

Baby Jane

After researching how menstrual taboos affect the female experience in today's society, I was inspired to create a video that examines this negative cultural behavior. I learned that even in the 21st century, society still uses menstrual standards to oppress women. My video explores elements of the female experience: the idea that beauty is pain, that we have to shave our legs and wear makeup, that it is unacceptable to have fat anywhere, and that ultimately our purpose is to be dainty and polite. In my video, I show gruesome representations of these ideas. I aim to take what society views as gross and intensify it. External forces (including friends, family, strangers, the media, fashion, and advertising) amplify and internalize this hatred in a woman's body and mind. Hatred towards oneself is the hardest to ignore and to deal with. This video outlines the injustice of this personal struggle.

This film contrasts the idea of disgust and discomfort with bright colors and carnival-esque music. My goal is to make the viewer as uncomfortable as possible. This accentuated disgust serves to evoke the experiences of life as a woman within our culture, and also the ultimate acceptance or surrender that occurs as young girls grow up.

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Out Damned Spot! How Menstruation is Used Against Women

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"So what would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? Clearly, menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine event... Generals, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ('menstruation') as proof that only men could serve God and country in combat ("You have to give blood to take blood"), occupy high political office ("Can women be properly fierce without a monthly cycle governed by the planet Mars?")"

-Gloria Steinem, "If Men Could Menstruate"

If you are someone who gets their period, think about the last time you were on your period, or maybe the first time. And if you are someone who knows people who get their period think about what they might have gone through. When you first got your period or the most recent time you did, did you feel ashamed? Scared? Had you heard horror stories about friends and family who had bled through their pants at school? Or been demeaned or devalued because of the fact that every month they bleed? Or maybe that person is you. Either way, to be a bleeding woman should not be something that is viewed as shameful or gross. You shouldn't be ashamed, or scared. Gloria Steinem correctly points out that if men had periods, they would be badges of honor. Instead, menstruation is being used to oppress, second guess and marginalize women even in today's society. Menstrual stigma runs deep. And examples of women's rights and abilities being restricted because of this are seen everywhere. In holy texts, the media, politics, the workplace, and more. Pliny the Elder, who was speaking hundreds of years ago, could be speaking today when he said:

“Contact with [menstrual blood] turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees fall off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison. And [he] shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening.”² To hear people speak of menstruation is to hear a story of fear and disgust, and it is to hear a justification for why women cannot be given the same privileges as men.

The idea of menstruation as a blight on women starts with religion. The five main religions—Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism—all have explicit rules and regulations that dictate what a menstruating woman can and cannot do. Although the idea of a bleeding woman should not unsettle God(s), the writings that are supposedly his word suggest otherwise. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all believe that menstruating women are dirty. The Quran says men should stay away from women on their periods “until they are clean,” (Quran, 2:223)³ In Leviticus, which applies to Christians and Jews, menstrual blood not only marks the woman but affects any man who touches the blood: “And if any man lie with her at all and her (menstrual) separation will be upon him, he will be *tamei* (unclean) for seven days....” (Leviticus 15:19-24)⁴ ‘Until we are clean’ implies that women's natural bodily functions make us gross or

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/the-me-in-we/201008/the-last-taboo-menstruation-and-body-literacy?amp>

² <https://www.sorchapeyton.com/project-2/>

³ <https://www.alislam.org/quran/2:223>

⁴ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus+15%3A19-24&version=NIV>

sickly. This makes women feel like something is wrong with their body, that they should separate themselves from others. Orthodox Jewish laws are so strict they prohibit any contact between a menstruating woman and man during her period and for a week afterward (Guterman)⁵ These holy texts are supposed to be the word of God and are supposed to teach people how to be good and righteous but instead are using women's bodies against them.

In other religions, women cannot cook food or attend places of worship while menstruating, and in some extreme cases, they are required to live separately from the rest of the family until their cycle is over. In still other religions, women on their periods “are thought to be in a “sickly” state, [and] . . . are not allowed fresh meat, juicy bananas or any red colored fruits. Furthermore, anyone who eats the food a menstruating woman cooks or even steps over, that person — particularly the husband — will become ill with a cough and possibly die”⁶ These negative ideas from religion have spread into the media as well, which explicitly carries on the same messaging. Breanne Fahs writes in *Out For Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* that “women face an onslaught of negative imagery about menstruation, as the media implies that menstruation makes women ‘unclean’ (Fahs). She goes on to say that “even the phrase feminine hygiene, a relic from 1930s advertisements for birth control, connotes that women should construct menstrual blood as fundamentally dirty (Fahs).”⁷ This type of stigma around menstruation has penetrated every aspect of the female experience and is cited and used to marginalize woman and justify exclusion and shame.

Religion and the media are not the only places that menstruation is used against women. Corporate America and politics are a daunting place for menstruating women. Because public bathrooms aren't stocked with pads and tampons like they are with toilet paper and paper towels, a women who runs out of period products or gets her period early that month finds herself in a stressful and uncomfortable situation. It doesn't help that the current president uses menstruation as a way to disempower and offend women who speak out against him as he did in his feud with Fox News host Megyn Kelly. After Donald Trump felt Kelly had gone after him about the sexual assault allegations made against him, he told another host that "you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her . . . wherever.”⁸ Saying that when women are on their periods they are irrational or overly emotional makes women afraid to let anyone know they are on their period for fear of being treated as weak or inferior. And this creates an environment of fear and shame and oppression. In Elizabeth Sagan's article in *Fast Company* called “Bleeding on the Job: A Menstrual Investigation,” one women said that when she runs out of period products or gets her period early, her first response is “Oh shit! Then I panic because I know I don't have any supplies. I get angry with myself for not being prepared. Then, I pray I have quarters for the tampon machine, and then, I pray there is a dispenser”(Segan). Another women in the same article said that “one of the most stressful parts about getting her period at work is trying to hide it from the men surrounding her”(Segan). Not having proper access to menstrual products or just running out is why “18% of American women have missed work out of fear that someone might discover they are menstruating”(Segan).⁹ The fact that we expect women to be able to do work and do it well when they are in an environment where they feel

⁵ <http://ispub.com/IJWH/5/2/8213>

⁶ <https://www.thedailymeal.com/entertain/10-food-taboos-around-world-slideshow>

⁷ <https://books.google.com/books?id=CKUwDQAAQBAJ&pg=PA25&lpg=PA25&dq=Out+For+Blood:+Essays+on+Menstruation+and+Resistance>

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/08/politics/donald-trump-cnn-megyn-kelly-comment/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/3061417/bleeding-on-the-job-a-menstruation-investigation>

they can't let anyone know when they are on their period because of shame, embarrassment and the possibility of their period be used against them should not be tolerated.

Often men in power, or those who fear losing power, will use menstruation as some kind of disabling and even disgusting condition. When Hillary Clinton ran for president, some wondered how she could make rational decisions when on her period, even though she was 69 and probably no longer menstruating. But such attitudes are not new. In 2013 a study suggested that women's periods affect their political opinions. So, in 2015 a new study was done to show that in fact women were not thrown into a state of indecision and confusion by menses.¹⁰ But the fact that such studies were even conducted says a lot about how we cling to falsehoods that surround menstruation. And when misinformation is not enough, shaming comes into play. Jane Ussher, professor of Women's Health Psychology at Western Sydney University, said that people often view "anything . . . coming out of us as women . . . as disgusting. So that would be menstruation, breast milk, sweat . . . what it is to be female is seen as abject." Ussher says that girls are taught from a young age to hide their periods, and this "not only affects how women feel about menstruation but how they feel about their bodies."¹¹ Rose George in her journal for The Guardian, *Menstrual Leave: A Workplace Reform to Finally Banish the Period Taboo?* says "Like millions of other women and girls, I had never encountered anything in society to teach me to treat my periods with anything but shame."¹² She goes on to say that she catches herself being concerned about carrying lipstick in her pant pockets for fear that it looks too much like a tampon. When girls grow to be adults who have always felt shame around a natural bodily function, it is hard to imagine them not internalizing this idea as an instant inferiority. Some have claimed that menstrual taboos are misogynistic at their core and that a society that typically supports male demonstrations of power will naturally want to marginalize women with whatever means they can find. Menstrual shame is one of those means.

Although there are cultures that don't have negative ideas about menstruation they are few and far between. One of these societies are the Shakta. Every year there is an annual fertility festival in the summer that is meant to celebrate the menstruating course of the goddess of desire Kamakhya. In Sikhism, menstruation is not seen as unclean or gross. It is seen as a god-given process and necessary for the creation of life. According to the Cherokee beliefs menstrual blood has extreme strength and can destroy enemies. In parts of Africa, menstrual blood was considered extremely powerful and used only in the most powerful magic charms when trying to purify or destroy.¹³ Even within these societies where menstruation doesn't come with negative stigmas, the women still have to deal with the stigmas from the societies around them. So, although cultures with period positive ideas exist, they have been pushed out of the public view, and are hard to come by.

Abolishing menstrual taboos and stigmas matters because stigmas have real world effects on women's mental and physical health. Such taboos also affect relationships and success in the workplace. Not speaking about things that happen to us, especially that are directly linked to our bodies, makes those things unspeakable. It makes it horrifying and embarrassing and creates a dangerous environment where women are too scared to ask for a bathroom break so they develop Toxic Shock Syndrome (a disease caused from a release of toxic chemicals into the body by way

¹⁰ <http://ispub.com/IJWH/5/2/8213>

¹¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2017-09-30/menstrual-cycle-taboo-holds-women-back/8996526>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/28/menstrual-leave-period-taboo-work-reform-women-health>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_and_menstruation

of a tampon left in for too long), or don't have access to period products so they don't go to school or work at all, or they don't have access to clean, sterile period products and end up extremely sick from using old rags or socks. And the fact that "The United Nations has declared menstrual hygiene a public-health, gender-equality and human rights issue" (Weiss-Wolf Time Magazine),¹⁴ and that we still haven't filed the taxes on menstrual products, and that we haven't made them easily accessible to women is absurd. The fact that in this day and age menstruation is still being used to oppress and demean women and their opinions is embarrassing.

A worldwide cultural shift around menstruation and women in general needs to happen. We need to stop viewing women's bodies as gross or impure. As objectifiable and anything less than beautiful. We need to stop body and period shaming because there is no need for periods to be taboo or for women to be ashamed or embarrassed by them. There is no need for men to use periods as a way to control and oppress women. And there's no need for period shame to stop women from achieving what it is that they strive for.

¹⁴ <http://time.com/3989966/america-menstrual-crisis/>

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