies that women cannot control themselves, that one must be continually careful around women because they have their period each month. In that way, the Kiwis reflect that this e-card had a sexist subtext that compromised its message of empowerment. Kiwis considered it obvious that women are logical people who also have emotional attributes – which is a feature of humans generally. For this reason, some of them view the e-card as reproducing a sexist stereotype of women which interprets them as emotional, dangerous creatures.

Such critical points of view are missing in the Iranians' interviews, and they would tend to read the material literally without considering hidden meanings or effects. It is hard to believe that they were not puzzled at the same time, because of seeing unfamiliar menstrual depictions. A reason for this superficial reading is the fact that, the majority of Iranians generally are not familiar with the notion of sexism as a cultural construct and further that these sorts of publicly mediated representations are not found in the Iranian media, while Kiwis are aware of sexism and familiar with

its occurrence in different contexts. For instance, the e-card reminded them of a similar graffiti, a concept that is often used in bachelor parties for advice or a line in a book with a similar notion. KF2 explains that she saw the concept in several media contexts. Also, earlier during her interview, she brought up the matter that her male family members would tease female ones by saying, ‘you can’t TRUST someone who bleeds for a week in a month and does not die!’ and that she would rather the saying with ‘never piss off’ notion rather than the same saying with ‘never trust’ one. As the former can convey empowerment at the same time:

I've seen it in so many different media. It's in South Park as well. They say that at one point – one of the teachers says to little girls, like the little eight-year-old girls in South Park – which is interesting! I like that it's an image of a witch. That just makes me happy, the idea. I mean, I know back in the day obviously [it's] like kind of problematic. But, now I like the idea of it being like women are mythical as like... don't mess with us. Because, we have powers... but, it's... I usually don't really like the rhetoric of – you know, the one that I talked about with my brother and step-dad – saying about 'don't trust something... but, I kind of like this. I do a little bit like that like don't mess with us; like, we're magic.

In this case, the empowering aspect of the concept is considered, rather than the sexist or stereotypical connotations:



Figure 5.8 Negative menstruation e-card

While some Iranians' previous comments contrasted with their criticism of the sexist content in the current representation and vice versa, the contrasts were in how they made sexist comments related to women, menstruation or menopause, but were quite offended by this particular e-card that made an explicit sexist point. Or the case that a female Iranian backed up the message, who previously was critical of how Iran's schooling system, does not support menstrual issues. Kiwis' predominant criticism of this e-card was consistent with their previous views. As it has already been elaborated in Chapter 4 for the Iranian interviews, some of the participants' understandings shifted gradually towards the end of the interview process. Though as it has already been also suggested, the Iranians' attitudes were unsettled by the unfamiliarity of materials, so this is a confounding effect that is rooted in personal understanding of the individuals. The shift was not present in the Kiwi interviews. Unlike Iranian females, Kiwi females did not consider all men would behave as suggested, i.e. shun contact with menstruating women. The tendency of Iranian women to accept generalisations about male distaste and avoidance, complemented

their own perception of themselves as sex objects and hinted at self-disgust. Overall, Kiwis found this stimulus image to be extremely sexist and ‘gross’ since it represented women as “useless” when they have a period and implied that their use only rested on their availability for sex. Overall the view of menstruation amongst Kiwi participants did not vary greatly across the various stimulus images. Their awareness of ‘sexism’ made them critical of its recurrence in different forms and contents.

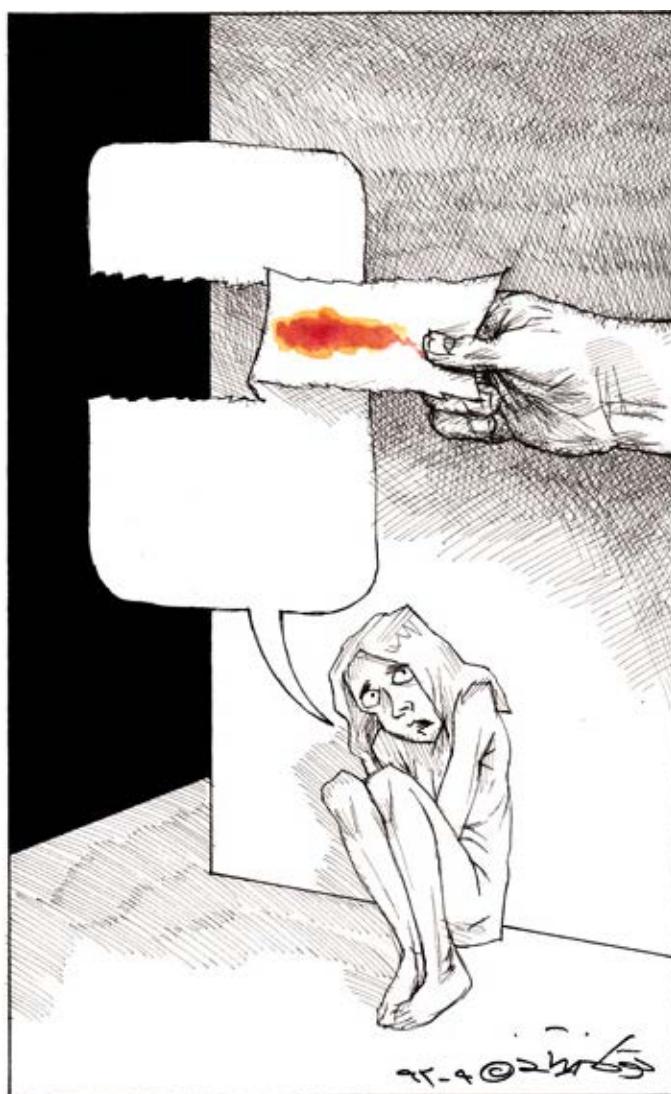


Figure 5.9 Menstruation caricature

All the Kiwi participants strongly agreed that the above Iranian cartoon was a powerful caricature of the horrendous and sexist side of patriarchal culture. But the

individual reasons for their reactions varied. They praised the cartoon as illustrating the tendency to stigmatise women. This stigma by design (or default), discourages women from talking about and discussing menstruation, attempting to render a fact of nature when in reality it is the social reaction to this fact that is the critical factor. Kiwis believe that the patriarchy is actually trying to remove females' ability to even speak about menstrual cycle. Further, it suggests women are silenced politically. The existence of this cartoon does raise the issue that not all Iranians share the stigma. The cartoonist himself is an Iranian political cartoonist, who lives abroad in order to be able to freely express himself in his art works. People like him, that think outside of the box, are in the vanguard compared to the common sense of the society.

All the Kiwi female participants understood that the caricature made tangible the presence of gender bias and patriarchal control. Among Kiwi female participants, KF2 offers an eloquent explanation of how she can relate to the cartoon's message in general,

It's interesting cause... I mean, obviously it's completely different ballpark but, still I can connect with to that. And, in some ways just the social shutting down of woman in terms of how easy it is for a woman to just be demeaned or their opinion to be put down; because, they're on their periods or they're not being rational. So, there's a little bit, a tiny bit that I can connect with in terms of that masculine control over women in terms of, via their period. I think that's an incredibly powerful image. And, I really like the idea of like that "voicelessness" that's projected in there.

This sole expression of empathy by itself, is an indicator for the fact that women in New Zealand are much less controlled by male dominance and the suppression is not as widespread as it is in Iran.

This raises the issue which needs to be highlighted, that this research is dealing with small, qualitative samples and therefore it cannot make sweeping generalisations

from the participants to the culture at large. Here and above it must be recognised that the data is suggestive rather than definitive.

The main patterns in Kiwis' discussions about the caricature focussed on the issue of how women's voices, discourse and ability to express themselves in Iran, has been suppressed by its association with the menstrual taboo. They focused specifically on Iran or similar kinds of societies. They see the image as an effective metaphor for the fact that women are hidden in a corner, do not exist, have no value, no worth; just because they bleed. It is as if the patriarchal society in Iran has so overwhelmed them that it is like they cannot even think about it. It further implies that women's bodies are objects of surveillance whose "dirty" secret is about to be publicly exposed. In other words, patriarchy requires that women internalise the denial of the facts of female biology and by so doing come to deny and devalue their own selves.



Figure 5.10 Menstruation in Iran's social media

Translation: How (can) those countries in which the president is woman function? Cause, the president will go through her period and will ruin the whole nation!

All Kiwi participants regardless of their gender, were against this representation of women and the implied disaster that will follow from a woman assuming a political role. Its intended joke Kiwis found rather offensive, stupid, upsetting and a smear on the principle of gender equality. Similarly, some female Iranians who were against the claim, raised the concept of man-period in order to expose the conspiracy around females' hormonal changes. A Kiwi female also brought up the concept of how men's testosterone level would spike and decrease more than women's estrogen level during their period, which scientifically makes men to be moodier than women overall. This counter-interpretation was made by all these female participants by

claiming that men get angry and hormonal too. Another Kiwi female's view was in line with the opinion of an Iranian female, who pointed out that men make such comments about women because they do not understand them.

In this section of the interview the participants' reactions varied according to their gender. Iranian female participants would stress marginalization, whereas the majority of Iranian male participants treated the message as a joke without serious political implications. In the Kiwi group there was not a distinguishable difference between female and male participants' opinions. They all agreed that the cartoon was either arrogant, sexist, unwise, sickening or offensive. Even if it is apparently intended to be a joke, at a deeper level it justified the lack of equal rights, normalising gender bigotry. Another pattern in most Kiwis' responses was that the cartoon specifically reminded them of the US electoral contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. They offered examples from some campaigns, interviews and ideas that had the same framework. For Kiwi participants, the example of Helen Clarke or Jacinda Ardern as Prime Ministers, highlights the sexism of Iranian culture. At the same time, such sexist ideas still have a tacit presence in "modern" societies like New Zealand and America – even if they are presented in the form of a joke. KF2 further describes the problem that, "I feel... we act like we are so much developed. And, that we have come so much further. But, if we still using that same rhetoric to try to gain power... I mean, it is not as bad of course, but it is still so bad." These types of comments indicate Kiwis' sensitivity over the subject matter, whether it happens in a third world country like Iran or first world countries such as America and New Zealand.

Part D: Transgender and Menstrual Cycle



Figure 5.11. Movie: Boys don't cry – 1999

There were expressions of empathy and sympathy for the subject amongst Kiwi participants too, although there was an obvious lack of information about the transgender issue though this was less pronounced than the information gap found in Iranian responses. None of the Kiwi participants related the transgender condition to sickness, being androgynous or to psychological and spiritual problems; again, quite unlike the most frequent response in Iranian interviews. The condition did not get compared to AIDS, drug addiction, cancer or leprosy; again, unlike the comments made by Iranian participants.

For the Kiwis, it was not a case of encountering the issue of transgender identity for the first time or of a lack of information about it. This response demonstrated a degree of transgender awareness in Kiwi communities. At the same time, it shows there is a huge lack of awareness, information and knowledge about it among the Iranian participants. Therefore, in contrast to Iranians who took the opportunity to

learn about the subject through asking questions while being interviewed and completely forgot about the menstruation context in that regard, the Kiwis acknowledged that the transgender situation that took place in the movie in relation to the menstrual cycle, was the main reason that the transgender representation was shown to them. Also, in contrast to the Iranians who did not know about the difference between sex and gender and were prone to consider the whole LGBTQI community as defined in terms of sexuality, for the Kiwi participants, being informed and educated about the LBGT community, meant that they went into details about the links between being transgender and having menstruation. They also brought up subtle in-depth primary topics such as: hiding sexuality, controlling matters, transphobia, ‘coming out of closet’, binary issues, sex vs gender distinctions. This was crucial and fundamental information that they had acquired through living in New Zealand and its culture. Based on the answers given, both Kiwis and Iranians do have empathy for them in general, but as Kiwis were better informed and had a more nuanced picture of the transgender community, they could correlate it with menstrual issues. The Iranians were very much into questioning the reality of transgender as it is unknown and new to them, because in Iran the issue has its own kind of taboos and barriers.

E-cards: Turning to the last part of the media representations:



Figure 5.12 Man-period e-card

A female Kiwi participant is the only one in the group that did not know about a man-period and had not heard of it till the e-card that was shown to them and was explained to her.

One of the first things that most of the participants acknowledge about a man-period, is that women are taking back symbolic power through this meme. Since women have long been depicted as hysterical and over-emotional during their period, the concept of a man period can be seen as a re-coding of gender stereotypes. Kiwi respondents readily understood the meme in this light. It was observed that the illustration craftily set the illustration in the Regency period in order to make a satirical point, recalling an era when gender stereotypes were strong, when men were 'men' and women were perceived as more feminine and delicate. KF3 observed that our ideas of gender have been historically variable, recalling that earrings originated as a men's decoration, powder and wigs were for men and men even used lipstick on certain circumstances. The image pokes fun at the traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity by having the man addressed by a concerned female

about the state of his period. Here again the difference between the Kiwi group and Iranians is that the former recognised complex layers of meaning in the image while the majority of Iranians took the meaning literally, as offering personal sympathy or puzzlement by the depiction. This difference is once again rooted in the presence or absence of a public discourse on gender equality and the awareness of the need for female empowerment, the lack of which is tangible in Iranian communities due to the dominance of patriarchal values and traditional religious practices.

Part E: Post Materials Encounter Questions

Overall, the Kiwi group appreciated the diversity of views on the menstrual cycle in the presented materials. This was, according to them, a good aspect which encouraged reflective consideration. For instance, KF1 observed that she had experienced first-hand some of the issues identified and so had people she knew. But what makes Kiwi responses different from the Iranian responses is that the latter were fascinated by how many different takes on the menstrual cycle representations are in the public domain. Kiwis were more inclined to appreciate and demand more inclusive and fair points of views. But since the concepts introduced to the Iranian participants were not very familiar, due to the lack of menstrual cycle representation, they tended to focus on the detail of a specific representation, even to the extent of trying to understand what it denoted without particular regard to its wider connotations. In this sense their puzzlement effected a depoliticization of the content. By contrast Kiwis were advantaged because whether through the media or in their personal lives they had encountered similar ideas. So, they were better equipped to weigh in on the issues represented. For most Iranians however, this was the first time they had encountered explicitly depicted menstrual subject matter in

the media or in their personal life. This made the media representations ‘otherworldly’ or ‘exotic’ to them; for instance, transgender and tampon topics.

In the case of Kiwi participants’ responses, their personal reactions and how they felt about them, they had no problem in interpreting the content and did not feel offended; as menstruation was a topic that they were open to discussing in real life. According to them it was a very good cross-section of images and clips that covered a good range of material. In addition, KF3 admitted she was annoyed by some of the content but that it was her personal or subjective reaction.

Kiwi participants did not feel that their attitudes changed after encountering the representations, as they had observed the topic via the media, before. Their prior attitudes were reinforced and they were more responsive to the nuances in the material. The 75-year-old Kiwi male who showed a comparatively more conservative viewpoint than the rest of the Kiwis, nevertheless felt he was developing a comparative perspective:

It is the same as they try to show a man going through prostate problems and they have a hose dribbling with water. Sort of men not being able to urinate. I suppose they are showing more of these advertisements now; trying to get across that it is okay, it is normal part of life.

Well, I look at it from a point of view of how sophisticated or how well they represent things to get the message across. In other words, if it is well done in media... then, full marks to them. Because, it is a difficult social topic. That is how I feel. I mean, 30-40 years ago I might have been blushing and quite embarrassed, but you know, maybe as you get older it does not matter so much!

His statement in regard to his change of attitude in time also had an echo in the age-related thoughts of a Kiwi woman who is in menopause and another one who claims to be close to it. Their recognition of a change in attitudes reflected a gradual change

and increasing openness in gender attitudes within New Zealand. In their experience in this day and age, it is a lot easier to talk about a topic like menstruation than it was in the past. They believe that for young women now, issues of sexuality and gender are more openly discussed than they were when they were younger. These life stories' reflections are indicators of a gradual openness over time about menstrual matters in Kiwi society, a phenomenon that is still emerging in the modern era and is still progressing in developed countries.

There is a feature of Kiwi and Iranian men's overall feeling and understanding about menstruation and menstruators that is the same. They feel men have to put up with women who go through that period, as it is a difficult time for women. The key difference is that Kiwi males emphasize the importance of social support for women while Iranian males focus on the impact on the private family and personal experiences outside of the public realm. KM1 from Kiwi group recalls his experience as:

As an employer, I was always conscious of women employees being through, going through that period, that situation. And, I was trying to be a caring employer. So, I knew that was a situation to watch out for. And, I think that is about all.

An elaboration of a similar situation by an Iranian male interviewee, consists of a totally different point of view towards women in working sphere, in which menstruation is a reason to mock them:

...in that time, especially before it, they're very angry, they should try not to set meetings at that time... must announce before it that, when is my time! To know when to have visits! For example, we have like, there is a manager in our company that is a woman. Then, suddenly the serviceman comes out says, don't go to the person, she's on period. Was saying not to go, her condition is devastated. I said, well, ok.

He earlier expressed his worries about his teenage daughter's bad (bond) experience with her own period or was compassionate toward his wife's menstruation issues. He is more concerned to find a personal and pragmatic solution to menstrual problems rather than considering them as a social or cultural problem.

Furthermore, an Iranian woman from the group of Iranians who live in New Zealand, compared both societies' working environments in relation to menstruation. Her comparison is another indicator of a relatively more tolerant attitude to menstruation found in the workplace or social relationships in New Zealand compared to Iran. Yet the respondent tended to view menstruation in sexist terms when applied to herself. This raises a more general concern in regard to comparison of menstrual tolerance in the two societies. That is, the menstrual acceptance could have a positive impact on migrants who come from social contexts such as Iran, where menstrual acceptance is rare. The absence of such a moderating effect in the Iranian migrant responses, suggests that attitude change may need more time, attention and effort. On the other hand, long term Iranian migrants did not sign up to participate in the research. Historically though, there are not likely to be many long term Iranian migrants in New Zealand and the majority of them are refugees who may have reservations about taking part in a research concerning gender studies. In particular, this is true of Iran, which is ruled by a religious-based regime.

In total, most of the Iranian participants' feelings and understanding of menstruation revolves around its physical and personal dimensions. The Kiwi participants on the other hand put it all into a broader perspective, as a multidimensional biological phenomenon that is socially constructed.

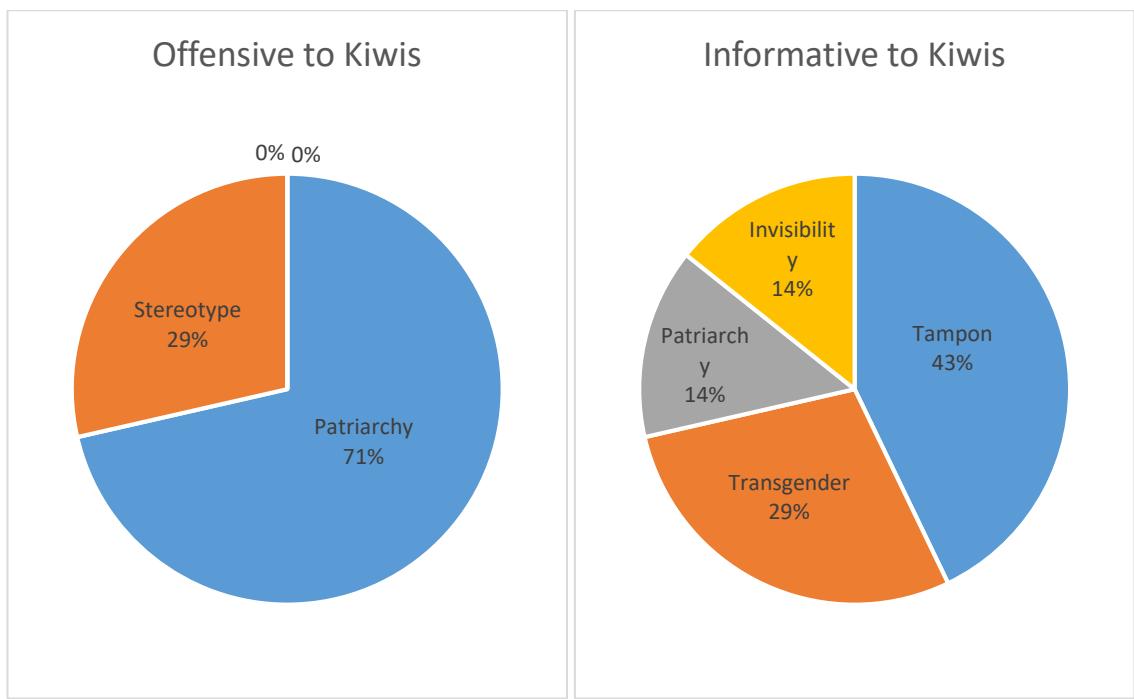


Figure 5.13 Most offensive and informative materials to Kiwis

Kiwis were most offended by the patriarchal content of Iranian materials. By contrast, Iranians located in New Zealand and Iran, were more offended and hurt or upset, by the representation of menstruation as a transgender issue. Apparently, each community found that the subject is less represented in their society as most offensive, compared to the ones that have a wider presence among their communities. As for Kiwi participants, the two patriarchal dominated materials from Iran, with sexism and marginalization content, had the greatest impact, partly because it added to their existing understanding of what it is like for women in Iran's patriarchal culture. Kiwi participants, however lacked insight into the full impact of religious belief as an endorsement of patriarchy, given that they lived in a predominantly secular society. In short, they had an outsider perspective. In another sense so did the Iranian participants in relation to the 'foreign' materials they found most offensive. As KF3 of the Kiwi group of participants puts it, "...it's stuff I'd want

to know. But, there's no other way of finding out about them without being a fly on the wall!"

Iranians and Kiwis were in agreement about the most informative of the representations, the 'Keeping up with the Kardashians' reality show and its emphasis on menarche education, although for different reasons. Iranians predominantly picked it because it was their first encounter with an actual tampon and its function. While it was not the Kiwi participants' first time to be exposed to a tampon, they also chose it, as it has practical content along with demonstration.

In conclusion, one of the things that really is very noticeable about this research data is that, most of the Iranian women do not expect to carry on their day-to-day routines during their period. They seem to view their period as an interruption to their ordinary lives. It disables them from full participation in their lives for that time of the month. Ironically this is the way the menstrual taboo and purdah operates, and the women expect the men to support their "retreat", no matter what the circumstances are. This expectation does not only apply to full time jobs but is mainly focused on day to day routines. So ironically this practice endorses the male view that women are somehow socially limited and are closer to nature than men are and that this accounts for the necessity of the restrictions placed on women in their professional and day-to day-lives. This pattern is totally missing in the Kiwi part of the interviews. As a matter of fact, some Kiwis explicitly voiced criticism of how many of the menstrual cycle depictions, reinforced gender stereotypes. These Kiwis also described their frustration over the fact that female anger was represented as an irrational and emotional response brought on by menstruation rather than as a valid response to a particular situation. This means that compliance and cooperativeness

is expected in any circumstance as a default assumption. What annoyed these Kiwi participants, is the conflation of emotions or reactions that any human being would experience with hormonal reactions. This says in effect that the reactions and emotions are not important in themselves but are mere venting. For example, KF2 from Kiwi group who picked the image advertisement, in which the woman on her menstrual cycle is depicted as ‘martial art persona’ as the most offensive to her out of all the materials, expressed her intuition accordingly:

... it makes it sound like, ‘Oh! You know! When a woman is on her period, it’s up to the man to try to fix this as much as he can. So, he can have an OK existence for those 5 to 7 days or whatever! And, I just found that really gross. So, that was the image that would’ve been put up there that young girls and young women will be seeing in terms of how people expect they are going to behave while on their period!

Those participants thought this way because such stereotypical perceptions are so devaluing of one thing that a woman actually goes through in her lifetime. Moreover, the stereotypes make it seem like a female on her period is suffering from a medical condition or a kind of emotional disease, when actually it is nothing like that. The life cycle from menarche to menopause is when a woman is fertile and capable of making a highly productive contribution. For Iranian women particularly but not exclusively, the discourse of patriarchy and the rhetoric of the “curse”, turns this time of high importance for the reproduction of society, into an affliction and illness, rather than just something that happens naturally. Thereby it makes the very essence of being a woman disempowering by her own fertility cycle. Equally, menopause – another natural, biological event – is seen as yet another kind of illness. As noted, Iranian women explicitly addressed menopause as a threat to their heterosexual relationships, marriage, family, status and womanhood.

But again, this dual pattern of interpreting the menstrual cycle as a kind of illness and social disability, is absent in the Kiwi interviews. Kiwi women see menopause as the last part of the cycle, which needs to be embraced. None of the Kiwi participants linked menopause with an unsuccessful and unhappy life or a threat to a relationship, a common perception amongst Iranians. In Kiwi cases though, menopause is regarded as a natural feature of female biology that requires no medical fix.

In addition, fertility and consequently childbirth, is a conventional way of securing a continuous marital status in Iran, especially for dependent females. It is not just that fertility is under the control of women or presumably in their favour. Rather, birth control can be seen as controlled by men in their interest, particularly since those policies in Iran are strictly set and closely watched by governmental bodies, in support of patriarchal and religious principles. Iranian law gives the custody of children to their fathers and not to their mothers, except in cases where it is proved that the father is addicted, absent or other reasons that prove he is not competent to raise them. Furthermore, in Iran the majority of women are not employed in the formal economy, so their earnings do not usually play a huge role in families, though their contribution to the domestic economy through labour in kind does. They are financially dependent on men who are considered as breadwinners and the heads of the families who make all the key decisions. On the other hand, the only legal way to have a sexual relationship under the religious constitution of Iran, is either through marriage or a temporary marriage. Other relationships than these are considered against the Islamic law and would bear severe punishment, including stoning in case of adultery. Therefore, becoming married and having children in many cases can be seen as a strategy for independence and survival in a male dominated society. Or for

men by contrast, marriage constitutes an opportunity to have social standing and a means of perpetuating a family name and lineage. This old fashioned system means that men have the role of the breadwinner with the role of women to serve them sexually, domestically and provide them with children. This arrangement could be a partnership, but often it turns out to be a form of dependency and servitude.

When the majority of women in a society are financially insecure and dependent on men and when sexual relations and childbearing out of wedlock is illegal, these conditions play a huge part in the formation of attitudes toward the menstrual cycle.

That is why for Iranian women it is hard to accept menopause, because, they see it as the point through which they will lose not only their womanhood but also their social position. This was why terms such as fertility, beauty, youth, sex appeal were used frequently by Iranian female participants and why they would feel ‘useless’ with menopause. Considering that these feelings of “uselessness” were expressed alike by independent and dependent Iranian women, shows how deeply patriarchal values and ideals affect their mindset and keep them concerned about how men view their sexuality, attractiveness and bodily functions. The view of women as being less than men is not a matter of individual male perception, but the normalised, institutionalised mindset toward women embedded in legislation and in public opinion as represented in the media.

This menopausal bias, expressing a fundamental hatred and fear of it is, projecting the idea that women suffer for being women and are depicted as invalids, had no place in the Kiwi women’s discussions. For these participants, the key issue is not about women being happier or better when they have their period or are going through menopause, but rather about the enormous impact the menstrual bias can

have on their lives. In relation to the menstrual cycle and its impact, the majority of Kiwi women have an independent legal status. Moreover, there are social welfare schemes that would support jobless citizens which do not exist in a third world society like Iran. In New Zealand, public opinion, media representations and the law support gender equality and female empowerment. Children's rights are not exclusively tied to their fathers, the status of women is not exclusively defined by their marital status, people are not legally restricted to marry in order to have sexual relations. These are all factors that affect how women see themselves, their bodies and their functions. In a modern and secular society like New Zealand, females do not necessarily need to have children in order to be socially and personally secure. For these sociological and cultural reasons, Kiwi women do not see menopause as a biological function that takes away their femininity. They consider the menstrual cycle as a chain from menarche and including menopause. By contrast, Iranian women do not tend to acknowledge menopause as a part of a natural cycle. They essentially consider it as the phase that takes away the 'trophies' attached to menstruation. Moreover, it does not depend on whether a 'male' or 'female' applies and executes the double standard, because this standard is shared across the gender divide. In Iran, written and unwritten rules governing gender related matters, favour males. But ultimately, they would have no force if they were not capped and reinforced by females.

A pattern emerges through many of the Iranians' interviews in this research. It is basically, that being a woman is more difficult than being a man in terms of bodily functions and their relation to social life. Women either dislike their menstrual cycle or, like it only before menopause. Women also claim they are happy with their

gender, but they exclude menopause from their gender identity, although this biological process is a unique, vital component of their gender. It can be concluded that the majority of females in Iran are not 100% satisfied and not happy with their gender. Also, many of those who claim satisfaction, set boundaries and restrictive conditions on the possibility of happiness.

For the Kiwi group by contrast, there was a fundamental disapproval of stereotypical menstrual representations in media, in part because in order to capture the viewers' attention, they have become increasingly exaggerated and driven by hyperbole. The Kiwi group were sceptical, for example, of the realism of the representation of early menopause as shown in *Desperate Housewives*. It is not clear that all viewers would be so sceptical. Rather they are likely to accept it as a reliable means of understanding their own experience and the experience of others.

In sum, Kiwi participants were fortunate to have a wide exposure to menstrual product advertising, fictional and documentary texts and public information that explored menstruation. Compared to their Iranian counterparts, they were "savvy" spectators, capable of exercising a distancing reading. This background and reading competence are missing from Iranian experience. It is difficult when you have only got a snapshot, to have anything more than a snapshot reaction to it. Even Iranians who live in New Zealand, revealed very similar or even identical patterns to Iranians who live in Iran. None of them were primarily educated in New Zealand or received sexual awareness education. By the time they emigrated to New Zealand, their core values were shaped by years in Iran. Additionally, as immigrants, they have been very busy with settling down and surviving in a totally different environment, so that seeking information about sex values and morality would have a lower priority than

having a focus on adjusting to the new country and its system. Thus, Kiwis compared to Iranians viewed and regarded the materials along with their concepts, with scepticism and did not interpret them literally. But, at the same time they believed menstruation it is a fact of life and it is not something that any of us should be afraid to discuss or experience.

Finally, based on all the participants' responses, there is some truth in all of the media representations of the menstrual cycle. But there is also a lot of exaggeration and stereotyping too. You could see about three to four perspectives in each of the materials and what was funny and why it was funny. If you did not have the relevant cultural background, you might miss the humour, so that something satirising sexism might be seen as a literal statement of how things are, rather than how they should not be.

Chapter 6

Findings of the Study

This section sets out to triangulate the data collected from the three groups of semi structured interviews. The outcome of the study will be explained through three core dimensions: 1) ‘personal attitude’, 2) ‘third world and first world comparisons’ and 3)the role of the media.

6.1 In Relation to Personal Attitudes

In relation to personal attitudes from both Iranian and Kiwis’ interviews, there are cultural differences in how menstrual representations are perceived and interpreted. According to the participants’ responses, the social context in which the menstrual cycle is located has an important impact on how it is experienced and the reactions to it. Accordingly, the meaning and importance of the experience changes from one place to another. That said, there are a few common feelings among Iranian and Kiwi females which centre on factors such as mood swings and menstrual-related pain. These reported feelings are limited to the menstrual cycle and do not cover menopause. Basically, the similarity ends as the topic of menstruation shifts to the topic of menopause, at which point the two cultures manifested almost totally different points of view.

For Iranian women menstruation has a dual aspect. While it is an enduring source of inconvenience and discomfort, it is also a marker of desirable qualities such as fertility, youth, energy, beauty, sex appeal and drive. Such qualities make it a sign of female health and for this reason is a positive contribution to forming or sustaining

heterosexual relationships and feeling secure in terms of their feminine attributes and identities. Since, menstruation connotes natural health for Iranian women, its cessation or menopause is considered ‘not healthy’ and is seen as a threat to their identity, femininity and ultimately to their chances of sustaining or finding a heterosexual relationship. By contrast, Kiwi women did not see menopause negatively, compared to the menstrual cycle. They accept it as the last part of a natural cycle and unlike the Iranian female participants, did not look for options to suppress menopause. In short, they did not see it as a fundamental threat to their femininity.

Another relevant difference that emerged, was that Kiwi men and women participants, unlike their Iranian counterparts, do not believe that menopause necessarily leads to declining libido, nor they do see it as a sickness. It is part of a natural ageing process. They believe declining libido affects both men and women and requires managing changes in their sex lives. Yet they can understand that women who want to have offspring may regret the end of their fertility. Besides, there is the benefit of sex without the risk of pregnancy, which the Iranian females predominantly failed to emphasize, since they valued the chance to become pregnant.

Based on the paper ‘An Existential Function of literal Self-Objectification Among Women’ by Morris et al., the Iranian data on attitudes to menstruation is in line with objectification of women. In their study, American women wanted to keep their periods secret but nonetheless hoped to stretch their menstruating years out for as long as possible. This contradictory attitude arose because they viewed menstruation as a sign of a sexually active life style, which was natural. The males in the study

revealed a tendency to perceive women as less likeable and less approachable, during their period.

In a controlled experiment, we explored the role that women's "nature" plays in societal attitudes and behaviours toward them. Specifically, we hypothesized that being reminded of a woman's menstrual status would lead both men and women to evaluate her competence less favourably, like her less, and physically distance themselves from her compared to when they were reminded of some aspect of her femininity that is not tied to nature. We also hypothesized that the menstrual status prime would lead to greater objectification of women in general. (Roberts et al., 2002, p.132)

In relation to menopause, the data is in accordance with Terror Management theory, which basically claims that people are inclined to distance themselves from reminders of their mortality. Following the results reported by Roberts et al. , "reminders of women's menstrual status" have deep effects on "interpersonal perceptions and behaviour", which lead to general negative attitudes towards menstruation and menstrual women. The findings of this study are compatible with the Iranians' data. Among the Iranians' interviews there are examples of finding menstrual woman "less competent and likeable", keeping "distance from her", "negative judgement of women" based on their menstrual status and "objectification of women in general".

Deficiency of information, knowledge and education and its social and personal consequences, was noticeable among Iranians on the menstrual cycle. However, these kinds of issues and anxieties did not emerge in the Kiwi dataset. This suggests that having a systematic menstrual education, representations of the menstrual cycle in media and the absence of control and censorship applied by authorities, have a beneficial impact on attitudes. The basic issues raised by the media stimuli, went smoothly for Kiwis, while the same materials perturbed and shook up Iranians.

Lack of information and reliance on folklore and word of mouth information, both of which are not based on scientific knowledge, is part of the reason why Iranian females do not have positive attitudes towards menopause, which contrasts with Kiwi females' general acceptance of menopause as a fact of life. This lack of information was also common among Iranian females in regard to menarche. Several Iranian female participants disclosed their own experience of not knowing and not having been told about menstruation. Consequently, when it occurred, it was a frightening and disturbing entrée to womanhood. Kiwi female participants were better prepared through word of mouth and systematic sex education at school. Therefore, lack of knowledge or being misled by fiction rather than facts, were key reasons why women in Iran would have negative views about menopause and about menstruation generally.

A major issue that was raised by many female Iranian participants was their belief that menopause naturally would mean the end of sexual intercourse. This in turn was likely to threaten their relationships with their husbands, or if single would mean they would be unable to find a partner, because menopause would make them sexually 'unusable'. Such apprehensions were missing in Kiwi females' interviews. They recognised that women who still wanted to have children would be affected by menopause, but none were as worried as Iranian females, that menopause would mean that they would be unable to fulfil their own and their partners' sexual needs.

These findings were consistent with findings of three projects undertaken from a health and medical framework in different cities of Iran: 'The experience of puberty in Iranian adolescent girls: a qualitative content analysis' in Sari (Golchin, Z. Hamzehgardeshi, Fakhri & L. Hamzehgardeshi, 2012), 'Practice of Iranian

Adolescent Girls Regarding Puberty and Menstrual Hygiene and its Predictors, 2013' in Tabriz (Mohammad-Alizadeh et al., 2014) and 'Study of Menstrual Attitudes and Knowledge among Postmenarcheal Students, in Urmia, North West of Iran' in Urmia (Rabiepoor, Valizadeh & Barjasteh, 2017). These studies underscored the effects of a lack of sexual health education on the adolescent self-image and self-esteem.

The findings from the previous studies confirm that for most Iranian adolescent girls, menarche is an experience fraught with difficulties and negative feelings. Most of them needed "education regarding how to address issues surrounding puberty. The society, families and the adolescents themselves, are responsible for working together to create an atmosphere in which correct information on puberty and the associated issues is readily accessible." (Golchin et al., 2012, p.7)

Such results underscore the need for teenage girls to have correct information about menarche and menstrual hygiene. Hence, it is essential to provide education for adolescents. "Mothers need to be equipped with the correct information and communication skills to help their adolescent daughters to get ready for this important physiological event in their life." (Mohammad-Alizadeh et al., 2014, p.199)

They continue that, "This can be achieved through special educational programs in school curriculum, along with the involvement of parents, particularly mothers."

Such studies recognised the important association between "attitudes" and "knowledge" in the psychological wellbeing of pubescent girls. They noted that the chief sources from which young girls acquired menstrual information were their mothers and "teachers" of religion and health science. It is vital that teenage students and their mothers receive accurate information about menstruation, how it

affects their bodies, the nature of the cycle in its physiological and psychological aspects. The cost of such interventions should be measured against the immense social and psychological benefits. In the meantime, it is suggested that tentative revisions be considered, containing “rich educational content” and its consequences on the attitude of pubescent girls. “It is necessary to increase the knowledge of adolescents in addition to mothers’ education and other training facilities, and if possible health services-consulting for adolescents should be used in compliance with specific cultural sensitivities.” (Rabiepoor et al., 2017, p.4999) The “cultural sensitivities” referred to, relate to the religious, patriarchal and traditional values found in Iranian culture. Below are some examples of the impact of patriarchy and religion on research in this area:

Most participants expressed their need for having faith while undergoing pubescent experiences. Some girls stated that they were unaware of religious rules at the time of menstruation because they did not pay enough attention when those were taught by their teachers. However, now they feel they needed to know more about them. A participant 12 years old admitted this: “I don’t know how or when I wash my body after bleeding or when I am allowed to enter the mosque and perform daily prayers.”

Most adolescents in this study reported that they knew very little about the implications of Islamic and Sharia rules on ritual washing, praying and fasting after puberty and during menstruation. However, after their first experience of menstruation they felt they needed to know more about them.

It should be noted that knowledge should not be restricted to the mechanisms of puberty, menstruation and natural behaviour, but also should be accompanied with deep understanding of their attitude and physical changes and its relation to sexual issues, reproductive health, contraceptive methods and marriage health. (Golchin et al., 2012)

A previous study in Mazandaran, Iran showed that although almost 76% of students knew the correct answers to questions about menstruation and Sharia practices, only 56% knew the correct

method of ablution during the menstrual period. (Abdolahi F, Shaaban KB, Khani S, 2004 as cited in Golchin et al., 2012)

A study in Isfahan, Iran reported that implications of Sharia rules with regard to pubertal changes comprise an important entity. (Boroumand AR K, Abedi M, Hasanzadeh A, 2002, as cited in Golchin et al., 2012)

Similar factors are found in relation to the topic of menarche. For example, below is a detailed description of how women can present themselves in public in Iran and the apparel by which they are accepted to have social activities or presence,

There are at present only two countries that mandate women to be covered—Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iranian women and men must maintain modest dress in the workplace. Women's hair is considered erotic by Iranians and so covering hair as well as their female form is required. This prevents women from careers in physically active professions in a country where female equality in education is emphasized. For many centuries Iranian women wore the chador—a semi-circular piece of dark cloth wrapped about the body and head and gathered at the chin. It permits the woman to wear anything she wants underneath, but it is restricting because it must be held with one hand. Women have often used their teeth to hold the garment together. Since the Iranian revolution, dress has changed to long dress with long opaque stockings, a long-sleeved coat, and head scarf. This again has evolved into a thin shoulder-to-ankle smock or "manto" after the French "manteau." In Iran, the women look at it as a work uniform and wear jeans or other Western dress underneath. However, Iran has recently tightened controls on the Islamic women's dress code. Robes deemed too revealing are banned. Shops have been stopped from producing and selling "immoral coats" that are body clinging and too short. Women must return to the loose-fitting, ankle-length clothes and cover their hair and neck with scarves. Apparently, Iran has periodic crackdowns after complaints by conservatives that women are flouting the dress code (Anatomy of a Coverup, 2003, Daily News, as cited in Islam and woman: Where tradition meets modernity, Sechzer, 2004, p.271).

As can be seen, the nature of Islamic law that directly affects day to day rules and personal/social routines in Iran, can be very limiting and restricting for women, especially, because they predominantly emphasize a male point of view and are in accordance with patriarchy.

Another issue that led to a widespread fear of menopause among Iranian women is the concept of ‘end of life’ and the despair that comes to them with menopause or even with thinking about having to deal with menopause in future. It needs to be emphasized though, that male and female Iranians have the same negative views about menopause as a sign of ageing and the loss of women’s social usefulness – as breeders and sexual partners. Again, this feature is completely missing in the Kiwi data. This attitude is correlated with the fact that a happy, fruitful and fulfilling life for women in Iran, is strongly associated with a successful marriage. Personal achievements, for which there are limited opportunities, do not have a paramount importance for the majority of Iranian women in general. They view their greatest personal achievement as being married. By contrast, Kiwis did not see marriage as the only ingredient of a fulfilling life and they did not consider that menopause would spell an end to the many things they wished to achieve. Moreover, for Kiwis in contrast to Iranians, social and personal success and accomplishments have the same importance for females and males and Kiwi females have nearly as high a degree of social participation as men.

These differences obviously arise from the social and cultural differences between the two countries. For example, in a country like Iran, there are certain university degrees, jobs and social roles that are restricted to males. Since females cannot pursue these opportunities by the rule of law, naturally they accept the idea that males are the main players in social and cultural life. This passivity and restriction to the role of housekeeper and motherhood, marginalises females as a consequence. But by contrast in a country such as New Zealand where many women have been empowered and are socially supported and offered more of the same opportunities

as men, social usefulness is not seen as limited to motherhood and the domestic sphere. So, Iranian women placed in a marginalised status will be encouraged to attach themselves to men who are the breadwinners and possessors of power and money. Even in the case where men are poor and powerless, their wives/female partners are dependent on them having the status of being married or at least in a relationship; a reality reinforced by the stigma attached to being divorced or single. These are the social realities that encourage Iranian women and women in comparable positions in other traditional societies, to associate the menstrual cycle, a natural aspect of their bodies, with a loss of social status, as well as economic support and protection. On the other hand, for the independent women of New Zealand, social wellbeing is not exclusively defined by marital status, therefore menopause is not a potential social or personal threat which they must guard against.

It is one of the remarkable findings of this research, that the Iranian women do not expect to just be able to carry on: they almost seem to expect that having their period is going to interrupt their ordinary lives. Whereas in the Kiwis' interviews, the key attitude is that menstruation should be managed so that females can continue to swim or run. The Iranian perspective hyper-feminises menstruation and so disables them from full participation in their lives, for that time of the month. And they almost expect it to be like this and they expect the men to see it this way too. By contrast, Kiwi women regard menstruation as a private matter and wish to avoid becoming an object of pity because of what is a natural occurrence and part of every woman's experience. The menstrual cycle should be managed so that it does not interfere with normal life. So the dread of menstruation is not a feature of Kiwi females' world view and they did not express such sentiments.

The Iranian men exhibit the same broad attitudes as Iranian females but construe menstruation as an affirmation of their biological and social superiority, seeing it as a woman's affliction that makes females not as socially useful as the men are. The pattern of Iranian females' vulnerability to periods and the opposite pattern of having control over periods among Kiwi females, may be due to the fact that Kiwis have more menstrual products to manage periods – for example tampons are banned in Iran. The connection between cultural background and common attitudes and feelings evident across the data, indicates that Iranian females, regardless of the severity of the period, physically limit themselves during it. If all Iranian females' friends and their colleagues and their mothers and everybody else does so, why would they be different? Even if they do not have a tummy ache or feel bad, they are likely to behave as though they are fine; because they would not want to stand out. So the very essence of being a woman in Iran is to be disempowered by one's own fertility cycle. A further disempowerment stems from the fact that Iranian society gives men the power over birth control, expecting women to produce heirs which by law belong to the father and not the mother as a partner. This means that males have reproductive rights over a woman's body as well, in exchange for economic support, their wives produce sons and many children.

The need to have children has preoccupied the minds of Middle Eastern women for centuries since the establishment of Islam. Failure to bear sons often resulted in divorce and a return to a woman's parental home, or in her husband's marriage to another wife through the institution of polygamy. The pain of childlessness held devastating economic and social meaning for Muslim women... Scholars have informed us that before Islam, lineage and inheritance could pass through the mother's line in some tribes, and correspondingly, the role of the individual father may have been less important. Fertility was necessary for the survival of the tribal and clan units, and the gods and goddesses were thought to deliver children to the favoured. (Zuhur, 1992, p.1726)

Social roles reliant on gender, are probably influenced by characteristics and features of all societies (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Additionally, most psychologists and sociologists believe that the chosen social role replicates biological restrictions and differences, sexual experiences and interests (Eagly, 1987, pp.7-9). Therefore, Islam has an enormous impact on Iranian women's role in society, leading them to perform cost-benefit analysis of the effects of their menstrual cycle as a determinative factor for their social role or status.

Against this patriarchal setting, Kiwi females seem to get along with menstruation better, both personally and socially. Moreover, considering female participants demographically, a minority of Iranian female participants had careers, while all the Kiwi females did. Evidence of such marginalisation and limitation placed on females who are not very active socially and do not have professional responsibilities, is a really thought-provoking matter. Iranian women are deemed as not economically productive, so they are not recognised as making a huge contribution in society, despite their role as mothers and homemakers. It is not a question of women being happier or better when they are working in a paid job than when they are doing unpaid domestic labour, but rather that they should have the choice. Fewer paid employment opportunities – most of which are reserved for males - have an enormous impact on the quality of women's lives and life chances. In case of this study, women in Iran expect to be looked after when they are considered to be frail, for instance during menstruation. But this concept of care is escalated, generalized and affects all aspects of their lives and amounts to a process of social and personal control by men.

On the other hand, Kiwi females did not feel that the menstrual cycle defined them, and they did not feel defined by their fertility cycle nor were they ashamed or fearful of their periods becoming known. The only drawback they saw was the end of fertility for those who still wanted to get pregnant, especially those who were still childless. Iranian women thought if they cannot produce a child, their value to a man is severely reduced. By contrast, Kiwi females did not see their bodies and the birth potential as central to their self-worth or identity. So, the ‘self’ exists as a complete thing and the body is part of it but not all of it.

6.2 In Relation to Gender

In relation to males' and females' thoughts and beliefs about the menstrual cycle, they tend to be the same within each sample. For instance, in terms of menopause, both Iranian men and women acknowledge it as a negative aspect of aging. It is unwelcome and hardly considered to be a natural and normal part of the menstrual cycle that must be accepted, especially by women. Kiwi men and women consider menopause in terms of the context in which it is interpreted, depending on factors such as individual personality, cultural background and their relationship status. Kiwis argue that menopause is a natural aspect of femininity compared to the Iranian participants and Kiwis welcome menopause without seeing it as an end to life.

Overall, within each country there is not a striking difference between female and male attitudes. It means that, for instance, Kiwis females and males demonstrated the same attitudes and reactions as did Iranian females and males, albeit from a different perspectives. Therefore, while both the men and women of each country have relatively similar attitudes toward the subject matter, these attitudes were

diametrically opposed when compared cross-culturally. Another factor that affected the dataset is that, in both countries, female participants generally believed that males do not have a sound understanding of the menstrual cycle and its aspects, while the participating males in the interviews did not have a markedly different mindset than the females. The large number of males who declined to participate, suggests the possibility that they viewed the topic as something to be avoided or controversial. Besides, there were a number of Kiwis – men and women - who initially showed interest in participating, but after reading the Information sheet, either never showed up, nor got in contact or finally declined to take part. In general, it is at least a possibility that some Kiwis are just as prejudiced as traditional Iranians but are more adept at hiding this because they know it is not politically correct. This means even some of the respondents may have biased and intolerant approaches but not necessarily expressed it. It could be due to knowing the accepted legitimate judgment relevant to women and menstrual issues, as a ‘women's matter’ in their society and civil law which emphasizes gender equality, rights and empowerment. If this is the case, then the apparent agreement between male and female participants in both groups may be an artificial result.

The possibility of an unspoken bias against menstruation in the case of “liberated” Kiwis cannot be definitively ruled out. There is inferential support to the idea of a submerged bias found in research done in Australia which is a liberal Western society too. This research showed that a menstrual stigma/taboo exists in liberal and modern countries too,

...knowledge to be limited, with evidence of incorrect and negative myths about menstruation. Attitudes to menstruation were characterized by embarrassment, discomfort, and ambivalence

about growing up... along with shame and anxiety, linked periods with incapacity or illness, and expressed the norm of periods as events which require the use of deception and denial as coping strategies. Mature problem-solving approaches to the hypothetical situations in the stories were rare. (Moore, 1995)

Nevertheless, the research was conducted over 23 years ago and studied pubescent girls who at the time were not provided with systematic sex education. It cannot be inevitably concluded, that similar results obtain today, where sex education is, if not universal, is at least widespread. The conclusion of this article remains pertinent: "Certainly, the results of this study suggest that early education about the bodily changes of puberty is in order, particularly education which attacks the negative myths and stereotypes surrounding menarche." (p.103)

Based on the present study, males and females of each culture displayed common patterns of response that were different to the ones in the other culture. Consequently, applied values of each society, are performed as the main variables on the society people's menstrual perspectives and orientations.

Even so, the only chief distinguishably different pattern among the sexes in each country's groups, was the detail in which women would elaborate menstrual related issues, as the bearers of menstrual experiences. By contrast, men's explanatory approaches in both the Iranian and New Zealand samples, would be naturally general and abstract, relying on stereotypes and purportedly telling examples. Iranians in New Zealand and at home evidenced very few liberating ideas. Where empowering/positive thoughts occurred, they came from Iranian females and not males, which by itself may be an indicator of the issue that Iranian females are more open to the idea of women's liberation than Iranian males.

6.3 In Relation to Media and the Societal Context

The total effect of the selected stimulus set are outlined below:

- The mix of media and content had an impact on the way the participants responded. The static images compared to the video files did not engage them as much and the contents that were less known to them were more interesting for them. Some of them even declared that they wanted to know more about the subject matter or would do some research in that regard afterwards.
- And the sequencing of stimuli had an effect in that some of the responses later in the series were different from initial responses. It must be noted that this pattern was found among Iranian participants.
- The mode of the representation, humorous, satirical had an impact. Kiwi participants criticized the funny sexist remarks or representations while Iranians laughed at most of them or found them funny or as a laughable joke.
- There were another noticeable difference that could be attributed to media specificity, that Iranians predominantly affirmed the messages and representations while Kiwis debated the ones that they found sexist or controversial.

Peter Hartley (1999) believes that when the media portray the interpersonal relationships of other people such as strangers or celebrities, audiences are led/encouraged to decode the messages in line with that media representation.

Hartley gives an example in his book of the talk show in the USA, which often attempts to surprise or shock participants, in order to reveal their innermost feelings.

This strategy is based on a search for authenticity behind biased or pre-constructed conscious thought and the efforts of the media to set the agenda for public discourse and establish or set norms concerning what can be publicly acknowledged and discussed. Amy Reynolds and Maxwell McCombs' (2002) theory of the agenda-setting function of mass media is relevant here. The agenda-setting refers to the

media's impact on audience's understandings and attitudes towards specific topics and issues. Media (whether audio and video, such as radio and television, or writing, such as newspapers and Internet sites), tend to focus on some events and indicate the order of importance of the events depicted. The media, of course, cannot impose what audiences "think" about particular issues but they can determine what audiences think about, what relates to what and what is important. In this view, public opinion is being engineered by a process of highlighting and reinforcing specific issues through not paying attention to other issues and matters that may be of importance. One way that people are affected by popular media, is in the portrayal of interpersonal communication. In relation to the menstrual cycle, the popular media can guide an audience to accept, or at least not totally reject, a particular view of menstruation as personal rather than political or social. Within this ranking, largely at the lower margins of visibility, the various aspects of the menstrual cycle will be defined as important or unimportant in relation to hetero-normative values and norms of behaviour.

In sum, media representations and symbols affect how audiences understand and value the menstrual cycle as a social phenomenon. In general terms two factors are key: First, the background of the audience such as gender, culture, ethnic, age, are important. Second, the aesthetics of the medium is important in terms of its impact on audience perception/attitudes. For example, the impact of a movie depends on: how it is shot and framed, the type of music in the movie, how the director guides the scenarios, the dramatic context and how an actor or actress shows his/her feelings by his/her acting. As the clip from the television series "Desperate Housewives" revealed, the meaning of menopause depends on the participants'

cultural and social backgrounds. Iranian participants who do not encounter representations of the menstrual cycle are prone to accept media coverage as factually valid and authoritative. But Kiwi participants were much more likely to criticise the depiction as being unfair and biased in relation to their conception of gender equality.

Surprisingly, Iranians who live in New Zealand tend to share the same views and rhetorical stance of Iranians in Iran. There was not a noticeable or widespread difference in the Iranian data, nor was there a common or relevant parallel to the Kiwi responses. For Iranian participants, their generally passive acceptance of the prevailing representations of the menstrual cycle, can be seen as an indicator of the internalisation of the traditional values of their culture of origin, which their relocation in New Zealand has not substantially changed. For future studies and with a suitable research method, it would be interesting to consider whether other values have changed, For example, the menstrual stigma may be regarded as a personal matter compared to the right to free speech

The Kiwi data are in line with Corinna's (2011) and Erchull's (2013) findings, which found that media depictions of the menstrual cycle are predominantly set in a comedy context which emphasizes the relative unimportance of the phenomenon. Kiwi responses recognised this factor and related it to stigmatisation by an over-idealised view of womanhood, which advertised products that claimed to rescue women from the deleterious effects of menstruation. Criticisms and the questioning of portrayals of menstruation, are missing in Iranians' dataset. This is understandable since the majority of people from such a patriarchal society and culture have not been introduced to notions of gender equality and as a result have negative attitudes

toward feminism in general. The Iranian reactions were more about lack of menstrual education and representations in Iran, for which their reactions of shock, surprise, fascination, limited them to the surface of the materials presented.

According to researchers who are mentioned in Chapter two such as Bobel and Kissling (2011) “Shared cultural concepts and contexts give meaning to representation.” The meanings that observers derive from menstrual cycle representations, depend not solely on the images themselves but from the feelings that operate within a specific context of reception. If two persons of the same sex have the same menstrual experience, in the same duration and conditions but in different places and environments, the meaning that is created by them can be totally different. In cultures like Eastern traditional ones, the meaning of the menstrual cycle is decoded based on the norms of male dominance and will give different meanings to the menstrual cycle to those derived in the Western modern world. This was apparent when participants mentioned factors such as religious commitment and family values as important aspects of how they read images and texts. The bipolarity of Iranian and Kiwi attitudes, demonstrates that meanings given to menstrual cycle, change from place to place, based on social and cultural factors.

Iranian women’s success is always contingent on the husband’s and their own sense of personhood is defined by it. They are valid persons because they are attached by this invisible cord to not just to a man, but to a marital relationship. It is almost as if for females the umbilical cord to which they were attached at birth is destined to be replaced by the marital relationship as a second invisible umbilical cord. The marital relationship for females is more important than their right to be the kinds of people

they would wish to be. They may in fact be married to somebody who is uncaring, unloving, a bully, a beast, horrible, but they are still attached to the marriage.

There is the possibility of divorce under strict patriarchal legal rules but the laws are reinforced by the stigma attached to divorce in Islam. Nevertheless, with the development of more educated, modern young generations in Iran, statistics show that there has been a rise of divorce in recent years. By itself, this may be seen as indicating that in the past, marriages would continue regardless of their success or failure. Still the stigma around divorce persists, despite generational changes.

Another factor relates to a gendered distribution of labour force participation. According to The World Bank labour force participation rate, the percentages of the female population aged 15 and over in Iran and New Zealand, are estimated respectively at 16% and 62%, while in both countries the male population in the same age range demography of +15, has the same contribution of 73%. Solely based on these statistics, the scale of predominantly financial female dependence on men in Iran, is undeniable. Patriarchal values induced by traditional culture and religious hegemony add to the female dependency on the male in Iran's society.

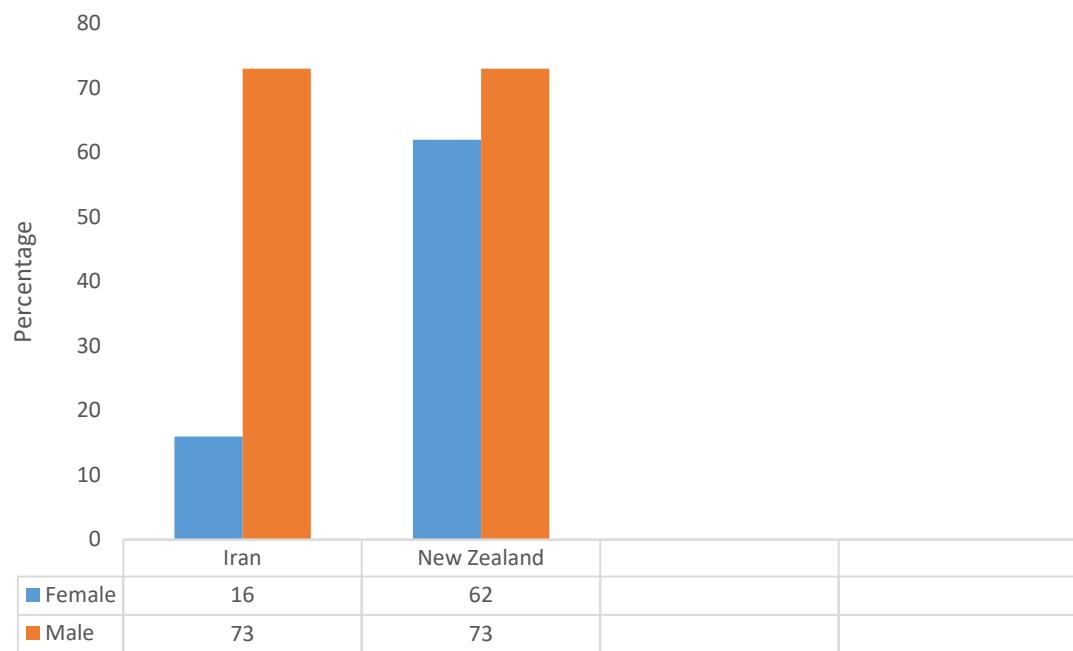


Figure 6.1 Labour force participation rate-based on gender

6.4 Reflection on the Results

The finding that individuals from traditional societies are less likely to abandon the menstrual prejudice compared to individuals from more liberal societies is interesting but is not the outcome that was expected at the outset.

I also thought it was unlikely that New Zealand located Iranians would not show some subtle differences from Iranians at ‘home’. After all, if I attribute at home Iranian attitudes to a lack of media exposure, then there should be some effect due to an exposure to a more ‘progressive’ media environment. Yet the New Zealand Iranian responses, recalled the same sexist values and implicitly demonstrated how women’s issues are subordinated to patriarchal norms and values.

As I had not anticipated this result, I needed to probe it further by looking more closely at responses. Are there hesitations, qualifications? I had to review my own observations as the interviewer to the account. I was there and could read paralinguistic signs. When I dug into the data looking for minor differences, I found

very few and compared to the similarities, they did not impact the results. I realized what the Iranians in both samples shared was a limited exposure to menstrual representations. As per their responses, the main menstrual portrayals that they were occasionally exposed to, were menstrual advertisements, which inevitably promote menstrual secrecy and discretion. Considering that overall menstrual portrayals in mainstream media are hard to find and those that occur are mostly biased, the lack of development of more enlightened attitudes in migrants was not surprising. Moreover, given the fact that owing to the internet, migrants nowadays are not cut off from their home-country media. Such factors may explain the reason why the two Iranian samples exhibited very similar attitudes.

I now believe, based on the current dataset, that merely residing in an open society would not easily lead to the abandonment of non-sexist ideas. If an attitude is to change, it will take a long time. Actually, the data demonstrates that mediated representations by themselves without a concrete understanding of sexism and the logic behind it, may not be as effective as educational or informational policies.

That is why as a future research, I suggest studying migrants/refugees who are grown up and have been acculturated in a different society than their place of birth, rather than people who emigrated in their adulthood with their attitudes and personalities formed. At this point I think that Iranians brought up in New Zealand-was a group that we needed, but I would not know this if I had not gone through the current research process.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The information in this part, contains conclusions derived from the research and suggestions for future study.

7.1 Conclusions Drawn from the Research

As previously it has been stated, the dataset for the thesis have been gathered by semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken and results of the present research are briefly examined in relation to the research questions stated in Chapter 1. The first two research questions are:

1. Are there any differences in the understanding of the menstrual cycle between the sexes? How do female and male attitudes differ?

The findings of the study, suggest that there is no marked difference in the understanding or interpretation of the menstrual cycle by male and female participants *within* the New Zealand and Iranian samples – though each sample interprets the phenomenon differently. Within each sample females offer more detailed and nuanced descriptions than males, as they are the ones who experience the cycle. Nonetheless in terms of personal and social values and beliefs, males and females of the same culture and society, project the same characteristics. In the Iranian and New Zealand samples, the attitudes of men tended to mirror or match the dominant view expressed by females of the same sample, although in a more abstract form. This clearly related to the fact that the females could speak concretely from experience, whereas the men could only describe the experience second-hand.

2. Is there any difference between male and female reactions to the media representation of the menstrual cycle?

Data collected indicates that there is no marked gender difference in the decoding of representations of the menstrual cycle. In other words, according to the responses, males and females did not decode the representations differently. The abstract versus concrete differences in the ways they perceive menstrual matters, came out in the elaboration of their feelings and attitudes towards menstruation, which could be stereotypically comprehensive or epitomic. When a particular interpretation was given, this was related to the subculture, family tradition and personality of the person doing the decoding, regardless of their gender. The major impact was not gender. but major collective sources of influence were subcategories of culture and the social milieu that cut across gender lines. This explains why participants of different genders in New Zealand and Iranian samples, shared similar attitudes despite the idiosyncratic details of their personal experience.

3-4. Do people from different nationalities differ in their attitudes toward the menstrual cycle and do they differ in their reactions to depictions of it? How do New Zealanders as representatives of developed, modern and secular society differ from Iranians, as representatives of developing, traditional and religious society?

It was found that participants' cultural background and the social context they grow up in, played a direct role in determining attitudes toward the menstrual cycle. Iranians as members of a developing country viewed the menstrual cycle more negatively and with sexist feelings rather than positive or realistic ones. The majority of Iranian female interviewees in both Iran and the migrant sample, expressed negative feelings about the different phases of the menstrual cycle on a personal and

social level. By contrast, Kiwis maintained a balanced viewpoint without projecting sexism in their views. There were minority opinions expressed in both datasets, but these were few. Some Iranian women offered empowering comments in the Iranian data and in the Kiwi sample conformist ideas were expressed by the oldest participant who was male. By contrast, the Iranians who raised liberating notions, were all young to middle-aged females. Both examples suggest the general trend is that men are more likely to agree with the menstrual taboo, than women who experience it.

In addition, characteristics of a person and her/his cultural background, is important in establishing the attitude towards the menstrual cycle and its representations. The dataset suggests that there is a distinction between personal interests and social interests, which depends on the participant's background. Iranians exhibited different interests from Kiwis. While Iranians discussed the personal issues and limitations across different stages of the menstrual cycle, Kiwis mainly criticised negative cultural and background representations of females.

According to the findings of this research, cultural background has the strongest impact on attitudes to the menstrual cycle and how media representations are interpreted. Because of the effects of culture, the perception of the complexity of the menstrual cycle varies from one society to another society. Culture affects the expectations out of the menstrual cycle and menstruators directly and can give different connotations to the subjects in different cultural contexts. Participants' interpretations from entirely different societies indicate that there is an effort to make sense out of the menstrual cycle as a fact of human biology but this effort, in its scope and intensity, varies between Iran and New Zealand.

5-6. Does the cultural context in which people are located affect their attitudes towards menstrual cycle? Do they interpret menstrual cycle representations used in media in a different way than people of their home country? The sample of New Zealand migrants was designed to test this out.

Iranian participants who live in New Zealand, maintained the same points of view as Iranians in Iran, that is, they are more concerned with personal effects of the menstrual cycle rather than its social aspects. Iranian females in New Zealand observed that they witnessed that people in New Zealand would openly discuss menstruation socially and they would even repeat the terms that they heard in public discussions. Thus, females used terms learned from Kiwis when discussing with friends and acquaintances, but their accounts demonstrate that they are not as open to the subject in a broader social context. Overall, this behaviour demonstrates that the relationship between the people, their culture and personality may play an important role. This is particularly demonstrated by the behaviour of people from a more closed society, who tend to see the menstrual cycle as a private matter. So that cultural background has a direct effect on whether the menstrual cycle is deemed a suitable topic for general social conversation.

One feature of traditional Western cultures, is that women are classified as occupying a particular category depending on their relation to sex and menstruation. The terms ‘maiden’, or virgin, or ‘mother’, describe people whose role is to provide sexual services to their husband and bear children. With the onset of menopause, women may be called ‘crones’. There is also a connotation of unattractiveness. So ‘maiden’, ‘mother’, ‘crone’ serves to identify three ages of womanhood with the associated identity and personalities. The ‘mother’ is important because of her reproductive function and sexuality. The ‘maiden’ is important because she is in preparation for

the succeeding roles and as a virgin promises her husband exclusive access. So, the ‘crone’ could be viewed importantly because she is old and has wisdom about life. This cycle of role identities is not something necessarily to be feared but can be seen as part of the *rites de passage* of womanhood. Consequently, such traditional beliefs recognised the menstrual cycle as a significant part of female development, though so-called primitive societies also had or have similar rites.

New Zealand is regarded as one of the most secular societies in the world. Based on the findings of this research, that image attracts some support. But at the same time, it is worth recognizing, that people who seek to emigrate to a country like New Zealand, are probably already turning towards a more secular philosophy and turning away from the more patriarchal and marginalizing orientation toward the menstrual cycle. We should not discount push factors such as persecution, asylum-seeking though. Nevertheless, the data on Iranian immigrants displayed an opposite view. It is possible to come to New Zealand and maintain very strong sexist values, especially as these may remain central to maintaining an identity with the home culture. But New Zealand makes it harder than some countries to maintain patriarchal values and sexism. This is because of the change from the 1950s when New Zealand was a very conservative society. At the time the prevailing attitude towards menstruation and towards homosexuals and transgender was similar to the cultural bias of Iran today. The religious and patriarchal values that predominate in Iran – epitomized, for example, by the proscription of the use of tampons – make the required forward-thinking changes difficult if not impossible or too far away to be achieved.

But the differences between New Zealand and Iranian participants was not a consequence of religious orientation. Iranian interviewees who did not show a strong

religious commitment exhibited the same negative attitudes towards menstruation as those who were more religious. Religious belief as a part of patriarchal values, thought, beliefs and aspirations certainly have an impact on attitudes to the menstrual cycle. But, sexist attitudes played a role just as great as or greater than religious commitment.

What this means is that unless societal change eliminates or moderates sexism and seeks equal rights then change will not occur without women challenging the stigma attached to menstruation.

7. Do media change/affect people's views of menstruation?

The dataset indicates that there are differences in how media images of menstruation are interpreted. There are three main conditions that affect how media representations impact on the understanding of audiences. They are:

the participant's background

the cultural values that construct the media text and position the audience

the medium that is used to deliver the message from media text to the audience.

Generally, it is considered the media affect the audience's view of menstruation; but Iranians were more affected than Kiwis. This is because many Iranians were encountering representations of the subject for first time and, other than private word of mouth accounts, had not seen or heard anything else regarding menstrual issues. Therefore, the materials presented prompted questions and issues that they had not considered before.

In relation to how Kiwis responded to Iranian media representations, just like Iranians encountering new materials, Kiwis had their expectations challenged. Their response was that the Iranian materials suggested retrograde or even reactionary attitudes and were besides very cruel. Kiwis emphasized rather, that there were multiple ways of interpreting images of the menstrual cycle. Rather than confining their responses to the level of denotation, the Kiwis operated with a depth of interpretation that explored the range of connotations evoked by a specific representation. By contrast, Iranians tended to confine their efforts to understanding what the images and texts literally denoted. This difference in reading strategies reflected the fact that Kiwis are more exposed to images of menstruation compared to Iranians and were able to judge the limits of a specific text or image against a “library” of similar texts they had already encountered. By comparison, Iranians were “naïve” consumers, who found representations of a taboo subject both difficult to read and challenging to their common sense understanding of gender.

7.2 Predictions not confirmed in the results

Certain outcomes and findings mentioned in the literature review were not confirmed by the data. There are three themes present in previous scholarship that were expected to show up but did not. Previous research identified concepts such as menstrual oppression/suppression, religious background and negative notions of menstrual blood. Below are overviews of the potential reasons and explanations of why those aspects did not emerge in the data or that their frequency and influence was not as strong as might be expected.

The first relates to menstruation suppression or the practice of stopping a woman's period. Overall this is a practice more prevalent in Western societies where it is viewed as a relief from the disadvantages of menstruation. For example, scholars such as Coutinho and Segal advocate suppression in their book *Is Menstruation Obsolete?*

But among the present study's Kiwi participants as Western societies' representatives, there is no comment on the topic of menstrual suppression. Few of them mentioned that they knew or had heard about the practice, nor did they indicate that they were for or against the practice. In the Iranian data, there is not even an acknowledgement of the practice. Once again this underscores the fact that it is a Western practice. Especially since menstrual suppression is associated with women's liberation, it challenges the norms of a conservative and patriarchal society such as Iran which seeks to control and marginalize its female population. Moreover, it threatens the values attached to the role of women as mothers and child bearers, though paradoxically, it could be seen as increasing the opportunity to use females as satisfiers of male sexual appetites.

By contrast the interest in suppression of the menstrual cycle in Iran is focused on menopause. All the female participants offered guarded responses that suggested that they were willing to suppress menopause but not menstruation. So, although the general principle of intervening in the menstrual cycle was implicitly accepted, it was applied in a manner that reflected traditional Eastern values about the role of women. What the responses showed in short was a desire to escape from the onset of menopause, affirming the value placed by Iranians on fertility and child birth. In Iran it is assumed that male interests are paramount. So, when the actual process of

stopping a natural part of women's bodily function is considered, this is displaced onto menopause which is seen as a process that impairs womanhood and makes women not 'feminine enough'.

By contrast, among Kiwis there was no consideration of suppressing either menstruation or menopause. They acknowledged that they know about the practice, but they did not do it themselves nor were they interested in it.

Regarding the religious significance of the menstrual cycle, a few authors have linked this to the symbolism of blood; for example, Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. I did not include any provocative religious material in the data gathering procedure intentionally, because I did not want the participants to be threatened, particularly knowing that Iran's culture is deeply religious. Therefore, the decision to exclude religion-based materials, in order to prevent negative reactions to sensitive materials by Iranians, may have contributed to the absence of explicit faith-based comments. But there are a few reactions that might suggest underlying reasons of faith.

Although Iranians in general are strongly influenced by religious values, so that even those who may not practice Islam on a day to day basis tend to use the religious symbols (decorations, ornaments, prayer beads or jewellery), or verbal expressions (terms, statements, words or prayers) and gestures to keep them safe or promote prosperity, there were very few religion derived comments and expressions in the dataset. This went against expectations. It can be speculated that the Iranian sample intentionally avoided commenting from a religious perspective. This might follow from the fact that most of the materials were Western, a fact which ironically reflects the strength of the menstruation taboo in Iran. Possibly the Iranian participants were

concerned that their faith would be questioned and were protective of their religious views. On the other hand, the fact that the Iran based participants agreed to be interviewed suggests that they are not fundamentalists. Besides, I would not know from meeting them how “religious” they were, as Iranians’ appearance and outward look is not explicitly demonstrative of the degree of their faith.

The other aspect of the data that suggests the impact of religious values was slight, was that there were a lot of comments about the pain, the suffering, and the embarrassment of bleeding and leaking, but not about feeling unclean. This lack of reference to notions of contamination and uncleanliness, was also found in male participants. But as I was a female interviewer, this factor may have influenced their reflections on female matters. Religious references when they occurred, were mainly focused on menstrual shame and the need for secrecy, which can equally be related to social values governing relationships. It was noticeable that there were few references by Iranians, whether in Iran or residing in New Zealand, to the religion-based stigma surrounding menstrual blood as dirty and unclean, that other studies have detected. Although previous research has speculated or has found that the notion of menstrual blood makes women unclean in a religious sense, this was not apparent in the data.

Considering the female Iranian responses, the absence of religious references in the data may be attributed to the fear the menstrual cycle promotes outside of any strictly religious significance. The overwhelming focus on menopause is understandable, because they feel it will render them socially useless. Moreover, the religious connotations of menstruation as God’s curse on womanhood and a state of uncleanliness, are all negative.

Iranian participants were fascinated by the materials presented to them and the entailed concepts - including the transgender one - because they knew about homosexuality but did not know about transgender. Fascination with new and unfamiliar materials may have suspended any religious concerns. Showing something completely new and unfamiliar to them may have sparked new concerns and questions and a setting aside of their normal reactions to the materials.

By contrast, it was not expected that religion would be a strong determinant of the responses of Kiwi participants and this was confirmed. This too was a surprising outcome because menstrual blood in Western societies is also considered as something negative, problematic and disgusting. Roberts et al. found in the research they carried out on women and bleeding, that their respondents did not feel cleansed or purified. The different results reported here, may also reflect cultural differences since these earlier studies were drawn from American culture. This work's sample of Westerners is taken from New Zealand. It may be that Americans culturally have more stigma attached to menstruation, ironically in this respect coming closer to Iranian respondents. If previous studies find that menstruation has negative effects on attitudes towards women in America, this research shows that New Zealand may not have the same degree of negativity. Although the sample of participants is small compared to other studies, it does suggest that cultural background is an important variable.

As the menstrual taboo did not emerge in the Kiwi part of data as the thesis' representative of Western culture, I reviewed what those previous scholars said and compared it with the findings. Overall the Kiwi comments are empowering and the only conclusion, is that they were not based on interviewees' examples of witnessing

menstrual stigma in the society. The fact that earlier studies identified a pervasive menstrual taboo in western societies would seem to contradict the absence of such a taboo in the Kiwi materials. But stigma can exist in society without some individuals not fully ascribing to it. According to their own reactions and statements the sample Kiwi group members, may be an exception. If the personal attitudes of the Kiwi participants seem to contradict existing scholarship, the examples of stigmatic practices by others are consistent with the general trend. The Kiwi participants had an apparently positive general attitude towards menstruation and were positive in their rejection of the menstrual taboo, although they may have learned that negative statements about menstruation are to be avoided. This may reflect historical trends towards more openness with more sex education and the impact of the 1980s after the so-called sexual revolution, which changed women's attitudes a great deal, at least in the West. More recently in third wave feminism, body positivity has led to more openness about menstruation, as witness the episode of Keeping up with The Kardashians. Also, Chris Bobel (2010) in her book "New blood: third-wave feminism and the politics of menstruation", elaborates "how optimistic and encouraged women refuse to pass on the menstrual disgrace and indignity to the pubescent girls." Another factor is the increased availability of medicine to help, along with medical interventions that make menstruation a less uncomfortable experience. Such factors may explain the presence of a more positive attitude. For the New Zealand women participants, in particular, there was the idea that science is the solution for them. So, this natural thing should not be the problem that it was once.

Morris et al.'s work shows that many women find literal self-objectification is a motivational resource in regard to menstruation, but my research shows the

opposite. Even the Kiwi participant who demonstrated rather conservative views about periods, was critical of the objectified image of women in menstrual advertisements, but not the fact of advertising per se. One of the interesting things about this particular point, is that we are living in an age when the sanitizing of the body is a pronounced trend (Roberts et al., 2002; Bobel & Kissling, 2011; Erchull, 2013; Morris et al., 2014). Given this development, it is reasonable to expect that the menstrual stigma would be in decline. But actually, the demand for and interest in such practices might be seen as evidence that the feeling persists that menstruation is a problem that needs to be fixed if one is to be a valid person. There is a really interesting juxtaposition between the metaphorical imagery of blood which is persistently considered to be dirty, negative and bad, in a society that increasingly is valuing hyper cleanliness.

7.3 Conclusion

Overall, the conclusion drawn from this research is that comparing Kiwi responses with Iranians' is like having a window back in time; or a snapshot of the past. Iran would be exactly an example of somewhere where you could have a pre-modern mindset persisting alongside modern practices such as science, medicine and architecture. This cultural disjunction is creating something approximating to the postmodern experience of multiple identities, except with a strong theological state, where multiple identities are not manifested in public, but remain submerged. Consequently, many Iranians have a public identity that can be at odds with their private identity so that wants and needs may be expressed and interpreted differently, along with different expectations, depending on the private or public context.

Ethnography is used in this thesis as a method of data collection which entails examining the behaviour of the participants in a certain specific social situation and also understanding their interpretation of such behaviour. Given a cross-cultural focus the ethnographic data was triangulated

Accordingly the examined the reactions of participants to the representation of menstruation across different media forms as a discursive field. Despite this focus, the approach was not primarily a medio-centric analysis but rather an audience response centred analysis. The results show the pervasiveness of negative imagery and the role of the media as second-order producers of a meta-discourse of popular cultural forms. (M. Macdonald, 2003, p.27). To capture the process of media influence in all its ramifications requires of a method of analysis that identifies how individuals construct meaning in the micro-context of reception. This qualitative approach by necessity obtains results that are indicative and suggestive but richer than those obtained by large scale surveys.

In a very religious society like Iran with a strong normative framework, social order is imposed and maintained by the redemptive belief that claims, 'do good deeds now so you can be rewarded when you die'. So, for a woman, her way of doing good deeds is to be with a man and give him children and keep on being a good wife and lover until she goes to heaven.

In a more secular society such as New Zealand, the conduct of one's life is not so tightly driven by thoughts of a spiritual reward in some sweet hereafter. Rather satisfaction must be sought in this world. The menstrual cycle is accordingly, not linked to ideas of essence but to the notion of a life course. A female is born, grows

up and becomes an adult who forms a family of their own, in which there may be or may not be children. But the point is, that the progress through one's life is towards being an independently functioning social unit as a citizen. From this point on one moves through adulthood and its milestones and transitions to old age and finally death. This is a socially constructed cycle that seems natural in a secular society but in religious society operates through divine sanction. Individuals accordingly in these contrasting social settings interpret the facts of life differently.

The findings of this thesis suggest that New Zealand women do not relate menopause or periods or being fertile or infertile to spiritual values. This requires the idea of religiosity that does not normally occur to them.

But for many Iranian women it did not occur to them to see their lives as part of a natural cycle of life. For them, it is a cycle that is intimately connected to the religious duty of meeting their husband's needs and desires. This duty if theologically sanctioned is nonetheless thoroughly related the mundane imperative of satisfying carnal demands, which is rooted in social, cultural and financial dependency on men. So, their unreflective tendency is to see their period as being a time of inconvenience because it upsets, or it stops the man from doing what he may wish. And menopause is viewed as being a time when they suddenly become vulnerable to the wishes of the man, who may suddenly feel he would like somebody who could still produce children for him or who is more sexually desirable.

Thus, menopause is something to be feared and horrifies Iranian women. By contrast male sexual problems, such as impotence and erectile dysfunction, do not receive the same level of concern. This mindset is not necessarily an attribute of those who

practice Islam or are religious. Even people who are westernized in many ways, demonstrate the same view, that menopause is an unwelcome development, compared to menstruation, because it ends the promise of fertility and lowers sexual desire. But the power of religious sanction inevitably deepens the symbolic weight given to what is a base a physiological process connected to aging.

As a matter of positive agency, fertile Iranian women are identified with being ‘useful’ and making a contribution to society as a citizen. By contrast the Kiwi female participants never connected the status of their menstrual cycle and fertility with their usefulness as citizens. They certainly never talked about it as ‘the curse’, because it was just part of being who they are; to be female is to have their period. So, there is a political difference between Eastern and Western mindsets regarding the menstrual cycle. This difference in a large measure owes to the general ignorance of Iranians about bodily functions and biology - itself a result of a lack of sex education. Iranian women do not understand their own bodies and do not see menopause as a biological fact but a symbol of personal and social failure. So, it is that Iranian women unwittingly collude with patriarchy.

In summary, the data collected in this research reveal that Iranian and Kiwi respondents share a narrow view of the physical aspects of the menstrual cycle, but differ in their interpretation of its cultural and spiritual meaning. For the Kiwis, it is just a fact of life and for Iranians, it is seen as a threat to personal and social identity. Moreover, females and males of the same culture retain relatively similar points of view on the menstrual cycle. Although background, culture, media, or education, are significant factors in the way individuals perceive the menstrual cycle, males and females learn those meanings by experience and by sharing these meanings with

each other. As the time passes and they have more experience about the meaning of the menstrual cycle through an educational system or media representations, it becomes more common among males and females. Also, this means that females as the ones who experience the menstrual cycle, do not necessarily understand it or see it as fair. Males by contrast are less involved in the experience and to that extent, take a more complacent attitude towards it, defining it as a woman's problem.

In total, the Kiwi data is dominated by notions of female empowerment, with non-sexist and non-critical elements. Iranian data though, both in New Zealand and Iran, speaks to a huge gendered double standard and positions women as second class-citizens and men as owners and regulators of them, their offspring and their menstrual (fertility) cycle. This process is very subtle, albeit insidious, so that women do not see themselves as being controlled, more like being looked after.

Lastly, as a reflection on the research and its overarching conclusion, the present thesis tried to do something that was new, different, aiming to fill a gap in the research field. The findings of this research are both stark and nuanced, exhibiting a clear outcome emerging through tiny shades of meaning buried under the surface. So, especially when some of the things that the participants think are looked at, they seem very monochromatic, very uncritical about life and who they are. Yet the data does not only reveal a stark contrast, but multi-layered details which are rooted in social and cultural values and beliefs and in something of the processes through which the participants navigate their way through a contradictory field of discourse.

7.4 Doctoral Journey

The doctoral journey for the present thesis was quite different from what I expected in the first place. I set out to find out where Iranians stand in terms of attitudes toward the menstrual cycle and how they perceive its media depiction, as menstrual cycle censorship is a part of authorities' control over the general attitudes toward women, attitudes that foster marginalization on a personal and social level. So where I started, I thought there would be a combination of similarities and differences amongst people from the West and East. What I found was that, the similarities were a fraction of what I expected and the differences are rather fundamental and complexly layered. Having said that, the differences between cultural groups rested on strong similarities within them.

What has surprised me was the degree of similarity in the attitudes of Iranians in Iran and Iranians in New Zealand. It could be due to the fact that I am an Iranian woman and it may have played into this. I was surprised how often in the Iranian samples that men's and women's views coincided. Yet from another perspective it was not surprising given that Iranians, whether male or female, reacted stunned to 'tampon' and 'transgender' depictions and conversely, that Kiwi males and females were shocked with the few Iranian materials. What hugely pleased me was that in the use of in-depth, one-on-one interviews, there was the chance to explore in greater detail what previous research and my own enquiries had revealed.

As I took this journey, my insight has changed in terms of understanding menstrual culture as it is practised by different people. I previously thought, based on the social media boom of recent years, that attitudes across cultures were converging and that with increased awareness of women's rights worldwide and better education, the

similarity between Eastern and Western attitudes towards the menstrual cycle would have increased and the differences would be less. Nevertheless, I encountered a strikingly different outcome. I have grown to look beyond the menstrual cycle as a female bodily function. My new perceptions are that the menstrual cycle's personal or social effects are complex and can shape and have a huge impact on people's self-perception and the perception of others. My feelings about myself as a researcher, evolved to become more eager to see what I may do next in the same field, as I now recognise that there are still many questions remaining to be explored in the area of menstrual studies. The journey has changed my relationship with my own body, to be more sensitive toward it, have more respect for it and to be more understanding of it. The situations that it put me in and the ones that I put it in, caused me to become self-reflexive, enthused and stimulated to seek out more dimensions of the phenomenon. Finally, this journey has provided me with a sounder vision of the culture I come from, especially in terms of the menstrual cycle. For example, in Iran the whole taboo is based on patriarchal values that are all shaped around it. I now can better understand why I went through some menstrual difficulties and found the answers to my menstrual questions, which were not addressed or were addressed improperly since menarche.

Other things that I have perceived relate to New Zealand culture. I did not expect so many rejections from potential male candidates to participate. Their input may have brought other perspectives into the research. The reasons given for non-participation included for instance, "I tend to close/ignore anything related to menstruation", "sorry but, it is not my thing!" and general rejection/cancellation emails, texts or not getting back/getting in touch at all.

Another thing I discovered was that geographical location had little impact (as in the case of Iranian immigrants). It may not inevitably matter because the culture, values or beliefs are living in the people. It is also true that New Zealand Iranians are still linked to a diaspora community. Somehow although I have got Iranian interviewees in New Zealand, they were not freer or less traditional than they were necessarily in Iran, so this was another insight. Thus, the intensity with which people would hold on to something, is a deep cultural base. Whether they would be in Iran or New Zealand it does not matter, because the culture is in them. However, it needs to be noted that among them, there was nobody who has been born or grown up in New Zealand. Again, an Iranian who has been brought up and schooled in New Zealand, may have also shed new lights into the study; which provides an opportunity for future research in this field.

In conclusion, Western attitudes towards the menstrual cycle are rather empowering with positive elements in all phases of it, while Eastern attitudes are more inclined to count the advantages and disadvantages of each phase, a process that is ultimately biased and in-line with patriarchy's sexist morality. This is something that was found and observed that had a profound impact on me and my research.

And what I hope for the future, my intentions is to undertake further research into where there are gaps in menstrual cycle studies and to take the outcome of this research to potential conferences. Developing my research as basis for more enlightening and insightful discoveries.

7.5 Research Limitations

The menstrual cycle is as old as humankind and it is a very significant aspect of the human reproductive system. Nonetheless, the literature review conducted for the present study proved that there is not a comprehensive body of research on the issue. Research conducted into the menstrual cycle is mostly related to the origin of menstrual taboos or the study of menstruation as a part of human biology and physiology. This research aimed to identify the role of the media, in various forms and formats in forming attitudes to menstruation. There remains a huge gap in studying audience reactions, which this research on a modest scale and with qualitative methods, has sought to address.

Most studies and research done in relation to the menstrual cycle, are from Western societies rather than Eastern or Middle Eastern societies. That is an issue concerning freedom of research in academia. Such freedom is more prevalent in developed modern Western countries, compared to developing traditional Eastern cultures.

Another difficulty in pursuing this topic, related to the cultural differences between New Zealand and Iran and how such cultural differences about blood and bleeding, were related to the strength of religious beliefs. As is mentioned above, the subject is widely controlled and censored in Iran. The stimulus materials had elements that are not legitimately projected there. To manage a sensitive situation, the researcher intentionally avoided religious-based questions and materials during the interview process, being sensitive to the people's personal and social conditions as far as possible.

Consequently, a limitation in relation to this study is in regard to the materials used for interviews as stimuli. The materials chosen for interviews were designed to cover a range of different media and concepts, from menarche to menopause in order to prompt the participants to get engaged with the interview and its objective. They include image advertisements, video advertisements, movies, TV series, reality shows, caricatures and social media feeds. At the same time, each stimulus represented a different concept. The contents spanned topics such as menarche, menstruation as a personal and social problem, positive and negative attitudes toward menstruation and menopause, transgender identity and the concept of the man-period. In this way, different notions were brought to the audience's attention in different media formats. Although utmost consideration was given to selection, owing to the fact there is also no representation of menstrual cycle in Iran's mainstream media, the related concepts could only be found via social media. And, as almost all of the Iranians' social media feed in regard to menstrual cycle are translated from English ones, only two representations were produced by Iranians as stimulus items. There was one exception which was a song produced by an Iranian singer who had left Iran. He was expelled for his 'felonies' towards the Islamic faith in Iran by the Iranian government and there is a representation of menstruation in its lyrics. Nonetheless, considering the singer's anti-Islamic approach, this stimulus was omitted, considering especially when conducting the interviews in Iran.

This research data gathering time was limited according to the slow pace of finding candidates. If there was more time to collect data, the study would have benefited from a greater number of interviewees and probably more diverse orientations accordingly. Hence larger snowballed samples would be more conducive for

generalizing. Similarly, one of the limitations regarding Iran's data collection was the difficulty that I had to get back to Iran and find participants in a very limited timeframe. Overall, data was collected by semi-structured interviews in which eighteen participants, six males and twelve females ranging from 20 to 80 years old participated.

As one of the limitations of this study was finding participants, it must be considered that outcomes generated via this thesis' data, were drawn by those people who agreed to sit and talk about the menstrual cycle and watch the related materials. There were many potential participants who were informed about the research and did not agree to participate. Or, there were even those who agreed at first but after reading the Information Sheet, which explained the study in more details, withdraw from participation. Also, there were many potential male candidates who expressed that they felt the topic is irrelevant to them or that they would avoid anything related to menstruation. These cases happened for both Iranians and Kiwis, females and males. It means those people's participation might have given different dimensions to the present study. On the other hand, those who did participate were by no means uniformly progressive in their attitudes and to that extent managed to present mainstream attitudes.

7.6 Indications for Further Research

As I come to the end of this thesis, I am aware that there were certain limitations in implementing the study. As there was no similar research of this type, I had to develop a way to research into menstrual cycle representations from a communication and media study perspective. This limitation could suggest ideas for

future research. A future study opportunity could be repeating the research again with different parameters. So, I think it would be very interesting to repeat this research and look at generational differences, in order to account for these. Different layers of cultural or familial difference and similarities might be looked at, to have a deeper insight into the topic and its social presence and effects. The menstrual cycle's social and religious events, rules and practices – in terms of culture, geography, time, religious beliefs – are other settings that can be further discussed and elaborated too. Factors such as social class, race and ethnicity would warrant further investigation.

Although representations with humorous content were included among the interview materials, further research on the concept of 'humor' in relation to the menstrual cycle would be beneficial. As pointed out in some cases throughout the interviews, there are jokes, folklore and common beliefs about the menstrual cycle that are specifically mixed with humorous edges. These kinds of representations do not necessarily receive media representation, but they are nonetheless part of popular culture.

The findings of this research were so unexpected and insightful that I sought to construct a model of research that could illuminate existing scholarship and reveal its limitations, such as its Americano-centric focus or western bias. There are still many gaps in the research into the cultural meanings of the menstrual cycle from a social science perspective that need future work.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet



This sheet will be using for English language participants.

Date Information Sheet Produced:

10 October 2015

Project Title

Menstruation, Media and Audience

An Invitation

My name is Mana and I am a PhD student conducting research into people's reaction to media texts.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research by attending in an interview that is designed for this particular project. The research will contribute to my PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) studies. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection (31/12/2016) without being disadvantage in anyway.

What is the purpose of this research?

A thesis for my PhD in Communication and Media, will result from this research. However, the overall purpose is to examine reactions to representations of menstrual cycle in media texts among audiences.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Selection process involved, word of mouth into the communities and recruitment of the interviewees were from among their acquaintances. The invitation was extended after you contacted me expressing your interest.

Due to legal ages that need to be considered in both countries, anybody below 18 in Iran and anybody below 16 in New Zealand will be excluded. Moreover, Kiwi participants include New Zealand citizens.

What will happen in this research?

The project involves some individual interviews that each will take about 1 hour. You will be invited to answer questions and take a look at some materials that will be shown to you by me; I will ask you some questions about the materials next. You will be interviewed only once.

What are the discomforts and risks?

You may feel discomfort or shy talking about menstrual cycle matters and regarding the related materials which will be shown to you.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If you will experience any significant discomfort or embarrassment, the interview will be stopped and you will be offered the chance to recover or withdraw from the interaction.

What are the benefits?

The findings of this research will be used for academic publications and presentations, including a PhD thesis. You will have a chance to discuss about this particular topic and the result of this research will be given to you in order to keep you informed about final findings which may benefit both individuals and societies in a bigger scale.

How will my privacy be protected?

All information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party. Confidentiality of the participants have been considered from the first place of designing of the research and it will be the case through all stages of completion the thesis. There will not be any given name or particular indication that may reveal the participants' identity. Also, the interviews have been designed to be individually rather group interviews so the information each participant provides will only be discussed with me and will not be disclosed to anyone else other than the supervisors and for the actual thesis. Moreover, the interviews will be conducted in private places of the participants' preference or pre-approved in order to keep the interviews discreet and comfortable.

Everybody can see their own interview's transcript. But, other interviewees' details and information cannot be offered to participants as I will not identify any of my participants or share content of their interviews with others. All participants may see summary of conclusions.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

A week.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You will be provided with a Consent Form by me, once you express your interest into participation. You will need to sign the Consent Form and return it back to me; or you may do so at the time of the interview.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes; if you express your interest in the related section of Consent Form, that you would like to get feedback on the outcomes of the study, I will provide you with summary of the result.

You will be offered your own transcript and a summary of the final conclusions.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Barry King, barry.king@aut.ac.nz, 921 999 extn 9626*.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, *ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038*.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

Mana Ahmadivostakolae, AUT Email Address: psf7847@autuni.ac.nz, Personal Email Address: ahmadi.mana@gmail.com

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Barry King, barry.king@aut.ac.nz.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEC Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix B: Participant information sheet in Persian/Farsi



پرگه‌ی اطلاعات شرکت کنندگان

این برگه‌ی برای استفاده‌ی شرکت کنندگان فارسی زبان خواهد بود.

تاریخ انتشار پرگه‌ی اطلاعات:

1394 مهر 18

عنوان پروژه

قاعدگی، رسانه‌ها و مخاطبان

دعوت

نام من مانا است، یک دانشجوی دکتری که در حال پردازش پژوهش در ارتباط با واکنش مردم به متون رسانه‌ای هستم. من می‌خواهم شما را دعوت به شرکت در پژوهش بنایمی از طریق حضور در مصاحبه‌ای که برای این پژوهشی خاص طراحی شده است. این پژوهش در ارتباط با مطالعات دکترا (PhD) خواهد بود. مشارکت داوطلبانه است و شما از این امکان دارا هستید در هر زمان قبلاً از اتمام جمع آوری داده‌ها نصراحت دهید (1395/12/10) بدون این که ضرری متحمل شوید.

هدف از این تحقیق چیست؟

در نتیجه‌ی این تحقیقات پایان نامه‌ای برای دکترا ای داشته‌ی ارتباطات و رسانه، تکمیل خواهد شد. اما هدف کلی این است که واکنش‌های مخاطبان به چرخه‌ی قاعده‌ی در متون رسانه‌ای بررسی شود.

چگونه من (مصاحبه‌شونده/شرکت کننده) شناسایی شدم و چرا من دعوت به شرکت در این پژوهش شدم؟

فرایند انتخاب شامل، اطلاع رسانی فرد به فرد (دهان به دهان) در درون جوامع است. بعد از تماس شما با من و ابراز علاقه‌ی خود از شما دعوت به عمل آمد.

در این تحقیق چه خواهد اتفاق افتاد؟

این پژوهش شامل برخی مصاحبه‌های فردی است که هر یک حدود 1 ساعت طول خواهد کشید. شما باید به سوالات پاسخ داده و برخی تصاویر و نوشته‌ها توسط من به شما نشان داده خواهد شد، سپس چند سوال در مورد موارد و مطالب ارایه شده از شما خواهیم پرسید.

ناراحتی‌ها و خطرات مربوط چه هستند؟

در صحبت کردن در مورد مسائل چرخه‌ی قاعده‌ی در مورد مرتبط که به شما نشان داده خواهد شد، شما ممکن است احساس ناراحتی یا خجالت کنید.

چگونه این ناراحتی‌ها و خطرات کاهش داده خواهد شد؟

اگر شما هر گونه ناراحتی یا خجالت قابل توجهی را تجربه کنید، مصاحبه متوقف خواهد شد و به شما فرصتی داده خواهد شد برای بازیابی و یا انصاف از تعامل.

منافع چه هستند؟

وقایت‌های این تحقیق برای انتشارات علمی، سخنرانی‌ها و از جمله پایان نامه‌ی دکترا استفاده خواهد شد.

چگونه حریم خصوصی من محافظت شود؟

تمام اطلاعات ارائه شده به عنوان داده‌های محروم‌انه خواهد بود و توسط پژوهشگر به شخص ثالث انتشار نخواهد یافت. از وله‌ی اول طراحی پژوهش، معرفمه‌دان اطلاعات شرکت کنندگان در نظر گرفته شده است و در تمام مراحل تکمیل پایان نامه به همین ترتیب خواهد بود. هر نام یا شناسه‌ی خاص که ممکن است همیشه شرکت کنندگان را نمایان سازد وجود نخواهد داشت. هم‌چنین، مصاحبه‌ها به صورت داگانه طراحی شده‌اند و نه مصاحبه‌ی گروهی به طوری که اطلاعاتی که از شرکت کننده خواهیم می‌کنند تها با من مورد بحث قرار خواهد گرفت و به هر کس دیگری به غیر از استادان راهنمای برای پایان نامه اعلام نخواهد شد. علاوه بر این، مصاحبه در محل دانشگاه مربوط که پیش تایید شده انجام خواهد شد به منظور حفظ احترام و راحتی در مصاحبه.

همه می‌توانند من مصاحبه‌ی خود را بینند. اما، نمی‌توانم آنرا در جریان جزیبات و اطلاعات مصاحبه‌شونده‌ی شرکت کنندگان دیگر قرار دهم. از آن جا که، هیچ یک از شرکت کنندگان را قابل شناسایی نخواهم کرد یا محتوای مصاحبه‌های آن‌ها را با دیگران به اشتراک نخواهم گذاشت. همه‌ی مطالی که قابل ملاحظه‌ی مشترک برای شرکت کنندگان است، خلاصه‌ای از نتیجه‌گیری می‌باشد.

چه قدر فرصت دارم برای در نظر گرفتن این دعوت؟

یک هفته.

شرکت در این پژوهش را چگونه قبول کنم؟

وقتی شما ابراز علاقه‌ی خود را به منظور مشارکت اعلام کنید، فرم رضایت قبل از شروع مصاحبه توسط من به شما ارایه خواهد شد.

بازخورد نتایج این تحقیق را دریافت خواهم کرد؟

بله، اگر شما ابراز علاقه‌ی خود را در بخش مربوطه‌ی فرم رضایت اعلام کنید، که شما خواهان دریافت بازخورد نتایج این مطالعه هستید، خلاصه ای از نتیجه را برای شما فراهم می‌کنم.

به شما خلاصه‌ای از نتیجه گیری نهالی و متن مصاحبه‌ی خونتان پیشنهاد خواهد شد.

چه کار نکم اگر نگرانی در مورد این تحقیقات داشته باشم؟

هر گونه نگرانی در مورد ماهیت این پژوهش باید در وهله‌ی اول به استاد راهنمای پژوهه اطلاع داده شود، بری کینگ، barry.king@aut.ac.nz .[921 999626](tel:921999626) داخلی

نگرانی در مورد اجرای این تحقیق باید به دبیر اجرایی AUTEC اطلاع داده شود، کیت اکتر، ethics@aut.ac.nz .6038 921 999
برای کسب اطلاعات بیشتر در مورد این پژوهش با چه کسی تماس بگیرم؟

اطلاعات تماس با پژوهشگر:

مانا احمدی وسطی کلابی، آدرس ایمیل AUT: ahmadi.mana@gmail.com، آدرس ایمیل شخصی: psf7847@autuni.ac.nz، بری کینگ، barry.king@aut.ac.nz

تأثید شده، توسط کمیته‌ی اصول اخلاق دانشگاه فناوری اوکلند در 4 آذر 1394 ، شماره‌ی مرجع 15/370

Appendix C: Consent form



Consent Form

AUT
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Project title: **Menstruation, Media and Audience**

Project Supervisor: **Barry King**

Researcher: **Mana Ahmadiostakolaee**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 10 October 2015.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEC Reference number type the AUTEC reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D: Consent form in Persian/Farsi



فرم اظهار رضایت

موضوع پروژه: قاعده‌گی، رساله‌ها و مخاطبان

استاد راهنمای پروژه: بری کینگ

پژوهش گر: مانا احمدی وسطی کلابی

- من اطلاعات ارائه شده در مورد این پروژه تحقیقاتی در برگه اطلاعات مورخ ۱۸ مهر ۱۳۹۴ را خوانده و درک کرده ام.
- به من فرصت پرسش و پاسخ داده شده است.
- من متوجه هستم که در طول مصاحبه و اداشت برداشته شده و نوارهای صوتی نیز ضبط و متعاقباً نوشته خواهد شد.
- من متوجه هستم که امکان انصراف از مشارکت در تحقیق و هر گونه اطلاعات ارائه شده در مورد این پروژه تنها قبل از تکمیل جمع آوری داده‌ها بدون متحمل شدن هر گونه زیانی وجود دارد.
- من متوجه هستم که در صورت انصراف، تمامی اطلاعات مربوطه از جمله نوار و متن، از بین برده خواهد شد.
- من برای شرکت در این تحقیق موافقت می‌کنم.
- من مایل به دریافت یک نسخه گزارش از پژوهش هستم. (طفا یک گزینه را انتخاب نمائید): بلی خیر

امضای شرکت کننده:

نام شرکت کننده:

اطلاعات تماس با شرکت کننده (در صورت امکان):

تاریخ:

تأثید شده توسط کمیته اخلاق دانشگاه فناوری اوکلند در تاریخ ۴ آذر ۱۳۹۴ با شماره ارجاع 15/370 AUTEC

Appendix E: Interview questions and materials

- 1) Tell me the story of this meeting, beginning when you first heard of it.
- 2) What media do you consume?
- 3) What is your opinion on exposure of menstrual cycle in media?
- 4) How does your family feel about menstruation? / How do you see yourself when you are on your period?
- 5) Are you pleased to get your period? Do women welcome it?
- 6) What do you think about these texts? (Will show participants the texts one by one.)
- 7) Do these representations match with what you expected?
- 8) What is your personal reaction? / How does this make you feel?
- 9) Is it a new sense? (What makes it in that way for you?)

Advertisements

- a) Image:



- b) Video: [U by Kotex Tampons Leakage Freakage](#)

Movie: [Boys Don't Cry \(1999\)](#)

Reality Show: [Keeping Up with the Kardashians S02E04](#)

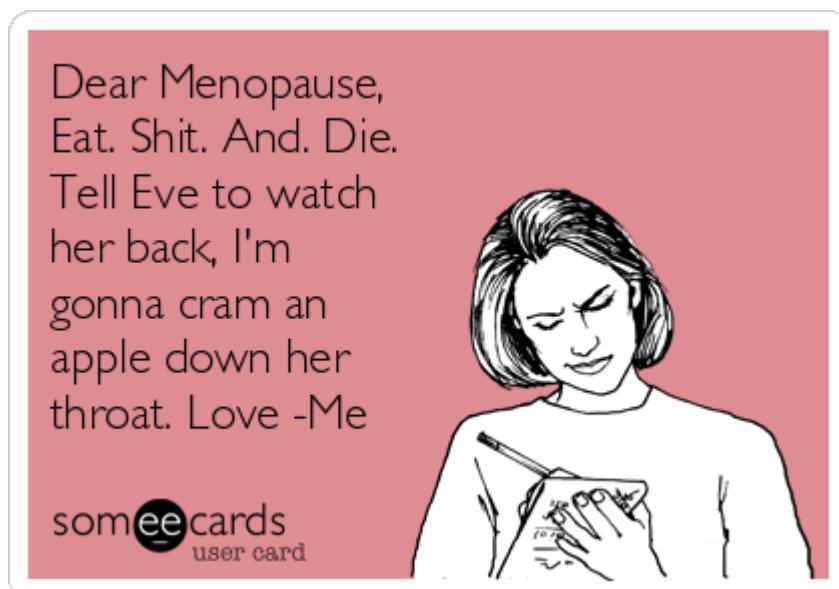
TV Series: [Desperate Housewives s04e01](#)

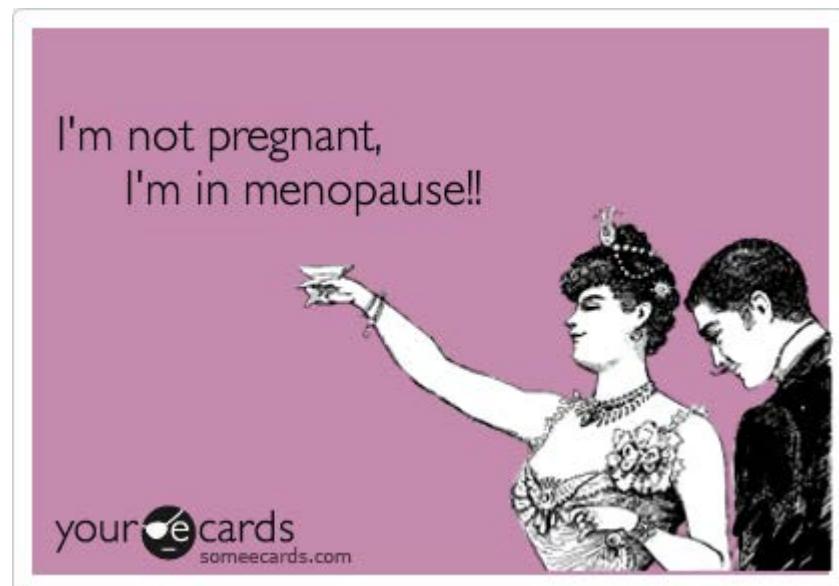
E-Card:

a) Text + Image



<http://iranwire.com/blogs/6302/7243/>

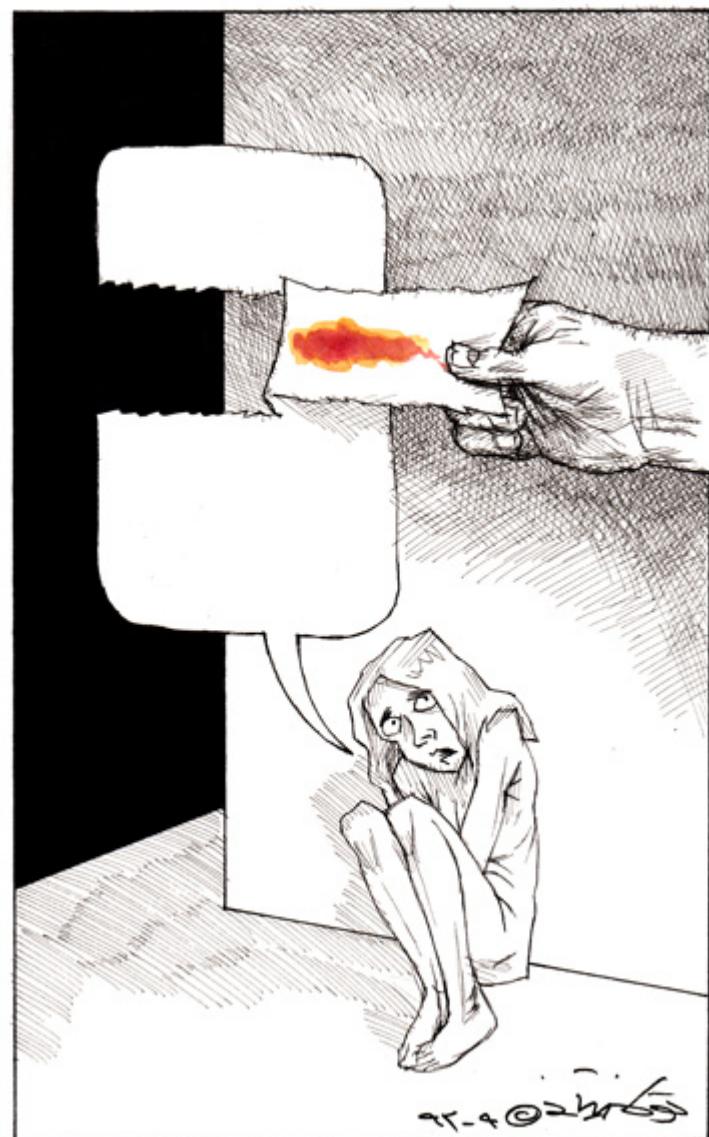




b) Text Only



Caricature:





How those countries in which the president is woman function? Cause, the president will go through her period and will ruin the whole nation!

10) After seeing & hearing the mediated representations of menstruation that I showed you and we discussed, what's your overall feeling and understanding about menstruation and menstruators? - Which one of the materials did you find most offensive and why? Which one was most informative and why?