

Research on menstruation stigma

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Menstruation carries a stigma in almost every part of the world, sometimes to such an extent that basic human rights are at risk. With an ERC Consolidator Grant of two million euros, Inga Winkler is investigating what changes are needed to improve the situation and ensure justice. Text Marieke Enter • Photo Guy Ackermans

Winkler's research focuses on menstruation, but ultimately it is about gender relations, gender norms, and whether and how human rights can transform these, she explains. Her work largely concerns cis women – 'cis' means a person's gender identity matches their sex at birth – however, the word 'woman' is mentioned only sparingly. 'We have to acknowledge that not all women menstruate, and not only cis women menstruate. That acknowledgement starts with using inclusive language.'

What does your project entail?

'Obviously, menstruation is nothing new. But the fact that we are publicly paying attention to it is something that started in the last 10 to 15 years. The media are talking about menstruation now, a lot is going on in femtech (e.g. apps to keep track of your menstrual cycle, ed.) and in some countries menstruation is addressed in public policy. But many of these efforts relate only to the management of the bleeding. The socio-cultural meaning, the menstrual

stigma and gender injustices remain unaddressed. In my project, I will study whether and how social movements address these invisible and intangible impacts.'

Forget the pads, cups and tampons?

'No, certainly not, but focusing on menstrual products is not sufficient to address menstrual stigma and gender injustices. Much of the messaging around menstrual products is hugely problematic. They supposedly help people to "keep their dignity" or "avoid embarrassment". I want to challenge that message. People's dignity is not dependent on a menstrual pad, and a leak or stain should not be a source of embarrassment. We should be thinking much more holistically about what menstruation means, and how we accommodate menstrual needs.'

The stigma around menstruation might even affect human rights, you state. How?

'The stigma around menstruation is quite difficult to capture because it's so invisible. But the impact can be huge. For instance, on the right to health: men-

strual pain is normalized, which leads to not going to the doctor and not trying to figure out what's actually going on when people experience heavy cramps. But severe pain is not part of a normal cycle. Another example is how people who menstruate are being perceived at work. All too often they are labelled as too emotional, bad tempered, irrational and hysterical, questioning their ability to deliver and take decisions.'

So your research is about changing perceptions in society?

'Mostly, yes. It is about looking at the bigger picture and thinking about what changes we need to create a society where no one is disadvantaged simply because they menstruate. State institutions play a role, in terms of creating an enabling environment for people to ensure that their menstrual needs are met. But it is also about societal life and cultural ideas. Human rights are ultimately about agency, about the autonomy to make your own decisions. Do you need to take a day off, or do you have enough energy to power

through? Do you want to take part in sports, social life or religious activities, or would you rather have some time to yourself? No one should be judged for any of these decisions.'

Your project is transnational and participatory. What does that mean on a practical level?

'The menstrual movement is emerging in different parts of the world and started in the Global South. Kenya eliminated taxes on menstrual products in 2004. That was much earlier than the introduction of Spain's menstrual leave in 2023. Even today, the most exciting work is happening among movements in the Global South.

'My research is a mix of a global component – so far, I have done fascinating interviews with activists from Turkey, Taiwan, Fiji, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil, who are all connected – and certain country case studies, where

PhD researchers will be based. One is definitely going to be in India. I have been working for a long time with Dalit feminists (Dalit is the name for the group previously called the untouchables, ed.), who are part of the manual scavenging movement (the people who clean toilets and do sanitation work). For them, menstruation is an entry point for other gender-related conversations in their community. This is the basic idea for the project: to understand people's lived experiences with menstruation, how they experience discrimination and stigma, and how they get together and seek change, using what kind of strategies. We'll do that in India and in South Africa, and I want to look at the US as well.'

That might be challenging now...

'Yes, we will have to see how that goes. I have structured the project to look at four different forms of marginalization and how they intersect with menstrual

stigma: caste, ethnicity, informality and the fourth would be the menstrual experiences of trans and non-binary people, i.e. the intersections with gender identity – which is heavily politicized now in the US, but not only there. Overall, I'm interested in how people rely on concepts of human rights and justice to work towards a society where menstruation is no longer a constraint in people's lives.' ■

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