

A Study of Women's Period Experiences inside Dhaka City: At
Home and Workplace

By
Fariha Haque
18217003

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Declaration

I hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material accepted or submitted for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Student Full Name: Fariha Haque

Student ID: 18217003

Approval

The thesis A Study of Women's Period Experiences inside Dhaka City: At Home and Workplace that Fariha Haque (18217003) submitted in the Fall of 2023 was accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology on 19/11/2023.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:

(Member)

Dr. Seuty Sabur

Associate Professor, Department of Economics and Social Science

Program Coordinator:

(Member)

Dr. Shahidur Rahman

Professor, Department of Economics and Social Sciences

Chair:

(Member)

Dr. Wasiqur Rahman Khan

Department of Economics and Social Sciences

Abstract

Women's income is still seen as a secondary source of income by their family members regardless of their professional success. This belief system also permeates the workplace as the male counterparts look down on their female counterparts. Yet, women have consistently shown themselves to be just as productive as men in the workplace, time and time again. But are expected to work just as hard as men, without complaining or raising physical or family issues at work. The fact that women are seen as more of a consumer rather than a producer of the family's standard of living is a widespread chauvinistic mindset that leads to continuous stigmatization around 'menstruation' and 'menstruating women.' The study looks at the main difficulties women face when menstruating on a workday and their living conditions, which may be linked to their barriers to advancement in their field. As a result, deep-seated gender discrimination is becoming increasingly visible in the workplace.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Every 28 days of the month, menstruation occurs naturally in the female reproductive system. During the initial two to three days of menstruation, women typically experience fatigue, nausea, headache, and heavy menstrual bleeding. Additionally, blood loss can cause severe discomfort in other areas of the body. However, the way in which menstruation is perceived by society has caused this biological bodily alteration to become a hindrance to women's daily activities. Bleeding and menstruating are spoken of in an unfavorable manner in social settings across cultures, and are perceived as demeaning and embarrassing experiences that can manifest in a variety of ways and are detrimental to menstruating women. Traditional taboos and beliefs associated with menstruation, such as those that some view as unclean or dirty, may lead to behaviors such as isolation, exclusion from religious gatherings, or restrictions on a person's daily activities during menstruation. As a result, menstruation can naturally lead to feelings of guilt and shame, which can lead to a reluctance to speak about menstruation or seek assistance when necessary. (Cnc, 2021)

The perpetuation of a stereotypical culture around menstrual health paves way for continuous discrimination against women in the workplace. Because menstruation is perceived as a burden for employers in certain cultures, it can lead to women taking time off for their period due to a lack of hygiene facilities or out of shame. Furthermore, women may not seek medical attention for menstrual problems or conditions due to the stigma associated with menstruation. Thus, problems like infections and other health issues may result from a lack of access to hygienic items

or sufficient breaks when needed to manage painful periods. Women who have leak stains or takes leave to cope with their menstrual-related issues at the workplace are most likely to face direct or indirect bullying and ridicule from colleagues and supervisors upon their return. The impact of menstruation on productivity and efficiency is not uniform across all individuals. This is due to a variety of factors, such as differences in physiology, menstrual symptoms, intensity of pain, condition of mental resilience and availability of support and accommodation at work. Not all individuals experience the same type or severity of menstrual symptoms. Some may experience mild discomfort and minimal disruption to their daily routines, while others may experience unbearable pain, fatigue, and mood fluctuations that significantly interfere in their productivity. Each individual's mood and psychological state is affected differently by hormonal changes throughout the menstrual cycle. The impact on productivity can be largely determined by the level of support and accommodation available at work as well. Cultural norms and social attitudes around menstruation also influences the ways menstruation is perceived and managed in the workplace. In some cultures, menstruation may be viewed with more stigma than in others, while in other cultures, there may be a greater level of openness and empathy towards menstruating women. The level of productivity that is affected by menstruation can be largely determined by the availability or absence of menstruation-friendly accommodations within the workplace. It's interesting to note that the impact menstruation has on productivity can differ significantly depending on the nature of the work too. Jobs that involve physical labor, long work hours, or demanding hours can be more challenging for women who menstruate. In order for employers and colleagues to create an inclusive workplace that considers the unique needs and challenges of each employee during their menstrual cycle, it's important to

recognize the variety of menstrual cycles in women. Employers and recruiters often have preconceived notions that women are less reliable, productive, or dedicated during their periods. These preconceptions can affect hiring decisions, leading to qualified people being turned down based on their menstrual health. Employers may think that women are more likely to take days off due to menstrual problems, even though this it might not be the case every time.

This fear of absenteeism, combined with a negative perception of menstruation, has led to discrimination in the selection of female candidates, particularly in the white-collar sector of Bangladeshi labor market. This discrimination hinders inclusion and diversity. Recent years have seen a significant amount of research on menstruation among adolescents and women living in rural areas of Bangladesh, where access to menstrual hygiene and sanitation is limited. Much of this research has focused on the female blue-collar workers of Bangladesh, who are subjected to long shifts without washroom breaks, necessitating drastic measures to ensure that menstruation does not interfere with their job performance. However, there has been almost no research conducted on female white-collar working women, who also face long shifts and often encounter similar problems while menstruating, especially if they suffer from period-related pain. This study is looking into how Bangladeshi women work in the private sector feel about menstruation. The stories they've given us give us a better idea of what they've gone through in the past, what might have changed in the last few years, and what problems they're still dealing with because of the lack of better period help in Bangladeshi workplaces. The outcome of this thesis will help us get a better understanding of the struggles Bangladeshi women face in the workplace and how the stigma around menstruation still exists.

1.1) Theoretical Framework

In the context of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the term is used to refer to the knowledge and skills acquired by individuals and the cultural norms that shape their experiences of life. (Bourdieu, n.d.). Here, the theory can also be connected to women's general knowledge, experience, and menstrual management skills. Again, this is based on the writings of Bourdieu, and the term "symbolic violence" describes how dominant groups impose their norms and values on subordinate groups. (Bourdieu, n.d.), which may be utilized to clarify the justification behind the practice of period shaming and stigmatization by both men and women, reflecting on patriarchal society's conception of menstruation. Further, Foucault's concept of "biopower" can be used to examine how the state apparatus contributes significantly to the resistance against women's and advocacy groups by fully taking control over their access to period-related products and helping them fight period poverty. (Geng, 2021) also maintains stigma through laws and rules that either prevent or make period poverty worse. By limiting the supply of period-related goods, these laws and regulations have a significant influence on how women's lives will be affected. (G.2023)

Although the biopower allowed the medicalization of women's bodies, which eventually turned menstruation into a medical concern, (Alavi, 2021) The upside is that this process has advanced medical knowledge and practices, resulting in improved healthcare for menstruating individuals. It made period products more available for women. Women can be a little less discreet with the use of menstrual products, hiding menstrual symptoms, using cotton clothes as an alternative to sanitary napkins, and the prohibition of openly discussing menstruation even with fellow women, as we can see in our interlocutors. (Medicalization of PMS and

Menstruation, UBC Wiki, n.d.) But the issue is that it is completely a biological matter of concern rather than an experience that affects both the mind and body of a person. Hence, it is a psychological experience as well, which is barely acknowledged. Using Foucault's framework, it is possible to see how individuals and groups counteract biopower. For instance: the actions of Ashrafi's brother, who took care of her during her period; the protection of her younger coworkers; the sanitary pad-bringing of Farha Ahmed's father; and the encouragement of candid conversations about menstruation within the family.

1.2) Research Purpose

This study is going to give an anthropological look at how Bangladeshi women are dealing with the stigma of menstruation in their home and workplace. It's going to show how a person's attitude, positive or negative, can really affect the mental and social standing of women just by accepting or not accepting their menstruation journey. Instead of thinking about what female employees need, workplaces make it easier for male workers to do their jobs. Even the job criteria are made to focus on what men do better than women. In that case, asking for menstrual assistance or leave just makes things worse. It's a very stigmatized topic and people often ignore it. A lot of women deal with the pain of menstruation in discretion. They are often forced to hide their menstruation symptoms even in the comfort of their own homes instead of being able to relax and take care of themselves more easily. Because menstruation is still considered a dirty secret, especially when it is discussed with the men in the family, many women are forced to keep it away from any conversation, suffer silently or even try forget its existence at all as a coping mechanism commonly taught to women from South Asian culture. As we move forward, we will learn from the stories

of women's own menstrual experiences how, with so much negativity surrounding a natural phenomenon, women are unable to be themselves or achieve their goals without being judged by the people around them. We will use shared experiences to gain a better understanding of women's lives and their complicated relationship to menstruation, as their experience of menstruation is heavily affected by the culture in which they live.

1.3) Research Questions

- What sort of challenges do women in Dhaka encounter at the workplace while handling their menstruation?
- What kind of circumstances are women in Dhaka enduring within their homes as they deal with their menstruation?
- How are menstrual experiences at home manifested at the workplace?
- How are women's career advancements consistently hindered by the negative attitude fostered against menstruation?

Chapter 2

Research Methodology and Site

In order to conduct this research, I have used qualitative methods and conducted in person interview session with five knowledgeable female participants. Two of these individuals have a long history of working in the white-collar industry of Dhaka, while the other three individuals represent the current workforce. The purpose of the age gap among the respondents is to explore the current and past status of menstrual experiences among working women. For which, I have selected qualitative research method and IDI method for the interview process. Every participant received a questionnaire with common inquiries on it, and based on their answers, a recorded interview was held with each of them. This procedure was carried out in order to incorporate any information that might have slipped through the questionnaire. Due to this, I was able to closely monitor each person's response regarding their menstruation as the questions were developed based on their menstrual history.

The interview focused on five women in Dhaka who lives in Mohmmadpur and Dhanmodi area of Dhaka. They have similar financial backgrounds which is higher middle class respectively. The interview sessions only took 40-45 minutes each, which was cut back to fit each person's busy schedule. They are all between the ages of 25 and 55, so there's significant distinction in how they experienced menstruation. We can divide the group into two groups based on their ages and how they live. The older group is in menopause and has gone through their periods, while the younger group is still going. We'll also talk about their menstrual cycles in this study.

To ensure the anonymity of each respondent, I have adopted a pseudonym for each of them. The respondents, Zia and Ferdousi Khan are coworkers with comparable titles

under the same organization. For the purpose of this paper, they will serve as the senior generation of menstruation experience. On the other hand, Hanna Ara, Aireen Noor and Farha Ahmed will represent the menstrual experiences of the younger generation. One out of five of these respondents reported no pain during their period, while the other four expressed excruciating premenstrual symptoms (PMS), severe cramping, muscle spasms, back pain, nausea, exhaustion, low blood pressure, sporadic headaches, digestive problems like bloating, constipation, or diarrhea, high fever, muscle and joint pain, loss of appetite, depression, and frequent mood swings. Therefore, we will be following the pattern of the shared experiences as mentioned by the respondents to learn more about the present condition of menstrual support inside Bangladeshi workplaces through the menstrual journeys from the viewpoint of female employees of Dhaka City.

As for secondary data resources, numerous pieces of information were collected from existing research papers, books, report writings, newspaper articles, and blog posts from both the internet and books available. Additionally, the study heavily relied on the deep information from online articles about menstruation because, in contrast to other sources, these articles highlighted a number of fascinating little details and recent findings coming from social scientists and international organizations. Suitable for creating a thorough literature review.

Findings

Table: 2.1 Background of the interlocutors:

Name	Age	Occupation	Salary	Educational Qualification
Zia Noor	55	Underwriter	Above 1 lac	Master in Islamic Education, Dhaka University
Ferdousi Khan	52	Underwriter	Above 1 lac	Bachelor in (B.Ed), Social Sciences, TTCT
Hanna Ara	30	Graphic Designer	10,000	Bachelors in EEE, (BRAC University)
Farah Ahmed	27	Copywriter	7000	Graduated from BRAC University
Aireen Noor	25	Assistant	-	Graduated from BRAC University

Chapter 3

Women Denying the Menstrual Rights of Other Women

3.1) What is Period Shaming?

'Period shaming' is the term for the social shame and discrimination that some people, mostly women and those who menstruate, experience in connection with their menstrual cycles. It includes a variety of unfavorable attitudes, convictions, and actions that may be displayed toward people who menstruate. (Cnc, 2021). The topic of menstruation is taboo in Bangladeshi culture. People may not freely discuss menstruation. Resulting in a lack of knowledge and awareness of it. According to an article by CHR Michelsen Institute, "the shame about menstruation is a symptom of a not yet achieved gender equality or in other words a symptom of patriarchal ideas about the role of women and girls in our society." (Let's Talk About Our Periods, 2023)

Menstruating women regularly experience stigma or guilt for what is only a normal biological process. Making offensive or inappropriate remark causes menstruating women to feel ashamed or degraded. They may also avoid seeking help for the fear of causing discomfort to their family members, relatives, and neighbors by asking for menstrual hygiene products. Such fear is often introduced by period shaming. A study conducted in the USA by 'menstrual hygiene day', says, "Menstruation is one of the most natural functions in the world. It is a mark of femininity and fertility, and a huge part of life for most women. Yet, for some reason, women are frequently made to feel

ashamed or embarrassed simply because they bleed, and, according to new research, this shaming often comes from those closest to them.¹ Because of this, women's discomfort about their menstruation remains unchanged.

The act of embracing and believing in the negative beliefs, taboos, and shame connected to menstruation is known as internalizing menstrual stigma. This indicates that due to societal, cultural, or personal factors, people—especially those who menstruate—have come to believe and feel humiliated or embarrassed about their own menstrual periods. Menstrual stigma has an array of detrimental impacts on a person's well-being and self-esteem when it is internalized.

3.2) Women Practicing Period Shaming

Women who are affected by cultural, societal, and personal reasons by internalizing menstrual shaming. And often engage in shaming other women about their period experiences. These women fail to recognize that period shaming is damaging and unhelpful and that these justifications are crucial. Menstrual misconceptions, fears, or discomfort can result from inadequate information and come out in the form of period shaming.

Menstruation can cause individuals to react unfavorably if they are not adequately informed about why and how the process works naturally. It is an outcome of cultural and societal conventions surrounding menstruation. And is also viewed as filthy or impure inside many communities in Bangladesh which causes females to feel poorly about themselves. The respondents to this paper experienced period shaming at the hands of women, which exemplifies the concept in action stemming from a variety of circumstances as per the experiences shared by the interlocutors.

According to Aireen, her mother has treated 'menstruation' as a vile subject to discuss or even experience during her entire lifetime. She says, "As a child, whenever I would leak, for I had extremely heavy flows that once resulted in hospitalization, she would accuse me of not wearing a pad or taunt me for not being able to take care of myself or of not being civilized enough to do so even though her symptoms were beyond my control and required medical help." She also added that her grandmother would not let her mother or her other daughters even acknowledge having had their periods.

She added that it was her grandmother who forced her children to never admit to having them or even showing signs, so they had to always manage it without letting her understand at all, starting from their first period. In Aireen's own words, her grandmother made it seem like periods were 'defects' that women could overcome simply by not acknowledging their existence. Once she was told by her mother that her mother would leave the house the day, she and her sisters got their first period due to how disgusting it was, and she feels as if a lot of her present discomfort regarding periods comes from that.

Aireen also believes that it was her great-grandmother who taught her grandmother to view menstruation as a negative experience. Hence, the traumatic experiences were then passed on among Aireen's mother and aunts, who would later teach their daughters the same behavior. Therefore, Aireen had a very toxic relationship with menstruation, as instructed by her mother's side of the family. Following the pattern of menstrual experiences, it is found that some women are susceptible to the social stigma associated with menstruation, causing them to motivate others to partake in menstrual shame. They possibly grew up in settings where having a period was something to be dismayed about or concealed. To adhere to what is expected within their social group, women can indulge in period shaming.

Similar behavioral patterns can be found in the experiences shared by Farha Ahmed, who worked for a reputable fashion-based company in Dhaka. According to Farha, her boss was a female herself. Farha says, "The most my office did was let me work from home during my period days. And even then, in some cases, my boss would think I had not done enough work from home, which they wouldn't tell me directly to my face, but when I got back in the office, they would find one way or another to give me more tasks to perform by mentioning that I did less work last week and work has piled up a lot since I was not present physically in the office! As if I had gone on a vacation and did not tell them.

She adds, "I could work from home during my menstrual days; there isn't much to say. But yes, I would have to ask for permission from my boss for it, which is understandable. But what bothered me was how, in some cases, I would have to send a message in the office chat group if my boss had not responded when I needed them to. Not that anyone had any issues with it, but I was uncomfortable with the situation. The reason I had to send messages in the group was that if I did not notify my boss as early as possible, then the possibility of my getting scolded and maybe even getting my day's salary cut was high.

The way Farha's boss approaches her when she takes menstruation leaves shows how some women are motivated by gender role interpretation to keep period-shaming the women in their lives, especially when it happens in front of the public. Systemic gender inequality at contemporary companies in Dhaka is indicated by the fact that employees are overworked to make up for absences and are paid less when they take menstrual leave. Such behaviors merely discourage female workers from seeking help for problems like menstruation and those who are in extreme need, like Farha, who suffers from painful period conditions.

According to Farha, her boss has told her multiple times, "You could only take leaves because I am considerate enough. If it were some other organizations, they would have gotten rid of you way earlier." The victims are left feeling ashamed and disturbed by such offensive remarks, which could traumatize them for the rest of their lives. Women are inclined to put their health at risk rather than jeopardize the careers they have worked so hard to establish in a competitive workplace. Based on their own experiences, many women tend to judge or disparage other women who experience various menstruation symptoms or cycles. The initial cause of period shame usually involves personal insecurities. It implies that those who judge or blame others for their emotional or physical problems during menstruation are "overreacting" or being "too sensitive." Another typical manifestation of period shame in women can be linked with Ashrafi's case of menstruation with her mother and maternal aunts.

Another respondent, Ara believes that her mother plays a strong role in the negative experiences she endures at home. Her mother has told her to hide her period symptoms from all family members and encourages her to be present despite the pain and discomfort. According to Ara, her two maternal aunts have bullied her from time to time during family gatherings, where they blamed her weight gain for having an irregular period during her teenage years. She added that while suffering from irregular period flow for a year, her mother would take her to a renowned OB-GYN in the city. The doctor, while inspecting her problems, suggested that conceiving would solve all her period-related problems. Then, I prescribed her medicines that completely stopped her period. Later, she stated, "I had to fight with my mother to stop taking the medicines as it is stopping me from having my regular period as she would not listen to me at all."

It can be understood that many women who are self-conscious about their bodies or menstrual cycles frequently make other people feel degraded about themselves. Women may use period shaming as a way to express their resentment or wrath. As a result of this unhealthy way of managing emotions, Women may not develop a strong bond of trust among themselves as a result of this tendency.

Chapter 4

Impact of the Menstrual-Related Belief System

Inside the Home and Outside at Work

Family support is extremely beneficial for a menstruating woman because it helps to break taboos by provide accurate information while educating and guidance about menstruation. This support makes the experience less intimidating to women by enabling a better understanding of what's happening to their body. A range of emotions, including confusion, discomfort, and mild to severe pain, can be triggered from menstrual blood loss. Family support helps people feel more at ease with their physical changes by offering emotional comfort and assurance.

Menstruation is highly stigmatized socially and culturally in most societies around the world including Bnagladesh. By dispelling these misconceptions and taboos, families can cultivate a culture where menstruation is accepted as a normal and healthy aspect of life. Also, receiving family support during the menstrual cycle can increase self-esteem and confidence among menstruators which they might lack otherwise caused by unfavorable circumstances regarding menstruating.

4.1) Supportive Family Members

A more open and sympathetic society is brought about by men, who play a crucial role in supporting menstruation. The first step is to educate yourself on the menstrual cycle, its biological processes, and its difficulties. It encourages both men and women to have more honest and open discussions about menstruation at home and in public by helping to eliminate myths and prejudices. To reduce the taboo and lessen stigma,

standardize conversations about periods. Male supporters often exhibit empathy and sympathy for women who are experiencing menstrual period pain without passing judgment. (Hendre, 2023)

They understand that for some people, menstruation can be physically and emotionally demanding. Men favoring menstruation can support their female family members by providing emotional support, whether it be in the form of consoling words, actions, or simply by being present. They also make an effort to assist menstrual women with their daily requirements, such as buying period hygiene items, doing errands, or giving them access to painkillers when necessary. Actively dispelling stereotypes and falsehoods about menstruation when they come across them. Additionally, by promoting gender equality in society and within the family, Supportive men also tend to defend activities aimed at addressing existing gender and menstrual-related inequalities through their actions.

All of these characteristics can be found in the behavior of Ara and Ahmed's siblings. Along with Aireen and Farha's fathers, respectively, who have frequently stepped up in support of their sister's and daughter's menstrual needs and continue to support them till today,

Ara says, "When I was younger and I got my first period, my mom tried to explain to me that it was taboo and that I shouldn't talk about it in front of my brother and father. But as I grew older, I realized that it should not be taboo. And it happens to every woman in every household, so I tried to break the stigma at home. I tried to talk to my brother, and he is very supportive of it. He even helps and takes good care of me during my period days by handing me food, water, snacks, and anything that relieves my pain.

Ahmed shares, "I have a younger brother who is almost close to my age, and when I started to have my period, there would be days when he would randomly start a physical fight with me, and it was not a pleasant situation at all. So, for my own sake, after dealing with this for almost a year, I tried my best to explain to him why I did not want to fight or play with him at certain times. To my surprise, I got to know he was kind of aware of how the period had worked, i.e., women bleeding out of their private parts. Thankfully, I didn't have to explain too much to him, and when I was on period, I would just shout 'Period' and that would keep him away from me for days! Also, my family is understanding enough about the matter that I can text my father to bring me pads when I need them."

In Aireen's case, she was raised by her father mostly during her teenage years. So according to her statement, "I have developed enough transparency with him to discuss her menstrual needs. My father also tried to talk her mother out of the negative attitude she fostered against menstruation for Aireen's physical and mental well-being. Therefore, I am grateful to him for understanding when my mother was not supportive at all."

In the context of larger societal settings as well as in their intimate relationships with menstruating women, men can play significant roles in supporting menstruation. In order to do so, it is important to dispel stigmas, advance understanding, and foster an atmosphere in which people who experience their period can feel valued, at ease, and cared for. Men as well as other members of society must work together to support menstruation; it is not solely the duty of women. They can positively impact individuals and communities by actively engaging in these roles and fostering a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of menstruation.

4.2) Family Members Denying Period

There are a number of reasons why family members might avoid talking about menstruation, including cultural, social, and personal factors. Menstruation is associated with long-standing taboos and beliefs in many cultures worldwide. Menstruation may be avoided because it is seen as unclean, filthy, or shameful in these cultures. For both individuals going through it and those talking about it, the menstrual cycle can be a cause of shame and embarrassment. To save themselves or the person going through menstrual embarrassment or discomfort, family members might choose not to talk about it.

It is possible that some family members—especially those from older generations—weren't raised with thorough education regarding menstruation. It may be challenging for them to participate in thoughtful conversations about the subject because of their ignorance. Understanding and attitudes regarding menstruation can differ between generations. There might be a communication gap in the family if younger members are more liberal and open-minded and older generations are more traditional or conservative in their beliefs.

Ara shared, she was never really open or comfortable discussing issues like menstruation with her father. She thinks that it's mostly because her dad was not around much while she was growing up because he had to stay away from home for work purposes. She also believes that her mother played a role in creating this barrier, as she never discussed stigmatized topics like this with her father or even allowed Ara to speak about them in front of him. Even her father was quite ignorant of the idea of menstruation from time to time. Ara said, "I think my dad intentionally tries to avoid speaking about menstruation as he chooses to create circumstances for me where I have to lie about my symptoms like having fever, stomach ache, and food poisoning.

But in reality, it's my period cramps that's killing me. I wish my father would be more open about it so that I didn't have to lie like this."

Even in Zia's case, she told us that she was taught from a very young age to hide her period from the male members of her family. She belongs to a large family of six brothers. Since then, she has witnessed her brothers reacting negatively to the period as time went by. According to Zia, it was her parents who enabled the negative attitude among her brothers, which remained unchanged.

-Women in Bangladesh are taught to hide their menstruation from male family members. There is an unrealistic belief that menstrual blood is so impure that even seeing period blood can make a man blind. One study found that some women have to wake up early before other family members just to wash their menstrual clothes (Organic Nutrition Limited, 2022).

4.3) Acceptance of Menstruation in Workplace Settings

For most women, the experience of managing their menstruation at work is not all that different from what they go through at home. A lack of open discussion or education about menstruation in some workplaces due to cultural taboos surrounding the topic becomes a hurdle in women's experience of menstruation similarly to what happens inside household settings. Women feel equally if not less uncomfortable sharing their needs or experiences in workplace environment regarding their menstruation. It is possible that many workplaces do not provide enough resources or assistance for managing menstruation. It can be difficult for women to manage their menstrual needs discreetly and comfortably when there are barriers to accessing sanitary products, private restrooms, or disposal options. Policies implemented in the workplace that do not take menstrual needs into account may constitute

discrimination. A hostile or unsupportive work environment may result from things like rigid work schedules, a lack of paid menstrual leave, or even unfavorable responses to requests for time off owing to severe menstrual symptoms.

Zia Noor had worked almost her entire life, she witnessed that when her female co-workers and subordinates requested period leave or benefits catering to menstrual needs, male managers along with male co-workers would consistently express disapproval. For instance, some of her male coworkers once commented: "Women go through period-like illness every month of the year. So, should we continue to work every day while the women rest? But when claiming pay, women always demand equal rights. But in reality, women should not be compensated equally if they receive these benefits without putting in the work." Even her male supervisors have occasionally stated, "Women seek equal rights, although they frequently take leaves whereas men do not."

However, she protested the statements by using the uncalled smoking habits of male employees as an instance. She called out the male colleagues by mentioning how frequently they would leave their desks 4–5 times a day for smoke breaks without being held accountable or frowned upon for their unprofessional behavior.

"On the other hand, women's menstruation is natural. So, asking for menstrual leave is a right that she should possess." Zia says, "The males showed no sign of changed behavior, and women have now backed off from arguing about this debatable topic any further since it did not prove to be effective in any shape or form." In her opinion, men have more competitive advantages than women in the workforce.

When men overlook the menstruation of women, it has a detrimental effect on both the individual and society. Ignoring to acknowledge menstruation indicates dismissing the experiences and requirements of menstruating women. And shows a lack of

empathy towards the physical and psychological difficulties of women. Leading to feelings of inadequacy and a lack of emotional support. Neglecting or dismissing menstruation as a –women’s issue|| perpetuates the stigma and shame associated with it. Ignoring or dismissing menstruation only reinforces the idea that menstruation is a –taboo topic|| that should not be spoken about openly. It also exacerbates gender inequality by disregarding the role of men in promoting understanding and equality. The prevalence of menstrual stigmatization has created a culture of exclusivity and a lack of support for those who experience it, as well as the perpetuation of false beliefs and misperceptions about it. This has led to a reluctance on the part of women to seek medical attention for menstrual-related problems, as it can result in a multitude of health risks that may not be identified. This can lead to a hostile environment in which menstruation is perceived as a negative experience, and those affected by it may not feel valued or supported.

Chapter 5

Period Poverty (then vs. now)

The main cause of period poverty is financial constraint. It is often difficult for many people, particularly those living in impoverished or marginalized communities, to afford basic menstruation supplies like tampons, pads, and menstruation cups. These items' regular monthly costs may become too much to bear financially. Lack of access to hygienic menstruation products can result in improvised or dirty materials being used, raising the risk of infections and other health problems. It has an impact on mental health as well because improper menstrual management leads to stress and anxiety.

Period poverty is also exacerbated by the shame and stigma associated with menstruation. Menstrual health can't be openly discussed due to this stigma, which makes it more difficult for people to ask for help or support. Such crisis has an effect on one's general well-being, work prospects, and education. Inadequate menstrual products may cause girls to miss school, which could result in an educational gap. Women may have to miss work, which has an impact on their earnings, productivity and even their job security at workplace.

5.1) Overall Condition of Period Poverty Inside Dhaka City

Urban areas may have a wider selection of menstrual hygiene products; however, access to reasonably priced solutions can still be difficult for economically disadvantaged individuals living in cities. In densely populated urban settings, low-

income residents have limited access to private, clean restrooms too. Public facilities in Bangladesh cannot always offer ideal circumstances for properly managing menstruation. Consequently, in terms of education and employment, women in urban areas are often affected by period poverty. If they cannot adequately control their periods, women have to endure multiple issues at work. Urban places are not exempt from the stigma associated with menstruation, generating further stigma and social isolation.

Noor (55) was born in Bikrampur but was raised in Lalmatia area of Dhaka. She started her period at the age of 14. According to her, she would frequently use old clothes that needed to be washed after becoming drenched in period blood. The garment is required to be rinsed in hot water with detergent and then dried outside in the sun to prevent infection. She states that since she was little, she has taken part in numerous sports and physical activities. She performed in the long jump during one of her sporting events. Her period cloth came off as she was performing. Though it appeared to the audience that she lost her balance and was harmed, she realized what had happened and quickly left the field to investigate. She never felt pain because, before it was too late, she had trouble comprehending how blood flowed. Additionally, she has a large family with numerous brothers and sisters. Buying sanitary napkins was costly and difficult to find in those days; the girls were only permitted to use them on special occasions. That was supplied by one of their relatives, who worked as a doctor at Dhaka Medical Hospital.

Both Ferdous and Zia shared their thought that girls of today are fortunate because people are becoming more open about talking about menstruation and having to use sanitary pads. In contrast to their era, basic resources like sanitary pads were scarce.

They both felt that their menstruation was a grim experience because they did not have access to sanitary pads in particular.

Thus, it is imperative to acknowledge and tackle period poverty in urban settings to guarantee that every person, irrespective of their financial standing, has access to the essential menstrual products and education for their overall health and wellness.

5.2) Current Condition of the Crisis

All three women, according to Aireen Noor, Farha Ahmed, and Hana Ara, say that they can afford sanitary goods for their periods. They favor a particular brand that is tailored to the sort of menstrual blood flow they typically experience. Even though they all endorsed those popular brands of period pads, like Whisper, Sofy, Tampax, and many other brands, were once too expensive for them to buy when they were unemployed, they were forced to resort to Bangladeshi-made sanitary products like Senora, Freedom, and Joya. Sometimes, the size and comfort of the pad are more important than the price. In general, they all agreed that the Bangladeshi-made pads were too narrow and delicate to manage menstrual blood flow.

However, the issue occurs when people fail to bring extra sanitary products or have unexpected menstruation in public. Most restrooms don't have any sanitary pads for women kept in storage. These events may also occur in work-related circumstances. All three women claim that none of their places of employment offer sanitary napkins to female employees and that they are expected to handle menstruation on their own. Aireen says she once experienced

an unexpected period in the middle of her workday. She sought out her female coworkers as well, but none had an extra pad to give. The last resort was to look for sanitary pads in the female restroom, only to discover that there were no such arrangements. Farha Ahmed experienced a similar event when she accidentally stained her clothes in the middle of work and could not find a period pad in her workplace.

So it is safe to say that during this period, poverty may have improved in terms of accessibility compared to the options in rural areas. It is yet to address the complex issue of the availability of menstrual products among urban dwellers. And take accountability for the significant difficulties faced by those who live in urban settings of Dhaka.

Chapter 6

Adopting Strategies and Coping Mechanisms at Work

Individuals who experience severe menstrual symptoms have to choose sick days or regular leave in the absence of a specific menstrual leave policy. Resulting into a rise in absenteeism, which could impact their productivity and attendance. Menstrual symptoms like weariness, discomfort, and cramps can affect a person's capacity for productive work.

Productivity also declines among menstruators, thereby compromising the quality of work produced. Women feels forced to cope with severe symptoms of menstruation which can be emotionally and psychologically taxing. Their overall well-being is impacted, leading to elevated stress levels and decreased job satisfaction. They also tend to suppress or disregard their physical and mental needs and make their conditions worse by ignoring extreme discomfort or health problems related to their periods.

Gender inequality in the workplace exacerbates by the lack of menstrual leave. If men and women do not experience comparable biological challenges that call for specific leave, then women maybe unfairly treated. This is all because seeking assistance or modifications for managing menstruation at work may become uncomfortable as a result.

6.1) Treating Sick Leaves as Alternative Option

An article published by The Daily Star discussed the absence of menstrual leave in Bangladesh workplace policies. According to the article, –the very concept of menstrual leave is a neglected and overlooked issue in Bangladesh. According to a report by the International Labor Organization titled 'World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2018', 28.4% of women in Bangladesh are employed. Hence, menstruation leave is a topic worth bringing to the limelight.¶ The article further claims that –Research conducted by Acta Bio Medica, titled 'Dysmenorrhea in adolescents and young adults: a review in a different country' depicts that 59.8% of women in Bangladesh suffer from dysmenorrhea.¶ And goes on to elaborate on the current leave policies for employees under the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA, 2006), which offer: –10 days of unpaid casual leaves under (section, Act 2006), 14 days of paid sick leave (sections 116, 117, and 118), and maternity leave (sections 45–50). Though it includes specifications for reasonable behavior towards working women, it does not consider the inconveniences arising from menstruation for paid leave.¶ (Rights, 2020)

When asked about how she managed periods at work, Ferdous shared, I had unbearable period pain my entire life. I would take a short leave if my period started while at work and take sick leave from the office for the following two days to rest at home. But I feel bad when I look back on all the game-changing opportunities I had to let go of due to a painful period. Otherwise, I would be in a much better designation by now, I suppose.¶

Farha Ahmed had the option of taking period leaves, so she explained: –I could work from home during my menstrual days; there isn't much to say. But yes, I would have

to ask for permission from my boss for it, which is understandable. But what bothered me was how, in some cases, I would have to send a message in the office chat group if my boss had not responded when I needed them to. Not that anyone had any issues with it, but I was uncomfortable with the situation. The reason I had to send a message to the group was that if I did not notify my boss as early as possible, then the possibility of my getting scolded and maybe even getting my day's salary cut was high.¶ Therefore, taking menstrual leave came with a cost for these women. Hana Ara does the same thing as Ferdous and Farha, who say, -Usually I experience severely painful periods, so I try to take leave to rest at home.¶

On the other hand, Aireen has more manageable period symptoms at present but worries about not being able to handle the emotional symptoms that come along the menstrual cycle to maintain her most professional and stable self during her period. Aireen says, -I still take extremely frequent bathroom breaks to check for bleeding and sometimes wonder if I am being judged for it.¶

All these difficulties faced by the respondents can be greatly reduced by enacting flexible leave policies or menstrual leave for those who are suffering from severe menstrual symptoms. It acknowledges and supports each person's unique needs during their menstrual cycle, which promotes better health, higher productivity, and a more welcoming and encouraging work environment.

6.2) Employees Concealing PMS And Menstrual Symptoms at Work

This brings us to the next topic of discussion, which is the pressure of hiding period symptoms for the sake of professional and sometimes personal relationships.

Menstruation-related social taboos can cause embarrassment or shame. Some people may choose to conceal their discomfort at work rather than openly discuss their menstrual symptoms because they find it uncomfortable to do so. People may feel pressure to present themselves in a professional manner, which makes them hide any physical pain or emotional swings related to their menstruation in order to live up to expectations at work. It may seem easier for people to conceal their symptoms at work if there is a lack of understanding or support for menstrual health, rather than asking for accommodations or understanding. They hide their discomfort out of fear of being judged or thought less of because of menstrual symptoms. In an attempt to seem unaffected, this fear may cause tension and anxiety to rise.

Zia says, (-I did not suffer from a painful period cycle but I did go through heavy bleeding for which, changing pads now and then was necessary, especially during the first 2 days of my period. Also, there was a high chance of leakage which would constantly stress me while on periods). According to a health study report based in America, menstruation symptoms significantly affect productivity at workplace in women. (Swensen, 2023)

Ferdous on the other hand said, (-during premenstrual symptoms, I tried to hide my moodiness and crankiness. But it was really hard as it would affect my relationship with bosses and colleagues and I had to make up for my outburst later on by talking it out with each one of them in person. It was definitely frustrating.)

Even Aireen is insecure about having to leave her assigned place during work hours to take frequent washroom breaks. To explain the situation she says, –I think most of it is put into going in and out of the bathroom to check and being worried others are thinking I am not working hard enough as I am away from my desk a lot.¶ Also, it was visible that figure out from the storytelling of her life, the respondent did not have a healthy relationship with menstruation as her mother’s side had somewhat carried on an extremely negative idea of menstruation for which she might habitually hide her period symptoms as a trauma response. Farha Ahmed tried to break the stereotype of hiding menstruation in her family by taking steps and communicating her needs with her parents and her brother. Hence, she says, –Life has become easier for me ever since I decided to step up. Thank God! I had the courage to do so.¶

Hiding discomfort may have an impact on output since people find it difficult to concentrate on work when they are in pain or experiencing other symptoms. Severe symptoms that are ignored or concealed can put one's health at danger because one may neglect to get the help they need or take time off when needed. It is critical to establish a more transparent, understanding, and caring work environment where people feel at ease talking about their menstrual health needs. This entails offering the assistance and accommodations that are required as well as establishing a society that respects and values each person's needs without stigmatizing or passing judgment.

6.3) Female Colleagues Helping During Each Other’s Menstruation

Menstrual needs discussions can be held in a safe environment when coworkers demonstrate empathy and understanding. It can be very beneficial to be understanding when someone is in discomfort or needs a break. It's really beneficial to offer a heating pad, painkillers, or an extra pad or tampon. These modest deeds occasionally

have a profound effect. Colleagues who are supportive of the person in question may offer to cover for them or help finish work if they are feeling under the weather or need a breakthrough menstruation. People feel more at ease when they work in an environment where talking about menstrual health is not frowned upon.

According to Zia, for being a senior level officer, she did not become a victim of period shaming but has witnessed her fellow female colleagues being bullied by male colleagues for going through periods or taking leaves. She would step up to protect the females by telling men to understand and respect the female's journey. Ferdous had the responsibility of managing the department she was serving in. Therefore, when any of the female members had their period, it would be quite common for other female employees to come forward and fetch her sanitary pad. If the period was accidental, then they would ask for permission to leave their seats and visit the pharmacy, as asking the clerk of the office is considered humiliating and highly unprofessional in their work culture. Ferdous, as a manager, had always allowed her female subordinates to take washroom breaks as many times as necessary. She should also let other female subordinates step up for their fellow female colleagues if one of them suffers from accidental period leakage by covering up for them to the higher authorities. Thus, she had put in an active effort to utilize her managerial position to protect female employees as much as possible during her tenure at the workplace.

Need of supportive colleagues who creates an inclusive and understanding work environment, by people manage their menstrual health needs with less stress or discomfort is extremely required in workplace setting of Bangladesh to build a safe space for women employees to build a better future for all the women of this country.

6.4) Further Research

The results of the interviews shows that menstruation is associated with acute stigma and shame, which is why women in Bangladesh tend to avoid discussing it with male family members. They worry that their male children will find out about this shameful phenomenon. So, the mothers choose to control their daughters' or other female members' conduct during period inside homes. Additionally, parents avoid talking to their kids about sexual reproduction because of its taboo nature. Also, girls are not taught about menstruation until they reach reproductive age, which has been a cultural norm. Therefore, many women tend to have negative attitudes towards their menstrual journeys, like anxiety and a persistent fear of going through uncomfortable times every month. Not regulating legislation surrounding menstruation at workplaces presents a serious obstacle for women entering the workforce as they become older. The absence of such legislation jeopardizes a woman's reproductive health and professional prospects.

6.5) Assessment of The Outcome

The research findings indicated that a scarcity of assistance, including sex education and feminine napkins, played a role in the heightened anxiety experienced by older generations over their periods. However, as more people had access to sex education and physical education classes throughout time, menstruation became more openly discussed and awareness was raised. Despite a large number of men were once less accepting of menstruation, some of them are now supporting their spouses and children. It is also been noted that younger people are more straightforward about menstruating and its importance in social contexts, whilst the older generation still exhibits a degree of hesitation and apprehension.

6.6) Research Limitations

The process was harder to plan than I had thought because there was a lack of useful data about working women's circumstances on their periods. This was the first issue I had to deal with when doing my research. While addressing the challenges faced by teenage girls and women in Bangladesh's remote areas is as important, most research is based solely on their testimonies, that overlooks the difficulties experienced by women in urban areas, who should also be considered. And I was obliged to stay focused on the stories of working women employed by private companies because I did not have the time and resources necessary to cover the women working in government sectors inside Dhaka.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Women menstruate on a monthly basis. Therefore, it is essential to educate girls about menstruation and the consequences of menstruation early on in their lives. Having an in-depth knowledge of menstruation will prevent them from experiencing the kind of misconception or negative reaction towards experiencing period that the respondents described in this paper when they first started menstruating. Every working woman in the city of Dhaka should be able to get medical care and assistance for menstruation related issues including PMS, Polycystic Ovaries Syndrome (PCOS), Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOD), Endometriosis, Menopause and other health concerns with the help of menstrual rights.

The purpose of menstrual rights is to address essential aspects of gender parity, human rights, and safety that is actively absent from the current work environment of Dhaka city. As per UNFPA, –Menstruation is intrinsically related to human dignity – when people cannot access safe bathing facilities and safe and effective means of managing their menstrual hygiene, they are not able to manage their menstruation with dignity. Menstruation-related teasing, exclusion and shame also undermine the principle of human dignity. (Menstruation and Human Rights, 2022.) Many governments around the world, including Spain, as well as those of India, Korea, Japan, and Africa, have recently urged businesses to acknowledge the necessity for paid time off for female workers who suffer from severe menstrual discomfort (The Global Push for Paid Menstrual Leave as Spain Brings in Law, 2023). Standardizing paid menstruation leave guarantee employees who decide to take time off from work

won't be penalized or burdened financially. Employers in Bangladesh should thus take note of these measures and offer menstruating female staff with paid period leave when asked for.

The objectives of menstrual rights are to address fundamental aspects of gender equality, human rights and safety that are actively lacking in the current work environment in Dhaka city. According to United Nations Fundamental Rights Protection Agency (UNFPA), –Menstruation is intrinsically related to human dignity – when people cannot access safe bathing facilities and safe and effective means of managing their menstrual hygiene, they are not able to manage their menstruation with dignity (Menstruation and Human Rights, 2022). Furthermore, menstruation-related bullying, exclusion and shame are detrimental to a woman's human dignity. Governments around the world, such as Spain, and other Asian, Korean, Japanese and African governments have recently called on businesses to recognize the need for paid period leave for female workers who experience severe menstrual discomfort. (The Global Push for Paid Menstrual Leave as Spain Brings in Law, 2023)

And standardizing paid period leave guarantees that employees who choose to take off from work to deal with their menstrual cycles will not be penalized or financially burdened. Therefore, employers in Bangladesh should take these measures into account and provide menstruating female employees with paid period leave upon request. It is imperative to ensure that laws and regulations prohibit employers and employees from engaging in any form of discrimination against those who menstruate in order to gain an advantage over both genders and to ensure that menstrual rights are taken seriously. In the context of Bangladesh, the social taboos associated with menstruation should be eliminated, thus safeguarding menstruating individuals from

discrimination, harassment, and bullying by ensuring that menstrual rights are implemented in all workplaces.

Public spaces such as offices should be equipped with menstrual hygiene facilities that provide adequate disposal options for female personnel in order to guarantee menstrual rights. Lack of access to menstrual hygiene resources has been a major obstacle to the advancement of many women's careers. Therefore, the granting of menstrual rights to women is essential for safeguarding their status in the workforce and providing them with greater opportunities to succeed. Although Dhaka is more developed economically than the rest of Bangladesh, the menstrual rights of working women are still not safeguarded in the city. Therefore, granting women menstrual rights in the workplace will enable them to participate in the workplace more fully without feeling restricted by their menstrual period or being ashamed of it. The modern societies of Dhaka City should begin to recognize and advocate for menstrual rights for female workers in all sectors of the economy, such as the private sector, in order to encourage the less developed regions of the country to upgrade their facilities as well. As menstrual rights can provide solutions to issues, their implementation will help to create a more secure and hopeful future for the female population in the country by promoting acceptance of the equal value system across all settings, including homes and schools.

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7.2) Appendix

A questionnaire created by Fariha Haque for each participant understands their menstrual experiences respectively

Demographics:

Name.....

Age.....

Educational Qualifications:

Occupation:

Menstrual experience:

Brief description about yourself

.....

Period symptoms you face?

.....

.....

Salary range?

.....

.....

.....

Type of workplace: Friendly or gender-biased?

.....
.....

1) What are the main symptoms of your period?

.....
.....

2) Do you feel comfortable participating in conversations about periods?

.....
.....

3) How period related matters dealt with in your household?

.....
.....

4) Any healthcare facilities provided by the organization you work for?

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.....

5) Describe your menstrual experience at work.

.....
.....

6) Do you think menstruation can affect career growth?

.....
.....

7) Any arrangements for menstruation at your workplace?

.....
.....

8) What is your viewpoint on regularizing menstrual support at the workplace?

.....
.....

9) How much energy do you have to put into hiding your period symptoms at work?

.....
.....

10) Were there any incidents of harassment/bullying/period shaming in educational institutes /workplaces you've been into?

.....
.....