Out for Blood

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Plus: Poetry, Periods, and Patriarchal Put-Downs!

FOR ALL WOMANKIND
A n anecdote: In 2008 Celeste Mergens, a white American and member of the Church of Latter Day Saints, was working with an orphanage through an NGO in Kenya—and worrying and praying for the 1400 orphans there who were struggling with basic needs, like food, water, and cooking stoves—when she drifted off to sleep. She woke up eureka-style. What are the girls doing for feminine hygiene? she asked herself (and eight years later asked a room of more than seventy listeners at an off-site event during the 2016 UN’s Committee on the Status of Women gathering). She posed that question to the assistant director of the orphanage, who told her, “Nothing. They wait in their rooms until it is over.”

“I couldn’t imagine,” she later told the roomful of listeners, detailing how the orphan girls sat on pieces of cardboard until their periods were over. Some, she said, “were being sexually exploited in exchange for a single pad.”

Mergens went on to found Days for Girls, an organization that makes and distributes menstrual kits. “Today, Days for Girls has reached more than one million women and girls in 125+ countries with DfG Kits and menstrual health education,” the DfG website boasts. “This translates into over 115 million days of dignity, health, and opportunity.”

Days for Girls dovetailed with a growing international movement among NGOs that focused on the urgent plight of vulnerable girls, seeing them as linchpins for social change. (And also, I’d add, by making it about girls, rather than women, kept it within the framework of the “deserving poor,” i.e., children.) Part of helping impoverished girls succeed, the NGOs explain, is helping them manage their periods so they have the sanitary protection they need to stay in school and stay healthy. The reasoning gained rapid traction, and by January 2018, 133 campaigns in 38 countries in the Global South—from Kenya to India to Bolivia—focused on improved Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM).

All good here, right? Hmm, not so fast.

Let’s wade into the murky waters of menstrual activism—and let’s do it with the perfect guide, Chris Bobel, who throws up a warning flare for her fellow feminists: navigate carefully here.

Bobel is an associate professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts and former president of the Society for the Study of Menstrual Cycle Research (and yes, there is such an organization—so get the snickering out now—and it’s been around since 1977, trying to wrest the conversation and the research on menstruation from the slimy menstrual products industry). She is also the author of the 2010 book, New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation, which looks at menstrual activism and period politics in the US.

In The Managed Body, she shifts her sharp gaze to the Global South—a term preferred to “third world” or “developing nations”—an area that encompasses many countries within Asia, Central America, South America, and Africa.

Almost despite herself—given her empathetic desire to challenge the status quo surrounding periods—Bobel sees some troubling trends emerging.

Here’s her beef, albeit simplified: Aren’t we in danger of repeating our imperialist past by swooping in to rescue our little brown sisters from a hygienic “crisis” that may not actually exist, solving this “problem” with products that help keep periods secret, and fueling rather than facing the stigma associated with menstruation? (My words, not hers; she is more gracious with qualifiers like “unintentionally” and “to be fair.”)

But let’s back up. I’m going to shorthand this because it is not really the focus of Bobel’s book, yet it is the motivating impulse behind her critique.

Feminists, myself included, have been challenging the culture of concealment surrounding menstruation for two-plus decades now. In 1995 when I was first writing about it for the Village Voice, I offered this profound analogy: “Blood is kinda stinksnatch. How come it’s not treated that way?” For her part, Bobel compares menstrual products to toothbrushes or hairbrushes. “A hairbrush is a tool that enables us to look ‘presentable’ (civilized?); yet a menstrual mandate remains silently on the books, telling women they must keep their periods on the down-low and their menstrual products discreetly tucked.

Then, over the last decade and a half, a whole movement has coalesced around this issue. Indeed, a glorious red tide of activism has finally forced the mainstream media and the US public to sit up and pay attention to menstruators. The press has been practically tripping over itself to interview tennis players and artists and activists and sit-com writers who challenge taboo by saying the word “period” out loud. And by 2015, everyone from NPR to the Huffington Post to Cosmopolitan was declaring 2015 the Year of the Period (or some variation of that).

But Bobel, who has been scrutinizing menstrual activism’s mainstreaming argues that the movement “has also contracted both ideologically and practically.” She insists, “A movement that聚焦 taboo by saying the word “period” out loud. And by 2015, everyone from NPR to the Huffington Post to Cosmopolitan was declaring 2015 the Year of the Period (or some variation of that).

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of sexism and the grammar of capitalism. So ‘who can imagine’ going without this essential material?” But, Bobel argues that:

[e]quipping girls with “better” menstrual care does not challenge menstrual stigma, it accommodates it. When we focus on product, we are missing the bigger picture. In the West, menstrual taboos and the sexist foundation on which they are built did not disappear as we “upgraded” our menstrual care. Without the heavy lifting that is menstrual normalization—a cultural shift we in the West have still not achieved—any menstrual care practice, whether homegrown or imported, will still be a thing best hidden.

At one point, Bobel describes menstrual health as a “gateway issue,” a playful nod to the warnings to the dangers of that “gateway drug,” weed—and indeed goes on to describe how education about menstruation can be “a portal to topics such as sexual harassment and assault, dating violence, and sexual decision-making.” This is true of puberty education and sex education around the world. Instructors often rely on anonymous index cards—write down your questions about periods or anything else, they say as they open a session—and girls and women ask questions about everything ranging from incest to masturbation to the amount of blood in an average period (approximately 2.7 ounces or “one and a half shot glasses” worth, as the National Institutes of Health amusingly notes on its website). These conversations are important and, if educators are equipped to respond to them, the perfect “gateway” for situating girls’ oppression into a larger discussion about their bodies, their sexuality, and their right to say both no and yes to sex.

While observing a community education session conducted by Iriise International, a social enterprise that distributes pads, offers education, and conducts research in Jinja, Uganda, Bobel describes a role-playing exercise:

[The “mother” (played by one of the pad-making staff) tries to convince the “father” (played by a menstrual health educator) to pay for EasyPad for their daughter. The role play employs the method of “touch tag,” where any member of the group may replace the “mother” if she has an idea of how to convince “father.” One “mother” makes the point that providing their daughter with improved menstrual care is a matter of dignity. This line of argument seems to excite the assembled women; it gives way to a quick succession of “mothers” who take their turns articulating why “father” must fund the pads to protect their daughter and the family. Finally, a new “mother” takes her turn. She sits, stares into “father’s” eyes, and states unequivocally: “When our daughter soils her clothes, she brings shame to our family. People will wonder whose daughter is that one who is careless?” This is the winning argument in the role play.

Bobel knows that her “American standpoint compromises her understanding of the nuanced dynamics of local norms and values” and acknowledges she doesn’t know what is best for a Jinja girl or how to convince a Jinja father. “But even with these concessions,” she says, “I struggle with any message that even hints that a stained skirt (or the threat of some breach of the menstrual social contract—keep it hidden, keep it quiet) somehow reflects badly on the menstruator, and by extension her family.” Shame, she says, “remains the boogeyman.”