

Men and Menses: Scaling the Fences

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My earliest encounter with menstruation as a young boy came while I was in primary school. A female classmate who was late to school was punished with two strokes of the cane on her backside. Seconds later, she was soiled with blood, and quickly, she was whisked away from the pandemonium that had started. Our teachers came back to tell us she was alright and was being catered for. There was no mention of what had happened to her, only that she had changed schools. Months later, we heard she had her 'period' while she was being caned and felt ashamed coming back to school. That experience stayed with me and left me rather confused. Years later, I understood it all, and coming to terms with it, I realized why this is a broader conversation that must be had.

For as long as we have known, men (both young and old) have always had a complicated understanding of menstruation, or what we term "women's period". It is a narrative that is not only surprising but also outdated and must give way to a more progressive understanding of what this natural cycle is all about. Humans tend to mystify or create myths about ideas and natural occurrences they do not understand; thus, men can be spared for being so ignorant about menstruation and how it affects women and even men as well. Regardless of that, we must change the narrative.

While considerable progress is being made to change the male perspective on women's menstrual health and hygiene, there is a need to make a concerted effort to ensure this narrative is totally revamped. The result of the prevailing status quo is this: most women, especially young girls, are left to themselves with no support during their monthly periods because the whole conversation of menstruation is shrouded in secrecy and, in most cases, between mother and daughter, without recourse to men.

On the other hand, I have encountered some young men who also feel that issues around menstruation or periods are private matters and that an attempt to discuss them in public or create awareness of them constitutes an invasion of privacy. We see this line of thought displayed in how males treat their female partners during their menstruation. This is as absurd as it can get; if for nothing else, it is imperative that men take a keen interest in the menstrual cycles of their partners. When it comes to menstruation, there must be a united call to action for both men and women.

The truth is, men have always been perplexed and somewhat confused about women, their menstrual health and cycle, and reproductive health in general. This can be explained as there is very little literature on this amazing natural phenomenon. In some cases, the very few

books that dare to discuss menstruation also end up confusing us. The stigma that comes with menstruation has largely contributed to the fact that there is very little literature on the matter.

Society has played a major role in shaping the opinions men have about menstruation. These opinions have shaped the worldview of males and have succeeded in building abstract fences that must be vanquished. These outcomes have again succeeded in creating a decline or lack of interest in these matters among men. The stigmatization and discrimination women face during their monthly cycle are under-covered even in these modern times. The pain and stress they encounter are further inflamed because there are very few friendly facilities they can turn to during these times.

To understand this narrative, we need to go back to history. One of the earliest recorded cases of menstruation can be traced to the Bible in Genesis 31:34–35, where Rachel had stolen and hidden her father's gods under the saddle she sat on. Laban's father refused to go near her and search her because she mentioned she was menstruating. Laban's decision not to go close to her during this period summarizes men's attitudes toward women during their menstrual cycle. Again, in Leviticus 18:19, it is recorded thus: "Also, you shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness during her menstrual impurity." Replaying how religious connotations affect our behaviors and decisions, it is less surprising how this may have affected men's appreciation of the monthly flow of women.

The importance of the above biblical anecdote and quotation is revealed in how women, during their menstrual cycle, are shunned or ostracized by the community as being unclean. We have come a long way from biblical times, when knowledge on menstrual health and hygiene was not available. We must continue to engender an open conversation on the matter, looking at new information from years of scientific research and outcomes.

In our own local setting, the situation is no different. In a typical Akan traditional setting, conversations related to menstruation and menstrual hygiene are less spoken about in public. In most cases, euphemisms, which are often negative, have been employed to 'cover up' such conversations. In his seminal work, *Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo among the Akan of Ghana*, K. Agyekum (2002) notes that "the use of euphemisms that portray the negative aspects of menstruation makes Akan women feel bad and suppressed and somewhat elevates the status of men. In contrast, the "positive" euphemisms reflect the role and value of women in society. The effect of language and utterances may be determined by the power, status, rank, age, and gender of the participants in the communicative encounter and by the distance and differences between them."

In schools and some homes, conversations around menstruation are relegated to the 'backroom', between mother and daughter. The male members of the family are left out

altogether because it is not considered an issue for men. In my case, although I had witnessed a schoolmate's uniform soiled with blood in primary school, I had no knowledge of what menstruation was until I was in senior secondary school. I recollect that during one of our reproductive health lessons in primary school, there was a brief mention of 'period' by my tutor, and that was it. Perhaps men show little interest in these matters because there is no deliberate attempt to carry them along in such situations.

In our schools, conversations on menstruation should go beyond surface tutoring to in-depth knowledge of menstruation. The curriculum must be expanded, redefined to reflect new trends and information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene management. Once we demystify it; we create an environment where everyone is comfortable discussing the matter, and that ensures girls are comfortable seeking help when they are in distress during this period.

To expand this conversation and increase awareness, the workplace must be employed as a medium to disseminate information on menstruation. Forums like employee town hall meetings, seminars, webinars, and staff meetings can be strategically used for an open discussion on the matter. These same platforms can similarly be used to promote and increase awareness of other health-related issues.

The home is the first point of socialization for every one of us; it is the most common and surest place where perceptions and opinions are created. The nuanced conversation around menstruation can also be traced to our homes; if the narrative should change, it must begin from there. There should be frank and open conversations in the home about menstrual cycles and their effect on women and the home at large. These conversations will expose the entire family to a myriad of issues surrounding menstruation.

I am aware the church, mosque, or temple are sacred places; hence care is taken in addressing certain issues; however, such a platform can be instrumental in helping society accept and destigmatize issues around menstruation and menstrual hygiene management. Religious institutions remain one of the most powerful institutions for reform and social change. If the conversation on menstruation becomes mainstream and the scales drop from the eyes of men, these setups will be vital to the success of this mission. It goes without saying that many of our religions themselves have an opaque approach to menstruation, but this conversation must be engendered, and religion must play a role in it.

As we celebrate World Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28, I believe the fences must come down just like new knowledge and interest brought down the Berlin Wall. We are not protecting the privacy of women by ignoring this; rather, we are hurting their health and promoting uncondusive environments for women during their periods. The fences are only

abstract, an imagination in our minds, and with the right information and understanding, they will come crushing down.