



## Women's perception of menstruation: a question of solidarity

*A percepção de mulheres sobre a menstruação: uma questão de solidariedade*

*La percepción de mujeres sobre la menstruación: una cuestión de solidaridad*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to describe women's experience of menstruation. **Methodology:** this qualitative study was based on the thematic content analysis method. The setting was a public university campus in Rio de Janeiro. Twenty-three women from 20 to 72 years old participated. Data were obtained between July 2015 and July 2016 by semi-structured interview. **Results:** the central theme/category was identified as solidarity among women with regard to menstruation. Four subcategories emerged: women's connection with menstruation; one's experience of menstruating affects others; influence and support from mothers and/or other women; and transference. **Conclusion:** menstruation causes ambiguous feelings in women, with negative feelings, such as fear and a sense of shame, predominating. At the same time, it can be seen as a reason for happiness and tranquility. Solidarity among women is a factor of empowerment, and can influence women's perception of menstruation positively. **Descriptors:** Menstruation; women's health; obstetrical nursing; social support.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** descrever a experiência de mulheres em relação à menstruação. **Metodologia:** estudo qualitativo baseado no método de análise de conteúdo temática. O cenário foi o campus de uma universidade pública no Rio de Janeiro. Participaram 23 mulheres entre 20 e 72 anos de idade. Os dados foram obtidos entre julho/2015 e julho/2016 através da entrevista semiestruturada. **Resultados:** foi identificada, como tema central/categoria, a questão da solidariedade entre mulheres quando o assunto é menstruação. Emergiram quatro sub-categorias: A conexão das mulheres com a menstruação; A experiência de menstruar afetando umas às outras; A influência e o suporte proveniente das mães e/ou de outras mulheres; e A transferência. **Conclusão:** a menstruação causa sentimentos ambíguos nas mulheres, resultando em predomínio de sentimentos negativos, como medo e sensação de vergonha. Ao mesmo tempo pode ser percebida como motivo de felicidade e tranquilidade. A solidariedade entre mulheres pode influenciar positivamente a percepção da mulher sobre a menstruação, sendo elemento de empoderamento.

**Descritores:** Menstruação; saúde da mulher; enfermagem obstétrica; apoio social.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** describir la experiencia de mujeres en relación con la menstruación. **Metodología:** estudio cualitativo basado en el método de análisis de contenido temático. El escenario fue el campus de una universidad pública en Río de Janeiro. Participaron 23 mujeres cuya edad estaba entre 20 y 72 años. Los datos se obtuvieron entre julio/2015 y julio/2016 a través de entrevista semiestructurada. **Resultados:** se identificó, como tema central/categoría, la solidaridad entre mujeres en relación con la menstruación. Surgieron cuatro subcategorías: la conexión de las mujeres con la menstruación; la experiencia de menstruar, afectando unas a las otras; la influencia y el apoyo de las madres y/o de otras mujeres; y la transferencia. **Conclusión:** la menstruación causa sentimientos ambiguos en las mujeres, resultando en predominio de sentimientos negativos, como el miedo y la sensación de vergüenza. Al mismo tiempo, podría percibirse como un motivo de felicidad y tranquilidad. La solidaridad entre mujeres puede influir positivamente en su percepción sobre la menstruación, siendo un elemento de empoderamiento.

**Descriptorios:** Menstruación; salud de la mujer; enfermería obstétrica; apoyo social.

## INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a natural process during women's reproductive phase and happens when egg fertilization does not occur. Historically, many cultures such as the Judeo-Christian have condemned menstrual blood as something dirty, but also as a symbol of feminine power, which was not acceptable at that time<sup>1,2</sup>. Records in history show that in Paleolithic cultures the woman was seen as a very powerful being. Menstruation or having monthly bleeding, usually without causing complications and being able to generate a new life, expresses a condition of female fertility<sup>2</sup>.

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The solidarity conception may have a positive and expected meaning as in the relations of couples, friends and family members. It also relates to partnership, trust and support in the most varied decisions and situations. The meaning assigned towards the attitude of solidarity in this study is positive, since aspects like harmony, companionship and understanding are demonstrated<sup>3</sup>. Menstruation is a routine phenomenon for women at fertile age, but the ones with negative experience are likely to report it as uncomfortable and unbearable<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, considering the biological, psychological and social intrinsic factors to this phenomenon, the objective of this research was to describe women's experiences related to menstruation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the relations among men and women, society determines a system of roles based on the political, economic and cultural context in which the representations of what is masculine and what is feminine are found, with the subordination of women in relation to men occurring over time<sup>5</sup>.

Besides the world health conferences, one of the highlights happened in 1984, when the Brazilian Ministry of Health implemented the Program for Women's Integrated Health Care (*Programa de Assistência Integral à Saúde da Mulher*, PAISM). Another relevant achievement - the National Policy for Integral Attention to Women's Health (*Política Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde da Mulher*, PNAISM), of 2004, represented a progress in women's health care. Over time and with new events, the debate on social issues and female consciousness has deepened<sup>6-8</sup>.

In this context, we find gender as the social construction of the masculine being and the feminine being, which carries in its essence the mark of power, favoring unequal relations among men and women<sup>6,9</sup>.

In this sense, the social and cultural aspects of menstruation and its influence on women over time raise concerns. Menstruation is a process related not only to women, but also to their social group, being a socially important event. According to sociocultural aspects, each social group has a distinct view and interpretation of menstruation, which marks the woman's life as it is a transition period in two different stages. There are cultures, for example, which elevate menstruation to a high social and community meaning providing rites and festivities for women in the menarche phase. Others exclude women from their social environment during this period. In this way, depending on the woman's sociocultural environment, menstruation expresses different beliefs, being developed and transmitted around this process<sup>1</sup>.

In the feminist perspective with regard to menstruation, women are closely linked to the power and structural inequalities that have oppressed them – or still do – in their bodily experiences. Menstrual shame was identified as the organizing principle that perpetuates male domination and female subordination<sup>10,11</sup>.

However, contrary to male hierarchical thinking, both menstruation and birth are sources of authority and power and place women ahead of men in the evolutionary path<sup>12</sup>.

Menstruation is often associated with taboos and myths that somehow directly influence a woman's relation with her social environment during the menstrual period<sup>13-15</sup>. Modern women experience more menstrual cycles when compared to their predecessors, who used to experience menarche later, with multiple pregnancies and long periods of breastfeeding and that suppressed menstruation.

Women's motivation seems to correspond to a more complex process, which is part of the concept that the woman is no longer obliged to fulfill her biological functions. Getting free from this biological function was one of the great achievements of the so-called feminine revolution<sup>16,17</sup>.

However, social pressure for hiding menstruation from others persists and influences the female behavior related to health.<sup>18</sup> Thus, menstruation has been seen with ambiguity: a necessary and unpleasant evil that is part of women's nature. At the same time, menstruation has been associated with health, femininity, fertility and youth<sup>16,18-20</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was based on the thematic analysis method, as described by Braun and Clarke<sup>21</sup>.

The narrative method was chosen, which provides a greater understanding of the experiences lived by women regarding menstruation. The narrative is a fundamental way of expression for communication among human beings. This work's narratives were obtained through data collection, in a qualitative research<sup>22</sup>.

Twenty-three women, aged between 20 and 72 years old, were interviewed based on the reflection of the theme: menstruation as a natural phenomenon. The total number of participants was determined by saturation of information. The *snowball* technique was used to find participants.<sup>23</sup> As inclusion criteria, women should have had or still have regular

menstrual cycles. In the study scenario, the women chose the location of the interview, the *campus* of a public university in Rio de Janeiro.

A semi-structured, individual interview recorded on MP3 equipment was used based on an individual script, containing informants' characterization questions and a triggering question. Additional themes were pointed for inclusion when not spontaneously addressed by the interviewees.

Thematic content analysis was used, which presents six phases<sup>21</sup>:

- Extracting the text from the interviews, through a thorough reading of the information, recording the ideas, familiarizing the related data;
- After the process; an initial coding of the characteristic data was generated;
- The search for themes began after creating a list of various codes;
- The accuracy of the themes was analyzed. The data and themes should be correlated, thus resulting in a thematic *map* of this analysis;
- After the thematic map was created, the themes were defined and named. Thus, it was possible to produce simpler definitions and also to name each specific theme;
- Finally, the final analysis was performed in order to reproduce the research report.

The study was conducted in accordance with Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council and approved by the Research Ethics Committee under opinion No. 1.507.975 and CCAE No. 55209016.40000.5282<sup>24</sup>. The women received information about the purpose of the study, they participate voluntarily and have the right to leave at any time. The informed consent was signed.

## RESULTS

Data analysis allowed us to identify the issue of solidarity among women as a central theme when it comes to menstruation. In this way, the theme constituted the main analytical category in which developments/dimensions were expressed in four subcategories, namely: Women's connection with menstruation; The experience of menstruating affecting one another; The influence and support from mothers and/or other women; and The transference.

### A matter of solidarity

Solidarity, according to the Brazilian Portuguese Dictionary, is a connection of two or more people, exchanging ideas, feelings, or a situation of a group in which attitudes and feelings are shared, making the group stronger and thus able to resist external pressures<sup>3</sup>.

In the context of menstruation, solidarity is related to support among women, the exchange of experiences, orientations, confessions and secrets because, as an exclusively female issue, women have better management on how to deal with it and thus, to help each other in any situation. It is important to emphasize that this support helps women feel safer and empowered to fully expose their values and have a strong sense of belonging, recognition and confidence in themselves.

*I was not ashamed because my cousins had already had their periods, I already knew a little. My mother used to talk to me, so it was easy. (E10)*

*I prepared her, I said she would come to an age when she would get her period, I cleared her doubts and showed her the care she should have. (E17)*

### Women's connection with menstruation

Instinctively or not, women show a connection with menstruation, understanding the moment as a way of being closely linked to their body, to femininity, to "being a woman". This connection will be manifested in each woman differently, influencing her life.

*Oh, it's beneficial, healthy, important to me... (E7)*

*It's a regular physiological process, it means I'm fine. The woman feels safer for sex, more prepared. (E22)*

Although still neglected by modernity, menstruation was present in the women's reports as a connection to their origins, since only women are able to menstruate and thus there is the symbol of femininity, sexuality and promising motherhood.

### How the experience affects one another

The experience of menstruation is felt in many ways by women, because, for each woman, the subject is discussed and experienced in different ways, depending on their education, culture and experiences.

For some women it was a quiet experience, without major concerns, as they had already been oriented and already knew the menstrual phenomenon experienced by family members.

However, negative experiences were reported, such as pain and body change that were later softened. Many taboos were also passed on to these women, thus resulting in an unsatisfactory experience. In other cases, with the support of others, they hid the fact that they had menstruated for fear or shame.

*I was 12 years old, my sister had already had her period and knew about it, my mother also helped me; I did not have big barriers. (E7)*

*The first experience was very bad. I got my period when I was 10 years old, I wasn't really prepared, my mother wasn't either and as a consequence, she had certain taboos to talk about it. It was a bad experience... (E11)*

*I hid it from everybody. My mother only got to know after almost a year. My mother worked and I used to stay with my sister, who was 18 years old. I was 12. My sister-in-law and I were the same age. And she was the only one who knew and helped me. She used to buy the sanitary pads for me and I would use them. It was after a long time that my mother saw it. My mother cried because there was no need to hide it, but I was embarrassed. (E19)*

### The influence and support from mothers and/or other women

The women's narratives presented various aspects regarding solidarity and the importance of another woman's presence when it comes to menstruation. The mother was mentioned as a great support and influencer during menarche, reassuring and guiding. The support from friends and family was also mentioned.

It was observed that, when rethinking their menarche experience, some women recognized the bad influence of taboos on their mothers' behavior when they did not meet the demand and their expectations regarding the menstruation process, resulting in dissatisfaction and feelings such as shame and fear.

*It was easy, because my mother had already guided me, so I just waited for the moment. I did not get scared, I did not despair, it was quiet. (E5)*

*I first heard about this subject from a friend. The first time I told my mother I got my period, I was slapped in the face. So I talked to my friend and she said I couldn't have sex, she gave me a contraceptive and I started using it. (E22)*

The participation of another woman to assist in the construction of the new meaning of menstruation was extremely relevant; the result was surprising: women are recognizing menstruation as natural and belonging to the female body and to femininity.

### The transference

It is a fact that the way women are educated related to menstruation will influence the education of their children, transferring their meanings and feelings to the next generation throughout their lives.

With this transference of guidelines, information is passed in order to create a kind of connection among women, a community, because it is only them that experience this phenomenon, understand their fears, doubts and joys and, thus, from mother to daughter, from friend to friend; among women this theme will be passed on, because it is part of their lives.

When asked about their message on menstruation to their daughters, the answers were positive. For mothers, it is relevant to pass information and guidance on so that they have good influences and experiences, as it is something that is part of women's lives.

*I prepared her, I said she would come to an age when she would get her period, I cleared her doubts and showed her the care she should have and how to use the sanitary pads, it turned out she used it the wrong way, but I had prepared her for that. I talked, and still do, about everything, not only menstruation. (E17)*

Therefore, guidance and information are important so that the woman is well instructed, has good experiences throughout her life and, thus, has the ability to pass the knowledge on to her daughters, friends, and other women who need guidance.



## DISCUSSION

As observed in the interviews, solidarity in this context is related to support among women, and to the exchange of experiences, guidance, confessions and secrets. There is also the intimate aspect of menstruation. It is a natural impulse not wanting to announce it, as women are educated to deal with it privately. The feeling of shame for being in the period is seen as a bad thing, as if the woman herself was to blame for what happened to her, for being in her period. Thus, women express the meanings of menstruation negatively, as they still see it as something that should be hidden, because it is shameful, stressful and involves taboos<sup>22,25,26</sup>.

This behavior occurs mainly between mother and daughter. Menstruation should be faced as something positive, being a confirmation of women's development and, especially, a sign of health<sup>22</sup>.

However, it is through solidarity that women will feel safer, more confident, more empowered, and thus become more integrated into society<sup>23</sup>.

Among the interviewed women, it was observed that they have a connection with menstruation, making them act naturally when it comes to this health sign. In addition, the results showed that menstruation was present in the women's report as a connection to their origins. The perception of menstruation seen as a natural process helps women to relate menstruation with femininity, sexuality and motherhood, which may form a greater bond between mother and daughter<sup>16</sup>.

Many women identify menstruation as a sign of health and normality, and its absence is characterized as some type of anomaly<sup>17</sup>.

Studies indicate that physical, mood, cognitive and behavioral changes occur during the menstrual period, resulting in the woman's complaining about many symptoms, which are understood as disorders, each with its severity level related to psychological, biological and environmental factors<sup>27,29</sup>.

However, some women were not oriented. With the experience of menstruation, they have learned that being a woman is being discreet, silent, accepting the body with resignation and without questions, with the mystery as an attribute of the feminine<sup>28</sup>.

Regarding how the experience affects each other, it was observed that women reflect the experience of menstruation in different ways, because, for each woman, the subject is discussed in a specific way, whether oriented or not, and each one reacts in her own way. The participation of another woman to help in the understanding of menstruation was relevant. Some women experienced quiet moments because their mothers or sisters had guided them. They found it strange at first, but then they were properly oriented. They had experiences and taboos were transferred; they were not oriented, which favored the emergence of feelings such as fears and shame. They even suffered aggressions; but also received the support of others connected with them. Other women were not oriented; however, they reacted naturally to the situation.

Many have learned how to be women by living and producing their bodies marked with too much shame, knowing a daily life of secrets, fears and shame, and sometimes going through this experience of menstruation in secret. According to them, their experience with menstruation introduces their process of becoming women<sup>28</sup>.

Even nowadays, there are taboos about menstruation which are transferred through generations by the *historical ancestral culture*. Menstruation has several symbolic meanings in various cultures: after the menarche, in some indigenous and African societies, the girl is isolated and she undergoes a rite of passage, which will introduce her to adulthood<sup>29</sup>.

Perception and influences are inserted into women's life history, including their cultural background and experience. With regard to menstruation, as it is still unexpected, many women experience its specific signs and symptoms in a unique and individual way, as these changes are linked to their biological, psychological, nutritional and environmental context. Support and guidance given by the family are also relevant<sup>14</sup>.

As stated above, the influence and support of mothers or other women are quite relevant. The mother figure was mentioned as the most influential among women. This support is sometimes complemented by friends and family and is naturally received.

For most women, the mother is the first person to talk about the situation, having a positive feedback most of the time. They are usually the first ones guiding women, although they may also contribute negatively for keeping the secret about menstruation, imposing restrictions on female bodies<sup>16,30</sup>.

When the mother is absent in this context, this role is usually transferred to the closest woman in her circle of friendship or family, and even the father can fulfill this function, as observed in the data, resulting in satisfactory support. In some situations, the guidelines on menstruation provided by mothers did not provide daughters with the necessary help to prepare themselves, or were simply not given. In this way, despite the secrecy and negativity about menarche and menstruation, women sought information by listening to conversations from adults, through older sisters, friends or at school<sup>16</sup>.

The importance was evidenced of transferring guidance and information so that the woman may be well instructed, have good experiences throughout life and thus, have the ability to pass her knowledge on to her daughters, friends or to other women who need orientation.

The analysis highlighted the importance of communicating about menstruation and other sexuality-related issues, especially information about body changes, care and responsibilities to be taken, thus generating safety and tranquility for women. It is noteworthy that this conversation is not only held by mothers and friends, but also approached at school by teachers. For some young women, school is the only source of information as their parents did not guide them, and so teachers become their main source of knowledge<sup>16</sup>.

Nursing can play a fundamental role in women's empowerment, in dealing with the phenomenon of menstruation by stimulating and enhancing solidarity among women. Acting as a mediator of educational practices centered on the reception and promotion of security may help women to strengthen themselves and to incorporate a positive meaning for menstruation in their lives<sup>31</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

It was concluded that several aspects may influence women's individual perception about menstruation and about how solidarity in relation to this phenomenon is relevant to them.

Menstruation should not only be seen as a natural and health process, but also as social one, as it is through culture and social representations that this process is constructed.

In addition, each woman lives her culture in her own way, even if she has been oriented and educated to experience representative roles of the feminine. Each woman has her own experience combined with the cultural representations of the group, such as mothers, neighbors, sisters and co-workers. So she attains various ways of experiencing the body and will be stronger with solidarity.

It was observed that menstruation causes ambiguous feelings in women, resulting in a predominance of negative feelings, such as fear, sadness, and the sensation of shame. However, there were also feelings of happiness, tranquility and satisfaction.

The reports pointed out that, like sexuality, menstruation is little discussed. It belongs only to them, making them allies on the issue.

Nursing may help women re-signify the phenomenon of menstruation as something natural, enabling them to assume menstruation as a symbol of the feminine and as an instrument of empowerment. This constitutes an important action of nursing care, as it values its freeing nature.

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